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ANAMORPHOSIS

I will take my cue from anamorphosis, but I wish to disentangle this concept from its mere placement in the field of the visual and give it a more emphatic range. This would be an ontological status, as it were, a structure which has far-reaching consequences for the major questions (I am almost embarrassed to say it) of subjectivity and being. I wish to formulate from the outset a simple philosophical thesis, namely, that the subject can be grasped as an anamorphosis of being. This is one way to bring subject and being together in one conceptual move. The way subjectivity is inscribed in being is anamorphic, that is, we never have an initial zero situation where subject would confront being out there, where the subject would be essentially established in a subject-object relation, in a correlation (caught in a correlationist cage, to follow the trendy parlance promoted by the recent vogue of speculative realism). Rather, there is an anamorphosis of being which conditions the very notion of the subject as placed in a (dis)torsion.

This is in line with Lacan's initial and pervasive move in session VII, entitled 'Anamorphosis,' of *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (26 February 1964).¹ This is the session whose reference to Hans Holbein's notorious painting *The Ambassadors* (1533) provided the front cover image for the book publication of the seminar in 1973 (subsequently reproduced in most of its numerous translations). This choice of cover image thus placed the whole enterprise of *Seminar XI*, Lacan's most famous and most programmatic seminar, under the banner of this anamorphic structure, under the cover of anamorphosis as clue. Anamorphosis thus offers itself as entry point to something that epitomizes Lacan's psychoanalytic endeavor, capturing its thrust in an image, something that vividly (graphically, as the American saying goes) encapsulates Lacan's particular take on the Freudian discovery: his perspective and the torsion it involves. The cover image cannot help but function as an allegory or a metaphorical condensation of the teaching that is being expounded; it is its striking emblem, one designed to strike the eye.

The enigmatic blur featured on this very famous painting is no longer really an enigma to anyone these days. It presents the most notorious case of anamorphosis,

1. I will be referring to Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. A. Sheridan (London: Penguin 1977).

often used as a showcase in the classroom (including my own schooldays). It is a pedagogical device that can immediately enthrall the audience of pupils to the delight of the teacher and provide the instant gratification of discovery. It is thus an apt initiation into the visual arts, and particularly apt since it demonstrates by a very simple means that a picture, an image, the visual field as such involves an enigma. The image has to be deciphered; there is a blur implied in its viewing and by extension ultimately in all vision. Given the notoriety of this picture and the fame of the solution to its riddle, it takes effort to restore to it the dignity of an enigma. This is what I will try to do here. There is an immediate joy in discovering an image within an image, in detecting the two perspectives one must adopt: the side-view that makes sense of the blur, but this making sense can only be attained at the price of turning everything else into a blur. One sees this other image only by blurring what was presented to the canonical front-view, so one is stuck with a parallax view. Either one sees the ambassadors, or one sees the skull; we cannot have it both ways. There is a choice, a shift in view that constitutes the tension in the image and the oscillation of the gaze. Hence there is already a minimal trap of desire in this oscillation, a pulsation of desire that comes from being caught between two viewpoints, from being literally displaced in relation to what is presented up front. The satisfaction then comes from the shift itself, the gap involved in the gaze. While there is an immediate joy that comes from deciphering, from finding a hidden image within the image—a message within the message, the making sense of what seemed merely a contingent smear or disturbance—in fact, and here is where the value of allegory comes in, one surmises that this gap conditions the very image itself. It spells out the hidden condition of its vision, well beyond the particular picture at hand. If this is endowed with this allegorical value, and assuming this hidden condition to be universal, then the blur in this particular picture displays something that conditions vision as such, its anamorphic torsion, and this particular picture only brings out and displays what is usually concealed: the blind spot not usually seen as such.

Lacan's move is very simple. It is spelled out in various ways in the four sessions that constitute the second part of the seminar under the general heading "Of the gaze as *objet petit a*." It is condensed in the simple statement that the gaze is an object. This claim is counterintuitive for one commonly assumes that the gaze is a subjective opening to objectivity. It is in front of the gaze that objects are presented—this would even be what presents the minimal trait that defines objectivity, namely, the capacity of the object to be both an object of and for the gaze and thus, by extension, an object of representation. The object's "thereness" consists in its availability to the gaze. An object is what offers itself to the gaze. Thus the gaze epitomizes the subjective standpoint, the subject's point of view on the world at large out there. Even if the physical gaze is metaphorized or spiritualized, the same structure still holds, or holds even more emphatically in its pure form. This is what is encapsulated in the very term theory. It comes from *theorein*, to look, to contemplate, to seize by the gaze, to gain insight. And this is not merely by the physical

eye, which is always prey to deception, but by the mind's eye—the eyes of the soul, as Plato famously put it—in a pure gaze that is beyond the limitations of physical perception.² Pursuing this metaphor, thought would then be the pure gaze beyond perception. The same goes for the term speculation, with its Latin etymology from *specular* (and thus all the way up to 'speculative realism'). Furthermore, the same also goes for reflection as an essentially optical phenomenon: there is no reflection and no self-reflection without the prop of the mirror. From Plato to Husserl, one follows the sustained endeavor of theory to seize the *eidos*, the pure form or the pure object as it presents itself for an essential vision, for a pure gaze. (What is Husserl's phenomenological and eidetic reduction but a systematic attempt to distill the pure gaze as constitutive of objectivity?) There is a quintessential visual metaphoricity underlying western philosophy, its theory, its speculative turn, its reflection. In short, visibility underpins the very notions of subject and object. The history of philosophy could be written as the history of optical metaphors from Plato's cave to Marx's *camera obscura*. To know is to see properly, to see clearly, and if human vision is distorted, if one cannot see and know properly, this can be accounted for by optical delusions and trickery, by the physics of vision underlying the metaphysics. To be aware of these delusions is tantamount to removing them or counteracting them, thus enabling clear vision. The metaphor is not innocent, its visibility has a number of invisible presuppositions.

In the opening paragraph of the 'Introduction' to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, on the very first page of that notoriously difficult book, Hegel uses the metaphor of the optical medium as the metaphor for cognition in order to expose some presuppositions of this metaphor. He speaks about the ray of truth being refracted through a medium, through the prism of our cognitive apparatus. The epistemological problem of cognition would then be how to subtract the refraction so as to get to the original direction of the ray of truth, to its undistorted form. Our cognitive attempts refract the unalloyed ray of truth and the problem is how to set it straight. Hegel's point, in a nutshell, is that, by formulating the problem of cognition in these terms, we are already looking at the picture the wrong way: we presuppose that we are over here and the truth (the object, being at large) is over there, and the problem is how to get to it. His point, not unlike Lacan's, is that we are already inscribed in the ray of truth supposed to come to our gaze from out there. Our gaze, he claims, cannot be separated from it: "For it is not the refraction of the ray, but the ray itself whereby truth reaches us, that is cognition" (47).³ And a bit further: the idea of cog-

2. Derrida famously diagnosed Plato's enterprise as 'phonocentrism,' the privilege of the voice in its unalloyed presence over writing, the trace etc. (and in Plato's tracks, the whole history of western metaphysics that followed suit). But the theme of the voice is no doubt of a lesser importance in Plato in comparison with the ubiquitous presence of the theme of vision, the proper ways to see (cf. the parable of the cave etc.), with all its metaphorical extensions, so that Plato's endeavor can perhaps be more adequately described as "oculocentrism" See Adriana Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2005).

3. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford UP 1977). Henceforth cited in the text as *Phenomenology*.

dition as a medium, as an optical mechanism, “assumes that there is a difference between ourselves and this cognition” (47) In short, the problem is rather that *we* are part of the picture. Our gaze is already inscribed in the image we are supposed to reach through some pure vision, through the purification of the refraction that distorts our vision. We are ourselves already the refraction of the ray, but the ray of truth is nothing without this refraction. What ultimately follows from this could be called the “ontological necessity” of anamorphosis: the necessity of blurred vision as an inner condition of truth, of vision itself—the condition of theory as *theorein*. Subject and truth meet in the refraction of the ray. By removing the refraction from the ray, by straightening it out, we would lose the ray itself.

A further common assumption places the object at a certain distance from the gaze and endows the objective world out there with a certain permanence and stability (as opposed to the experience of the sound and the voice where no such distance can be maintained; the voice hits us in the interior, and furthermore the sound/voice lacks stability and steadiness, it is constantly on the move—I have written about this extensively elsewhere⁴). Furthermore, one has a certain liberty with respect to the gaze. One can direct it where one wants, one can inspect the world in a series of snapshots to get one’s bearings and construct objectivity from multiple glimpses. Even more, one has the freedom to close one’s eyes and withdraw from the visual, one can cut it off (whereas ears, on the other hand, have no lids making one always exposed and available to the sonorous). This seems to subtend visual perception in any common experience. It defines the minimal relation between a subjective stance, namely, its perspective, its free capacity to capture and take in on the one hand and, on the other, the object (truth, being) as something separate, something placed at a distance from the gaze and endowed with an independent consistency, an ontological firmness. This forms the basic opposition and correlation that subtends our thought.

Hence the claim that the gaze is an object, even an object *par excellence*, and counts among the privileged objects that psychoanalysis has to deal with. *Objet a* goes against the grain of common understanding and experience. If it is an object, it needs to be placed out there, at some distance from the observer and separated from him/her. But this is precisely the assumption Lacan attempts to put into question by examining what he calls the split, the schism between the eye and the gaze (“The split between the eye and the gaze” is the programmatic title of the previous session). The eye as an organ, as an opening, a physiological condition, an aperture, is coupled to the gaze as its extension but does not coincide with it. It is, rather, that the gaze, irreducible to the subjective stance, appears as a short-circuit between the subject and the object out there. It is the way in which the subject itself becomes part of the picture. And if the subject is indeed inscribed in the picture in the form of the gaze that is part of the picture, this is precisely what yields the necessary structure of anamorphosis—not as *trompe-l’oeil*, optical illusion, a trick or distor-

4. See for example Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 2006).

tion, a blurred picture that must be deciphered by adopting the proper perspective. It is rather as an inner torsion of the visual field itself: vision's constitutive blur, its separation of itself from itself, its condition of being torn and distorted. The oldest philosophical problem of appearance versus essence or true reality, the "insight" that things in their essence don't coincide with the way they appear, that all perception is prey to delusion, this oldest philosophical mantra is simply one way of expressing this inner rift of visible reality. What you see is not what you get—or perhaps, fatally, ultimately it is.

Lacan never tires of repeating this point in the sessions we are dealing with. In its most compact form: "The picture, certainly, is in my eye. But I am in the picture" (96). "*Le tableau, certes, est dans mon oeil. Mais moi, je suis dans le tableau.*"⁵ Evidently this statement, as clear and simple as it is, appeared so outrageous to the English translator Alan Sheridan that he must have either assumed it was a typographic error or made an oversight, for he translated it as "But I am *not* in the picture" (my emphasis). This would be the opposite of an oversight: seeing too much, seeing a "not" that is not there.

Let me give some more examples: "The correlative of the picture, to be situated in the same place as it, that is to say, outside, is the point of gaze ..." So the gaze is on the same surface, as it were, as the picture, and this already implies an anamorphosis. The sentence continues:

...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. (96)

The point of the inscription of the gaze in the picture—and hence also of the subject's desire and its propensity to divide the space, to bring in a twist in the geometric and the optical space—is also a screen. It is screened off. One never gets a clear picture of the gaze as the mark of the subject's inscription. What we get is the screen of distortion, the blur, the curving. We cannot see the gaze as an object in a straightforward vision. In other words, there is no 'full frontal nudity' of the gaze. It only consists in the curvature of anamorphosis. Anamorphosis is the screening of the object *a*. As Lacan says, "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 (*la tache*)" (97).

In the beginning of the next session, Lacan sums this up even more outspokenly:

I must, to begin with, insist on the following: in the scopic field, the gaze is outside, I am looked at, that is to say, I am a picture. This is the function that is found at the heart of the institution [*placement*] of the subject in the visible. What determines me, at the most profound level, in the visible, is the

5. Jacques Lacan, *Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*, ed. J.-A. Miller (Paris: Seuil 1973) 89.

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 *photo-graphed*. (106)

A photographic move inhabits the subject of vision. One is photographed, as it were, in the field of vision before one can isolate oneself as the subject who photographs, and the way one is photographed, seized, captured in the visible will leave its mark as a blot, a stain, a torsion in photography: the opaque screen of the gaze.

What is at stake here is not the notion of representation, which is always a representation for a subject, namely, that which is put before him (*vor-stellen*). Possessing the function of the screen, the stain is like a stand-in for the gaze: the objectal external 'representative' of the subject and its desire, and it has ultimately the same structure as the notorious *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz* in the field of language and the signifier, that is, as a representative of representation. The stain is a stand-in for a structurally missing representation (the signifier of the missing signifier), which makes the whole field of representation dependent upon it. The ersatz of the stain is structurally missing but this stand-in is on the same level as other representations, standing in for the impossibility of ever closing, delimiting or totalizing the field of representation. Representation is non-whole, not-all, because of the inscription of the subject for whom something is represented in the field of representation itself. There is a short-circuit. (Hence also Lacan's notorious canonical formula that "a signifier represents the subject for another signifier," making representation immanent to the signifying chain and metonymic to infinity. The crucial point of this formula is that the subject features as something represented and not, as commonly assumed, that for which something is represented.)

What is at stake is also not some kind of "beyond of representation" or, in the Kantian parlance Lacan employs, a noumenon beyond the realm of phenomena: a transcendental level conditioning phenomena as the realm of appearance. What is at stake in this very long-standing philosophical division is, rather, the division as such—the partition of the visible:

For us it is not in this dialectic between the surface and that which is beyond that things are suspended. For our part we set out from the fact that there is something that establishes a fracture, a bi-partition, a splitting of being to which being accommodates itself, even in the natural world. (106)

Une schize de l'être, une fracture de l'être—being is attuned to a crack, a split, a schism. Being 'is' this split of being; there is no being without the split. Philosophy famously partitions being into appearance and its beyond—whether as essence, as the suprasensuous, the idea, the noumenon, the true reality freed of semblance—but this partition that has conditioned philosophy from its inception obfuscates the minimal and obvious 'fact' of a split that traverses the visual. One must envision the split *as such* before assigning to it the familiar bi-partition of appearance and essence, of the delusive and the true reality.

Curiously, in this quote Lacan implies that this split would not be a human exception, that is, a particularly human way of inscribing desire in the visual as compared to the animal world. It is there already “*dès la nature*,” starting from nature. It is already present in nature in incipient ways such that human desire, the gaze, anamorphosis all take off, as it were, from a split already present in natural being. Taking his cue from Roger Caillois’ *Méduse et Cie* (1960), Lacan invokes mimicry, producing a series of loose reflections on this topic throughout his sessions on the gaze. Here he enters into something that might well appear as wild speculation:

In it [in mimicry] being breaks up, in an extraordinary way, between its being and its semblance, between itself and that paper tiger it shows to the other. (107)

In mimicry, an organism splits between its organic being and the way it presents itself in appearance: the intimidating but phony paper tiger. There is “something like a mask, a double, an envelope, a thrown off skin” by which being already masks itself in nature. It parades, it thrives on appearances:

It is through this form of being separated from itself that it enters into play in its effects of life and death, and it might be said that it is with the help of this doubling of the other, or of oneself, that is realized the conjunction from which proceeds the renewal of beings in reproduction. (107)

The fact that there is already a split of being in nature, the fact that nature itself divides into being and semblance conditions the very reproduction of life, that is, the way being breeds more being. Is mimicry anamorphosis in nature? The natural prefiguration, anticipation of the cultural? This is one line of thought that would follow from our topic, leading one, intriguingly, to question the dividing line between nature and culture itself. The gaze, the screen, the semblance, the split, the stain in the picture; turning oneself into a part of the picture, all of this is already “in place,”—or, rather, out of place, in nature itself. Nature, that is, is “always already” out of place, a dislocated nature that need not wait for the human to operate with lack, gaze and semblance. Nature is out of joint.⁶ I cannot pursue this any further here.

6. This line is severely opposed to, say, Kojève and Sartre, but not to Hegel. Kojève, Lacan’s subject supposed to know in matters of philosophy, maintained that the lack, the negativity as such, is the privilege of the human, conditioning human desire, as opposed to the natural being, which is in itself continuous, inert, without a lack. Sartre followed suit by his massive division into *en soi* and *pour soi*. But in Hegel one finds a different line of thought, e.g. light itself is already a first reflexivity of nature. It is the moment of its manifestation, neutral and abstract; it is the medium of phenomenality as such, where nature lets itself be seen and sees itself. It reflects itself, as it were, in light which it produces, and thereby light entails already a first movement of subjectivity, the first split into light and darkness: the light is “the first ideality, the first selfhood [*das erste Selbst*] of nature. In light, nature becomes for the first time subjective and is now the universal physical I [*das allgemeine physikalische Ich*] ...” G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics II. Lectures on Fine Arts*, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1975) 808. *Werke in zwanzig Bänden, Theorie Werkausgabe*

Let us return instead to Hegel and comment briefly on two passages related to our topic. The most spectacular is the following from the *Aesthetics*, which deals with the question of the gaze in its relation to art:

... it is to be asserted of art that it has to convert every shape in all points of its visible surface into an eye, which is the seat of the soul and brings the spirit into appearance. ... [A]rt makes every one of its productions into a thousand-eyed Argus, whereby the inner soul and spirit is seen at every point. And it is not only the bodily form, the look of the eyes, the countenance and posture, but also actions and events, speech and tones of voice, and the series of their course through all conditions of appearance that art has everywhere to make into an eye, in which the free soul is revealed in its inner infinity. (*Aesthetics*, 834, TWA 13, 203-4).

Hegel refers to the Greek legend of Argus Panoptes, the giant with a hundred eyes (not a thousand, as Hegel says). All-seeing Argus (a precursor to the Panopticon) was hired by Hera to watch over Io, a nymph that Zeus fell in love with, and who was transformed into a white cow. The legend has it that Argus could sleep at all times by closing some of his eyes while the majority would always be open and on the watch. Hegel thus proposes this very strange and troubling image: a work of art is like Argus, this gigantic, hundred-eyed monster. Everything in the work of art turns into an eye; its every element and move should be considered as a metaphorical eye, a stand-in for the eye. We never simply watch an artwork. It watches us at the same time. Of course, here Hegel invokes the traditional notion that the eyes are the seat of the soul, its revelation, the part of the body where the soul manifests itself. However, pushing Hegel a bit, one could make him say that what makes art special is the way the object gaze is inscribed in the work of art. It is the kind of object which never simply exists out there, opposite the observing subject, separate and independent. If it is an artwork worthy of its name, it has the capacity to embody the gaze, to be not just the object of the gaze but the object into which the gaze is inscribed—a short-circuit between the subject and the object. It is not that the artwork returns our gaze in a symmetrical exchange and recognition. Rather, it acquires in some form the quality of anamorphosis, the blur that regards us: its gaze is entwined with our own. What singles out art, then, is that it is never simply an object. What we must decipher in its enigmatic appearance is the way we are inscribed in it: it regards us, it embodies our own gaze, appearing to us as an enigma that we cannot grasp self-reflexively. To push it to the extreme: every artwork is anamorphic, art is the anamorphosis in the “picture” of society.

(Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1971) v. 15, 31. (German text henceforth cited as TWA). It is already in light that nature becomes unequal to itself by manifestation in phenomenality, so the process of reflexivity, of something becoming itself by becoming other than itself, has always already begun. It is not the human privilege.

The second passage is from the end of the chapter on understanding in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which, concluding the section dealing with consciousness, presents the passage to the notion of self-consciousness. Hegel says:

It is manifest that behind the so-called curtain which is supposed to conceal the inner world, there is nothing to be seen unless we go behind it ourselves, as much in order that we may see, as that there may be something behind there which can be seen [*ebenso sehr damit gesehen werde, als dass etwas dahinter sei, das gesehen werden kann*].” (*Phenomenology*, 103; TWA 3, 135-6)

Philosophy began from the insight that what is seen and immediately perceived cannot be true. However, against its claim that there must be a hidden truth behind the surface, a concealed essence we must aim for, Hegel, at the point of the demise of the grand metaphysical tradition, posits that there is nothing behind the curtain. Yet there is nevertheless a structural necessity that pushes the subject—a move that constitutes subjectivity—to step behind the curtain of the visible to discover that nothing. What we see there is simply ourselves stepping behind the curtain. There is nothing else to be seen. Subjectivity is thus based on a certain “structural blindness” which inextricably connects illusion—chasing the ghost behind the curtain—with the production of truth that is deployed in this move. The subject can only function by missing the curtain as the mere surface, trying to penetrate beyond to the real. Yet it is only by this oversight that what resides on the surface can emerge—the beyond as the anamorphosis of the surface. What we miss in the surface, in other words, is the subject’s own place, which we mistakenly located somewhere behind the surface. As a result, we necessarily overlook the way in which the subject is inscribed on the surface itself and is tied to it.

Lacan uses the same image of the curtain in his reading of the famous parable of Zeuxis and Parrhasios. Zeuxis’ painting of the grapes is so convincing that even the birds are deceived. Parrhasios merely paints the curtain, setting a trap for the gaze that seeks to penetrate behind its surface (103, 111).⁷ One could say that by attempting to disentangle the topology of the gaze, Lacan was largely echoing Hegel in this passage, positing the gaze as the non-reflexive object that the subject structurally misses through a blindness at the heart of seeing. What the subject structurally misses is its own inscription in the image: the short-circuit that conditions the anamorphosis of the surface, a strange offspring of Hegelian reflexivity. To put it in a nutshell, the object is the non-dialectical kernel of Hegelian reflexivity, something that cannot be dealt with through the subject’s reflexive self-appropriation. The anamorphic stain is unsublatable, *unaufhebbar*, something that resists the movement of Hegelian *Aufhebung* yet persists at its heart.

7. One can add that in Holbein’s picture the ambassadors are actually standing in front of a curtain and that the blur floating in the forefront of the picture could be taken as what epitomizes the gaze that wants to reach behind the curtain, the beyond being placed in the indefinite space in front of the two figures and the implements.

At the end of the previous session there is an extremely important and clarifying exchange with Moustapha Safouan (who, among many other things, translated *The Interpretation of Dreams* into Arabic (1959), as well as La Boétie's treatise on voluntary servitude). Safouan asked Lacan about the relation of the eye, the gaze and the picture, and Lacan responded:

I shall take up here the dialectic of appearance and its beyond, in saying that, if beyond the appearance there is no thing-in-itself [Sheridan: "nothing in itself"!], there is the gaze. It is in this relation that the eye as organ is situated. (103)

Instead of the thing-in-itself, instead of the noumenon beyond phenomena, in the empty place of the missing *Ding an sich*, there is the gaze. But this first step of the answer could lead us astray. It could take us in the direction of conceiving the gaze as the unattainable *Ding*, or else (and concomitantly) in the direction of the gaze as the transcendental condition conditioning phenomena—the condition of possibility of their visibility, of their being given to the vision. Or the gaze could figure as the thing that is to be excluded from reality in order for reality to be constituted, for reality to close upon itself and become totalized by the exclusion of its constitutive exception. But the exchange continues. Safouan asks: "Beyond the appearance, is there the lack or the gaze?" His question is to the point because the lack or the gaze are not at all the same and, in a sense, everything depends on the connection between the two. After all, the gaze was posited from the outset precisely as an object and, in its objecthood, as a short-circuit between the subject of vision and the field of vision, that is, the way that the subject and its desire are present in the field of vision. This is what undermines any usual notion of object which is prey to the framework of (the object as an object of) representation for the subject or correlated to the subject. Hence the proposition that the gaze is an object counteracts the notion of a transcendental lack, or the logic of the constitutive exception. Maintaining that the lack is nothing (and thus what one excludes), that it is not an element but an empty set is not enough to undo this logic for the crucial move is that the lack has to appear as such as an element among all other elements, on the same level with them. This is precisely what happens with the object *a*. The inclusion of the gaze into the field of vision detotalizes this field. It prevents it from closing in on itself by some constitutive exclusion, and the presence of this inclusion is precisely anamorphosis. The object gaze is present in the field of vision as its anamorphic torsion, its inner split, its fracture, which is the fracture of being itself, *la schize de l'être*. With the inclusion of the transcendental condition in the realm of phenomena one detotalizes phenomena and subverts the very notion of the transcendental. The transcendental appears, but only as the object *a*. The transcendental appears within the order it conditions and makes possible.

As an aside, one might add that Kant himself was far more aware of this than one might think or as generally presupposed in a naïve reading (including Lacan's own

sometimes). His problem was not that the noumenon is a beyond that cannot be known, the unreachable *Ding an sich*, but rather that the very absence of the noumenon leaves a trace in the world of phenomena. The traces of the absent noumenal world of beyond haunt the phenomenal world. This is the central problem of Kant's third critique, the *Critique of Judgment*, with its focus on the beautiful, the sublime, the teleological—one could say its focus on the glimpses of the beyond inscribed in the phenomena themselves, as their excrescence.

Lacan responds:

At the level of the scopic dimension, in so far as the drive operates there, is to be found the same function of the *objet a* as can be mapped in all the other dimensions. The *objet a* is something from which the subject, in order to constitute itself, has separated itself off as organ. This serves as a symbol of the lack, that is to say, of the phallus, not as such, but in so far as it is lacking. It must, therefore, be an object that is, firstly, separable, and secondly, that has some relation to the lack. (103)

This is what stands at the core of Lacan's take on psychoanalysis: the strange and paradoxical connection between the lack and the object, the *objet a*, which comes not to fill in the lack but to present it as such, as a stand-in for the lack, its inclusion. The lack introduces the relation to phallus and castration, the basic cut or the (-1) (the $(-\phi)$ in the Lacanian algebra), the separation, the cutting off, the negativity which, in psychoanalysis, is always mapped onto the body and its topology, its apertures and its extensions. Paradoxically, one can maintain that for Lacan the problem of castration is not the problem of lacking something, but of having something too much. It is not that one lacks, that one is cut off from *jouissance* that is the problem. Rather, one gets an excess of it in the place of the lack, a *jouissance* that one cannot quite place and cope with, an enjoyment one didn't cater for, indeed a *surplus* enjoyment for the object can neither fit the lack nor fill it. Instead, it produces anamorphosis.

Earlier in the seminar, Lacan invoked penis tattoos to make a joking connection between the phallus and anamorphosis. This practice does exist: the kind of anamorphic pictures that appear as blurs "in the state of repose" (88) acquire the distinctiveness of a fully blown picture in the state of erection. It is a specific type of anamorphosis linked to bodily sexual functions. Lacan speaks of a "phallic phantom" that haunts anamorphosis. There is more for, if we consider anamorphosis in its various historical uses, one sees that the hidden picture one deciphered by adopting a particular perspective was there to evoke a hidden meaning. It served two main purposes: either what emerged as the hidden image were various obscene scenes, pornography lurking in the innocent-looking pictures, lying low in some blurry detail—the underside of the sexual and the forbidden, of the sexual as the forbidden, pointing to the concealed sexual meaning underneath and within the official and the spiritual one. So one use of anamorphosis was to bring out the hidden and repressed sexual reference lurking within the ideal and the elevated. One sim-

ply had to adopt the proper perspective to see it. Or, the hidden image epitomized the highest meaning, the cipher of our destiny, the skull—reminder of our mortality and harbinger of *vanitas*, of *vanitas vanitatum*, the vanity of all human endeavors as their ultimate truth. This is the way Holbein's painting is usually interpreted. The skull stands for the nullity of human worldly striving and thus points towards the true meaning: that of spiritual elevation. What anamorphosis seemed to convey was this: look for the higher hidden meaning within the apparent meaning (in *The Ambassadors*, behind the instruments of human knowledge and their apparent magnificence and omnipotence, there is vanity and death). Or else, look for the lower hidden meaning, the sexual meaning within the apparently non-sexual, the ideal. Taking the phallic cue, one sees in psychoanalysis the link between the one and the other: the secret highest meaning to debunk is always tied to the sexual. "The Signification of the Phallus" is the title of one of Lacan's famous *écrits*, and there, true to the title, Lacan attempted to spell out the connection between the phallus and the production of meaning: the phallus as the operator of meaning, the phallic signifier which, marking a lack and meaningless in itself, is the condition of the production of meaning as such. It is the apparition of meaning in what has the value of a blot. Anamorphosis seems to prolong this phallic quest for meaning, the image within image bringing out hidden meaning within meaning. But this is where anamorphosis is also misleading, a lure (and this is where the phallic reference is also a lure). For the great joy, the childish joy one obtains from deciphering this image hidden in a blur, depends on the supposition that this hidden meaning can be had, is something one can get a hold of. It has the value of a revelation like the solution of a riddle, the elucidation of a puzzle, of good detective work brought to an end. "Aha, so this is what the blur means: it's a skull, *caput mortuum*, vanity." (Alternatively, "aha, there's porn inside this sacred image, let me show it to you too, let's have a good laugh.") The shift, then, is from the apparent official meaning to the real secret meaning. Isn't this an excellent metaphor for the psychoanalytic endeavor as such? The debunking of secret meanings and sexual underpinning of all apparently official pictures? To decipher the anamorphoses, to offer the proper perspectives from which they can make sense?

Not at all. This is why it is difficult to restore the value of enigma to Holbein's painting for everyone already knows the solution and no enigma appears to be left once we have been shown the way to see this other message. Anamorphosis is a riddle whose solution is misleading, our joy at finding the solution is premature. And so it is for the unconscious.

Adopting this particular perspective, it seems clear that the unconscious has a structure that is analogous to that of anamorphosis. It always emerges as a blot, a smear, a blur in the picture that makes sense—a quirk in the sense-making. Whether as a tiny slip of the tongue, a dream whose meaning is enigmatic, a symptom that is out of joint with one's usual life, there is always an enigma to be deciphered, a sense to be restored to what does not seem to make sense. And the analyst seems to proceed like a teacher, or an art historian, saying: see here, you have to look at

it sideways and then you will see that this blot actually makes sense—even more, it conveys the secret sense underlying all sense-making, the true sense behind the appearance of sense, the secret cipher, the clue. Sense was amiss for a moment with the formation of the unconscious. But by adopting this other perspective, by looking awry, we have restored sense to what seemed to resist it. We have straightened out the crooked lines, debunked the pattern in the amorphous, restored order to the chaotic. One recalls the childish joy of reading *The Interpretation of Dreams*, where Freud comes up with illuminating and unexpected solutions to the murkiest puzzles—the sudden revelation of the clue to it all whose solution, as in all good detective stories, has been there right under our noses, too obvious for us to see. All it took was this slight adjustment of perspective. The unconscious seems to be telling us something in roundabout and blurry ways; now the business of the analyst would be to say in the most straightforward, direct and clear way what has been conveyed through a puzzle. But this is precisely a lure.

Of course, it is the business of psychoanalytic interpretation to try to decipher the hidden meaning of blots of the unconscious. It is hard work, but it would be a lure to suppose that by debunking this hidden meaning one can meet the unconscious in person which, with one's detective effort, finally makes its appearance. The meaning one gets hold of—say the latent content of a dream—pertains to the preconscious. One can always, with some effort, bring clarity to what was blurred and make conscious what was obscure, but in doing so one neither does away with the unconscious nor brings it to consciousness. The unconscious consists precisely in the roundabout; by straightening out the roundabout one loses the unconscious on the way. The unconscious pertains to the “excess of distortion,” to the *Entstellung*, the dislocation of meaning. By spelling out meaning in a direct way one can account for everything, for every unintelligible element of the dream, except for the dislocation itself that made it possible. This resides in the form—the form of distortion—not in the content.

Freud only gradually became fully aware of this, and undoubtedly his pleasure in his detective work of unearthing hidden messages in *The Interpretation of Dreams* frequently gives the impression that we are thereby unearthing the unconscious itself. But he says explicitly in *The Introductory Lectures*:

The latent dream-thoughts are the material which the dream-work transforms into the manifest dream [...]. Analytic observation shows further that the dream-work never restricts itself to translating these thoughts into the archaic or regressive mode of expression ... In addition, it regularly takes possession of something else, which is not part of the latent thoughts of the previous day, but which is the true motive for the construction of the dream. This indispensable addition is the equally unconscious desire for the fulfillment of which the content of the dream is given form.⁸

8. Sigmund Freud, *The Pelican Freud Library, Vol 1: Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973-86) 261-2.

He adds that latent thoughts may be unconscious for the dreamer but they are perfectly intelligible and can be brought to consciousness. The unconscious desire, on the other hand, pertains not to latent thoughts as such but to the surplus of the distorted manifest form over the hidden latent content. It resides only in between the two, in the surplus of distortion. It conditions the distortion and, although all the distorted elements can be sorted out and put into order, the unconscious desire persists in the gap between the two:

The remains of the day are not unconscious in the same way (as the unconscious desire). Desire belongs to another kind of the unconscious ... Already when we posit one unconscious we are reproached that this is fantastic; what will they say if we admit that we need two kinds of unconscious? (Freud 265)

This is the quote one should keep as a motto for every introductory course on psychoanalysis. There are two kinds of unconscious. We must redouble the very notion of the unconscious: the one that can be spelled out by adopting the proper perspective and seeing the hidden image within the blur, and the other which consists in the blur itself, the distortion, the break, the crack, the division of the visible and the intelligible—ultimately *la schize de l'être*, the scission of being, of which the unconscious is the indicator as something conditioning our being, and ultimately being as such.

One could make an analogous argument for the other great discovery of psychoanalysis, sexuality, but I must limit myself to the briefest of hints. Sexuality and anamorphosis? The situation seems from the outset rather the reverse of that of the unconscious, for the unconscious presents an anamorphic blur one must look at properly to make sense of it. In sexuality, it is rather the case that nobody seriously considered it a mystery or an enigma until Freud. This is one way to formulate Freud's discovery: to turn sexuality into anamorphosis, to restore to it the value of an enigma where everyone else saw the pursuit of a natural course (pursued by humans in particular ways, but at the bottom still pertaining to natural causality, in continuity with the animal instincts). To put it in a formula: sexuality is not a universal answer, but a universal question. It is always a blur in the picture. It is not something that can explain other things—"in the limit everything," as the psychoanalytic vulgate goes—but is itself badly in need of an explanation. Sexuality is not a primary given; it is an intruder which denaturalizes the natural course and thwarts it. It is in itself nothing but a deviation. It is something that causes the anamorphosis of human experience, not something that could explain away the anamorphic enigma and make sense of it. It lurks in the rift and the torsion and this is why it cannot be made into some universal substance, nor can one be rid of it. It emerges only at the point of disruption or deviation of a supposedly natural course. To put it in a nutshell: sexuality is not an entity, not a separate realm of being, an existing *something*, but rather what constantly produces an anamorphosis of human experience, its blur, its distortion. It persists only in the anamorphic curving, but one is never in a position where one could look at the blur from a proper per-

spective and say “this is sex,” as one says “this is a skull” (or “this is porn”). Or to put it in another way, what Lacan calls *jouissance* is the anamorphosis of life, but it has no substance of its own apart from the anamorphic one.

What I am ultimately getting at is this: there are entities which can only “exist,” insist, persist through anamorphosis. The unconscious and sexuality, if I take only the two grand entities psychoanalysis deals with, do not have a separate existence apart from their anamorphic distortion. Thus it is not that the unconscious is the intrusion of some other reality into the picture, which manifests itself in anamorphosis—the unconscious has no other reality than the anamorphic one, and ultimately neither does sexuality. Both can only exist as a picture within a picture, and the hidden picture that one debunks within the picture is not something that one can get hold of by itself. The illusion that one can (“this is the skull,” or “this is pornography”) is the lure of anamorphosis, whose other expression is the common opinion that Freud discovered the unconscious and sexuality as the underlying hidden realms that determine our existence. They only exist as the blurs on the picture and cannot be apprehended separately, for what counts is not the content or the hidden message, but the torsion itself—the scission of being by which the subject is inscribed in being as its anamorphosis.

Let me finish on a lighter note, with *Alice in Wonderland*, and the notorious disappearing Cheshire Cat of which only the grin remains, lingering on without the cat, an anamorphosis of the cat that is not there. Psychoanalysis is the science of the grin without the cat.⁹

‘All right,’ said the Cat; and this time it vanished quite slowly, beginning with the end of the tail, and ending with the grin, which remained some time after the rest of it had gone.

9. Lacan uses this image as well, in the “Introduction to Hyppolite’s Commentary on Freud’s ‘Verneinung’”: “And were there to remain of a dream [in the analysand’s account] but a fragment as evanescent as the memory floating in the air of the Cheshire cat who fades away in such a worrisome manner in Alice’s eyes, this would simply render more certain that we have here the broken end of what constitutes the dream’s transference tip—in other words, the part of the dream that directly addresses the analyst.” *Écrits*, (Paris: Seuil, 1966) 378 (English trans. B. Fink, New York: Norton 2006, 315). The reality of transference, another of the four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis, is also tied to anamorphosis.



Cheshire Cat fading to smile

“Well! I’ve often seen a cat without a grin,” thought Alice; “but a grin without a cat! It’s the most curious thing I ever saw in my life!”