5 The currency of looking

'I' and the picture look each other in the face.

Paul Klee *The Thinking Eye* (ed. Jürg Spiller), London: Lund Humphries 1961, p57.

This chapter will consider an aspect of making, viewing and discussing pictures which various commentators have described as *the gaze*, a term which was originally coined in French philosophical thought as 'le regard'. Although its translation as *the look* is perhaps more flexible in that this does not imply quite such a fixity on the part of either viewer or viewed, it has been absorbed into a variety of discourses as the gaze and so, for now, I will stick to the common usage. The gaze could generally be described as that aspect of seeing which anticipates and acknowledges the presence of others. It is often used to imply a sense of the self or subject's objectification in the eyes of another which, in the extreme, may evoke feelings of confrontation or threat. It is worth quoting at length from a passage in Damisch's study of perspective which itself ends with a quotation from Merleau-Ponty:

"That the place of the 'subject' is not the geometral point defined by optic geometry, and that the same subject moves about within the painting, that it can be attracted and seduced by it, like Narcissus by his spectral reflection, such is the very law of vision. In this respect the visible becomes tangible: my hand can touch something only because it can itself be touched, and if vision, as Merleau-Ponty put it, following Descartes, is a 'palpitation of the gaze', it follows that the person who gazes must not be unfamiliar to the world upon which he looks: 'from the moment I see, my vision must be doubled by a complementary vision, or another vision; myself seen from without, such as another would see me, installed in the midst of the visible, in the process of considering it from a certain spot.'"[1]

1. Damisch, op.cit. p46; Merleau-Ponty quotation from *The Visible and the Invisible* Evanston: NWUP 1968, p134.

Drawing on both Merleau-Ponty and Sartre's *L'Être et le Néant*, Lacan sees the gaze as occurring at a prior level to the visual. If the gaze is the object through which we see ourselves being seen, it occurs within the domain of our imagining. It accords our perception of others with a condition of subjectivity. Through the gaze "imagined in the field of the Other" that other becomes more than objectified in our perception, that is, we may acknowledge their subjectivity.[2] We may be surprised by the gaze of another - surreptitiously catching their eye, for example - but it is not necessarily a "seen gaze." It can also be imagined by us in the "sound of rustling leaves, suddenly heard while out hunting... a footstep heard in a corridor."[3] Bearing in mind Sartre's equation of seeing with desiring, specifically in the sense of voyeurism, the gaze

2. Lacan, op. cit. p72.

Figure 27

Jeff Wall *Picture for women* 1979

encounters itself in this experience of surprise not as a property of the "annihilating subject" but of "the subject sustaining himself in a function of desire", that is as the (shameful) object whose desire, like Duchamp's *Bride*, is disclosed in the imagined revelation of another's look. Lacan relates the picture's function to this property of disclosure, as an arena in which the subject maps himself. If the act of mimicry in the animal kingdom (governed by the conventions of camouflage, intimidation and what he calls travesty, the intent to self-ridicule through self-representation) could be related to the act of mimetic representation in painting, the latter could be seen as an anticipation of the gaze: "You want to see? Well take a look at this!"[4] Lacan sees in this activity, not the painter's desire to be seen (although this surely plays some part in the process) but to offer something to be seen:"Something is given not so much to the gaze as to the eye, something that involves the abandonment, the laying down of the gaze."[5] In painting whose intent is to deceive the eye, *trompe l'oeil*, this pacifying gesture is transformed into one which 'lures', it solicits a look which it subsequently deceives. The painting here constitutes "a triumph of the gaze over the eye" in that it camouflages its status as a representation with the intent to master the viewer's eye.[6]

Jeff Wall's *Picture for Women* (1979, figure 27), a photographic reworking of Manet's *Une Bar aux Folies-Bergère* (1881-82), provides an intriguing interpretation of both the gaze and of the gaze as a function of desire. The picture portrays the image-making process transparently, in that it reveals the process through which it has come into being. Wall's strategy is deceptively simple. He has photographed an interior space, the artist's studio, in which are situated two figures, a large format camera, lights and other assorted objects - namely, the photographer's working environment and his tools. One realizes, however, that the camera, whose lens corresponds to what could be construed as the vanishing point of the implicit perspective scheme, is actually an image of the camera used to expose the film, to take *this* picture. What we are seeing is a photograph of a reflection in a mirror. The woman to the left appears to be looking directly at the viewer but her gaze is in fact directed beyond, to the camera reflected in the mirror. The man to the right, Wall himself, holds the cable release connected to the camera's shutter and looks somewhat tentatively at the woman's reflection. Between them, the 'eye' of the camera impassively looks at itself in the mirror and in doing so, encompasses the scene and the play of gazes it contains. Model and photographer become both figures in the picture and simultaneously its viewers through the intercession of the mirror. The camera records its function as the means through which the picture comes into being and simultaneously embodies the notional vanishing point. It is the viewer's counterpart in the scene, "both our eye and our blind spot" as Thierry

3. Ibid, p84; In Sartre's words: "Of course what most often manifests a look is the convergence of two ocular globes in my direction. But the look will be given just as well on occasion when there is a rustling of branches, or the sound of a footstep followed by silence, or the slight opening of a shutter, or a light movement of a curtain." *Being and Nothingness*, p257.

4. Lacan, op. cit. p101.

5. Ibid. p101.

6. Ibid. p103.

7. Thierry de Duve 'The Mainstream and the Crooked Path', *Jeff Wall* London: Phaidon 1996, pp26-55, p31.

de Duve has noted.[7] The woman is no longer only the object of the artist's gaze but also its viewer - he is 'surprised' by her reciprocal stare. The mechanics of the illusion are laid bare, with the hierarchy of roles disintegrated and the dominance implied by the artist's male gaze, his founding perception so to speak, dissolved in a play of gazes. Voyeurism - artist's and viewer's desire to see without being seen - is unveiled by the mirror's transparent clarity which renders visible the traditionally invisible surface of photography's picture plane, proffering its 'underneath' to use Damisch's term.[8] "Everything is explicit in this image, its entire procedure is avowed, nothing is concealed and its total visibility is blinding."[9]

8. see Hubert Damisch 'The Underneaths of Painting' (trans. Francette Pacteau & Stephen Bann), *Word & Image* 1/2, April/June 1985, pp197-209.

9. de Duve, op.cit. p31.

This reflexivity, through which the picture reveals its formation, is what Bryson would describe as *deictic*. In his polemical discussion of 'The Gaze and the Glance', he asserts that Western painting has generally sought to erase the evidence of its grounding in the material labour and mental processes of the artist, processes which occur over time in the physical space in front of the picture surface. In this sense, it is what he terms *aoristic*. In linguistic terms, a deictic utterance is understood as referring to its spatial and temporal location relative to its content. It "points back directly (deiknonei [to show]) to the body of the speaker... " An aoristic utterance on the other hand, "describes that action without involvement or engagement on the part of the speaker recounting the action", that is, it is dislocated spatially and temporally from the event described.[10] Western painting has, for Bryson, an aoristic tendency to cover its tracks. The brushmark obliterates the canvas and is in turn obliterated by further brushmarks in a process of perpetual martyrdom. The resulting image is formed over time but resists enquiry into its formation. The fleeting moments of observation (perhaps best summed up by the term, *glance*, as opposed to the gaze), of thought and gesture which cumulatively coalesce into the final form are subsumed into a mythical instantaneity, "an eternal moment of disclosed presence" which posits "on the one hand, the moment of origin, of the founding perception; and on the other, the moment of closure, of receptive passivity".[11] The artist's method becomes the magician's *abracadabra*, the puff of smoke in which the image is transported into a realm of "transcendent temporality."

10. Bryson, op.cit. p88.

11. Ibid, pp93-94.

However attractive Bryson's ideas are in general, theoretical terms, when they are applied to specific paintings (he cites Titian's *Bacchus and Ariadne* as an example), the actual evidence does not always support the claims made. Even a cursory look at the surface of a Titian painting reveals a wealth of information about artistic gesture and the image's development over time which undoubtedly evokes the artist as a presence in front of the canvas. A painting by Holbein or

Van Eyck would, perhaps, provide a better instance of Bryson's 'painting of the gaze' in that the point at which the paint itself appears to cohere into a sensible image is situated extremely close to the picture surface, thereby making it difficult for all but the most inquisitive of spectators to trace the image's genesis. Such observations, however, may account for the technical aspects of an artist's practice but they do not even get close to its mental or conceptual dimensions. After all, the material process is rarely the sole motivating factor in an artist's pursuit of meaning.

Bryson's analysis of Masaccio's *Trinity with Donors and Skeleton* (1425-28) is more convincing. He maintains that the 'painting of the gaze' is less apparent in the earlier phases of perspective painting where the viewer's body occupies a privileged position in relation to the depicted scene and is conceived of as participating in a continuation of the implied pictorial space as a "measurable, visible, objectifiable unit."[12] He notes that the viewer's body is accommodated by a "continuity of ground plan from the exterior to the interior on the image" but maintains that Masaccio has incorporated a second non-empirical vanishing point, higher than the first, which locates the spiritual dimension of the picture's content "in a zone the body of the viewer cannot occupy" with the figure of Christ interpreted as "spatially elevated far above the viewer's own body."[13] He seems to be suggesting that the painting's system is adapted to present an image in which the primary iconographic element is freed from the spatial construction of the rest of the painting, a construction which incorporates the viewer's own body into its proportions. The figure of Christ is apparently elevated into a space which is set aside both spatially and temporally. Whether or not the painting itself sits easily in such an analysis is open to debate. Bruce Cole, for example, suggests that Masaccio sought to exclude the viewer from an implied spatial relationship with the represented scene, making him "an observer instead of the participant he is in the Brancacci Chapel" frescoes.[14] Bryson's use of the painting, however, is unashamedly programmatic - it is a means to an end. Whereas the spatial description of such works directed itself towards the viewer's body, with the depicted figures often aware of the presence of a witness, later paintings such as Jan Vermeer's *The Art of Painting* (1662-65) display a different regard for the viewer, one which has an element of theatre about it. Indeed, Vermeer's painting is highly staged and orchestrated for this viewer. The curtain is drawn aside, quietly - one could say almost surreptitiously - revealing the studio, its occupants and a wealth of iconographic details which invite speculation about the painting's allegorical subject. Unlike the Masaccio, the figures here are inadvertent, absorbed in their tasks and thoughts, *apparently* unaware of an observer whose status as implicitly transparent or invisible Michael

12. Ibid. p106.

13. Ibid. pp108-110.

14. Bruce Cole *Masaccio and the Art of Early Renaissance Florence* Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press 1980, p182.

15. Michael Fried *Absorption and Theatricality, Painting and the Beholder in the Age of Diderot* Berkeley & London: University of California Press 1980, see pp130-150.

Figure 28

Diego Velazquez *Las Meninas* 1656

Fried has described as the "supreme fiction" of later (specifically French) painting.[15] Like Masaccio, however, Vermeer implicitly orientates the entire illusion towards the viewer, inviting meditation on the divisions between art and life and illusion and reality.

In Diego Velazquez's *Las Meninas* (1656, figure 28), the figures are anything but unaware of an onlooker's presence. The painting represents a large interior space, apparently adjacent to Velazquez's own suite of rooms in the Alcázar Palace, the Royal residence of King Philip IV of Spain.[16] From behind a huge canvas whose back is facing the viewer, the painter himself gazes out of the picture, brush and palette in hand, as if caught in the dual act of observing and representing his model. To his left are eight figures and a reclining dog, five of whom similarly gaze out towards the same point as Velazquez himself. The centre of interest is the Infanta Margarita, daughter of the King and Queen, whose face is situated almost exactly in the centre of the lower half of the canvas. Around her, the maids of honour, a male courtier, a dwarf and a small boy make up the retinue whilst the dog dozes, seemingly oblivious to the scene around it, acting, as Foucault has pointed out, as nothing more than "an object to be seen."[17] At the rear of the space, another male courtier is silhouetted as he stands on the threshold of a brightly lit stairwell which lies beyond the open door leading out of the room. As he holds back a curtain, letting the light into the well, he also looks towards the same point beyond the picture's surface. Next to him on the far wall is a framed image which at first appears similar to the numerous other images of paintings hung around the room. This image, however, seems to glow with a light which does not tally with the subdued lighting in that part of the room. It soon becomes apparent that this is no ordinary picture but the ghostly reflection in a mirror of the familiar faces of Philip and his wife, Queen Mariana. Now the object of the Infanta's, the servants' and the painter's respectful gazes becomes clear. The implication is that they are looking at their Sovereign. But at the same time, the multiple looks are directed also at us, the viewers, who simultaneously occupy that same point in front of the scene as the implied monarchs. Moreover, as Kemp has observed, the image in the mirror is not necessarily a reflection of the King and Queen themselves but of their image on the great canvas on which Velazquez is working.[18] There is an intriguing double trope at work here: *Las Meninas* is itself a painting representing a painter working on a canvas which in turn is represented as a spectral image in a painted mirror.

Each element in the large painting together with its implied sense of hushed deference, seems to relate to the particular perspective of the Royal pair, not least in terms of their privilege, nobility and absolute power. They, and we by

16. Two opposed but equally illuminating discussions of *Las Meninas* can be found in Michel Foucault 'Las Meninas', *The Order of Things* London and New York: Routledge 1989 (1966), pp 3-16 and Kemp *The Science of Art*, pp104-108.

17. Foucault, op.cit. p13.

18. Kemp, op.cit. p108.

proxy, are both the painting's observers and its protagonists, determining the order of things - our relationship to the picture and depicted world - and activating the painting's meaning through our reciprocal gaze. For Foucault, "the entire picture is looking out at a scene for which it is itself a scene."[19] The picture plane serves as the ground on which the fictional world of the illusion confronts the real one. The scene is *seen* by us and yet we simultaneously and unwittingly serve as the absent party, the missing object of the various characters' gazes. We, in turn, see *ourselves* seen in the deferential looks of what, up to that moment, were the objects of our own gaze and become an object in the eyes of these other, albeit fictive, people. The painting cunningly forces us, therefore, to question our own subjective relation to it and, as with the examples discussed earlier, necessarily requires our participation: it needs us to look at it looking at us. It epitomizes the division in the viewing subject between the seer and the seen, or in Lacanian terms, the split between the eye and the gaze, where the subject is both situated at the apex of the cone of vision and simultaneously serves as a screen which interrupts the gaze of the 'other'.

19. Foucault, op.cit. p13.

In terms of painting, the gaze, according to Bryson, is a static, fixed mode of looking which abstracts from the practice of viewing "a valorized moment when the eye contemplates the world alone." Its logic rests on two assumptions: the reduction of the body to a single point; and the moment of looking as an occurrence outside duration.[20] Where the gaze is immobile, however, the *glance* (le coup de regard) is fleeting and surreptitious. It enables the artist and subsequently the viewer to build up a conceptual version of compositional structures but does not allow them to take these in at once. If the gaze is constituted from the fused epiphanies of the glance, its logic requires the latter's repression. The glance could be seen as vision at leisure, with the eyes free to wander in the realm of the visible without recourse to or understanding of structure or composition. In physiological terms, *foveal acuity* requires that the eye fixate on an aspect of the world in order to achieve a clarity of perception but it also necessitates the eye's constant scanning of the visual field in what are called *saccadic* movements. Without such movements, an optically stabilized image projected onto the retina's foveal region will appear to fade as the receptor cells adapt to the constancy of the light signal and "cease to signal to the brain the presence of the image in the eye."[21]

20. Bryson, op.cit. p94; see also his 'The Gaze in the Expanded Field', *Vision and Visuality* (ed. Hal Foster), Seattle: Bay Press 1988, pp87-108.

21. R.L. Gregory *Eye and Brain, The Psychology of Seeing* London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson 1972, p59.

The physical motivation of the glance therefore informs its acquisitive and purposive functioning. When viewing a picture, as any other object in the visual world, the eyes likewise scan the surface, direct the fovea to areas of interest and enable the brain to construct a 'picture' of the picture. As we have seen,

Figure 29

Ernst Mach *Self portrait through the left eye* 1900

22. Ernst Mach image (figure 32) reproduced in *Kunstforum International* 128, October/ December 1994, p190; *Anders Zorn* Bielefeld & Leipzig: Verlag von Velhagen 1925; there is a reproduction and discussion of Zorn in E.H. Gombrich 'Standards of Truth: The Arrested Image and the Moving Eye', *The Image and the Eye, Further Studies in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* Oxford: Phaidon 1982, pp244-277, p265.

if the actual picture is constructed according to the principles of perspective, it will resemble the represented object or space to some degree and enable the viewer to successfully construct a perception of that object or space from an aspect of it. Logically, 'painting of the gaze' (or for that matter, the photograph) which presents the image as a totality in focus both across its surface and into its depth, would appear to provide the necessary minimum means with which to construct or reconstruct an understanding of what is pictured and would appear functionally more robust to what could be called a painting of the glance. Appropriate examples of the latter would be the curious *Self Portrait through the Left Eye* (1900, figure 29) by Ernst Mach or the portrait etchings of Anders Zorn, where the facial features of a figure are often the only areas treated with any degree of focus as the rest of the image dissolves into a mass of vigorously hatched lines.[22] More effectively, however, the work of Swiss artist, Markus Raetz, explores the activity and space of viewing and the mobility of vision conveyed by the notion of the glance. Raetz's work employs a vast array of media including painting, sculpture and photography but which perhaps is essentially rooted in the practice of drawing. Since the late 1960s, he has developed a mode of 'drawing' or constructing what could be called three dimensional anamorphoses. Elements such as twigs or pieces of bent wire are deployed across the space of the wall/gallery in seemingly chaotic configurations which appear to coalesce into recognisable two dimensional images when viewed from a specific point, often being seen as reflections in strategically placed mirrors.

A work titled *Dryade* (1985-88, figures 30 & 32) consists of the following parts: an arrangement of briar twigs is located on a wall in the corner of a room; on the adjacent wall, a small circular mirror has been placed at right angles to this apparently random arrangement; to the left of the twigs is an elliptical blue shape painted directly onto the wall's surface and, finally, a clear glass disc of the same dimensions as the mirror sits atop a plinth placed in front of the wall. This disc is rotated around the vertical axis so that its shape in perspective matches the shape of the elliptical blue form on the wall. The viewer seems to be invited to line up the contours of the glass and painted shape and in doing so, he or she experiences an unusual, fleeting revelation. The blue shape turns the glass disc into a kind of mirror which in turn is positioned to reflect what is reflected in the real mirror, namely, the array of twigs. Seen from this specific point, the twigs combine to delineate a naked female torso, offering - as the title suggests - a glimpse of a nymph bathing in a pool of blue water. The piece could also be seen, perhaps, as an exploded reworking of Duchamp's photo-collage of 1942, *À la manière de Delvaux* (figure 31), which similarly depicts a naked female torso glimpsed through a circular mirror perched on a bow of white, gift-wrapping

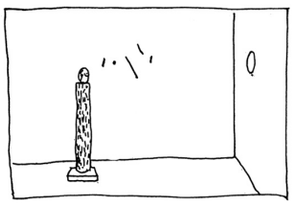

Figure 30

Markus Raetz drawing of *Dryade* 1985-88

23. François Grunbacher 'The Op-posite of Things', *Parkett* 8, 1986, pp61-65, p62.

24. 'Markus Raetz in conversation with William Furlong', *Audio Arts* 14/1, March 1994.

Figure 31

Marcel Duchamp *À la manière de Delvaux* 1942

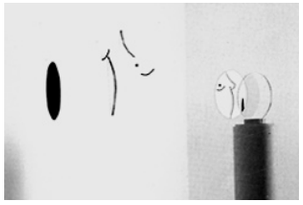

Figure 32

Markus Raetz detail of *Dryade*

ribbon (itself a reference to Paul Delvaux's painting *L'Aurore* of 1937). More in the manner of a Heath-Robinson contraption, Raetz's ensemble and the space it occupies are orchestrated by an invisible network of construction lines, the "rays" of linear perspective, in which the viewer is caught in an attempt to reconstruct

a "scattered reality" from the work's seemingly random elements, as François Grundbacher has noted in his discussion of Raetz's visual puzzles.[23] Vision *grazes*, and is grazed by, the work's tangle of forms and invisible force field of lines. The work's sense is revealed through snatched glimpses and in turn reveals looking as almost furtive. Although Raetz has said that his subjects and motifs are chosen simply in terms of their ease of recognition, it cannot be denied that in this work, the mirror reflects that which is desired or more specifically, what the artist presents as desirable.[24] As in the Duchamp collage and his later installation, *Étant Donnés...* (1946-66), the viewer is implicated as explicitly voyeuristic.

Raetz's 'drawing' is glimpsed through the mediating devices of mirror and glass and disintegrates with the slightest change in the viewer's position. The mirror is fundamental to the work's effect. It shows the opposite of the real, and more generally, it reflects the image of ourselves as we appear to others. Lacan's concept of the 'mirror stage' developed initially in 1936, identifies a moment of transition in a child's development from a condition of fragmentation of the self, a lack of awareness of the self as an organized entity, to a totalized image of the self.[25] This epiphany occurs when the child first recognizes himself in his reflection in the mirror, in the (inverted) image of himself as he appears to others. The mirror stage establishes a narcissistic, dyadic relationship between the subject and their reflection with the self being subsequently constructed in imitation of this coherent image. It is indicative of what Lacan calls the Imaginary realm, that is, a realm prior to the subject's immersion in the world of social relations and language (the Symbolic realm) which is brought about as a result of the œdipal stage. In terms of "the split between the eye and gaze", a later development in Lacan's thinking, the mirror image provides a nice example of the divided subject who is simultaneously objectified via the reflection in the mirror, at once both seer and seen.[26]

The mirror translates the world into an image but an image that changes to reflect the subject's movement. Its image exists within the dimension of time as well as space. Raetz's twig drawing is therefore a line extended not only in real space but also in time. It reveals itself as an image in the time of viewing, in the time of the viewer. This image is disclosed from one magic point but that point precludes a reading of the chaos which precedes and succeeds it; the image is presented in its process of formation as it moves in and out of

legibility. In this respect, the work is directed to the glance and refuses a closure of form and hence of interpretation. Just as the 'drawing' is expanded in a spatial field, stretched between the poles of chaos and order, so the act of looking is recognized as essentially embodied, that is, as the faculty of a mobile, active and desiring subject. The viewer retraces the artist's steps, discovers paths through the work. They become part of the picture as Raetz has said, literally inhabiting and moving around within it. Much as Magritte's *Pipe* unsettles our reading of pictures, the work's effect, its embrace of mutability, resides in the viewer's oscillation between the poles of recognition and confusion and in the projection of perception along an axis of desire, the desire to extract an image from the flux of appearances. Actual space is organized through invisible threads which plot vision and the visible in terms of projection: projection of the image and the projection of desire.

25. Marcia Tucker *Markus Raetz: In the Realm of the Possible* New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art 1988, see pp44-46. Tucker draws on psychoanalysis in order to illuminate the relation between the structure of the mind and the structure of art: "If we can assume that in some ways the structure of art... is, like literature, analogous to the structure of the mental apparatus itself, then the form of both should coincide - that is, artistic forms and structures will reflect psychic ones and vice versa." (p44)

26. Lacan *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, see especially pp67-119. The reference for Lacan's later (1949) paper on the mirror stage is as follows: 'The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I', *Écrits: A Selection* (trans. Alan Sheridan), London: Routledge 1992 (1977), pp1-7. A useful gloss on Lacan's attitude to vision can be found in Jay *Downcast Eyes*, pp338-353.