

text &  
subtext

# The Blind Gaze of Theories of Representation<sup>1</sup>

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## Some Preliminary Remark: The Misunderstandings Between Us

1. The notions of the visual, look, body, corporeality and the gaze enjoy unprecedented epistemological privileges both in the production and theorisation of contemporary art. It has had an impact on art scenes around the world. Art critics, theorists and artists habitually apply the theories and the notions I discuss in my article to their analysis of Singapore art scene, or art scene in other countries in this region. Thus on one level I consider my article as a contribution to already existing field of references, especially to those to Rosalind Krauss or Luce Irigaray.

2. In the opening address of the Exhibition of Feminist Art and a Symposium "A Self of One's Own" (Singapore, September, 1999) I raised an issue of those restrictions and limitations that we impose on the notion of 'woman' as 'lesser' or 'derivative' from the notion of 'human'. Thus 'woman-artist' is seen as 'more specific' notion than the notion of 'artist', and points of references of her art must be somehow defined in those restrictive terms, in terms of 'women's issues'. For example, the notion of maternity is a woman's issue, but explorations of time and space in art is 'general' issue of an artist without any significance given to gender differences: the notion of human covers both, according to such logic. Thus 'woman' is seen epistemologically as 'lesser' than generic 'human', and 'woman-artist' is 'lesser' than 'an artist'. Then according to such logic, cultural

specificity would restrict notions even further, and if in the West women-artists can address 'women's issues' in general, and if it is necessary, also in particular, women-artists in Asia 'must keep to themselves', and discuss only so-called Asian context. Thus 'Asian woman-artist' is defined even as 'lesser' than 'woman-artist', and her agenda understandably so would cover her 'Asian female experiences'. Thus we must expect her exploring 'Asian male gaze', or 'Asian body'. However, the notions of 'male gaze' itself or what has been defined as 'Asian', remain unquestioned at all. And dear reader, I must warn you, that by such logic major Western cosmetic companies, that are currently selling products aimed at 'whitening' skin and designed specifically for 'Asian delicate skin', might seem to be empowering Asian women and 'more sensitive to ethnic differences' than my article is!

3. Dear reader (whoever you might be) I leave it to you to decide on definitions of women, Asian women and Asian women-artists if you currently need them for strategic purposes and feel comfortable in doing so. However, one point must be clear: I refuse to write on Asian women, but rather I see my article as a result of my engagements with women-artists in Singapore, collaborations with them and a teaching of a variety of students a variety of courses in feminist art and feminist theory in a critical vein. Please note that those images that surround my writing are carefully placed and speak for themselves. This article has been written for you by an author from Russia, whose own relation to East-West divide is not as easy as for some 'West-Asia' divide is even before we come and speak together. However, I was keeping in mind my flesh-and-blood colleagues and friends from Singapore as my immediate readers; those who have inspired me and helped me in many ways to deliver the following pages. It is written for





Saraswati Gramich, *Extension* 1999. From the exhibition *A self of One's Own*. Curated by Dr. Irina Aristarkhova. Singapore, 1999. Courtesy of the artist.

those, who are looking for a negotiation of specific localised feminist strategies and the development of feminist aesthetics in non-western contexts, geographically and through the embodied social and aesthetic practices. Dear you—she-reader; I leave the space for your readership and its identification open, and I respect your choice, for I have made my position clear. My work is for you, whoever you might (decide to) be(come), in the embodied spirit of sisterhood that is not afraid of welcoming our differences and (mis)understandings.

## The Blind Gaze of Theories of representation<sup>1</sup>

*Mulvey's argument, or 'the birth of the male gaze'*

Any epistemological field has key texts that crucially influence its development. For theories of representation, especially in studies of representations of women, the work of Laura Mulvey "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" has acquired such a central epistemic status<sup>2</sup>. It has played a key role for a generation of theorists who now approach their research and reflections on her notion of the so-called "(male) gaze" that has even somewhat overshadowed the importance of Foucauldian concept of the "gaze" (*le regard*) in contemporary visual theory.

Mulvey treats psychoanalytic theory as a political tool that can help us understand how

the "mystery" of film works and how it penetrates 'the unconscious', language and those social formations that are involved in the cultural constitution of subjectivity. According to psychoanalytic doctrine, the main constitutive event is the introduction of sexual difference as a meaning-producing instance dependent on the Oedipal drama. Film is conceived as reenactment of this scenario, unraveling the drama and producing its result - *desire*. Thus the characters in film, the scopoc regime that organizes it and the unfolding spectacle as a whole follow an Oedipal logic. Let us briefly follow it.

For Freud, the castration anxiety was the primary source of woman's meaning. She is imagined as the castrated and this condition of her 'lack', her castrated nature, makes phallus what it is - universal principle / sign of 'having' and possession. This status of woman as a figure and instance of lack has been translated into much of visual culture, including film. Ultimately, Mulvey claims, representation expresses castration, and nothing else. The female character, or female image, according to Mulvey, serves two main functions in 'the patriarchal unconscious'. First, woman symbolizes the threat and fear of castration by her conspicuous absence of phallus, and second, she 'covers' her lack, this 'hole in the unconscious', by bringing up a child into phallogocentric culture. After this cultural function of a woman is fulfilled, she practically evaporates from legal and linguistic spheres, since the subject of law and man are generically defined as of male gender. As Mulvey writes, woman becomes a double-memory "between a memory of maternal plenitude and a memory of maternal lack. Both are defined as natural (or as 'anatomy' in Freud's view)" (Mulvey, 1989).

<sup>1</sup> The ideas presented in this article were formulated, explicated and contested during a graduate seminar cum workshop entitled "Feminist Art" which I conducted between July - November 1999 at LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts (Singapore). I would like to thank all my students and participating artists for their intellectual and aesthetic contributions that also resulted in a symposium and an exhibition appropriately entitled "A Self Of One's

<sup>2</sup> First this text was presented at the University of Wisconsin in 1973 and then published in the British journal "Screen" (3, 1975). Later this essay became a part of Mulvey's book "Visual and Other Pleasures" (Mulvey 1989). Own".

Mulvey goes on then to analyze the relationship between fetishism and scopophilia. In his "Three Essays on Psychoanalysis" Freud defines scopophilia, as a pleasure from looking that is rather independent from other erogenous zones of the body, as a controlling and intrusive gaze. In his later works Freud developed his theory of scopophilia as a primary pleasure that issues from looking and which is initially connected to infantile autoerotism (that is, seeing oneself as an object of pleasure and desire), which only afterwards by analogy spreads on other objects/people. In its somewhat abnormal development it can, he notes, transform into narcissism. As Mulvey argues, cinema has followed this scopophilic scenario from its early beginnings. Bright screen; lights switched off such that the focus is forced upon images; the serial development of the plot; the viewers isolated and surrounded by the darkness disposed to stare at 'glaring moving shadows and light on the screen' - all stimulate a viewer as a scopophilic and a voyeur. The cinematic conditions are architecturally, Mulvey reminds us, structured to create a situation of 'peeping into' someone's private life, when viewers are encouraged to repress their exhibitionism and project this repressed desire onto actors. Thus cinema, for Mulvey, especially narrative cinema, stimulates scopophilic drives and in an inverted manner satisfies a repressed desire for exhibitionism.

Moreover, cinema not only satisfies scopophilic hunger, it transforms it into narcissism. It happens as a result of the total anthropomorphism of the unveiling scenario on the screen. In film everything is measured by human size: screen itself, sound, actors, editing, cinematic techniques and camera angles. The spectator is fascinated with this similarity and familiarity, he is taken by this 'recognition of his face, his body, relationship between human form and its surroundings, by the visible presence of the man in the world.'<sup>3</sup>

Mulvey connects this cinematic principle of recognition with the Lacanian recognition of the mirror-stage, when the child's own image in the mirror is conceived as a crucial step in the child's ego formation. Lacan constantly stressed the importance of 'image' for subject formation, since 'image constitutes the matrix of imaginary, recognition / misrecognition and identification, and therefore, of the first articulation of the Self' (Lacan, cited in Mulvey, 1989). However Lacan has always seen the linguistic and the discursive as a 'filter' for our vision, that actually makes it work in a meaningful and a discriminatory manner. Christine Battersby in her article "Just Jamming: Irigaray, Painting and Psychoanalysis" mentions this privileging of the word by Lacan that figures prominently in the works of some contemporary women-artists (Battersby, 1995). One such example would be the works of Mary Kelly, who refused the image as a result of her feminist interpretations of Lacanian ideas.<sup>4</sup> (Kelly, 1995). Many women-artists, who had been influenced by Lacan's readings of the image have considered 'representation' to be feeding 'the male gaze' and therefore the modernist phallogocentric logic.

Interestingly, Mulvey also writes that pleasure from looking was split within the patriarchal world into 'active-masculine' and 'passive-feminine'. Women usually are exhibited in their traditional film roles to elicit and provoke a strong erotic response coded by what Mulvey calls, a 'being-looked-at-ness'. Woman signifies male desire: from low-budget movies to expensive Hollywood blockbusters she feeds the male gaze. Traditional film combines visual and narrative elements, where female presence constitutes a necessary stage working against the grain of a story, punctuating the narrative with long pauses of erotic contemplation and visual experience. On the other hand, the male image cannot be posed as sexually charged or as an explicit sexual object, for it would contradict the principles of ruling ideology and psychological structures that both support and reflect that. It is also reinforced by the need of recognition and identification with a male hero by male spectators. When he identifies with a male hero, Mulvey claims, the male viewer projects his gaze onto something similar to him so that his power coincides with the power of a male hero, controlling events and following his erotic adventures. He is the bearer of the gaze, and his film surrogate gives him the pleasure of identification with power, of empowerment. According to Mulvey, in contrast to two-dimensional female figures, male film characters enjoy and need three-dimensional space where the male hero is free to control the filmic space and act out the narrative.

3 This use of 'he' is to be construed, as it is in Mulvey, not as a generic reference but to a particularly gendered notion of spectatorship.

4 Derrida on few occasions criticized this Lacanian linguistic reductionism. See, for example, *L'oreille de l'autre*. (Derrida, 1982).

However, even in such 'safe' and 'controlled' situations a female figure can pose serious threats. Her contour reminds of something unpleasant, long-forgotten, unbearable to be revived in memory, for according to Freud and Lacan, 'woman' is a castrated (non)man: "As an icon exhibited for the pleasure of male viewers", active bearers of the male gaze, "she is always potentially there to provoke an anxiety she covers and thus represents". To deal with the castration anxiety represented by (any) female character in a narrative film her image is manipulated in a variety of ways. She can either be coded as a mystery (eternal mystery of Woman); as an abstract idea; as a disembodied muse that a male hero, being 'taken by her', seeks to resolve in a film narrative; or she can be 'punished, devalued, and then saved' as a guilty object (like in *film noir*); it is also possible to deny this castration anxiety by transforming her figure into a fetish; and often the female image is simply presented as completely safe and harmless for 'the phallus', constructing an illusion of fullness and hospitality.

In her conclusion, Mulvey connects the spectator's gaze with the function of cinema (in general) that has the ability to control our gaze, its direction and intensity, and its identification with screen characters. Thus, narrative films are made according to human scale and its vision, they are made for human 'looking', for spectators' sympathy and involvement. That is why, she believes, filmic imperatives like viewing angle, focus and direction of the gaze are absolutely important, and define cinema as such. This ability of film to focus and fix the human gaze to such a degree distinguishes it from other visual spectacles, like theatre, shows, striptease, etc. The role of the female image, the role of woman in film far transcends the seeming simplicity of 'to-be-looked-at-ness', being a foundation stone in cinema's construction of "look, world, and object" and an illusion. For Mulvey, such codes implied and put to work in a narrative film are tied to economic and social structures that are already in place before cinematic production and it is important to study them in order to transform narrative film, and to show its stimulations and productions of certain kinds of spectatorial pleasures.

#### *Multiplying the Gaze or Krauss contra Mulvey*

There have been a multitude of discussions and theoretical offshoots following the publication of Mulvey's article, affecting a variety of disciplinary fields in film theory, photographic studies, cultural studies and theories of representation.<sup>5</sup> In this section, one of the more striking criticisms of Mulvey's arguments elaborated by Rosalind Krauss in a lesser-known text on Cindy Sherman will be presented.

In this text Rosalind Krauss transforms Laura Mulvey's argument into psychoanalytic *doxa* when she presents it, (in capital letters), as the *Male Gaze* theory. In order to unsettle Mulvey's thesis, Krauss instantiates at the very beginning her central concept: 'myth', a derivative from the work of Roland Barthes. She writes that Sherman deals with the myth not 'as a myth-consumer' like many critics have interpreted her works, but "rather as a mythographer, like Barthes - a demystifier of myth, a de-myth-ifier". Sherman's work, however, according to Krauss, itself becomes a myth in the hands of interpreters-buyers, who are consuming her myth as "a salesman's pitch ... [where] the buyer, never looks under the hood, accepts the name, is satisfied (or suckered) by the pitch. The somewhat more technical analysis involves the terms signified and signifier, form and content."<sup>6</sup> Krauss argues that many of these interpretations have "bought the salesman's pitch but never thought to look under the hood". The text was written as a reaction and a counter-reading to some of the specifically feminist readings of Sherman's work. Mulvey and her feminist interpretation of Sherman, according to Krauss, have supposedly bought the sale's pitch. She goes on to present a critique of Mulvey's position using the 'technical' arsenal of poststructuralist and post-Lacanian vocabulary: 'appearance', 'simulacrum', 'signifier' and 'signified', 'unconscious', 'screen', 'mirror' and 'informe' (Bataille).

Krauss provides a brief outline of feminist interpretations of the images in Sherman's *Film Stills*. It moves from Judith Williamson's title "Images of Women" to Solomon-Godeau's expression "woman-as-image", purposefully stressing the distinction from and continuities with the ideas of Laura Mulvey, strategically citing the following words of the latter: "The initial idea that images contributed to women's alienation from their bodies and from their sexuality, with an attendant hope of liberation and recuperation, gave way to theories of representation as symptom and signifier of the way problems posed by sexual difference under patriarchy could be displaced onto the feminine" (Mulvey, cited in Krauss, p. 44).

5 For separate discussions see: Adams (1996), Brennan (1992 & 1996), Burgin (1991), Isaak (1996), Export (1991), Jones (1998), Kelly (1995), Krauss (1994), Lutz (1994), Mulvey (1996), Owen (1983), Schor (1997), Silverman (1994), Schneeman (1991), Tagg (1994), Zizek (1999), Nochlin (1999), Pollock (1994), Robinson (1995).

6 The expression 'to look under the hood' appears and is invoked repeatedly throughout Krauss's text.

Krauss insists that according to Mulvey's argument starting from "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", "woman is constructed as spectacle and symptom, becoming the passive object of a male gaze." She presents Mulvey's argument as universalistic and as fixing gender roles for men as active voyeuristic consumers and women as passive objects of the Male Gaze. It is noteworthy that for Mulvey the 'male gaze' played a secondary role, as a result of a certain regime of looking, of viewers' participation and involvement with narrative film structure. However, Krauss persistently demonizes Mulvey and her followers, placing them under metatheoretical banner of "Male Gaze Theories" in capitals. It is noteworthy that, Mulvey, just like Krauss herself, follows the psychoanalytic tradition in its French semiotic and structuralist mutation, where control and certainty can only be regarded as illusions and myths. Repetition of such illusions - is what Mulvey sees in Sherman's Film Stills: "The camera looks; it 'captures' the female character in a parody of different voyeurisms. It intrudes into moments in which she is unguarded, sometimes undressed, absorbed into her own world of the privacy of her environment. Or it witnesses a moment in which her guard drops as she is suddenly startled by a presence, unseen and off-screen, watching her" (Mulvey, cited in Krauss, 1993). For Krauss, these words point out at her vulnerability and his control, - a rather forced reading, that itself does not seem to be willing to look 'under the hood' of Mulvey's argument, collapsing it yet again into 'buying into a signified-as-instance, a congealed sign, the semantic totality that reads "woman-as-image", or again, "woman as object of the male gaze":

*"What is being masked that the name, rather than pointing to a primary entity in the 'real', is an effect of the vast already-written, already-heard, already-read of the codes; it, the denotation, is merely the last of these codes to be slipped into place. The consumer of realist fiction, however, buys the pitch and believes in the 'character', believes in the substance of the person from whom all the rest seems to follow as a set of necessary attributes - believes, that is, in the myth." Thus, "Sherman, the demyth-ifier, is reconsumed as myth".*

In the horizontal Film Stills from 1980s Mulvey, according to Krauss, 'does not look under the hood' again since she is blinded by the myth of the signified, presenting woman as 'to-be-looked-at-ness', as an image and a symptom. The masquerades of a woman reveal themselves in the photographic settings: "a dreamer", "waiting near window", "waiting for a phone-call", etc. For Krauss these 'narratives' have no meaning since they are defined as signified, while what actually matters (only?) is the signifier: specifically, the horizontality of these pictures. Mulvey, following too closely the verticality implied in Lacanian psychoanalysis, missed the importance of horizontals; in short, she was blinded by her focus on the 'invisible vertical' dimension.

The fetishization of and fascination with the vertical in high art and mass media was questioned by a number of artists, and as Krauss claims, Sherman's work should be put within this tradition (Jackson Pollock, Andy Warhol, Robert Morris, Ed Ruscha)<sup>7</sup>, that is, *outside of feminist interpretations*. The problem here, however, is not simply in the denial of a link between Sherman's work, the work of above-mentioned artists, and a feminist art tradition, especially American art of the same period, but in the opposition between vertical (phallic and modernist) and horizontal (multiple and postmodernist) that is implied in Krauss's argument. Krauss seems to suggest a certain 'ban on the vertical' for our reading of Sherman if we want to see 'what is under the hood', and even if we are unable to see it, being blinded by the 'verticality' of the Male Gaze, she is able to enlighten us, to uncover and unveil the proper way, the right way, of looking. She concludes this section with an assertion that the 'vertical logic' of the Male Gaze is itself being repeated in the discourse of its theorists, due to their "own fetishization of the vertical" and inability to think through the vertical register of the image/form. Thus, Krauss reminds us, Mulvey continuously consumes Sherman's work 'as myth' (Krauss, 1993: 97).

However, we are mostly interested here with the alternatives that Krauss provides in her interpretation of the gaze in Sherman's work, against Mulvey's reading. Again, it would be a different issue if Krauss radically questioned the notion of the gaze, or visual metaphors of theories of representation. It would also be interesting if she would present her interpretation as 'an addition to' or 'an alternative of' Mulvey's feminist argument. Without aiming at any of those maneuvers,

7 For further elaboration of the vertical and horizontal as discussed in Krauss see her *Optical Unconscious* (Krauss, 1994).

Krauss takes up the same sources as Mulvey's, to theorize gaze in a supposedly radically different way. To put it in a somewhat reductive manner, one might say that Krauss charges Mulvey's interpretation of the male gaze with the very modernism it tries to subvert, and frames her own interpretation of a gaze as a 'horizontal' of Sherman, as a radically postmodern gesture.

Her own interpretation of 'the look' and what happens to it in Sherman's works, Krauss borrows from Lacanian ideas too as if contemporary art theory cannot escape him<sup>8</sup> (and his gaze?). Krauss focuses her attention on Sherman's works of the late 1980s, especially privileging photographs where the figure (always of a woman - though this is a blind spot in Krauss - obsession to deny it any relevance) almost disappears and becomes only a hint in a play of 'gleams and reflections', as Krauss calls it. These gleams reflect the viewer's gaze only to deny its focus, its point of capture, of light coming together in one specific point. They 'deny sublimation' that can be achieved through a (narrative?) visibility of a full (female?) figure. Such gaze, that Lacan calls a 'gaze of objet a' with all its accompanying theorizations and historical narratives of French thought, Krauss uses to ground her theory of the gaze using the framework that was developed by Lacan in his work "Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis". Male Gaze theory, according to Krauss, 'links the institution of the fetish to the very conditions of vision, understood as mapped by perspective's optical pyramid'. However, as Krauss states, in this work Lacan was intent "on restricting this optico-visual model, which he terms 'geometrical', to the real of idealized, abstracted, Cartesian conception of

space. In place of this spatial conception, he wishes to set a more fundamental condition of visibility, namely, that of light." (p. 111)

We are surrounded by light, its play of shadows and reflections. This makes our mirror image seem less whole, with continuously permeable organic boundaries that merge with and emerge from the background. Here Lacan, Krauss notes, was directly inspired by the work of his friend, sociologist and a researcher into animal (insect) behavior, Roger Caillois. His notions of mimicry, imitation, camouflage, and adaptation were enthusiastically adopted by Lacan who transmitted them onto the human subject of gaze, stating that 'I am in the picture'. Lacan was also influenced by Merleau-Ponty's theory of the gaze, where what is allowing light to make us a target of the gaze in space is 'the thickness and density of the body that simply intercepts the light'. Krauss concludes that this subject is not organized by form, but by *formlessness* (*informe*). It is noteworthy here in anticipation of the Irigarayan reading of Merleau-Ponty's gaze theory to be presented later, that Krauss does not pick up this dimension of embodiment that she saw aptly identifies in Lacan via Merleau-Ponty. It was lost in Lacan, and for Krauss it was insignificant moment too - density, thickness, flesh-ness. However, a more troubling aspect of Krauss's analysis of the gaze, irrespective of its desire to break from modernist "vertical" and Cartesian "optico-visual models", is that it remains within the framework of visual metaphors. Her account is largely devoid of any relation to corporeality, and uncritically privileges *light* as a primary source of the subject's organization, albeit a *light* without hope for unity and/or enlightenment. Thus, light refers to visibility, to vision, to the ability to see as the primary constitutive element of the subject, however split and multiple he can be.

Thus two points could be drawn from the proceeding discussion on Krauss. One relates to the issue of exploring viable alternatives to the Male Gaze theory, proposed by Mulvey. With regard to this Krauss, despite her interesting interpretation of Sherman's work, seems to have read Mulvey's argument in a rather rigid and narrow manner that makes her critical alternative of the multiple gaze rather weak. In fact, Krauss seems to have been more opposed to Mulvey's feminist agenda than to the substance of her actual arguments. She implicitly insists throughout the text that her interpretations serve as a *true* picture of what is going on, insofar as they are looking 'under the hood', in Sherman's images, in opposition to the *surface* level interpretations of feminist art theorists, who, she believes, have gullibly bought into Sherman's myths. Such reading is itself problematic for it re-enacts the very hermeneutic logic of 'unveiling the truth' that it tries to subvert in Mulvey. Second, in her own interpretation of the gaze Krauss follows an ocularcentric tradition that privileges gaze, light, vision and its correlates, a tradition that has itself undergone a critical reevaluation in

<sup>8</sup> This fact of inescapability of Lacan and its implications for our consideration of the visual will be touched upon later, in the section devoted to Irigarayan critique of vision.



the works of the very same French thinkers she relies on. In the following section we will present an example of a theoretical attempt to generate an alternative to the notion of the 'male gaze'.

*Matrixial Gaze or 'how the phallus cannot master the matrix'*  
(Lichtenberg Ettinger)

Drawing started from memory. According to an off-cited legend, the first drawing was that made by a young Corinthian woman. She is remembered in history as Butades, by the name of her lover and his father (by some accounts, by her father); in short, without a name of her own. It is recounted that she quickly drew an outline of her lover's shadow cast on a wall just before he departed. Derrida writes that in this moment 'Butades does not see her lover, either because she turns her back on him ... or because he turns his back on her, or again, because their gazes simply cannot meet: it is as if seeing were forbidden in order to draw, as if one drew only on the condition of not seeing, as if drawing were a declaration of love destined for or suited to the invisibility of the other - unless it were in fact born from seeing the other withdrawn from sight.' (Derrida, 1993:49, emphasis mine). This metaphor of memory as invisibility and/or visibility of the other from within corporeal remembrance rather than 'direct seeing' (is there such a thing?) has been widely employed by several contemporary women-artists<sup>9</sup>. Taking into consideration our limited scope, only one of such female artists-theorists would be discussed here, the one who directly challenges the uniqueness of the 'male gaze': Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger.

Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger is a painter, psychoanalyst and a feminist theorist, who has been redefining the Lacanian notion of the gaze in order to propose both artistic and theoretical alternatives to phallic subjectivity and signification. Her principal contribution to psychoanalytic theory has been the notion of the matrixial gaze which she developed through the critical engagement with the Lacanian theory of the gaze and Merleau-Ponty's writings on painting and art. For Merleau-Ponty, she notes, 'the drawing and the painting...are the inside of the outside and the outside of the inside, which is rendered possible by the duplicity of sensing'. However, for Lacan, this 'self-splitting-apart' and purification of subject and object, seer and seen, invisible and visible, are framed within 'the castrating function'. Lichtenberg-Ettinger prefers Merleau-Ponty's account over Lacan's since 'Merleau-Ponty's dehiscence attests to a continual outgrowth that leaves a symbiosis - yet in which inside and outside are not confused - slowly behind', while Lacan's *castration* '... announces alienation on the ruins' of the subject (Lichtenberg Ettinger, 1996:107).

She presents her notion of 'matrix' as the opening of possibilities for an *other* representation, for generating different meanings and images. It questions all distances but at the same time protects borderlines. It relates directly to corporeality and materiality of the world but it cannot be reduced to the notion of matter understood in opposition to spirit and mind, as non-ideal elements. The main characteristic of the matrix is that it does not need 'one' and 'the same', it can exist as multiple, connected to the pre-natal, which is nevertheless, symbolic, in a way different from that of Lacan's Symbolic:

*'Matrix is an unconscious space of simultaneous emergence and fading of the I and the unknown non-I which is neither fused, nor rejected. Matrix is based on feminine/pre-natal interrelations and exhibits shared borderspace in which I call differentiation-in-co-emergence and distance-in-proximity are continuously rehed and reorganized by metamorphosis created by - and further creating - relations without relating on the borders of absence and presence, object and subject, me and the stranger.'* (Lichtenberg Ettinger, cited in Pollock, 1996. P. 77).

In order for art-works created by women to be able to achieve aesthetic status on their own, 'the pre-natal' and 'the feminine' require a different set of measures, that is, a *matrixial field*. It would allow them, i.e. the two elements outside the Symbolic field, to gain access to the borderline, to their share of the aesthetic dimension, and their own processes of sublimation and subjectivization. Here Lichtenberg Ettinger departs from Kristeva, who sees the real of the maternal and pre-natal only in terms of the semiotic, where access to the aesthetic dimension is only attained through psychosis (revolutionary, avant-garde) and the mystical (religious par-experiences and shamanistic trances).

<sup>9</sup> In his article on the work of a prominent painter Avis Newman Michael Newman also cites this paragraph from Derrida, to somewhat a different inclination: see Newman, 1996.

Lichtenberg Ettinger develops this aesthetic dimension of matrix through her notion of the matrixial gaze. She sets up her discussion closer to the Lacanian question of the gaze, somehow neglecting Merleau-Ponty's interventions of 'sensing and corporeal sensuality' which she found so attractive to her explication of the matrix as was noted in earlier sections.

For Lacan, according to Lichtenberg-Ettinger, the gaze is 'a relic of a split from an aggregate that knitted presubject and preobject together as a partial drive. The phallic gaze is the invisible as the inside of the visible shell stripped of its libidinal charge, which from dawning represents an outside captivated within.' Following the Lacanian tropes of the fabric and its lining, the phallic gaze in its perception creates "a schism between my eye and the gaze of the Other, embodied by the screen of phantasy". This notion of screen has become dominant in recent debates on the gaze, and Krauss also used it for her discussion of Sherman, together with the image of the stain that subject becomes as a result of this screening: "Something of the gaze is cast upon the screen of phantasy when the subject is suspended, and if something of me appears on the screen, then it appears as a stain from which the gaze has dropped away". Unlike Krauss, for Lichtenberg Ettinger this gaze is ultimately phallic, though it cannot be seen as 'the only one'. She categorized at least three gazes within our experience of subjectivity and

encounters with art works: phallic gaze (Lacan), symbiotic gaze (Merleau-Ponty) and her own, matrixial gaze. She thus suggests a "matrixial productive-conductive projection of a gaze with-in(ter)-to the screen; a gaze that is not yet and no more a 'nothing' neither is it a whole, spread inter-with-in several elements, producing and transforming the qualities of the screen itself." (P. 107)

Unlike the symbiotic gaze of Merleau-Ponty, that is reversible "(T)he matrixial gaze emerges by a simultaneous reversal of with-in and with-out (and does not represent the eternal inside), but a transgression of borderlinks manifested in the contact with-in/-out and art work by transcendence of the subject-object interval which is not a fusion, since it is based on an *a-priori* shareability in difference." (P. 108). Lichtenberg Ettinger proposes a new way of looking at and thinking through art, both for the artist and for the viewer. Her notion of matrixial gaze tries to find new directions that our relation with sexual difference can take, and in doing so she articulates the radical difference in the experiences of the woman-artist. However it is also important to stress that for her the matrixial gaze is much less linked to the notion of 'woman' than to the notion of the 'feminine' that can be read as relating both to men and to women. This approximates her argument to that of Kristeva, though distancing it considerably from the position of Irigaray, both in terms of being interpretations of Lacan and feminist aesthetic strategies.

In the section of "To Emerge In-to-gather-with Painting" she questions the current ways of perceiving art by artists and viewers alike: "In art theory the gaze serves to analyse artworks from the perspective of their being objects that contain something of the *jouissance* and the desire of the subject who produces them or looks at them...Both the post- and the pre-Oedipal phallic gazes that repose upon the partial drive in the scopic zone expel the feminine from art and offer themselves in its place or *her-self* as the object." She later refers to Freud's writings on Leonardo and Lacan's affection for the work of James Joyce as two such examples of 'the expulsion of the feminine' via appropriation of her self and her place. The function of matrixial gaze is thus also to "reinstatement the feminine to its nomadic space as a link with-in-ter several subjects and between subject and object...Through painting the matrixial gaze 'tells' us not only that there is a feminine existence outside the phallus - in the Real - but also that there is a sublimation of the hidden feminine that ex-ists the body." (P. 108)

It is noteworthy that Lichtenberg Ettinger articulates a certain ethics of the Other. Her engagements with Levinas leave a permanent mark on her relation to Lacan, though she extends the notion of femininity that Levinas tied to the question of either the erotic or the maternal. She also seems to benefit from the Irigarayan critique of the notion of the gaze as logocentric and devoid of corporeal and sensual aspects, though she does not go so far as to think through other bodily senses (like touch in Irigaray). Lichtenberg Ettinger's project is largely aesthetic that marks her out as a rare example of a woman artist and an equally engaged

theorist of her own art and painting in general. In this she can be compared to Mary Kelly, who, unlike Lichtenberg Ettinger, was not formally trained in psychoanalysis. She also benefited from her Jewish background, linking her research and art to the tradition of Jewish otherness / religion, constantly working with Hebrew meanings, texts and symbols<sup>10</sup>.

The question though remains of how much we can follow even such critical reading of scopophilic and ocularcentric tradition in art and in philosophy. Does Lichtenberg Ettinger's notion of matrixial gaze allow us to approach the whole problematic of gaze in less idealistic and imaginative terms, even while being embedded in the primacy of the visual without motion, without warmth, without flesh? It seems that Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger's revision of the Lacanian gaze is not only positioned from with-in the phallic, but also relies too much on the primacy of the gaze, on the privileging of the visual and the look in the aesthetic experience: "Through metamorphosis, the artist and the viewer co-emerge in various unique ways in-to-gather-with the work. My painting and the one I look at convey the rays of the phallic gaze, the extensions of the symbiotic ones, and the aeriels of the matrixial gaze." (P. 109) Her metaphors and terms borrowed heavily from Lacan, and only partially reminiscent of Merleau-Ponty's, with her apparent faith in the healing power of traditional psychoanalysis and psychiatry, inevitably construct her notion of matrixial gaze along ocularcentric lines. Her elaboration of another Lacanian term, so much used by Krauss, the screen, though, seems to suggest a positive image of a matrixial screen: "The matrixial screen in art hides the traces of the gaze and also exposes them". They are presented as "revelations and apparitions that resonate into art work the intensification and the fading away of the modalities and qualities of its fraction with-in the feminine difference." However, this feminine difference does not seem to have any relation to sexual difference, and Lichtenberg Ettinger's suggestion that their positivity comes as a result of 'multiplying gazes' (like for Krauss) can be considered problematic too. The multiplication of the gaze, even if taken positively as in Krauss or Lichtenberg Ettinger, understood as sharable in the same way among men and women, still leaves unacknowledged the question of the woman (artist), or the problem of the primacy of the visual and its metaphors in Western discourse.

In our next and last section we will try to highlight this problem with the help of Martin Jay's history of ocularcentrism and Luce Irigaray's writings on the vision and touch.

#### *Forgetting of the Embodied Eye: Irigaray and Ocularcentrism*

David Michael Levin, among others, notes that the notion of vision has enjoyed special and central status from ancient times, especially in Western civilization (Levin 1993). However this discursive centrality was marked with ambiguity and anxieties. On the one hand, many thinkers approached the 'visible world' with suspicion, but on the other, declared it as a primary sense and a way of knowing: 'seeing is believing'. However, starting from the era of Enlightenment, philosophies of vision have experienced 'dark times', a process, Martin Jay has characterized as a "denigration of vision" or the problematization of what he termed *ocularcentrism*. Jay's 'Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in 20th Century French Thought' (Jay, 1993), provides a fascinating and wide-ranging history of the discursive primacy accorded to visuality and vision in French thought. A thorough exposition of the details of his argument in this book is well beyond the scope of this essay. It is sufficient here to mention some of the key elements of his argument insofar as they aid a critical reevaluation of theories of representation, in this case, of the gaze.

Ocularcentrism is, according to Jay, defined as the discursive, cultural and social primacy accorded to the visual, and its systematic permeation and instantiation within certain European cultures. By this Jay was pointing to the ways in which language, cultural and social practices, as well as the symbolic life of many cultures, revolved around notions of vision, visuality, looking, specularity, light, etc. Such discursive primacy accorded to vision has also deeply affected our epistemological categories and the methodologies we employ in trying to understand reality. With reference to studies of representation and their supposed constitutive 'power over us', one needs to reflect on the ocularcentric complicities of such views. If we continue to analyze gaze, and gaze only, if we assign epistemological and ideological primacy to the image, the visual, the represented, then we do feed

<sup>10</sup> This was also partly a link that Levinas and she maintained in Paris before his death, since Levinas approached the question of the Other via reflections on his own Jewish roots and engagements with Judaic philosophical traditions.

oculacentrism, and this is of special concern in areas like feminist critiques of representation and of women's images. Incidentally many feminist critiques of representation implicitly (and some even explicitly) claim that changes in visualizations of women will bring about changes in their embodied practices and even radically critique 'social constructions of gender'. We consider representation to be the most effective cultural weapon of state and capitalism, patriarchy and phallogentrism, oppression and false consciousness. Though exactly this *hope* that we have for representation and its power to change existing social and cultural practices, unveils our own enchantment and fascination with the visual, representation and the looking. The scholarly fascination with representation theories like those of the gaze continuously blinds us to other constructive alternatives. This situation is especially problematic since contemporary art has been desperately struggling to break out of this visual deadlock y moving towards more interactive and embodied aesthetics.

The central questions here seem to be: Why do we study representations? What are we aiming at? After studying them, what are we to do? These questions are especially important for feminist studies for without thinking through them there is a danger in reproducing existing systems even unconsciously rather than subverting them for the benefit of men and women alike. For example, Derrida, while recognizing that the history of different 'feminisms' was often obliterated and their accumulation of historical representations of women ignored, at the same time cautions us against a progressive feminist vision, a certain drive toward 'emancipation' from patriarchal history. The desire to collect and describe 'all terrible images / representations of women', both textual and visual, and dispose of them, with the help of another text or another image, does not free us from this history: *it repeats it*. Derrida says that 'it is the image of continuously accelerated "liberation" at once punctuated by determinable stages and commanded by an ultimately thinkable telos, a truth of sexual difference and femininity, etc. And if there is not doubt that this theatre, upon which the progress of feminist struggles is staged, exists, it is a relatively short and very recent sequence within "extreme-Western" history.' The price to pay for such 'progressivism' of certain feminist history is high, though it can help up to achieve serious and primary political goals. The price would be 'a sinister mystification: everything would

collapse, flow, founder in this same homogenized, sterilized river of the history of mankind [man's kind in the locution *l'histoire des homes*]. This history carries along with it the age-old dream of reappropriation, "liberation", autonomy, mastery, in short the *cortège* of metaphysics and the *tekhnè*." (Derrida, 1988, 1982: 165-166.)

Today we observe many repetitions of this kind of 'progressivism' within (feminist) theories of representation. 'Bad' images of women's are obsessively collected, described and reappropriated by supposedly 'proper and non-patriarchal' measurements and instruments of contemporary visual theory, both post-structuralist, post-modernist, and post-Marxist. While it is not enough to say that every study of representations feeds oculacentrism, it is crucial to note that such studies always *border* it through the history of our inherited language, our metaphors and words, and we must be aware of which meaning of the visual that we are employing at any one point in time. Here it is not about calling for 'no visual studies' or 'no representation' in feminist art, but rather a serious problem of definitions, terms and the epistemological framework within which we are setting up our analysis.

Apart from Derrida, who has been instrumental today in rethinking the notion of the visual especially in his works on painting and truth (Derrida, 1978, 1982, 1993), Luce Irigaray has been the major woman-philosopher reconsidering vision from within the question of sexual difference<sup>11</sup>. If for Derrida 'ear / listening' and 'writing' are those terms that help to think beyond metaphysical tradition, Irigaray adds to them notions of 'touch' and 'caress'. Let us consider here one of her many texts that directly question the visual tradition within Western metaphysics: 'The Invisible of the Flesh: A Reading of Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, "The Interwinning - The Chiasm"' (Irigaray, 1993: 151-184). This text is based on one of her series of lectures given at the University of Rotterdam in 1993, and devoted to providing close readings of a text each from a major Western philosopher: Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Spinoza, Merleau-Ponty and Levinas. It is not accidental that Merleau-Ponty provoked the question of vision. He has already been mentioned several times in this article in our discussion of Rosalind Krauss's and Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger's analysis of the gaze. His writings on this problem were instrumental

<sup>11</sup> I would like to thank Luce Irigaray for her clarifications of some of the issues presented here through our correspondence.

for Lacan, Levinas and others, whose own ideas enjoy dominant position in the current debate on the question of gaze. Irigaray's reading targets one of the major essays within his book on vision and 'the other': *Le visible et l'invisible* (Merleau-Ponty, 1964).

Let us come back to that Corinthian woman and her first drawing. For Michael Newman, she was not trying to imitate the face of her lover, but merely following the traces his face was leaving on the wall, attempting a caress. More importantly, according to Newman, the marks of her drawing remain 'as close to touch as it is given to be seen: the gift is of the hand. Turning away from him, Butades's daughter seeks the other not through vision but through touch... On this side of the scopic regime, she invents an art of memory of the touch... [her] activity has been a touching without seeing, without eidos, an opening of herself to nonknowledge, to not knowing the end... if she moves towards the other, it is through the gift in response to a withdrawal and not because she wants to possess him forever in a memorial or monument.' (Newman, 1996:275-6). The idea that a drawing is a metaphor of caress, that the eyes are like the hand caressing the canvas / wall / material, is somewhat akin to the psychoanalytic theory of sublimation of erotic feelings. There is still a rather romanticized view of both the first woman painter and painting in general (often represented by a female figure in the history of painting itself) in Newman's analysis that leaves touch within the metaphor of visibility. It is a way to express something that was lost in memory and wished to be remembered, to become visible again. For Newman the presence of her lover plays a crucial role since his entire interpretation depends on him, on his presence thus locking her within the logic of recollection and nostalgia. Looking is imagined and presented as a 'touching with distance', and touch is still subjected to the metaphor and primacy of visual. For Irigaray, however, touch cannot be reduced to the visual (once seen and then remembered in a drawing): "First of all, the tangible is received, perceived prior to the dichotomies of active and passive. It is received like a bath that effects without and within, in fluidity. It is never completely situated in the visible. And, furthermore, in the tangible itself, it is not sure that it can transform itself into act." (Irigaray, 1993:164).

If the question is posed in relation to the 'quantity' of touch within the look, it is caught within the tradition of light, when presentation of a distance is aided by metaphor of a movement of light from one point to another, as if light 'touches' us from afar. Lacan, among others, developed this view (what was also cited by Krauss in the earlier section, when she privileged light for the formation of the multiple gaze). He insisted that the gaze has a dimension of materiality, as a transmission from one point to another made available by light. Without light, these Lacanian fundamentals - notions of the screen, projection, shadow and mirror-image - would make no sense, they are senseless in the situation of lightless touch<sup>12</sup>, though they play a crucial role in constituting the subject, according to Lacan (see Adams, 1996; Brennan 1992, 1996; Krauss 1993, 1994). Irigaray questions this primacy of light for the touch. According to Vasseleu, for Irigaray the visible relies on the touch, but not the other way around. In fact, consciousness

cannot exist without touch that constitutes its spatial dimension. (Vasseleu, 1998:67). Thus for Irigaray touch constitutes our very sense of embodied being, first acquired by intra-uterine existence. Ironically the desire for light conceals the desire to reduce everything to light, to appropriate all that is defined as dark. The question is: Can I live within the visible completely without touch? That is, to what extent am I ready to privilege the eye, i.e., ocularcentric modes of being? For Irigaray, we can go rather far in trying to expel touch from our modes of being, to substitute corporeality with images of the self and others. However in this very moment 'I distance myself, for the greater part, from my sensible body.' (1993:165).

Merleau-Ponty writes that 'As soon as I see, it is necessary that the vision ... be doubled with a complementary vision or with another vision (cited in Irigaray, 1993:165). Thus, Irigaray argues, that for Merleau-Ponty, one must be seen in order to exist; one must belong to the other who sees me. And thus if our presence is manifested in us being seen for others, then our invisibility equals to death. However, there are a few situations when we are felt, but not seen. The most fundamental of these situations is intra-uterine life, or pre-natal: the mother knows of our existence long before anyone else can see us<sup>13</sup>. This situation, together with some others, is excluded from Merleau-Ponty's account (and it might be added, from the accounts of Lacan, Levinas and Derrida)<sup>14</sup>. Merleau-Ponty's visibility is related to the presence, to the fact of birth and life (endorsed by others' gazes and one's own in response). Irigaray notes that birth and life understood as conditional upon visibility in the world collapses one into a necessary

12 One of Thomas Mann's stories can serve us here as the best example of such photocentric (centered on light) tradition. In his novel "Joseph and His Brothers", which is based on the Biblical story, Joseph was supposed to spend his 'first night' with his new wife, whom he loved dearly for many years waiting anxiously for this moment. However at night the relatives replaced her with her elder sister, and Joseph mistook this sister for the woman he loved for many years and who lived within his community. The reason, as Thomas Mann and the Biblical story tell us, was darkness: he did not see that it was another woman. Darkness was a sufficient reason without any consideration given to all other senses of the body.

13 Obsession with visibility of fetus that are allowed by new technologies and developments in medical science has been noted long ago, and can be only mentioned without analysis here. However this question requires many separate studies since the notorious medical drive 'to see' as 'to know=to cure' serves the same illusions and myths that are discussed here within a larger framework of ocularcentrism.

solipsism. A more pertinent question though is of the relationship between the visible, the look, and the flesh as the realm of corporeality. We can touch ourselves in more places than we can see. Instead of being thrilled with the possibility of seeing them with a help of some objects (like a mirror) we might give this fact a second thought. The most striking fact remains invisibility and inaccessibility of our own looks and appearance to our gaze. I can see myself only through limiting the scope of my vision. Yes, I can observe myself, but my *face* would forever remain invisible for me - I need a mirror to see it. And is it my face that I see in the mirror, or is it the mirror-image (even though of my face)? "I see myself in the mirror as if I were another. I put that other that I am in the mirror between the other and myself" (p. 170). I cannot be bodily embedded in the world, and in my relation to others, and simultaneously see my face - just like in a drawing, I cannot both see the object of my drawing and draw. I have to turn away from others and from the world, at least for a second, in order to see my face / to draw. And this very face is invested in so much in our cultures and societies, with an inescapable anxiety deriving from my not being able to see it: "My face is always in darkness. It is never born. That is why probably it is at stake in metaphysics that wants to bring into the light that which is not yet clear. And that maintains the most radical polemos with the maternal, the intrauterine: irreducible darkness." (Irigaray, 1993:171).

Thus, our desire to flee thinking through the darkness and invisible corporeal experience *unless* defining them by light (lighting them up) relies too heavily on the vision and the look, missing the invisible experience. Even when Merleau-Ponty tries to augment his argument with embodiment and the presence of others in the universe of the self, he names the main characteristic of the body to be its ability to see and to be seen in a double way (literally and as image). Also, representation conceived in terms of the gaze, point of view / light, screen and its projections or splitting

of the image - that is, everything that needs light for its existence relies on somatophobic language and draws on the solipsism of visual metaphors. The absence of discourse of 'invisible' and all that surrounds representation and images (that is, absence of *parergon*, to use Derrida's term), leads us to eternal search of 'ideal image', to endless circulation among-between images and representations, their critiques and critics, without interval, without rest, without hope and hesitation.

"The phenomenology of the flesh that Merleau-Ponty attempts is without question(s)", writes Irigaray. It does not allow for any interval or a spacing for a free possibility "of questioning between the two". It is tight, it imprisons like a shell, without permission, without question: "No other or Other to keep the world open. No genesis. No grace" (Irigaray, 1993:183).

Such restless surrounding of oneself with its own images and self-referential returns to oneself, is what Irigaray teases out of Merleau-Ponty. Even speech is not for communication, but for 'listening to the self', for hearing oneself. This philosophical discourse is so obsessed with oneself, that cannot escape this weaving of a thread around itself, surrounding itself with a net of words, self-reflective images, speaking to its own images of itself. It is constituted in a way that there is 'no becoming that would not have been stopped'; that is why for the Merleau-Ponty world is moving around to come back to itself. Endless circulation of interpretations and analyses is relying on ocularcentric language, when we see ourselves in every other image, unable to not identify. A representation of a woman, any representation, returns as an image for our self, that we receive from the drive to consolidate and create our own image. *We see little at all.* Our gaze is senseless and blind since we are still 'staring at the image' in the mirror, placing image between ourselves and others, and even within our self. Thus we, women, are caught in an endless longing for some 'true image' of a woman, something 'suitable' for our social, cultural and political positions. Women artists and theorists seem to invest so much in 'returning the gaze' or critiquing its operations exactly because they still invest in the gaze, and its power to change. In these gestures, that re-instate the gaze in their very denials and critiques, are we not closing the possibility of another language, another experience, another vision of a different volume, level and density, less scared of darkness, mucous and corporeality?

*Traditionally, man claims to be the one who sees, the one whose horizon would not be pierced from one end to the other both by his "own" vision and by the look of the other who sees him. This belief, this will for mastery, probably constitutes one of the most fundamental illusions of the flesh. The screen or armor that places an interdiction on loving relations. And the postulate of a God who is both invisible and who sees all, which makes up for the blind gaze of the other.*

Luce Irigaray

14 It is noteworthy though that Irigaray does not place touch as a primary sense, or a sense that has some hierarchically superior (or prior) position to the other senses. Her position can be best considered in a context of her general philosophical project, rather than this one case.



Amanda Heng, *Let's Walk*. Opening performance at the exhibition "Ambulations". Curated by Gunalan Nadarajan . Singapore, 1999. Courtesy of the artist.



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