

NIDA Lacan Study and Reading Group, November Seminar

Date: Wednesday 29 November 2017.

Time: 6-8 pm

Location: Tutorial Room, No.3, NIDA, 215 Anzac Parade

Readings:

Lacan: Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, Penguin Books, pp.105-119.

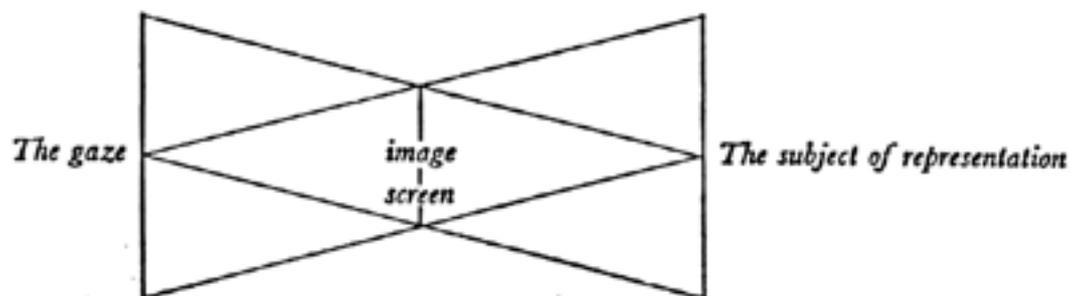
Lacan on the Gaze and Picture

In *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan spells out the genealogy of desire in a visual field. I would just like to sum up by saying in a nutshell that desire places delimitation on the field of visibility, where the eye functions in opposition to what the gaze may set to expose. In the theatre of desire, the object *a* plays a decisive role by symbolizing the lack upon which desire sustains itself. This object *a*, the object cause of desire is the gaze. Since desire in the symbolic, according to Lacan, is the desire of the Other, therefore in the field of visibility, *I see* turns into *I see just to be seen*. The unconscious desire of the subject does not lie in '*I see*,' but lies in '*I see to be seen*', instead. This makes a visual field the space of the gaze of the Other that calls for a subject's look just to neutralize it. It is because the gaze causes in subject the awakening of the scopic drive. The implication of desire in a scopic field on the subject is enormous. The gaze that animates desire, in fact, entraps the subject's look. The seductive and taming role of the gaze raises the strength of the seen object, the image, picture and so on. "The momentary feeling of unbalance when we chance to see something by accident perhaps as a result of the brushing glance as we turn away, is the gaze at work," (Murphy, 2001, 80). Suppose I look at a picture, my desire to look is triggered by the gaze hidden in the picture, which creates on its part what Lacan calls a spot or screen that floods me with the light. The light is thrown by the gaze of the Other rather than the picture itself. The subject who sees at the picture is succumbed to the flood of light. In this context, Lacan argues that the subject is photographed by the picture or to be more precise by the gaze and desire of the Other. Furthermore, the subject is determined by the gaze which comes from outside from where the Other is looking at the subject. The gaze is thus an 'instrument' through which, "I am photographed," (Lacan, 1994, 106). Animals remain in the imaginary capture but they are capable like humans to use the weapon of the capture in the scene of fighting by making gestures to defeat their enemies. The gesture is not the blow but the freezing or arresting of the enemy. The meaning of the evil eye that stops movement or as Lacan says it is killing life is imaginable from the arresting power of the gaze of the Other that makes the subject as a picture. Another example of the power of the gaze of the Other Lacan gives us is the gestures of a dancer in some dances. When a dancer pauses and momentarily stops his fast movements gestures like a marble statue, the arresting gesture of the gaze comes to life.

In order to elaborate further Lacan's theory of the gaze and picture, we need to disentangle the above theoretical contour by putting it in plain words. Lacan means that the object we see is turned into a displaced screen by the intervention of gaze that masks that seen object. As a result of this, the observer is caught in the trap of the gaze. The gaze is independent of the eye and the control of the subject. This turns the object I see into the picture or image

that see me before I put my glance on it. Therefore, what I see replaces itself into what I desire to see. This is the meaning of Lacan's famous phrase, *you never look at me from the place from which I see you*.

For explication of his theory of gaze, Lacan combines his own theory of the decentred subject and the logic of the scopic science of light, reflection, and refraction. He presents two interpenetrated triangles. The first triangle represents the subject or better the eye of the subject and the second signifies the gaze. As the diagram shows the eye of the subject is located at the apex of the second triangle and sees through this apex which belongs to the gaze of the Other. The image or picture that is formed at the point of the intersection between the two triangles is formed as the point towards which my desire is directed. What the eye sees is the screen or the trap laid down by the gaze which capture my eye. The trap belongs to the light of the gaze of the Other. Unlike the Cartesian subject, Lacanian subject is not the centre of its own visual experience. In other words, in seeing, the subject gets its light from the gaze that lies out of the subject. The image that is formed in the screen by the gaze of the Other is marked out by the lack. By way of illustration, Lacan presents Hans Holbein's famous early Renaissance painting *The Ambassadors* as an example of that picture that contains within itself the trap of the gaze. This lack in this painting functions as the taming of the gaze, *dompte-regard*, symbolized by the anamorphic skull at the background between the two handsomely dressed young ambassadors. The skull in the painting is curiously visible when it is looked at from a left angle from below or right angle from above. Lacan argues that the skull represents the trap for the observing subject, which symbolizes nothingness, death and the lack or object *a* of desire. In the dialectic of eye as organ and the gaze as the look of the Other, the gaze is on the winning side because it entraps the observer in its snare, as the skull in the *Ambassadors* illustrates. As this painting bears evidence, art is the guide that offers Lacan's theorization a full scope of exposition. In other words, art held within itself a hidden knowledge that needs to be discovered.



Jacques Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*

Courtesy of www.pinklink.net

Because of the involvement of desire, the taming of the gaze is always accompanied by the deception in vision *trompe-l'oeil*. The similar logic may be applied to the social function of the object *a* as gaze when we analyse religious icons. They are pictures that holds within themselves the lure and capture because they function as the objects of desire as well as the object of the desire of God. "What makes the value of the icon is that the god it represents is also looking at it. It is intended to please God," (Ibid, 113). Such icons symbolize the invasive power of the gaze which like Foucauldian panoptic eye are looking at everyone from all sides. This understanding of the religious iconography is fully sheltered in the analytical psychology of Carl Jung for whom the image was synonymous with exposition of God. From this power of the gaze of the Other, Lacan describes his theory of the evil eye and its

hypnotic and freezing power. The eye that is revealed as an uncanny object is the evil eye of the gaze. The eye as an organ is separated from the body, the subject as an object *a*. The uncanny nature and the threatening feature of the evil eye reveals the separating function of the eye. Lacan mentions the social significance of the gaze symbolized by the iconography of the eye in the mythology and antiquity. Poe in his short fiction, *The Tell-Tale Heart*,” reminds us of the evil eye:

I think it was his eye! Yes, it was this! He had the eye of a vulture—a pale blue eye, with a film over it. Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold...I made up my mind take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye forever. [xroads.virginia.edu]

Lacan refers to the Augustine’s *Confessions*, where he presents the story of his childhood and his envy towards his smaller brother who was still at his mother’s breast. The lure of the picture that arises in the eye of the viewer, as it was said earlier, is also compared to the function of gestures and masked in the battle zone. Grimaces, masks, and gestures were used in classical wars and moderns war alike which all used as weapon. “A threatening gesture, for example? It is not a blow that is interrupted. It is certainly something that is done in order to be arrested and suspended,” (116).

As Lacan reminds us that in the scopic level instead of the discourse of the demand we have the desire of the Other that is symbolized by the lack that gaze as the object *a* represents. Since the desire of the subject is the desire of the Other, in the field of visibility the subject is seen from all side, as it was pointed out earlier, the subject is already photographed. So, each picture and painting is recognized with its integral lure and trap. The gaze allows the photographing of the subject.

What determines me, at the most profound level, in the visible, is the gaze that is outside. It is through the gaze 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—if you will allow me to use a word, as I often do, in fragmented form—I am *photographed*. (106)

In conclusion in the theory of the gaze and the picture, what is at stake for Lacan is the configuration of desire in the field of invisibility. What the subject sees is determined by the exterior gaze that comes from the Other to which the desire of the subject is directed. The subject’s vision is not centred in itself. It is superimposed by the gaze of the Other that often exposes a lack. Thus, the subject’s eye is embedded in the gaze of the Other. The picture or painting functions as the confinement of the vision of the subject.

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Notes:

Lacan, Jacques, (1994), *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Penguin Books, London.

Murphy, Sara, (2001), “The Gaze,” *A Compendium of Lacanian Terms*, edit. Huguette Glowinski, et al. Free Association Books, London.