

On the “Split” Between the Eye and the Gaze in Literature

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[M]ust we not distinguish between the function of the eye and that of the gaze?
—Jacques Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (1964)

We make to ourselves pictures of facts. [. . .]
The picture is a model of reality.
—Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922)

*Distinction is perfect continence.*¹
—G. Spencer-Brown, *Laws of Form* (1969)

According to Cartesian theories of optics, which dominate modern theories of perception, visual perception is ideal and uncastrated. Seeing is believing. There is no *split*, no dehiscence to be seen between physical light and the act of looking (Groome 84-6). However, evidence that a primary split exists between the eye and the gaze is shown in their relationship to the origin of the subject. Counter to Cartesian optics, Jacques Lacan’s method points to the gaze as being prior to the eyes (*Fundamental* 72-3). This “split between gaze and vision,” Lacan notes near the opening of a long section devoted to the gaze in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, “will enable us, you will see, to add the scopical drive to the list of the drives. [. . .] Indeed, it is this drive that most completely eludes the term castration” (78). Not only is the gaze primary with respect to the eye, it is also attaches itself to the other three drives. Gérard Wajcman reflects on this point when he paraphrases Lacan’s (unpublished) “Seminar XIII” (“The Object of Psychoanalysis”; 1966) on this point: “It is the object itself that is at issue, declinable in its four currencies, that of

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the breast, the turd, the voice—the gaze is included here, of course, but with a singularity in this series, a privileged status, because it is the matrix of the three others. [. . .] when the breast, the turd, or the voice show themselves, they do so as a function of the gaze” (Wajcman 144-45). Because the gaze is least subject to castration of the four drives, it is also closest to the *real*, that which “is neither imaginary nor symbolic” (Lacan, *Fundamental* 280). This makes the gaze an ideal shield for the subject while trying to keep its distance from the real. “To explore the visual structure,” Wajcman says in paraphrasing Lacan, “will be, then, a matter of accounting for the relationship of subject to object insofar as it shows itself; this is called the fantasy” (Wajcman 145). Without looking properly, eyes cannot see the real—the invisible yet apprehensible—which is opened up to the entire world through this split. It is in this space and time of the real, the “impossible” which is already present, that literature inevitably begins, “Once upon a time . . .” Because many arguments about the gaze are based on cinema—the cinematic text and process, and how an audience views cinema—my argument about the split between eye and gaze will look to literary texts Lacan uses to make his arguments. In fact, because of its reliance on a screen, cinema can effectively hide this split in a way literature cannot. This essay uses the King

James Version of the Bible, Sophocles's *Antigone*, and Poe's "The Purloined Letter," to explore the makings, symptoms, and implications of this tragic split.

Primacy of the Sacred Gaze Over Profane Eyes

Despite the findings of cognitive science and biological models of language development, the origin of a signifier precedes that of its signified. For example, many stories begin with a word of primary, even magical embodiment—like "Once upon a time . . ."—as does a familiar creation myth: "And God said, Let there be light: and there was light" (Genesis 1:3). And just after creating Man and Woman, at the end of the Sixth Day of the New World, "God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, *it was* very good" (Genesis 1:31). Eyesight results from an originating utterance of the

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word, an invisible "thread" gazing into the void that "gestures" the visible world into being, "as the brushstroke is applied to the canvas" (Lacan, *Fundamental* 115). This same gaze, spoken and cast by an already dying creator, named each quarter of the New World, caressed the Other into being, and finally disappeared.² But, the real and its gaze return with some frequency to disturb the eye.

Though prior and split from its eye, the gaze nevertheless remains linked to it by a thread of light. Retracing this gaze, "It is striking," Lacan observes, "when one thinks of the universality of the function of the evil eye, that there is no trace anywhere of a good eye, of an eye that blesses" (*Fundamental* 115). Being prior to the organic eye on the other hand, it is the gaze, its persistent and recurrent return, which creates the common good spoken of by social contract theorists. It is the gaze that creates and consecrates the world prior to the conscious eye. "[T]he eye," on the other hand, Lacan continues, "carries with it the fatal function of being in itself endowed [. . .] with a power to separate. But this power to separate goes much further than distinct vision" (*Fundamental* 115).³ This ability to "separate" accompanies the act of looking and results in the power to cut or "act" as Lacan describes it (*Fundamental* 114-5). The "fatal function," to which Lacan points, might best be compared to the spectacle tragedy stages within narrative. Mathematician and philosopher, G. Spencer-Brown, also defines the effects of the separating power of vision: "Once a distinction is drawn, the spaces, states, or contents on each side of the boundary, being distinct, can be indicated. There can be no distinction without motive, and there can be no motive unless contents are seen to differ in value" (1). Spencer-Brown's connection between "motive" (that is meaning) and the act of seeing goes beyond metaphor. The act of distinguishing "value" says as much about the seer as it does the seen.

The gaze functions on the side of the object and is capable of having real effects upon the material world (*Fundamental* 106; Quinet 139-40); eyes, on the other hand, despite their own corporality and proclivity to see only the visible, are on the side of the knowing subject. Although the gaze is of a sacred (though

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taboo) origin, and concerned with the unconscious, eyes, on the contrary, are vehicles of natural science. A sacred gaze can be distinguished from the vast number of modern, profane forms of

perception by modernity's refusal to *look*, and instead *seeing*, cutting the useful from the real.⁴ Unlike the gaze, modern eyes insist upon the reality of their point of view because they have seen the truth for themselves. Eyes refuse to see that truth differs from appearance, and that motive is invisible and buried deep inside the subject (Spencer-Brown vii-viii). The sacred, epic recurrence of the gaze shames modern eyes in the momentary glance of a look (*Fundamental* 84), while profane modern eyes see *only* wholeness, claiming to represent the all while assigning universal guilt to the One. Sacrifice, for example, appears entirely different depending on whether it is viewed through eyes or the gaze. In the eyes of modernity sacrifice is the price the community asks each individual to pay to ensure the social contract. Under the gaze, on the contrary, the community is bound in a singular and common sacrifice shared by all, not forced on any one. Put another way, although modern eyes refuse to see or look for the gaze, the gaze nevertheless has effects that are apprehensible by the whole world.

The Modern World: Eyesight Against the Gaze

Among the senses in the human sensory apparatus, sight is perhaps the most powerful in literature. Literary narrative is dominated by both looking and vision; it can move like an eye across the horizon of the world (making it into a text). Historian Martin Jay confirms this in his dramatically comprehensive work, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (1993), "Unlike the other senses of smell, touch, or taste, there seems to be a close, if complicated, relationship between sight and language, both of which come into their own at approximately the same moment of maturation" (8). Interestingly, according to Jay—representing cultural studies and New Historicism—"French Theory" and psychoanalysis have adopted an irrational "antiocularist" discourse, abandoning vision in favor of language and

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"linguistics." From the point of view of cultural studies and historicism, psychoanalysis is too anecdotal, too literary.

Ironically, according to the narrative constructed by Jay, as knowledge of the human eye, optics, and cognitive psychology have advanced to even the microscopic level, a certain "antiocularism" has arisen in the nation of "the City of Lights." While *Downcast Eyes* is panoramic, Jay's thesis is concise nevertheless: "It will be the main purpose of this study to demonstrate and explore what at first glance may seem a surprising proposition: a great deal of recent French thought in a wide variety of fields is in one way or another imbued with a profound suspicion of vision and its hegemonic role in the modern era" (14). In the field of psychoanalysis in particular, Jay casts Lacan at the center of that field's contribution to the new, twentieth-century "antivisual discourse": "it was only with Lacan's linguistic turn that psychoanalysis became self-consciously antivisual" (331). Not only does Lacan define the scopic drive as the most crucial of the drives, the other drives are structured around it.⁵ Understandably then, in his very next paragraph, Jay lumps together the work of various and diverse ("French") theorists: Sartre, Bataille, Lacan, Merleau-Ponty, Foucault, Althusser, Debord, Derrida, Irigaray, among others. Considering Lacan's scathing critique of modern, phenomenological eyes, Jay's argument seems correct. However, it is precisely in his critique of Sartre—with whom Jay often pairs Lacan—and existentialism that Lacan theorizes the possibility of a third order—the real—and "looking askew":

At the end of a society's historical enterprise to no longer recognize that it has any but a utilitarian function, and given the individual's anxiety faced with the concentration-camp form of the social link [. . .], existentialism can be judged on the basis of the justifications it provides for the subjective impasses that do, indeed, result therefrom: a freedom that is never so authentically affirmed as when it is within the walls of a prison; [. . .]; a voyeuristic-sadistic idealization of sexual relationships; a personality that achieves self-realization only in suicide; [. . .]. ("Mirror Stage" 8)⁶

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Concluding this passionate comparison of Sartre and existentialism to the profane "utility" of modernity, Lacan declares finally, "These propositions are opposed by all our experience" (8). While existentialism privileges the ego, it also lacks any engagement with the real. The sort of four-"walled," "freedom" of the "prison" to which Lacan is comparing existentialism can also be found in some approaches by postmodernism and cultural studies to the four-sided literary page and the four-sided cinema screen. Existentialism, and Jay's version of cultural studies, reduces subjectivity and consciousness to the registers of the imaginary and objective visibility.

Rather being than a turn away from science, as many critics of psychoanalysis describe Freud's work (Jay 330), Freud always relied particularly upon biology to support his psychoanalytic discoveries. Freud clarifies the close relationship between biology and the psyche in his 1915 essay, "Instincts and their Vicissitudes": "The perceptual substance of the living organism will thus have found in the efficacy of its muscular activity a basis for distinguishing between an 'outside' and an 'inside'" (14: 119). Lacan's return to Freud begins with this two-dimensional spatial relation, and extends it to a third dimension in the shape of subjectivity: "This structure differs from the spatialization of the circumference or sphere with which some people like to schematize the limits of the living being and its environment: it corresponds rather to the relational group that symbolic logic designates topologically as a ring" ("Speech" 102). Subjectivity is shaped like a "ring" inhabiting three dimensions, having a donut-like shape like an "annulus" or "torus" rather than being a two-dimensional "zone." The biological and psychical implications for this disjunctive relation between subject and object are a result of Lacan's return to Freud, and have also contributed to various forms of contemporary cultural criticism, such as "film theory" and feminist psychoanalysis.⁷ Film theory in particular has been interested in the visual dimension of the relation between interior and exterior, subject and object. Psychoanalysis and cinema were born at the same historical moment in 1895 and, although the study of cinema remains dominated by technique, history, the *auteur*, explanations

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for cinema have always looked to psychoanalysis to understand and justify its popular effect.

Lacan emphasizes the excessive and subjective character of the eye in contrast to the gaze, an object exterior to the subject: "Light may travel in a straight line, but it is refracted, diffused, it floods, it fills—the eye is a sort of bowl—it flows over, too, it necessitates, around the ocular bowl, a whole series of organs, mechanisms, defenses" (*Fundamental* 94). It is the "overflow," the excessive character of visual perception that dominates Lacan's formulation of

the relation between eye and gaze as a *drive*. Lacan critiques the scientific predisposition of eyes in particular:

. . . we must now pose the question as to the exact status of the eye as organ. The function, it is said, creates the organ. This is quite absurd—function does not even explain the organ. Whatever appears in the organism as an organ is always presented with a large multiplicity of functions. In the eye, it is clear that various functions come together. [. . .] You will be able to see it only if you fix your eye to one side. (*Fundamental* 101-2)

It is this “montage,” a knotting of each of the three *jouissances* that extend from the real, symbolic, imaginary, that incorporates the “multiplicity of functions” constituting the “scopic drive.” The drive thus becomes a “gesture” beyond organic function. The eye is so much more than the natural product of the physical fact of light. This leads Lacan to describe the drive as *partial* rather than as complete or its own cause. Further, as a result of analysis, the subject need not blindly submit to the invisible eye of a universal seer; the subject can learn to look “askew” and make use of the gaze.

The “Split” Between the Eye and the Gaze

The relation of the subject with that which is strictly concerned with light seems [. . .] to already be somewhat ambiguous.

—Jacques Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*

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Critics of various sorts are increasingly debating (particularly within cultural studies) whether the “symbolic” and “language”—which distinguishes civilization and the “human” mind—should contain anything of the retrograde, primitive “imaginary.” One of Lacan’s distinctive contributions to the twentieth-century pursuit of subjectivity—a theory of mind composed of the “knotting” of rings, of *thirdness* (*Encore* 122-25)—is to have logically demonstrated the necessity of excess, “impasse,” and apprehension (vision beyond perception) in the making of subjectivity. As Lacan introduces in *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, this third term is bound materially by *alienation* and *aphanisis* (see chapters 16 & 17). Or, put another way, this third term is visibly marked, both by “separation” (dehiscence, withdrawal into wholeness) and “division” (cutting, displacing the unified subject). “What cuts a line is a point” (*Encore* 122). This third term that cuts, this *look* that is in excess of seeing—what Lacan calls the subject’s “lethal factor” (*Fundamental* 213)—leads to a persistence of the imaginary within the symbolic (the “true”), and ultimately of the real within both the imaginary and the symbolic (*Seminar I* 219). Lacan mocks a visual aphorism to distinguish between the eye and the gaze: “Even in our times, a witness is asked to tell the truth, and, what’s more, the whole truth, if he can—but how, alas, could he? [. . .] The truth sought is the one that is unavowable with respect to the law that regulates *jouissance*” (*Encore* 92). Regardless of the blindness of justice, however, “‘the true aims at the real’—that statement is the fruit of a long reduction of pretensions to truth” (*Encore* 91). A blockage, a veil, even a screen stands between the true and the real forming the “semblance” (a form of object *a*). And, of course, “reality” is the directly (perceptually) observed “experience” (Φ) that grounds the true (*Encore* 90-3).

Social scientific and cultural studies, as exemplified by Jay's reception of Lacan, generally have refused to recognize a theory of the real, the idea of something apprehensible yet invisible and non-measurable exists, "that can only be inscribed on the basis of an impasse of formalization" (Lacan, *Encore* 93). Being characterized by "impasse" would explain the

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disinterest of science in phenomena connected to the real. In its first systematic use in North America and Britain, the Lacanian gaze has been misused and misrepresented by film studies in particular in an attempt to prove that unequal power relations exist between "active" viewers/subjects and "passive" viewed/objects.⁸ Laura Mulvey's 1975 "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" was among the first and most influential works of film theory to make practical and systematic use of Lacan's theory of the gaze for textual and cultural study.⁹ Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure" is based on a selective reading of Freud's "Instincts and their Vicissitudes" (1915; 14: 117-40) and Lacan's "The Mirror Stage" to argue that popular culture (exemplified by Hollywood) assigns the "active" role to the male and the "passive" to the female (6-18). How active and passive agents are visually represented remains an essential point of debate for numerous discussions in cultural, film, and postcolonial studies (and elsewhere) on spectatorship and otherness. Typically, work in these fields—exemplified by Jay and feminist film theory—does not recognize the primary split between the eye and its function. Activity and passivity are self-evident qualities, and each can be measured. Rather than focus on this secondary split across the axis of reality—between active and passive, masculine and feminine—Lacan theorizes a split between the eye and the gaze, the true and the real that opens a space for semblance, for *jouissance* and meaning (*Encore* 82). Lacan's point in focusing on a material split between eye and gaze is not only to move beyond Cartesian optics as a theory for understanding the psychic dimension of perception, but also to suggest that—a "third" term, an object unseen and unseeing, yet *showing*—"a quite different eye" in the subject apprehends more than just electromagnetic energy (*Fundamental* 89); this "eye" (the gaze) casts its own light.¹⁰ This eye that can perceive the unseen real is also subject to the partiality of the scopic drive; it puts the subject into (barred, split) contact with the Other (A). This ("Big") Other is to be distinguished from "others"—those theorized by feminism, postcolonial studies and cultural studies, among others. There is no other of the Other, no alternative or parallel real to the real.

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Lacan begins his extended discussion of the gaze in *Four Fundamental Concepts* by setting Maurice Merleau-Ponty apart from "the philosophical tradition," implying that he is the first modern to question Cartesian focus on the visible by theorizing the existence of an invisible world. But Merleau-Ponty could offer no tangible sense of how this invisible could be perceived or structured:¹¹ "You will see that the ways through which [Merleau-Ponty] will lead you are not only of the order of visual phenomenology, since they set out to rediscover [. . .] the dependence of the visible on that which places us under the eye of the seer. But," Lacan continues, "that is going too far, for that eye is only the metaphor of something I would prefer to call the seer's 'shoot' [. . .]—something prior to his eye. What we have to circumscribe [. . .] is the pre-existence of a gaze—I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides" (72). Like the paradoxical pre-existence of signifier to signified, the eye's "shoot"—a

casting, a burst of its own light into the world—pre-exists in a God-like and primordial manner prior to the formation of each subject’s eyeball. Yet, the gaze remains attached to the eye in the present by the presence of dehiscence. Although the eye has an organic body, it cannot see itself directly—it must scotomize itself in order to function—and therefore is available to the vision of all who know how to look. Were this all Lacan said regarding Merleau-Ponty, Jay’s cultural studies reading of the gaze might be correct. “But,” referring again to Merleau-Ponty, Lacan distinguishes his theory of the gaze:

. . . it is not between the invisible and visible that we have to pass. The split that concerns us is not the distance that derives from the fact that there are forms imposed by the world towards which the intentionality of phenomenological experience directs us—hence the limits we encounter in the experience of the visible. The gaze is presented to us only in the form of a strange contingency, symbolic of what we find on the horizon, as the thrust of our experience, namely, the lack that constitutes castration anxiety. (*Fundamental* 72-3)

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The gaze blazes a “thread” through space between the object *a* and the real, the close proximity of which engenders palpable anxiety within each subject. The narcissistic dissociation between the eye and the gaze results in “castration anxiety” that is presented on the subject’s “horizon,” which functions like a “screen.” Though visible if the subject knows how to look, the presence of this “strange contingency” can be perceived, taking many forms: the feeling one is being watched, shame and averting one’s eyes, having eyes in the back of your head, paranoia and the feeling that everyone is out to get you, waking dreams, the “evil eye,” an all-knowing all-seeing god, etc.

Like mistaking a secondary division between visible and invisible for the more primary split of Lacan’s theory, a subject’s own visual desire should not be confused with the desiring gaze of the Other. That is, a subject’s desire should not be confused with desire itself; taste should not be confused with beauty. “The aim of my teaching,” Lacan declares in *Seminar XX*, “[. . .] is to dissociate *a* and *A* by reducing [*a*] to what is related to the imaginary and [*A*] to what is related to the symbolic. [. . .] And yet, *a* has lent itself to be confused with *S(A)* [truth]” (*Encore* 83). It is easy for a subject to confuse its own desire and point of view for the real and objective perception. Once Lacan locates the primary split that constitutes subjectivity between eye and gaze—that space opened in the dehiscence of *a* and *A*—he introduces the “stain,” that “strange contingency” that nevertheless permits eyes to apprehend¹² the gaze: “There is no need for us to refer to some supposition of the existence of a universal seer. If the function of the stain is recognized in its autonomy and identified with that of the gaze, we can see its track, its thread, its trace, at every stage of the constitution of the world, in the scopic field” (*Fundamental* 74). Despite the apparent invisibility of the gaze and its history, its effects upon the real can be apprehended and analyzed layer by layer. Lacan continues on this point, “We will then realize that the function of the stain and of the gaze is both that which governs the gaze most secretly and that which always escapes from the grasp of that form of vision that is satisfied with itself in imagining itself as consciousness” (*Fundamental* 74).

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Invisible to naked eyesight, the eye and the gaze exchange looks nevertheless, transferring knowledge to the unconscious, revealing the presence of a stain. The “thread” or “track” Lacan speaks of here, in regard to the apprehensible aspect of the gaze—the stain itself—should be understood as real, not simply metaphorical. “Yet, reflect that this thread has no need of light—all that is needed is a stretched thread” (*Fundamental* 93). The thread and its stain are material manifestations of the gaze and are often accompanied by anxiety, revulsion, and a sacred/taboo status.

The split between the eye and its gaze is composed not only of light but, according to Lacan, “What determines me [. . .] in the visible, is the gaze that is outside. It is through the gaze that I enter light and it is from the gaze that I receive its effects. Hence it comes about that the gaze is the instrument through which light is embodied and through which [. . .] I am *photographed*” (*Fundamental* 106). The gaze is a two-faced object: on the one hand, it can be used as a tool for cutting, as is the case for the profane eye; on the other, it has the sacred power to create embodiment. As an object existing prior to light and the eye, the gaze exhibits a very close relation with the Word, an utterance prior to the symbolic. The split between eye and gaze is also indicative of the “partiality” of the visual drive. The gaze is part object—object *a* cause of desire—and part drive from and returning to the real. Compared with the other partial drives, the scopic appears ideal and relatively uncut. Sight engulfs the World, spilling across its four horizons while each of the other partial drives is more limited in scope, repressed, and socialized. To account for the castration of the drives, Lacan begins with the impasse Freud theorizes between the “pleasure principle” and the “death instinct” in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (18: 20, 38). This impasse is the essence of tragedy.

“What is a Picture”—The Cinematic Inside the Literary

The objet a in the field of the visible is the gaze.

—Jacques Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*

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The picture is a fact. [. . .]

Thus the picture is linked with reality; it reaches up to it.

It is like a scale applied to reality.

—Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*

Visible universally yet also an intensely subjective phenomena, the object *a* is nevertheless a common feature in both literature and cinema, hence the occasionally cinematic quality of literature and the literariness of much narrative cinema. The gaze embodies and dramatically presents the tragic effects of the separating power of the eye. For example, in his analysis of *Antigone*, Lacan defines tragedy in terms of seeing and kinship: “Tragedy is that which spreads itself out in front so that that image may be produced. When analyzing it, we follow an inverse procedure; we study how an image had to be constructed in order to produce the desired effect” (*Seminar VII* 273). For its audience, tragedy therefore serves as a screen. In analysis or reading this “inverse procedure” coincides with the path taken by the stain, producing a genealogy that often has the structure of tragedy. As happens with the subject, tragedy too is stretched across the real, symbolic, and imaginary. Subjectivity is founded upon tragedy,

according to Lacan, “And if I am anything in the picture, it is always in the form of the screen, which I earlier called the stain, the spot” (*Fundamental* 97). It is upon this “screen” that the narrative real of tragedy shows itself.

Wajcman reads “Seminar XIII” at the point where Lacan returns to the paradoxical qualities to be found in the imagistic tendencies of literature and the narrativity of photographs/pictures:

. . . one could call a graph that which is meant to be read, a schema that which lets itself be seen, and a picture, that which shows. Always supposing a knotting of the three [real, symbolic and imaginary] in each case inasmuch as one must admit that a writing is susceptible of showing (the blankness or white between the lines), in which respect [that writing] would be a picture—the schema susceptible of being read, its graph side, or the picture, of being seen. (143)

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Tragedy is simultaneously a ritualistic form showing impasse and a scotoma. Tragedy shows the same blindness that accompanies the subject’s sense of identity and presentation of self to the world. As important as the first commercial production of the moving picture was in advancing the knowledge and power of the primary split in subjectivity,¹³ many cinematic structures and aesthetics are presaged by literature. Narrative structure, point of view, and description/exposition, among other literary techniques, can be used in ways evocative of cinema. Lacan analyzes Sophocles’s *Antigone* (441 BC), and Poe’s “The Purloined Letter” (1844) to demonstrate the role of cinematic spectacle and visual drive in tragedy and subjectivity.

Antigone shows not only the “primitive,” primordial conflict between sacred and the profane, between the “unwritten and unfailing ordinances of the gods [. . .], and no one knows how long ago they were revealed” (Sophocles 45) and the “mortal,” changeable laws of the state. According to Stuart Schneiderman, Sophocles’s play illustrates the tremendous, visible difference between cultures based on shame and guilt (*Saving Face* 5-6). Guilt is about evidence, while shame is about the presentation of *face* to the world. A brief argument between Antigone and her sister, Ismene, about whether to obey King Creon’s order to leave Polynices’s body unburied begins the tragedy. Antigone challenges Ismene’s fearful refusal to bury their brother: “there will be a longer span of time for me to please those below than there will be to please those here. As for you, if it is your pleasure, dishonour what the gods honour!” (11). To which Ismene replies, using an argument that will later echo the logic of Creon’s narcissism and attempt to identify himself with the state: “I am not dishonouring them, but I do not have it in me to act against the will of the people of the city” (11). The basic conflict between the sacred law and the popular “will” embodied in the modern state is further evidenced by the differing reactions of Antigone and Ismene to shame and guilt. Realizing that Antigone is determined to commit this capital crime against the “throne”/state—as Creon usefully equates them—Ismene whispers to her doomed sister, “Well, tell no one of this act beforehand, but keep it secret,

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and so shall I.” Antigone’s reply is quick and certain: “Ah, tell them all! I shall hate you far more if you remain silent, and do not proclaim this to all” (13). Not only does this sacred gaze compel

Antigone to act, to perform the burial rites, but also to act with “honour” in the open under the suspicious eyes of the state and its populace. Shame is the result of offense to what is sacred, while guilt results from the offense of getting caught by someone with the power to inflict punishment. From Antigone’s point of view, tragically inverted from that of her pragmatic and law-abiding sister, the “face” to be lost disobeying the law of a mortal state cannot match the impossible loss of face for violating several nearly instinctive and sacred taboos. Ismene fears guilt more than shame. Unlike her sister, Antigone would rather die than live under the eternal mortification of a sacred shame.

Antigone has decided from the beginning to recognize kinship and the sacred over the state. She has fallen “in love with the impossible,” as Ismene describes her sister’s seemingly irrational choice. It is the bold impossibility of her act that stares the state right in the face, shaming it, and hiding Antigone’s tracks from the eyes of the state. Upon hearing that “the necessary rites” have been performed on the officially desecrated body of Polynices, Creon demands of his Guard, “What man has dared to do this?” (27). Describing the scene of the miraculous burial of Polynices in the manner of a panning camera, or a human eye straining to see and report, a startled and “guilty” Guard responds: “I do not know; there was no mark of an axe, no earth turned up by a mattock; the earth was hard and dry, unbroken and with no tracks of wheels; the doer left no mark” (27). “Vanished” and given “burial,” though only “covered with a light dust,” the buried corpse is nevertheless a stain, visibly accusing and shaming the state yet also indicative of the criminal act of acknowledging sovereignty outside the state. Just as the Guard could not believe his eyes, yet must describe what he actually saw, Creon cannot believe his ears. Representing the citizens of Thebes, the Chorus confuses this sacred honoring of kinship for an act of the gods against the state (29). At this point, the Chorus, feeling guilt about their

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allegiance to the throne over the gods, is showing fear for their complicity with Creon to commit a sacrilege in the name of the state for its own sovereignty over the sacred. Suspicious of his Chorus, of their long history of devotion to the gods, Creon crudely threatens them, ironically invoking the name of Zeus to reinforce his visibly weakened authority (29-31).

The difference between the sacred gaze and profane seeing is exemplified in the difference between Creon’s guilty narcissism and cover-up on the one hand, and a community shamed at the excesses to which their leader has been driven on the other (*Saving Face* 5-6). Shame is one manifestation of the stain that accompanies the gaze; shame *shows* and its existence alone, Freud hints, is evidence of the split between eyes and the gaze (*Three Essays* 7: 157). Shamed subjects turn their heads from broken taboos and crimes while also trying to avert their eyes from the accusing gaze they know has seen them do wrong. Once Antigone has been condemned to die, and Creon’s refusal to acknowledge shame dominates the narrative, the narrative moves in a guilty spiral around Creon’s allegiance to his profane throne over the sacred desire of the Other (and the people of Thebes). Denying that the populace of Thebes sympathizes with the “traitorous” Antigone, Creon marvels: “Are you not ashamed at thinking differently from them?” Antigone responds from the point of view of shame: “There is no shame in showing regard for those of one’s own stock” (49). In doing this, Antigone favors the individual and familial over the community. As combative as her responses to Creon’s “just” rage seem, the

scenes involving the capture and confession of Antigone to a capital crime are remarkably undramatic; Antigone does nothing to conceal her act of burying the taboo.

Tragedy explodes as the narrative shifts away from Antigone's response to shame and to Creon's obsession with personal motive, betrayal, guilt, and retribution (79). Creon's tragic blindness turns on his son, Haemon's insistence: "This people of Thebes that shares our city does not" share his verdict on Antigone's guilt for treason. Creon thunders, "Is the city to tell me what orders I should give?" Rejecting tyranny, Haemon responds, "Yes, there is no city that belongs to

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a single man!" (71). Desiring to make an example of his son, Creon orders summary execution: "Bring the hateful creature, so that she may die at once close at hand, in the sight of her bridegroom!" (75). No longer addressed (seen) as the King's son by the state, Haemon exits the Palace at Thebes immediately: "She shall not die close to me, never imagine it, and you shall never more set eyes upon my face, so that you can rave on in the company of those friends who will endure it!" (75). Even as he loses his royal status, Haemon questions the legitimacy of Creon's authority and those few who support him. The unrecognized shame of an unburied royal corpse leads to the execution of Antigone, the suicides of Haemon and Eurydice, and the pollution even of neighboring city-states. Creon decrees not only the method of Antigone's execution, but also the motive behind it, saving his power: "I shall take her to where there is a path which no man treads, and hide her, still living, in a rocky cavern, putting out enough food to escape pollution, so that the whole city may avoid contagion" (77). Had Creon been able to look with "a quite different eye" he might have seen the impossible shame his legal policy was showing the "people of Thebes," shaming not only his entire family but the state as well. *Antigone* is a narrative that shows the tragedy that results from Creon's refusal to see himself being seen within the gaze, and attempting to substitute his narcissistic vision of the world for objective reality, that is confusing an object *a* for the Other's desire (A). It is not uncommon for political leaders to blindly impose their utopian visions on their subjects. Tragedy has a temporal, a narrative structure; it requires a temporal "cure."

The Split and "Logical Time"

Referring to the police Prefect's dilemma, in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Purloined Letter," the "lynx-eyed" Dupin observes, "If it is any point requiring reflection, [. . .] we shall examine it to better purpose in the dark" (7), evocative of the cinematic experience. Or, as Georges Bataille puts it in his surrealist manifesto, "The Absence of Myth": "'Night is also a sun,' and the absence of myth is also a myth: the coldest, the

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purest, the only *true* myth" (48). The gaze is most easily apprehended in the dark, askew to the line of light. Through Dupin's looking askew—seeking the Queen's stolen letter outside all hidden places—Poe explores the limits and possibilities of the gaze, that the gaze needs no light since it is neither visible nor invisible. The gaze is thus aligned with knowledge of the real. While the Prefect relies upon scientific observation (where semblance is taken to be the thing itself) and its attendant narrative of guilt to find the letter, the nearly "mythic" Dupin uses his

knowledge of the link between shame and camouflage to seek and find the letter, setting up its thief, Minister D—, for an anticipated (and shameful) fall from power.

The police are unable to find the letter, though they have “looked everywhere” in Minister D—’s hotel room and on his person; they can only rely upon a verbal description to find it (*Seminar II* 201). Despite the fact that police methods reflect belief in a complete separation of symbolic and imaginary, they actually demonstrate an unconscious dependence of the symbolic upon the imaginary. Or, as Lacan puts it, “From the outset, we see, in the dialectic of the eye and the gaze, that there is no coincidence, but, on the contrary, a lure. When, in love, I solicit a look, what is profoundly unsatisfying and always missing is that—*You never look at me from the place from which I see you*. Conversely, *what I look at is never what I wish to see*” (*Fundamental* 102-3). It is precisely this truth, which both hides the letter from the police eye, and makes Dupin look for a “certain gaze” camouflaging the letter. “Had the letter been deposited within the range of their search,” Dupin anticipates, “these fellows would, beyond a question, have found it” (14-5). The “range” of the police’s ability to “search” is limited at a primary, psychological level: “They consider only their *own* ideas of ingenuity; and, in searching for anything hidden, advert only to the modes in which *they* would have hidden it” (16). Put another way, the police can only think and search as those other subjects whom they recognize to be colleagues are able. Contrary to the assumptions of empirical sciences, *seeing* is not an intersubjective sense. On the other hand, as Dupin proves according to Lacan’s reading, *looking* demonstrates an

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awareness of a certain intersubjective logic having the structure of triplicity, the gaze. This tripartite structure also corresponds to what Lacan describes as the three “movements” of “logical time”: 1. “instant of the glance,” 2. “time for comprehending,” and 3. “the moment of concluding” (“Logical Time” 10-13). Like a flash of lightning, judgment results in the third logical “moment” because the subject suddenly apprehends a “certain gaze.”

Narrative too occurs within logical time, as the failure of the police amply demonstrates: “An indefinite number of 2s is always possible between a 1 and a 3” (*Seminar II* 193). The police repeat their strategies and tactics indefinitely, according to Dupin (16). Each of the three moments of logical time Lacan describes corresponds to a segment of the tripartite structure of the gaze, leading to the sublimating possibilities of literature. Analyzing the logical assertion, “I am a man,” Lacan states, “This assertion assuredly appears closer to its true value when presented as the conclusion of the form here demonstrated of anticipating subjective assertion: 1) A man knows what is not a man; 2) Men recognize themselves amongst themselves to be men; 3) I declare myself to be a man for fear of being convinced by men that I am not a man” (“Logical Time” 18). The search by the police for what they believe must be hidden—the Queen’s letter—is potentially endless. Whether it is Descartes, the police, Creon and his state, or the typical obsessional neurotic, each short-circuits logical time by remaining entrenched forever in the “second” moment. Each is imprisoned in a guilt-ridden process of endlessly recognizing and re-recognizing themselves to be “men” among the others each recognizes. Unlike the obscenely careful Prefect, Dupin looks askew and apprehends the Queen’s object *a*, the letter. Camouflaged with glasses with green lenses, “in going the circuit of the room,” Dupin’s eyes “fell upon a trumpery fillagree [sic] card-rack of paste-board, that hung dangling by a dirty blue ribbon from a little brass knob just beneath the middle of the mantel piece” containing papers in

Minister D—’s hotel room. Dupin notices a stain, turning out to be a certain “much soiled and crumpled” letter in the rack. “No sooner had I glanced at this letter, than

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I concluded it to be that of which I was in search. To be sure, it was, to all appearance radically different from the one of which the Prefect had read us so minute a description” (21). As precise as the Prefect’s knowledgeable description of the letter may be, it is “radically” wrong. Dupin’s statement also serves as an excellent definition for the object *a*, and the subjective qualities of literature as well. The Prefect and his police associates do precisely what Lacan’s teaching is meant to prevent: confusion of their own object *a* with the object of the Other’s desire (A). It is exactly because the police cannot see their own scotomas that the Prefect can claim “we took our time, and we searched *every where*,” and yet still cannot find the real letter (10).

In the ternary series of examples Lacan uses “anticipating subjective assertion” based on logical time, there is a point of view shift: (1) a phallic third person singular, (2) a castrated third person plural, and (3) a first-person, real declaration of imaginary identification that cuts into the symbolic through language. It must be noted that the tri-fold structure that is logical time is not Hegelian dialectic or an example of syllogistic logic. The second logical “time” promises the modern fantasy of utopia—a world in which all “numbers” are identical—not in the uncertain future, but in the here and now and forever more. The fact that the second logical time lacks awareness of the limits and possibilities of subjectivity crucial to the third logical moment is evidenced by the reliance of the second on the word of others. Lacan returns to the question of intersubjectivity in logical time in *Encore*: “what warrants a closer look is what each of the subjects sustains, not insofar as he is one among others, but insofar as he is, in relation to the two others, what is at stake in their thinking. Each intervenes in this ternary only as the object *a* that he is in the gaze of the others” (49). Although each subject is an object *a* for the others, this apparent commonality should not be understood as a form of authentic intersubjectivity. Each object *a* is distinct and subjective, and appears to be bestowed on each by the gaze of the Other. Of course, Lacan continues, “there are three of them, but in reality, there are two plus *a*. This two plus *a*, from the standpoint

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of *a*, can be reduced, not to the two others, but to a One plus *a*. [. . .] Between two [. . .] there is always the One and the Other, the One and the *a*, and the Other cannot in any way be taken as a One” (*Encore* 49). Identifications formed upon visible, typological binarisms are nothing but the product of fantasy, regardless of how beautiful, simple, or sensible they may appear. Between two subjects, as between the eye and the gaze, “there is always the One and the Other,” there is always the *split*.

“Screen,” Page, Curtain

One of the most common manifestations of the split between eye and gaze is in what Lacan calls the “screen.” The screen is two-faced and, on either side, “There are two terms, then,” according to Wajcman’s reading of “Seminar XIII,” “the world, the subject. How does the subject accede to a representation of the world? By the senses, beginning with sight. This

necessitates posing, or interposing, a third term: the screen. Let it be what supports everything of the world that presents itself for the subject” (Wajcman 146). Like the gaze, the screen shows. However, “The screen,” Wajcman reads Lacan further, “is an elementary term; elementary but complex, or ambiguous. For if its function is to support, even before presenting whatever it is then constructed on two opposing ideas—it presents and it hides” (Wajcman 146). The capacity of a screen to “hide” and “present” is simultaneous, and it cannot be consciously controlled, even by a subject who knows. The screen functions as a form of camouflage or, perhaps, camouflage is a form of screen. Wajcman’s paraphrase of “Seminar XIII” reinforces just this point: “the screen is also an object in the world [. . .]. If, however, the screen distinguishes itself from other objects, it is because it is the material upon which the world is deposited; the world is drawn upon its surface, the signifier is itself there inscribed, the object itself pierces it, in painting itself there” (Wajcman 147). Screens focus imaginary characteristics of the gaze for each subject. Wajcman suggests that the function of the screen is fulfilled not only by the cinematic, and that which might go by the name of “mind’s eye,” but also by the printed page, that four-sided sheet of paper upon which literature is

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focused, in the same sublimated manner that an eclipse must safely be presented for the naked eye. Although Lacan posits an essential difference between painting and representation in his analysis of the gaze, which might seem to put literature upon the side of representation, I suggest that literature—unlike literal uses of language which aim at reality—functions like a “picture.”

Endnotes

¹ The word “contenance” has particular psychoanalytic significance (especially for theories of drive) when its etymology is considered. According to the *OED*, the word is closely related both to “continent” (wholeness, holding together, space or territory) and to “countenance” (presentation of a public face). Contenance is an action that connects a subject’s perception, its eye, and a line of vision extending to a particular, enclosed space in the world. Early usages of this word refer generally to “a holding back, repression.” Later, the liminal characteristics of contenance focus on “self-restraint,” particularly with respect to “sexual appetite,” or even “voluntary control over excretory functions.” Seeing and reading a story are both performances of the act of contenance, which presents the subject with certain opportunities (being able to communicate and effect change upon the world) and difficulties (being subject to fantasy and desire).

² For an innovative and thorough discussion of the close and unique correspondence between the partial drives of gaze and voice see Ellie Ragland’s “The Relation between the Voice and the Gaze” (187-204). Ragland puts this special relation in the context of the voice and the gaze being among the eight primary objects that are a “cause-of-desire” (188) and that directly “drive language” (190).

Also, the Bible is instructive on the issue of the difference between the mythic seeing and modern vision. Once God—in this case, Christ—has died and been reborn, he walks among his subjects, “But their eyes were holden that they should not know him” (Luke 24:16). It is only at the moment when the dead God, under the profane pretense of seeking shelter and a meal with His disciples, blesses some otherwise nourishing bread “and their eyes were opened, and they knew him; and he vanished out of their sight” (Luke 24:31). A similar shift from mythic to modern occurs in Genesis at the moment Adam and Eve share the Apple, “And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and

they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons” (3:7). A mythic eye sees only its faith in the unknown and unseen truth; whereas modern vision responds to narcissism and naked fact.

³ After a warning to sacrifice the hands and feet if they should cause an “offense,” Christ warns about evil possibilities inherent in the eye, “And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: it is better for thee to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire” (Matthew 18:9). The connection of eye—its ability to tempt with erotic visions of the world—to the manual and motor drives is suggestive of what Lacan says about the gaze and its relationship to the real.

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⁴ For a discussion of the distinction between “seeing” and “looking” see Stuart Schneiderman’s “Art According to Lacan” (19-20).

⁵ This is especially true of the voice; see Ragland.

⁶ Lacan also compares existentialism and Sartre to a prison when beginning a discussion of “Logical Time” (6). For another excellent example of the differences between the Lacanian and the existentialist gazes, see *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (83-4).

⁷ See Erens, Penley, and my forthcoming essay, “‘Visual ‘Drive’ and Cinematic Narrative: Reading ‘Gaze Theory’ in Lacan, Hitchcock, and Mulvey.”

⁸ Since the 1990s, “gaze theory” figures in an increasing number of humanities fields and sub-fields, among them: critical race theory, film theory, Holocaust studies, mass communications, postcolonial studies, contemporary rhetoric, and various psychoanalytic approaches to literature and culture. Studies within each of these areas refer nearly always (and exclusively) to both Lacan’s “The Mirror Stage” and Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” See also the recently published “Rhetoric, Ideology, and the Gaze: *The Ambassadors’ Body*” by Henry Krips on the rhetorical applications of Lacan’s gaze for cultural studies. While Krips distinguishes his approach from what he terms “Screen theory” (which includes the semiotic approaches of Jean-Louis Baudry, Stephen Heath, Christian Metz, Kaja Silverman,) on the basis that it lacks a theory of the real, his own cultural studies application also omits discussion of the primary split, which is necessary for understanding the partial embodiment of the real.

⁹ The importance of “Visual Pleasure” in the broader practice of theory and criticism is shown by being part of the (single-volume) *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (2001). This comprehensive collection represents a diverse array of movements and both Western and non-Western authors, from Plato, Aristotle, and Augustine to Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche to Achebe, Bhabha, and hooks. This definitive single-volume collection of theory and criticism includes the most influential and formative works written in the last two and a-half millennia.

¹⁰ Michel Foucault’s discussion of the function of the eyeball in the literary and philosophical works of Georges Bataille in his “Preface to Transgression” (44-6) is relevant on this point.

¹¹ See also Jay 353.

¹² “Apprehend” carries with it not only a sense of awareness, but dread and anxiety as well, being related to “apprehensive.” This expresses the twin aspect of the “stain.”

¹³ It is no accident that Freud begins lecturing and publishing widely on psychoanalysis in 1895, the same year that the Lumière's organize the first-ever public screening of a film at the Grand Café in Paris.

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