

Of The Gaze as Topological Locus: Alberti and Lacan

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Anyone who has ever been to a drawing class has probably experienced an amusing situation in which a group of people sits in a circle around a still-life model or a nude, each of them holding a pencil in a forward stretched arm pointing at the object, and shutting one eye in order to focus the gaze. This procedure has a simple aim: the pencil functions as a tool estimating the exact dimensions of the object one wishes to draw correctly on a sheet of paper or a canvas. Each of the object's parts is measured in relation to the length of the pencil, while the position of the painter remains fixed.

This naïve procedure exemplifies something of the relation between vision, painting and the locus which painting permits: the pencil, the outstretched hand and the eye collaborate in order to transfer something existing "there" "over here" in the most concrete and direct manner, and hence to establish a new painterly locus parallel to the real one. A radically different state of affairs occurs in the works of Gil Jacobson, an Israeli artist, who, about two years ago, exhibited a series of paintings titled *The Peacock*. The reference point of Jacobson's paintings is Hubble's satellite broadcasts, which transmit images of remote galaxies to a NASA working team. These broadcasts are of stars which extinguished themselves millions of light-years ago, but which still transmit light because of the immense distance between them and earth. Using these images, Jacobson paints by scattering pigments and spreading lacquer in layers on the reverse side of a large black glass. Since he works on the reverse side of the glass, it is the first layer he applies that will be seen as the artist's final touch when the picture is ready and hung on its "right" side. Thus Jacobson cannot see the painting while working on it. Only once the painting is finished and turned over will he see the painting for the first time without the option of changing anything in it. The viewer of these paintings, for her part, finds it difficult

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and almost impossible to look at the painting "as is", since the black glass reflects the gallery space and the viewer herself. Hence, in order to see the painting, the viewer must either ignore her own image and the other reflections from the painting, or, regard them as an inseparable part of the picture. Moreover, precisely for this reason, it is almost impossible to document these paintings properly.



Figure 1:
Gil Jacobson.
The Peacock. 2004. *Hubble*
Takes a Close-up View of
Reflection Nebula.

Figure 2 is a digitally processed photograph of the painting *Hubble takes a close-up view of reflection nebula*. Although the figure relates to the painting it does not represent it completely: this is indeed the painting "as it is" or "in itself", yet it is not the painting that Jacobson exhibits, only a partial way of seeing it without the disturbance of vision which is one of its irreducible characteristics.

The name of this series of paintings, *The Peacock*, is seemingly unrelated to its images. But the peacock's feathers, according to recent research, are apparently not colorful at all. The abundance of colors and shades stems from the fact that each hair of the peacock's feathers has a prismatic structure. Thus, the colors of the peacock's feathers are not a consequence of pigments but rather of light rays refracted through them.

The relation between vision, painting and locus in the case of the drawing class differs radically from the one Jacobson

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posits between the three: in the former there is a painting in which an act of representation is meant to locate an object on a surface and hence create a new, painterly locus. This act of representation strives towards maximum congruence between the painterly locus and the original location being painted. In the latter, painting traces an object which no longer exists, whose visibility testifies at once to its former presence and to its current absence. It is not only that this object cannot be seen while being painted, as in many other cases of abstract painting or paintings of imagined scenes, but the painting technique makes it impossible for the artist to see the painting in the process of his painting it. This is a painting in which each viewing inevitably remains partial or excessive: one can never see "the whole painting" since the disturbances of vision obscure such a view. At the same time, these selfsame disturbances prevent us from seeing "only the painting", since that view would never represent it accurately.

It might seem that one could explain the radical difference between the two instances discussed here as stemming from the difference between the two painted objects: a model present in the studio as compared with a long-extinguished star. But Jacobson's painting procedure and its final result defy this explanation. While the implied assumption behind the

drawing class is that once the participants acquire the proper skill they will manage to locate the object on the canvas, Jacobson's painting shows exactly the opposite. Jacobson's painting suggests the impossibility of this act of locating or at least suggests a radical way of thinking about that act.

What is the locus of painting? Is it about a represented environment or ambience characterizing and specifying a certain location, embodied in a picture? Or does the locus of painting relate to the way the viewer takes up a position in front of the painting and the relations that occur between painting and viewer in a disposition that creates a place of its own? And if painting is its own place, what kind of a place is this?

In-between the extreme examples, that of the drawing lesson and of Jacobson's paintings, one could point to a variety of procedures of painting designating different ways of

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thinking about the relations between a painting and the locus it engenders. This multiplicity is not the issue here. In this paper I would like to suggest thinking about the locus of painting as transcending embodiment or representation. Even if the locus of painting cannot be simply located between these examples, they are both necessary in order to designate this place. In what follows I will show how the locus of painting is inseparable from the gaze it constitutes with which it is also bound in a topological structure. This claim will be demonstrated by two instances in which the presence of the painter in the painting exemplifies his position as a cross-cap or a Moebius strip.

To support my claim, I would like to revisit Lacan's concept of the gaze in *Seminar XI* and the relations between painting and viewer he assumes in *Seminar XIII*. But before doing so, I will begin with Alberti, one of the first theoreticians of painting, who, back in 1435, articulated and characterized the locus of painting. Then I will draw the connection between Alberti and Lacan. Although it is possible to regard Lacan as positing an alternative view to the Albertian one, surprisingly, hints of Lacan can be found in Alberti's work.

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One sunny day at the beginning of the 15th century, the Florentine architect Filippo Brunelleschi decided to represent the St. John baptistery in the most mimetic, exact and accurate manner possible. Brunelleschi drew the baptistery on a wooden board, and then drilled a hole in the board precisely at his eye level. After placing the painted board in front of him, exactly at the same spot from which he saw the building, he looked through the perforated board from its back side while positioning a mirror in front of its right side. In order to increase the illusionary effect, on the upper side of the board he placed a silver sheet reflecting the sky. In this way he succeeded in creating a painted image correlating completely with the object in reality, i.e., the baptistery.

As I claimed above, the drawing lesson exemplifies transferring something which exists "there" "over here". Brunelleschi, it appears, created a hybrid between "here" and "there", capturing something of the thing's visibility for

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the sake of its representation, or, put differently, he strove to imbue the represented image with real vision. His move can be regarded as an opening shot: about twenty years later, Leon Batista Alberti, another Florentine artist, wrote his famous composition *On Painting*, inspired

by Brunelleschi's innovation, a painters' manual or guide elaborating the basic rules of Renaissance painting.

Alberti is usually rightly identified with the invention of geometrical perspective – a method of representing three dimensional space on a two dimensional surface by stretching a net of coordinates and by the convergence of all the painting's diagonals into one vanishing point which represents infinity.

What the multiple interpretations of geometrical perspective have in common is that they consider perspective mainly as a procedure recruiting geometrical rules for the sake of making painting more scientific or reliable. Nevertheless, one should note that Alberti regarded himself as a painter addressing painters. What characterizes the painter, in his view, is the exclusive occupation with visibility. In the beginning of *On Painting* Alberti points out that "[n]o one would deny that the painter has nothing to do with things that are not visible. The painter is concerned solely with representing what can be seen".¹

Alberti's basic assumption is that the act of seeing consists of extending rays originating from the viewer's pupil to the object in reality. These rays envelop the object with what Alberti calls the visual pyramid. He distinguishes between three kinds of rays. Among them, the central, most significant ray is enveloped by the others. For Alberti, then, the act of painting means cutting the base of the pyramid at some point between the viewer's eye and the object, as though the base of the pyramid were completely transparent. Hence, when painters draw at some distance from the painting while looking at it and shutting one eye, as in the description of the drawing class, they are actually searching for the apex of the pyramid, which exists inside the eye, and from which they will best see the painting.² After characterizing the act of seeing in this way, Alberti turns to translating vision into painting.

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First, he claims, the artist must inscribe a quadrangle, "which is considered to be an open window through which [he] see[s] what [he] want[s] to paint".³ Then, the painter should construct another pyramid, besides the visual one, but in an inverted direction: a pyramid whose apex lies in the vanishing point, the point through which all of the picture's straight lines converge. The vanishing point is thus at once the point at the base of the visual pyramid through which the central ray passes, and the central ray around which the painting is constructed.

We have then two symmetrical pyramids: the first relates to vision, the second to painting. Inside the visual pyramid Alberti suggests placing a transparent thin veil, "finely woven, dyed whatever color pleases you and with larger threads [marking out] as many parallels as you prefer. This veil I place between the eye and the thing seen, so the visual pyramid penetrates through the thinness of the veil".⁴ This veil, Alberti claims, can guide the artist in anchoring the field of vision into a grid so that the depicted image remains constant. These two pyramids are symmetrical, and the skilled painter strives to achieve ultimate congruence between them.

Alberti thus systematically elaborates Brunelleschi's act, which originally involved representing and documenting real buildings. From it, he derives instructions for painters not only to paint objects of reality but also to create imaginary scenes painted according to the principles of human sight. The locus of painting derived from that move is thus a place based upon complete accord between the way of seeing and the act of painting. Between these two there is a screen. But it is a transparent screen meant to assist in translating seeing into painting.

Alberti, as mentioned above, focuses both his discussion and the act of painting itself on vision. He starts by defining painting as dealing solely with what can be seen, attempts to

track the rays emanating from the viewer's eye, and then moves to the metaphorical window through which he suggests painting should be done. All these imply that the act of looking constitutes the basis of painting and enables it. At the same time, one can indicate a few issues allegedly contradicting

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this notion: the apex of the pyramid of the painting, standing opposite the apex of the visual pyramid, which is located in the viewer's eye, is the vanishing point, a point of submersion, a point which signifies anything which cannot be seen. While far-reaching discussions were devoted to the intricacy of the vanishing point,⁵ I would like to draw attention to two issues: Alberti, as mentioned above, places a thin veil between the painter and the painted object, a veil meant to facilitate the painter's work. Yet this veil is a disruption to vision positioned by Alberti exactly at the place that is supposed to enable ultimate visibility. In order to achieve maximal visuality one would need to overcome this disruption. Furthermore, a few pages earlier, Alberti claims that: "Painting contains a divine force which not only makes absent men present, as friendship is said to do, but moreover makes the dead seem almost alive".⁶ Thus, if previously he claimed that whatever cannot be seen lies beyond the painter's occupation, he now claims that the essential correspondence between vision and painting grants painting the ability to present something that does not exist at all. This may be regarded a trivial statement regarding the documentary skills of painting. Yet if only simple mimetic reproduction, relying on a set of straight lines were at stake, why would painting require any "divine force" in order to achieve such reproduction? Alberti may be trying to draw our attention to another act which painting enables, one that does not stem simply from the mastery of painterly skills. This act, as yet undefined, I claim, is the act underlying the locus of painting.

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At this point I turn from Florence of the mid 15th century to Paris of the 1960s. In March 1964 Lacan designated for the first time his concept of the gaze, as part of *Seminar XI*.⁷ From this notion he would later derive a whole concept of looking and vision and show their relevance to representation based on the scopic drive. Lacan's point of departure assumes that vision consists of two simultaneous aspects: complete coherent vision as opposed to vision based on a radical gap within it. This, according to Lacan, is the split between the eye and the gaze. While the seeing of the eye is embodied in relations

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of representation in their traditional designation, like Alberti's geometrical perspective for instance, in which the painting is compatible with and corresponds to the represented object, the act of the gaze is radically different. The way in which seeing constitutes our relation to things leaves something which eludes us in the passage from one phase to another.⁸ That something which eludes representation is the gaze. The gaze does not constitute any mode of representation and does not participate in it, but is the outcome of such a mode. That is, the gaze is something which cannot be introduced in the order of representation and cannot be embodied in it. While relations of representation assume a correspondence between an object of reality and an image that stands for it, the gaze is that part which representation fails to cover, which could not ever be expressed in those terms.

This sends us back to Alberti, who linked painting with vision on the one hand, and with the presenting of absence on the other. By attributing painting to "divine force", Alberti actually implies something else that painting contains. This is something which relations of representation and their strict laws fail to include, yet which stems from these very same rules. In other words, what reading Alberti after Lacan reveals is not that perspectival paintings like Raphael's or Perugino's make it possible to make absence present as a depicted element among others. Rather, perspectival paintings make it possible to represent absence as what eludes any depiction yet is present due to this very eluding.

The split between the eye and the gaze, according to Lacan, is a split between two different fields of vision. In the first, the subject governs the field of vision. In the second, the subject turns out to be the object of looking, while vision as well as domination evades her. And yet the two fields operate simultaneously.

Lacan demonstrates these relations of looking by means of three diagrams: the first describes relations between object, image, and a geometrical point. This diagram actually coincides with one of Albert's pyramids. But Lacan claims that the geometrical point is only a partial aspect of the field

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of the gaze: "I am not simply that punctiform being located at the geometrical point from which the perspective is grasped".⁹ That is, the subject does not coincide with the imaginary point of the eye which Alberti assumed but she is located differently. And it is not only that the location of the subject regarding the picture is not that of a sovereign subject who perceives it from outside. The second diagram indicates that something far more complex is at stake. Lacan describes the second diagram as follows: "The correlative of the picture, to be situated in the same place as it, that is to say, outside, is the point of the gaze, while that which forms the mediation from the one to the other, that which is between the two, is something of another nature than geometrical, optical space, something that plays an exactly reverse role, which operates, not because it can be traversed, but on the contrary because it is opaque – I mean the screen".¹⁰

In other words, in the second diagram the subject does not govern the field of vision but she is the object of the gaze, the picture itself. The triangle (or pyramid) is overturned and the subject, who has now become the seen object, enters the field of vision through a point of light. This inversion makes the attribution of meaning as a result of looking at a picture, as perceived in the Albertian model, impossible. The image, which had until now been identified with the object of looking, has been substituted for by an opaque screen. The gaze is now considered as external to the subject, and the field of vision becomes devoid of any control. The subject, who was sovereign and unified with the gaze in the first diagram, becomes the object of vision.¹¹

The third diagram is a superimposition of the former two. It shows how the position of the act of looking oscillates constantly from being the object of looking in the field of vision, that is the picture, towards that which turns it into an object, that is, the gaze. The subject fails to fixate in any of these positions, and she alternates between them ceaselessly. The difference between Alberti and Lacan is thus apparent: Alberti's two symmetrical pyramids become contradictory according to Lacan's definitions, even though they function simultaneously. Alberti's transparent veil has been sealed, and the subject has

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been deprived of her major position and turned into the object of looking. Lacan claims: "In the depth of my eye, the picture is painted. The picture, certainly, is in my eye. But I am in the picture".¹² This sentence, no doubt, sounds strange: besides the intricate situation in which I stand inside and outside the picture at the same time, how can one be inside the picture if the picture is painted inside the depths of the eye? And if this is so, what does it imply about the locus of painting?

The very act of representation, the attempt at transferring whatever exists "there" "over here", has raised the imaginary conjecture that this endeavor has indeed worked out, that we do stand in front of a painting that allegedly imitates some kind of location. But at the same time, the act of representation gives rise to something else, something other than the taking of proportions and measures, albeit an outcome of such deeds. The coherent and complete appearance of the picture presents the opposite option, the possibility of some other vision which elides the subject, which the subject can never possess, a vision related to an Other who looks at the subject from a point she will never be able to perceive. But this very procedure takes place at the same time that the subject looks at the picture, the picture which henceforth contains the subject, but is at the same time still in her looking eye. The subject and the picture together create a single topological structure, unlike the dualistic structure in which the subject stands in front of the picture.

The topology of the gaze, implicitly mentioned in *Seminar XI*, would be further analyzed by Lacan two years later, when he returns to discuss painting as part of his occupation with phantasy in *Seminar XIII*. Here Lacan develops the consequences of the gaze and shows its function in a specific painting, Velázquez's *Las Meninas* of 1656. The topological structure of the gaze becomes clear when reading Lacan's analysis of *Las Meninas*, especially his analysis of the image of the painter. Lacan claims that the distance in the painting between the painter and the easel is crucial, since this gap demonstrates that the painting does not merely present problems of representation. This distance, he argues, is "...the passage of this phantastical presence of the painter in so far as he is looking. ...The

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look of the subject is going towards us; it is indeed also from this point that Velázquez made, in this ghost-like form, which specifies this self-portrait among all the others.... He will tell you himself: 'Do you believe that I would paint a self-portrait from this drop, from this oil, with this paintbrush'".¹³ Lacan also refers to another distance, the one that exists between the image of Infanta Margarita and the image on her right, a distance that was created by the passage of the painter "inside the picture".



Figure 2:
Diego Velázquez.
Las Meninas.
1656.

That is to say, Velázquez had ostensibly initially been standing in front of the picture, occupying the beholder's position. He then "entered" the picture in order to occupy his fantasmatic position in it, crossing the painted images on his way. His response to the other images in the picture, who plead with him to "let me see", is, "You do not see me from where I am looking at you".¹⁴ In this sense, Velázquez is the subject who sees himself outside himself. Or, to put it in Lacan's terms of *Seminar XI*, the subject is in the picture yet the picture is in her eye. Thus Velázquez's image not only represents the way in which the painter paints the picture, but his self-image stands also for that which could not be represented.

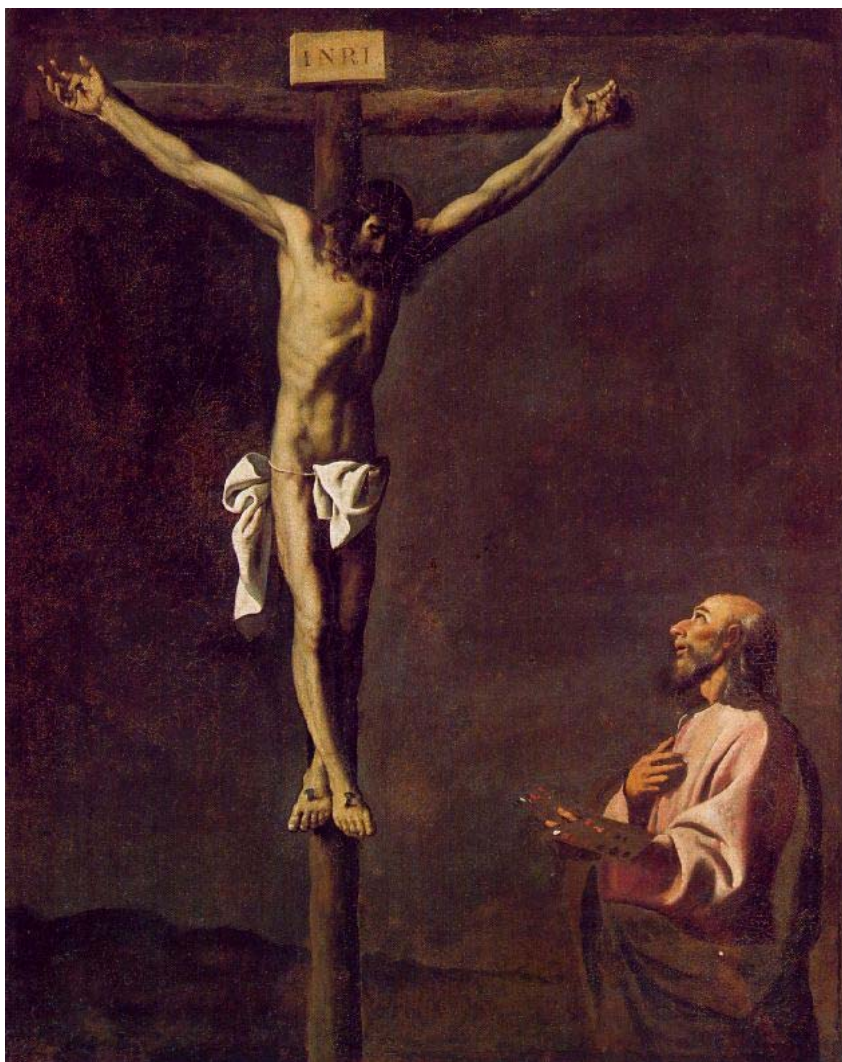


Figure 3:
Francisco de Zurbarán. *Saint
Luke the Painter before
Christ on the Cross*, 1660.

A similar state of affairs arises out of a painting by another 17th century Spanish painter, Francisco de Zurbarán, in a painting of 1660, *Saint Luke the Painter before Christ on the Cross*. This painting seems related to a long tradition of painting of the crucified Christ, in which Christ's figure is nailed to the cross, his fainting body and tormented head inclining forward. But this painting includes another figure, that of the saint, (identified by some of the interpreters as none other than Zurbarán himself), staring astounded at Christ, one hand holding the palette, the other hanging close to his heart, his mouth loosely opens, his profile almost amusing despite the pathos of the body language and its position in the specific scene. This painting may seem easy to explain: tradition has it that Saint Luke was a painter. Besides, his language is considered highly figurative and his Gospel, with its ornate descriptions, was a source of inspiration for many artists.¹⁵ Thus his depiction as a painter in a painting seems obvious. Yet this interpretation leaves the painting enigmatic in almost every respect. What is the painter doing at the scene of the crucifixion? How might one understand the undefined expression on his face, an expression that is not necessarily one of sharing sorrow, empathy

or great anxiety as required by the narrative, but rather one of wonderment and puzzlement, an expression including a fascinated gaze, curious yet calm and serene? The painting

becomes even more enigmatic when one looks at the loincloth of the crucified figure. The rear side of this cloth is strangely stretched, creating a bulk of itself, whitely glittering. This is not a worn-out piece of cloth, which, according to the narrative of the Crucifixion should at this point have been reduced to a shabby rag. Nor is it a cover wrapping a part of a body. It seems to have a life of its own, sharply contrasting with the corpse to which it is attached. The cloth also addresses another enigmatic detail of the painting, the palette in the saint's hand.

There seems to be a kind of balance as well as a contrast between the figures of the painter and the crucified Christ: the former is illuminated in a reddish shade, the latter shaded in dark brown colors; the former is clad in a multi-fold cloak, the latter is naked, the only folds on his figure being the marks of his muscles and ribs. The palette and the white cloth too, bind the two figures in a mode other than the narrative one. The saint does not merely paint Christ's figure. At the same time he paints with or through the image of Christ, strangely binding the act of painting with the object it reproduces. The painting, in the sense of the outcome of the encounter between the saint and the crucified, is the remainder of the cloth which will shortly be detached from the body of Christ, while the palette can be regarded as a kind of extension of Saint Luke's hand. Paradoxically, it is precisely the loincloth, which is supposed to be a part of the body, which receives a life of its own, while the palette, in the sense of a useful utensil, becomes here an integral part of the saint's body. The painting is at one and the same time a painting representing the saint and the crucified Christ, and a painting concerned with the nature of the relationship between them, with the act of painting itself and its essence, and with its materiality, that which the painting paints and presents.

While *Las Meninas* demonstrates the topological position of the painter in the painting, *Saint Luke the Painter* manifests the same topology while also taking into account not only the painting's creator, but the materiality of the painting itself

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as exemplifying the being on "both sides" of a Moebius strip. Thus Christ's loincloth is simultaneously not only vesture but also the painting's ground. Likewise, the painter's hand and the palette attached to it are elements which paint the picture while at the same time being represented in it. This double existence should not be regarded as a pictorial pun, but rather as something immanent to painting in general, in which the very act of representation allows something else to arise, something which cannot be represented but results from the act of representation. As *Las Meninas* had done, *Saint Luke the Painter* places that something as part of the represented scene. But Zurbarán goes a step further than Velázquez, binding the materiality of the painting with the materiality of the body of Christ. While Alberti attributed a divine force to painting due to its ability to present the dead, Zurbarán shows how that vitality should be attributed to painting itself, as creating a locus unfettered by spatial limitations.

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Painting can represent one place or another. One can also interpret a painterly corpus and attribute different meanings to it while indicating its local characteristics, derived from cultural or ideological schemas. But beyond these, painting is nevertheless a product of the encounter between painter or viewer and painting itself, in which this encounter constitutes the locus of painting, stemming from the topology of the gaze.

Endnotes

¹ Alberti, Leon Batista. 1435 [1966]. *On Painting*. Translated by John R. Spencer. New York and London: Yale University Press.

² Ibid, p. 51.

³ Ibid, p. 56.

⁴ Ibid, p. 69.

⁵ See for example: Bryson, Norman, 1983. *Vision and Painting*; Ronen, Ruth, 2002. *Representing the Real*, and many others.

⁶ Alberti, p. 63.

⁷ Lacan, Jacques. 1964-1965 [1998]. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XI*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. New York and London: Norton.

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⁸ Ibid, p. 73.

⁹ Ibid, p. 96.

¹⁰ Ibid, ibid.

¹¹ For a clear explanation of this state of affairs see: de Bolla, Peter. "The Visibility of Visuality". In: Brennan, Teresa and Martin Jay (eds.). 1996. *Vision in Context*. New York and London: Routledge, pp. 63-81.

¹² Ibid, ibid. Note that the English translation differs here from the original, on which I based this quote.

¹³ Lacan, Jacques. 1964-1965. *The Object of Psychoanalysis: Seminar XIII*. Translated by Cormac Gallagher. (Unpublished), p. 258.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 284.

¹⁵ Catholic Encyclopedia, Saint Luke.htm.

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