

## The Gaze of the Other

### Bringing in

The following commentary is an attempt to articulate the centre as well as boundaries of the *Other* as pertinent to the *gaze* in the context of the human *subject*, relevant to multisensory but mainly visual perceptual experience in and of a particular context. The *in* and *of*, of the context, may imply the near reciprocal looking out of the human subject and the subject's chosen human, animate, or even inanimate phenomenon looking back. Such looking can encapsulate more than the mere object, and the extent to which looking is variously philosophical and psychodynamic has caused it to be termed *the gaze*. The credibility of the idea of the gaze and the hypothesis that the Other works cooperatively with the gaze is not here disputed, and neither is the Other itself defined or challenged. Rather, the commentary brings in comparisons and contrasts of three authorities on the Other in their at-once similar and distinct ways, Levinas, Lacan and Foucault.

Insofar as concepts such as *Other* and *the gaze* concern the nature of subjectivity amidst human engagement with intentions and criteria that one might ordinarily assume are objective, Dalton (2013: 2-3) links Levinas and Lacan, particularly due to their respective challenges of Heidegger's thinking on the human subject as of 'being-in-the-world'. Foucault may also link in this context due to his concept of 'heterotopia', which provides a more physical scenario that has strongly subjectively dimensions. Apart from this, as the commentary's author I already have some theoretical knowledge, and interest in and of the Other, and construct the topic in terms relating to the sense of myself in, operating through, and reflecting back from a chosen and apparently external context. In this respect I might be said to bring myself into the topic. There would seem to be no way around this, apart from turning the topic into an academic inquiry of the Other, its relationship with the gaze, and how the latter phenomena variously relate to and reconstruct the phenomenon of the subject. To *bring into* is therefore to take up a question that's already *up and running* – to offer a metaphor of physical human movement – at the starting point of a project of artistic research. How the question is already part of a continuum may be argued as due to the reflexive element of artistic research; that one pursues topics that are of subjective interest to one in ways in which it feels congenial to work.

While this specific research concerns a site, a relatively unused builder's yard viewed across what I consider a void space from my apartment's balcony, the conjecture, to be explored through the project, is that such a site can somehow enable the consideration of responsibility. The space is void, however, precisely in the region where it's unaffected by the location's physical boundaries. Swifts know this, and fly and circle freely in the space in groups. Of the three aforementioned authorities on the Other, Levinas theorizes the question of responsibility in the context of human face-to-face, while Lacan and Foucault suggest more structural means, respectively psychical and metaphorical, which are also illustrated in physical terms. Since the builder's yard, let alone the void space that ranges over it, is obviously not a human face, the three authorities' similar and different reasoning may between them offer a subjective and expansive idea of *face* that can accommodate a reciprocal sense of gazing between myself and the site. Responsibility, I propose, oscillates in the in-between of these physical factors that I've termed void space.

#### Anecdotal

If I were typing an email casually to a corresponding artist and friend concerning my present project, I'd say that an idea that the Lacanian mirror, through its continual theorization eventually becoming the Other, links well with an explanation by Foucault of the mirror as an example of a 'heterotopia'. I'd also state that I was struggling with reading Levinas on the Other. I'd add that my visual work on the void space of the builder's yard visible from my balcony had become the motif for an artistic research call on the question of responsibility. Levinas, in contrast to Lacan and Foucault, I'd continue, regards one's relation with the Other as a relation of 'responsibility' – in more general terms as a matter of ethics. The difficulty with Levinas, as opposed to Lacan and Foucault, I'd then suggest, would be that one could not so easily extend his theory of Other to that of the object. Likewise, it would be difficult to apply Lacan and Foucault's approach to the Other to the question of responsibility. However, since my friend was a painter, I could introduce him to my sense of an idea of Levinas that the image-value of an art object is a projection out from its constituent *inwardness*. Certainly, a property of inwardness of the Other is shared by all three of the chosen authorities.

The emphasis of my own drawing-based visual work, I'd suggest, always returns to the question of space/surface paradox. In this respect I'd say that I owe it to

myself to attend to an essential value of both painting and drawing. It's not that I have to think much about this, I'd continue, since it was an outcome of one's training, a matter of visual art's *goodness* – to allude to Levinas – albeit in a sense limited to and by certain conceptions of what art is and can be, and one's reciprocal response by being good. I never thought I'd use *good* in this ethical sense, I'd suggest with surprise, but it's a collective ethics gained from a combination of what was once taught me and I'd subsequently developed through sensory awareness and conceptual understanding. Over the years this had been configured in my own personal terms that basically don't disagree with the notion that space and surface have to be locked in a manner of both intimacy and conflict, where one flirts with, worries over and occasionally broadens the boundaries. To flirt, worry, and broaden are modes of approach for, against and with the Other that do have their relevance, in different ways, to the work of the authorities.

The term *authority*, I'd suggest, might in fact be the key: responsibility to oneself and through one's actions, according to whom, or according to what pervading model. In the earlier phase of Lacan's structuring of the human subject as *subject*, the Other, I'd explain, *was* authority, an abstract all-pervasive value within and of the psyche that permeated language and all its manifestations in its broadest sense; perhaps everything. In saying this without theoretical reference, I'd be conveying my own opinion, only, of a role of the Other, which, even if it were close to what Lacan meant, will have developed in Lacanian theory and left me behind, as it were, with my struggles to argue and demonstrate how my sense of responsibility to myself reflected assumptions of responsibility in general.

This idea of *anecdote* is therefore integral with the project. One might even say that artistic research is by nature anecdotal. One's interlocutor may be considered a fellow artist, rather than an academic or of other inclination, and on the occasion that this commentary reflects, there is such a real person in the wings, as it were, whom I know through email correspondence.

### Theoretical

#### Levinas

Of the three referenced authorities on the question of Other, Levinas (1996: 83) particularly equates the Other with *responsibility*: 'The Other becomes my neighbor precisely through the way the face summons me, calls for me, begs for me, and in so

doing recalls my responsibility, and calls me to question'. This is not to suggest that the Other takes human form. The face bears what Levinas (ibid: 43) refers to as '[...] a relationship with a Mystery', which he describes as an 'event happens' that cannot be known or apprehended by a subject but '[...] where none the less in a certain way it is in front of the subject' (ibid: 45). To refer to this kind of 'event' as happening unconsciously to one, would be applicable to each of Levinas, Lacan and Foucault, but Moati (2014: 106) usefully states of Derrida's interpretation of the Freudian-founded dynamic unconscious that there is an 'alterity of conscious' working inside consciousness, '...implied by the precedence of iterability over presence'. This refers, in other words, to a continual repetition or *iteration* of internal concerns that cannot be stated in any overt sense that would make them *present*. To iterate, and perhaps also to *index*, especially as the latter is more suitable to the apparently inchoate gesture or trace that is often noticeable in drawings and paintings. In the Moati text (ibid), Derrida's view of the unconscious is that it has the potential to be split off from any human agency and occupy language itself, doing its subversive work 'from the inside' without being seen from the outside as any 'distinct psychic instance' (Moati, ibid: 106). This would suggest a more autonomous interpretation of the Levinas sense of the Other, where it inhabits, as it were, the other person unbeknown to them or to the observer of whom it affects. Levinas's alternation of capitalized *Other* and lower-case *other* conveys a sense of oscillation of the capitalized within the lower case. The other person may be considered to bear something *about* them that is at one and the same time them and the Other: '[...] the other as resembling us, but exterior to us [...]' (Levinas, 1996: 33).

However, neighbourliness is only one of a variety of ways in which the Other's presence in absence, as it were, can be felt, which '[...] goes beyond what I may or may not have done to the Other or whatever acts I may or may not have committed'. While such responsibility is 'guiltless', one is '[...] none the less open to an accusation of which no alibi, spatial or temporal, could clear me'. By 'alibi', one should perhaps take this to mean any sense of *object* with which to defend oneself against the Other. Whatever the Other is '[...] at once gives and conceals the Other' (Levinas, ibid: 43). Similarly, Levinas states:

This is not a participation in a third term, whether this be a person, a truth, a work, or a profession. It is a collectivity that is not a communion. It is the

face-to-face without intermediary, and is furnished for us in the eros where, in the other's proximity, distance is integrally maintained, and where pathos is made of both this proximity and this duality. (ibid: 54)

The above references suggest that the Levinas Other is a kind of disposition that might be said to be looking back at one but as no tangible thing, whether animate or inanimate. According to Dalton (2013: section 4), the Levinas subject is always '[...] beyond itself, in an Other who is situated on the "hither side of consciousness"'. This indicates that it is not in any sense a distinct separateness between oneself and an Other, so much as the permeation of oneself as subject within the apparently external circumstances of an Other, a 'Mystery'. Challenging the likelihood of the externality of the Other being considered in any straightforward external sense, Levinas (1996: 43) states: 'The Other's entire being is constituted by its exteriority, or rather its alterity, for exteriority is a property of space and leads the subject back to itself through light'. The Other would appear to be not only *other* to the subject, as a mystery, but *other* to itself, as an Other constituted by its own 'alterity'. Similarly with externality as synonymous with 'light', this would seem to mean not so much light's properties of making visible but as metaphorical of understanding.

Concerning art, Levinas (ibid: 132) suggests that it is the 'image' that can be extracted from the object that is of relevance to the question of the Other; that such an image is '[...] exterior to itself, but with an exteriority which is not that of a body [...]' Here we have an exteriority of the inward'. In this context Levinas (ibid: 132) does refer to *the gaze*. The following longer quote may serve as a key point of reference for the project, inasmuch as Levinas's philosophy is useful in positioning the question of responsibility, in this case in relation to drawing:

In the vision of the represented object a painting has a density of its own: it is itself an object of the gaze. The consciousness of the representation lies in knowing that the object is not there. The perceived elements are not the object but are like its 'old garments', spots of colour, chunks of marble or bronze. These elements do not serve as symbols, and in the absence of the object they do not force its presence, but their presence insist on an absence. They occupy its place fully to mark its removal, as though the represented object died, were degraded, were disincarnated in its own reflection. The painting then does not

lead us beyond the given reality, but somehow to the hither side of it. (ibid: 136)

In this sense, one's awareness that the painted representation is not itself the object indicates the presence of something in and through its very absence, which is in a sense a halfway house towards sensing and knowing the Other. One is directed by the representation towards a reality not so much within it as near it, 'the hither side of it', which preserves the idea of the Other as being something mysterious but still external.

### Lacan

In Lacan's theory the small other and capitalized Other are quite different concepts. Of most relevance to the present project is the question of reciprocity between the big Other and the gaze. This is where Lacanian theory is perhaps the more comprehensive. Perception is constituted in Lacanian theory by experiential subjectivity as well as biology, in which a psychically orientated 'stain' or blur projects from the gaze and spoils the clarity of the perceived object. Due to Lacan's theory of 'the mirror stage', where it is proposed that human identity is developed from an illusionary distinction between one's self and one's mirror image as the *other*, by extension the sense of self-reflection can be invested, albeit at the psychical unconscious level, in otherwise separate and unrelated people and things. This sense of investment of oneself in separate phenomena gazing back enables one to theorize an *otherness* of the gaze, an estrangement of oneself from oneself that is informative at the level of the subject in metapsychology, and also of the subject in phenomenological philosophy and philosophy of being.

What is called to question is the assumed clarity of visual experience; one's ability to observe sharply, quickly, and in detail, and to scan and respond to cues picked up peripherally – with or without glasses – and how the aggregate of a variously involuntary activity with conscious and unconscious intent is better termed perception than mere observation. Lacan (1981: 74) terms this sensory facility concerning sight, also considerably subject to psychical factors, the 'scopic field'. Lacan's (ibid: 72-3) explanation of the relationship between the eye and the gaze, inasmuch as the gaze is an activity of vision, is premised on a critique of the form-basis of the reciprocal *seeing* and *seen* in 'phenomenological experience' – for example as discussed by Merleau-Ponty in his last work *The Visible and the Invisible*

(1968) – because of its also being constituted by what he terms a ‘strange contingency’. Lacan (1981: 73) states: ‘[...] something slips, passes, is transmitted, from stage to stage, and is always to some degree eluded in it – that is what we call the gaze’. Of psychoanalysis itself, Lacan (ibid: 77) defines it as ‘[...] the elaboration of the notion of the subject. [...] leading the subject back to his signifying dependence’. Importantly, a key question of the constituent ‘contingency’ of the gaze that Lacan sometimes refers to as ‘stain’ is that it is not merely a matter of the eye. Lacan (ibid: 74) refers to the *secrecy* of the aspect of the gaze that concerns the stain, and suggests that we will never be able to understand this phenomenon ‘[...] from the grasp of that form of vision that is satisfied with itself in imagining itself as consciousness’. What the gaze contains, termed by Žižek the ‘blind spot’, is in Lacanian terminology (2006: 83) a ‘privileged object’ that represents the cause of the original desire, forever unknown to one, which may be sensed but is never clearly *seen* – to use this verb in its passive sense to suggest both vision and knowledge.

Lacan (1981: 86-7) uses two metaphors in explaining his understanding of the gaze. The first metaphor concerns the establishment of ‘geometral laws of perspective’ in the Renaissance, where coordinate points of objects in their spatial relationships are established on a flat intersecting plane to obtain a convincing pictorial view of the three-dimensional world. For this Lacan (ibid: 87) refers to Durer’s woodcuts of the Renaissance use of a gridded screen (Gombrich, 1977) or ‘*lucinda*’, where the artist, while looking outwards from the optical pyramid’s point in the eye, is in effect pulling observed object/s back towards him via coordinates on the screen placed in the middle distance that corresponds with a grid drawn onto the surface to situate an emerging pictorial representation. The second metaphor concerns how the ‘blind man’ learns ‘the mapping of space, not sight’, through relations of time between points established and known through the aid of sticks – the point being that the scopic field is structured not merely by sight. The usefulness of the Durer gridded frame is that it can also render the *image* anamorphic, Lacan’s example being the stretched and distorted skull in Hans Holbein’s *The Ambassadors* (1533). Importantly for Lacan’s theory (1981: 88-9), at roughly the advent of the idea of the human *subject*, the anamorphic means emerged that could metaphorically indicate the distortion of appearances sharable through geometral perspective by the power of individualized desire.

To understand such an idea more precisely, one has first to recall the diagrammatic schema of geometral optics, where, from the point in the eye, a cone is projected outwards. Perspective is registered by vision in the form of the flat-screen intersection on which coordinates are plotted by means of the threads as shown in Durer's woodcuts. In this schema the operative element is of threads rather than light, for which reason a blind man could make equal use of the system. However, Lacan superimposes on this schema its inverse, where the point is a point of light, which, in its constellation outwards of many points projecting from the object, creates a picture at the region of the eye. The intersection in this inverted schema, where in the conventional schema, the *image*, is situated, is a *screen*. According to Lacan (ibid: 96-7), the screen has a degree of opacity '[...] as space of light, that which is gaze is always a play of light and opacity, which disturbs the clarity of the image as 'the stain, the spot'.

This is not to say that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological interpretation of the gaze is not also relevant. Lacan (ibid: 95) acknowledges Merleau-Ponty's derivation of 'chiasm' that is 'interlacing, intersection, chiasma [...] which structures the whole of this domain'. Where it may be considered that Lacan challenges the phenomenological understanding of *chiasm* is in the chiasm's relatively synchronous mirrored merging between subject and object, which he replaces with an asymmetrical relation between the visual and psychic, with the latter obfuscating any assumption of clarity of the former. The Lacanian proposed tendency of perception to *hold* something that's not explicable in terms of whatever's the material object of observation, may be what Žižek (2006: 29) terms an irreconcilable 'gap' between the kind of perspective that generates the observation and that which generates the subjective other angle. The other angle, as it were, is the reverberation of significance from another or *other*-sensory domain. Žižek (ibid: 29) refers to 'a minimal reflexive twist': 'We do not have two perspectives, we have a perspective and what eludes it, and the other perspective fills this void of what we could not see from the first perspective'.

### Foucault

In a paper published in 1984, first delivered as a lecture in 1964, Foucault (1984: 3-4) distinguishes the space of two kinds of 'site', 'utopia' and 'heterotopia'. While by *site* one can think more obviously in terms of locations comprised of three-



dimensions, what Foucault (ibid: 3) terms 'heterogeneous space', utopian and heterotopic spaces have a 'curious property' of space in relation to site in that they '[...] suspend, neutralize, or invent the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect'. Foucault's mention of the 'internal space' of 'dreams' and 'passions' in this context, therefore, also suggests a degree of proximity to considerations of Levinas and Lacan.

Foucault (ibid: 3) contrasts utopias, which are '[...] sites with no real place', with heterotopias that he claims are 'counter-sites', sites that are real, but are '[...] simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted'. The example Foucault provides of the structure of a heterotopia is the *mirror*. In the quote that follows that describes how the mirror works in terms of heterotopia, Foucault also references the 'gaze', which compares to an extent with the mirror metaphor that one finds in Lacan's metapsychology:

The mirror is, after all, a utopia, since it is a placeless place. In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror. But it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy. From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there. Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am. The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there. (ibid: 4)

Among several principles of the heterotopia, Foucault (ibid: 6) states that it can combine into it, as 'a single real place', other places and sites that are in themselves distinct and different, that is often associated with time, and that it can

affect many or all other surrounding spaces. Alternatively, in terms that link this kind of space with Levinas and Lacan, according to Foucault (ibid: 8) a heterotopic space can be '[...] other, another real space.... The latter type would be the heterotopia, not of illusion, but of compensation'. What distinguishes this Foucault reference from that of Levinas and Lacan, which is a matter of degree rather than separation, is its much less apparent indication of the unconscious and psychical, where the latter is suggested as more likely to be utopic, as 'sites with no real place', rather than heterotopic space. It is more possible to apply Foucault's idea to the sheer visual-material that, following the mirror example as heterotopic, does exist in reality, but exerts '[...] a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy', both 'absolutely real' and 'absolutely unreal'.

Foucault seems to offer a description of how the mirror works that one can, with a little imaginative exertion, virtually *see*, where there is nonetheless an in-between oscillating as both real and unreal without its being subject to suppositional ideas of the unconscious psyche. Between oneself and one's mirror view, towards which one can project and 'reconstitute' oneself within that spatial context, is a void space, where it might be considered that any uncertainty of the situation exists.

### Discursive

The burning question is to what extent the forlorn looking builder's yard can be considered a reflection. The yard cannot, of course, actually mirror, and with what I'm suggesting, the view has at some point got to peter out and become space, and void space at that! I need to exclaim to myself, even while punctuating what I expect might be the reader's reaction. The entire project is in effect an exclamation that forces the idea.

To what extent could the builder's yard metaphorically represent authority, full of authoritative elements, civilization's building blocks, if that's not too grand a claim of a present state of near dereliction; of the latter's duty, of authority's having let one down? This would link: I adhere to the Symbolic, in the Lacanian sense, since I'm of that generation, yet I've always had a degree of ambivalence towards the Other as authority's commands. What I'm responsible for is however I steer things alternatively to what's deemed best by the status quo. Even in the drawings there's a refusal to do them well in the conventional sense, to make use of methods that both challenge verisimilitude and release into the drawings some autonomy of the medium.

Or perhaps in the latter respect there's something more fundamental about how the Other here manifests, more ineffably Real in the Lacanian sense, associated with his later idea of the unconscious as *lalangue*, as the carrying into adulthood of one's pre-linguistic babble, still with vestiges of significance but in ways that remain forever unknown because cannot be translated as language. In terms of the drawings this would mean the attempt to try to *see* the space, the void space of the Other also in the Levinas sense, and the indeterminate in-between of one's position and the counteractive position in the Foucault sense, through a method that paradoxically concerns lack of control.

Now here's the point: it's as though dragging vestiges of the Real that can be released from the ineffable into the domain of the Symbolic, and hence to take responsibility for them. It's not that the yard's details cannot be drawn, so much as are a willful distortion or degradation of them as if to say: "I refuse to do this correctly." In so saying, I set up my own challenge to authority, albeit discreetly, but sufficiently to position me a little outside of its grip. The importation of such vestiges into the Symbolic, which has enabled me to say of them the latter, doesn't alter them, but allows them to oscillate in a relatively accommodating space, the space of the void, more or less redundant to one's utilitarian needs, that variously mediate, obfuscate and challenge communication. This is most cogently explained by Lacan concerning the oscillation of *image* and *screen* in his theorization of the scopic field. Artistic practice does allow one to see this psychical relationship, if only as pockets of the medium's autonomy in an otherwise more structured field. What I'm suggesting is that such autonomy can be permitted greatest girth in the least relevant or determined of spaces, which I'm calling void space.

Lacan infers the forever unknown knowledge of the Real when, citing the words contained in a dream, he states:

*Father, can't you see I'm burning?* This sentence is itself a firebrand – of itself it brings fire where it falls – and one cannot see what is burning, for the flames blind us to the fact that the fire bears on the *Unterlegt*, on the *Untertragen*, on the real. (1981: 59)

Then, according to Lacan (ibid:60): 'The place of the real, which stretches from the trauma to the phantasy – in so far as the phantasy is never anything more than the

screen that conceals something quite primary, something determinant in the repetition [...]’. This suggests the limit of how much one can expect to access the Real: as no more than the ‘screen’ offered by and as the phantasy. The screen not purely by chance – because chance alone is really an encounter with the Real – muddies the clarity of the image; it is meant to do so as an indication that there’s something more and different to the assumed transparency that one complacently assumes of one’s experience. Of course, this supposition of a psychical unconscious working unbeknown to one within consciousness is largely a matter of belief. If the willingness to believe is there, however, appearances can have considerably more depth.

### Signing off

I could say that in order to explore the question of responsibility as artistic research I have chosen a site of near neutrality that *cradles* – given that this is a verb that can be construed subjectively – a void space, which I’m saying is the space of responsibility. This site is near- rather than completely neutral – apart from whether anything that’s a choice can ever *be* completely neutral – because it’s a collection of building paraphernalia that may at some future date again be used. Nearness might also imply the proximity to me of neutrality that it is, after all, subjective. As Levinas explains of the Other, it both resembles us but is exterior, yet not in any literal sense. In this respect, I can just as readily take the site in question as imbued with the subjective character of the gaze as another’s human face, and if it were the latter, one might just as well say of it that it could be a builder’s yard! I’m inclined to use exclamation marks because there *is* something bizarre about the idea, yet it’s harnessing my sense of responsibility, firstly of my inner sense of commitment to my creative practice, and secondly towards structuring a link to an unlikely observable motif formally and theoretically. Yet the builder’s yard is not quite the site, so much as the void space between me and the yard in which, in a more Foucault sense, oscillates as the projection my gaze outwards towards the site and a willing of the site back towards me through the manner in which I portray it. In the Lacanian sense, such oscillation is the obfuscation of the clarity of the image – recalling that Levinas does also equate the Other with *image* – with the subjectivity of the ‘screen’ that bears psychical content. This is interesting, when I’ve attributed the activity of the near *derelict* builder’s yard, in a sense a building abandoned in progress, with cradling.

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