In the Beginning was the Gaze

***Je me voyais me voir*[1] – discovering the self in the image**

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Translated by Brigid Grigg

> In vain your image comes to meet me
>
> And does not enter me where I am who only shows it
>
> Turning towards me you can find
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> On the wall of my gaze only your dreamt-of shadow.
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> I am that wretch comparable with mirrors
>
> That can reflect but cannot see
>
> Like them my eye is empty and like them inhabited
>
> By your absence which makes them blind.[2]

In Jacques Lacan's 1963/1964 seminar, in the section on the unconscious and repetition, he recites Louis Aragon's poem *Contre-chant* from *Le Fou d'Elsa*. This poetic work, set in Granada in 1492 and inspired by the figure of the Persian Majnun, is itself composed according to the principle of mirroring. It is characteristic of Lacan to illustrate his thinking through examples from literature and the visual arts. To demonstrate, he would project slides on the wall. In his

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1 Valéry (1917), n.p.

[2]Aragon, Louis: *Le Fou d'Elsa*, cited in *Lacan: The Four Fundamental Concepts*, trans. Alan Sheridan, p. 17. All references to this text refer to the German version, unless explicitly stated: Lacan: Die vier Grundbegriffe (2015). All translations are the translator's own unless explicitly stated.

keen interest, he also collected artworks, but above all cultivated friendships with figures such as Pablo Picasso, Paul Éluard, Salvador Dalí, Hans Bellmer, Georges Bataille and André Masson.[3] Inspired by his passion to illustrate the psyche through the visual arts, in particular painting, he seeks to conceive of "the subject as seeing and desiring, struck by the images."[4]

Art works want to be regarded in the context of their independent development - through words, through the experiences that they elicit, and through the way that they are repeatedly embedded anew in the tradition of history. As Walter Benjamin remarks in one of his "Denkbilder": "To find words for that which you have in front of you – how hard can it be. Yet when they come, they tap with little hammers against reality, until they have beaten the image out of it as if from a copper plate."[5] Art works require our eye and our willingness to see. For Lacan, art is something that is shaped by the eye of the observer. In his view, artists create something that is influenced by the expectations of their viewers: from the outset, then, there exists a relationship between the artist and the potential spectator. This becomes particularly interesting when we also consider how we experience ourselves when looking at art. Under the gaze of self-reflection, when we "see ourselves seeing ourselves"[6], we can experience ourselves existing – though only on the basis of an identificatory self-deception. The subject emerges through the

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[3] See Blümle, von der Heiden (2005), p. 7 f.

[4] Blümle, von der Heiden (2005), p. 9

[5] Benjamin, Walter: San Gimignano. Dem Andenken an Hugo von Hofmannsthal, in: idem (1991): Gesammelte Schriften 4, p. 364 (cited in Didi-Huberman (1999), p. 174 f.)

[6] See Lacan (2015), Seminar XI, p. 81 and p. 86 f. –in Lacan's elaborations on »reflecting reflection« (Lacan (2015), Seminar XI, p. 87) he refers to Paul Valéry's poem *The Young Parque* (see below for more in this). Mai Wegener speaks of "Illusions (…) of reflexivity (*se voir se voir*) in the field of vision" (cited in Bitsch (2005),p. 386).

recognition that we are not that with which we identify. Lacan turned the Cartesian *Cogito* into "I see, therefore I am".[7] For him, we find our way to ourselves through the Other (the Symbolic), and through cultural phenomena such as language and art. The Big Other ("*Autre"*) has meaning – as another subject, but above all, as the symbolic order that helps to construct the ego.[8] In a museum, a gallery, or an artist-run space, we can hope that our gaze encounters something that opens us up, if we let it affect us. In this way, an artwork can also serve as an Other, that we see in a highly subjective way. In most cases, that gaze that, for Lacan, always comes at us from the outside and determines what we see, corresponds to our own inner images. The journey to the self requires recognising that we are not that with which we identify.

In early 2022, I visited the exhibition "Dali-Freud. An obsession" at the Belvedere Palace, Vienna (the lower palace), and on the same day, Sarah Rapson's exhibition "Ode to psyche" at the Vienna Secession. The two exhibition visits, along with the impressions left by these contrasting artistic approaches - separated not only in time but also in style - a reflection on Lacan's theory of the gaze emerged.

In the "Dali-Freud" exhibition, paintings were displayed in all their artistic diversity, featuring dreamlike, illogical and distorted forms that allow the supernatural to appear amongst reality. One particular work – in reality quite small, measuring only 50.8 x 78.3 cm – titled *The Metamorphosis of Narcissus* (*Métamorphose de Narcisse*) was the climax and conclusion of the show, greatly

[7] See Lacan (2015), Seminar XI, p. 86 f.

[8] See Evans (2002), p. 39.

magnified and displayed as a wall installation. It is this painting that the 34-year-old Dali brought with him to show the 82-year-old Sigmund Freud during his visit to London in 1938.

The surreal, colour-rich dream world of the young Salvador Dali[9] stands in stark contrast to Sarah Rapson's exhibition. In the basement of the Vienna Secession, her empty white-grey canvases, some partially soot-stained and in varying sizes, are illuminated only through slits of natural light coming through the ceiling. It is difficult to imagine two exhibitions that, at first glance, are more contrasting. Between the seemingly solitary canvases in Rapson's show, sticky and unevenly worked, there are nails that have been pointlessly driven into the wall. Some works are stretched with jute fabric, the wood of the stretcher bars pushing through to the taught surface. Here and there a black and white photo showing indeterminate figures is attached to a stretched canvas. Rapson refuses to conform to the expectations of reception and confronts us with the objectlessness within the image. We are not distracted here by representation; we are disturbed because our expectations are not met. We must close our eyes in order to see. "Shut your eyes and see!"[10] opens one of the early chapters of James Joyce's *Ulysses.* Captivated by this gaze, there arose in me the desire to see what had been withheld from me.

Inspiration and Legitimization – the Surrealist Dali in Relation to Freud and Lacan

[9] Works from Dalí's early period were shown at the Belvedere. In 1938 (the year of his meeting with Freud), Dalí was 34 years old — the oldest exhibited work from that year is "Portrait of Sigmund Freud" (ink on paper).

[10] Joyce (1996), p. 51. Cited in Didi-Huberman (1999), p. 11.

Art stems from cultic phenomena that have, since time immemorial, creatively connected what was culturally and individually repressed. Our ancestors were already sublimating libidinal energy and carving stories into rock walls, or, through artistic creations, making the hidden accessible to the community. The arts present us with unconscious content in a symbolic form, and in this way, transmit their metaphorical understanding. The phenomena of dream and reality in Sigmund Freud's most significant early work, *The Interpretation of Dreams,* which marked a milestone in the development of psychoanalysis, fascinated and inspired the surrealists at the start of the twentieth century. In the still young discipline of psychoanalysis, they hoped to find a scientific legitimation for their conception of art. André Breton und Salvador Dali tried for years to arrange a meeting with Freud. This elective affinity, however, was not returned to the same extent nor enthusiastically received. While Surrealists prioritised aesthetic and literary forms of expression, Freud's main interest lay solely in the analytic investigation of the unconscious. So the contact to the surrealists remained one sided, limited to the reading of Freud's works, to appropriative references to Freud in surrealist publications, to sending Freud presentation copies in the hopes of attracting his attention with their publications, and the personal psychoanalysis that some Parisian surrealists undertook.[11] It was not until 1938, in exile at Freud's first London address following his emigration, that Dalí—mediated by Stefan Zweig—encountered the author of *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Dali seized the opportunity to present Freud with, on the one hand, a five year old article from *Minotaure,* in which he articulates for the first time his artistic method – the

[11] See Finzi (2022), p. 60.

"paranoiac-critical" - and on the other hand, with his relatively recent work *The Metamorphosis of Narcissus* (1937). Despite no real spark being struck by this singular, late occasion, Freud later wrote in a letter to Zweig that after engaging with Dali's surrealist painting he was at least not disinclined "to analytically explore the genesis of such a picture".[12]

By contrast, Dali's exchange with Jacques Lacan proved to be mutually fruitful. Belonging to the same generation, Lacan did not shy away from points of contact with the Surrealist movement. For his dissertation, *On Paranoiac Psychosis in Relation to Personality* (1932) (*De la psychose paranoique dans ses rapports avec la personnalité*), Lacan experienced more resonance from Surrealist circles than from psychiatric or psychoanalytic ones.[13] "The Problem of Style and the Psychiatric Conception of Paranoiac Forms of Experience" ("Le problème du style et les formes paranoïaques de l'expérience") appeared in 1933 as a contribution to the first issue of Minotaure, later followed by a second article of Lacan's in the same journal.[14] According to Annette Bitsch, it is thanks to "Surrealist image stimuli" that Lacan was able to illustrate his "theory of the genuine self-alienation

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[12] Letter from Sigmund Freud to Stefan Zweig, 20. July 1938, in: Freud (1968), p. 465.

[13] See Blümle, von der Heiden (2005), p. 9. However, Lacan deliberately omitted the Surrealist sources, as he did not want to offend either the medical profession in psychiatry or orthodox Freudians with references to the literary avant-garde. "The calculation did not succeed: the first to honour him will be precisely those whose significance he had concealed, and the first to despise him, those he had wanted to please." (Roudinesco 2011, p. 64)

[14] By not excluding external factors, Lacan's conception of paranoia stands in opposition to the established psychiatric view of his time, which understood the causes of this form of psychosis based solely on the patients' disposition. "Madness is dynamically analysed by Lacan as a temporary discordance between subjective desire and social adaptation, thus revealing itself as a superstructure of an unresolved, intolerable social conflict, and definitely not as a constitutional focus of illness." (Bitsch 2005, note 13, p. 361 f.) This interpretation is highly compatible with the Surrealist project.

and psychotic disposition of the ego" so vividly.[15] Lacan's close cooperation with the surrealists, especially with Dali, was so significant that the mirror stage can, without exaggeration be seen as a "product of many years of collaboration and friendship".[16]

> "Dali's images (...) are more than and different to simple transpositions of Lacanian theory into aesthetics; rather, both areas, (...) Dali's images and Lacan's words, ignite, support and supplement one another."[17]

It was Lacan who requested their first meeting. Dali, who at time was transferring a portrait sketch onto reflective copper plate, received him in his studio with a square of white paper attached to his nose, an improvised tool to help him focus the reflection and better orientate himself while drawing on the gleaming metal. Lacan listened attentively to his host's conception of paranoia, noticed the forgotten slip of paper, but remained unfazed.

The Mirrored Self as the Source of Narcissism

[15]Bitsch (2005), p. 367.

[16] Bitsch (2005), p. 361 f.

[17] Bitsch (2005), p. 367.

In Lacan's seminar, he recites the words of the young parque, words that might just as well have been spoken by Narcissus: "*I see myself seeing myself".*[18]

In Paul Valery's long poem, the Parque – and likewise Narcissus – conceives of herself as a seeing subject, as a subject with consciousness. Narcissus sees himself seeing himself in the pool's reflection. This way of seeing is self-sufficient, it imagines itself as consciousness. The self-loving gaze rests on the subject's own inner images. What is seen is only what we ourselves generate, mediated by our own beliefs. Narcissus adoringly contemplates his reflection, endlessly seeking himself. But in the attempt to unite with his mirrored image in the water, he encounters death.

In the mirror stage, the infant, from the age of six months, recognises itself in its mirror image, and is misled by an illusory sense of unity. The optical apparatus, already highly developed, simulates a wholeness that stands in contrast to the child's lack of bodily coordination. From this tension between the Ideal-Ego in the mirror and the still lacking motor skills there emerges an aggressive tension between subject and image. The child perceives itself as localised, is able to imagine its own form, and sees "something complete, [something imaginary,] lacking nothing".[19] Narcissus, too, perceives an illusory unity reflected in the pool. He has spurned the nymph Echo, who – like the mother in relation to the child – could have released him from the rigid world of reflection. The site of the psyche, the awareness of what is one's own, forms through the gaze of the Other. At the beginning was the mother's gaze, her touch, her voice, the breast, the

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18 Lacan (2015), seminar XI, p. 86; see. Valéry (1971), p. 71: "And in my own tender bonds, hung on my blood, // I saw me seeing myself, sinuous". Trans. David Paul.

19 Widmer (2004), p. 28.

fundamental bodily sensations which can only be inscribed in the subject, through language, after symbolic castration. They show that the path to the self leads through the Other. In the moment when the Other confirms the child's reflection by adding language, and saying: "That is you", the child identifies with its specular image. The result is the formation of the ego, the *moi* in Lacan's terms, in the Imaginary. Language frees us from the mirror-image entanglement of the Imaginary and leads us into the register of the Symbolic.[20] The appropriation of language and symbols, first through the Other and subsequently through one's own desire, allows us to experience ourselves as autonomous agents. Through the Other, we arrive at ourselves, yet we must wrest our own thoughts and ideas from the other in an act of aggression, so that the endless oscillation between fusion and rejection may lead to the acceptance of mutual difference. This path was closed to Narcissus.

In Lacan's theory of the mirror stage, he speaks of the seductive illusion of the mirror image. It begins with the gaze of the mother. 14 days after birth, the infant can already distinguish the mother's face from others. First reflected in the mother's eyes, and later seduced by the reflection in the mirror, the infant is lured into perceiving an ideal image of itself—"Hurrah, this ideal image, that's me!"—we are confronted with an ideal-ego that can never be attained. We are fascinated by this apparently bodily whole Other who we take to be ourselves. Yet, in the period Lacan associates with the mirror stage—roughly between the four and seventeen months old—we do not yet experience bodily unity. Only through the gaze of an Other – most often the parent, who told us in front of the mirror: "That

[20] See Widmer (2004), p. 33.

is you" - are our body parts perceived as a unified entity. The moment of joy over this unity collapses when the child is confronted with the lack of wholeness of its own body. The tension between the Ideal-Ego in the mirror and experiencing one's own body as fragmented and uncoordinated produces both conflict and aggression. From this moment on we perceive ourselves through the alienating perspective of the Other. The initial fascination fades and gives way to the relentless, but inevitably failed, attempt to interact with the specular image, a failure which leads to increasing anger**.** Without the mirror, the illusion of wholeness ultimately disintegrates once more, leaving us helpless before the ideal of an Ego we can never attain, yet to which we shall henceforth compare ourselves.

At the outset of the mirror stage, the young person does not yet distinguish between self and other; nor yet is there a third that could release us from the imaginary illusion that we are not our mirror image. Ovid's mythical Narcissus does not at first recognise himself in his mirror image with which he falls in love. It is only gradually – through language, which Lacan links to the symbolic order and which liberates us from the narrow, seductive, narcissistic bonds of the imaginary – that an "I" (*je)* begins to take shape. Dali's painting *Metamorphosis of Narcissus*, one of his major works, was created around the same time as Lacan's lecture *The Mirror Stage* (*Le stade du miroir*), first delivered in 1936 at the 14th International Psychoanalytic Congress in Marienbad and later in 1949 at the 16th International Congress in Zurich, this time under the title *The Mirror Stage as Formative of the / Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience* [*Le stade du miroir comme*

formateur de la fonction du Je telle qu'elle nous es nous est révélée dans l'experience psychanalytique].

Love, death and transformation are all themes in the myth of the beautiful youth Narcissus, told most poetically by Ovid in the "Metamorphoses". Everyone who saw Narcissus fell in love with him, men as well as women and children. One day, Narcissus discovers the image of a beautiful young man in the pool of a spring. Gradually, he comes to recognise that this image is his own. The sorrow of knowing that he can scarcely, indeed can never, reach his likeness, causes Narcissus to fade away. The distance between himself and the image in which all his unfulfilled longing lies costs him his life. Narcissus beholds that which he cannot see. In the place where he dies, no body remains – only a flower, the narcissus.

In Dali's painting, the mirrored doubling is staged through the Narcissus who is reflected in the pond, and the Narcissus depicted beside him as an oversized skeletal human hand. The painting translates a contradictory dynamic into figural form, oscillating between the question "Who am I?" and the continual questioning - to the point of failure – of the ego-position. Narcissus looks for himself in his reflection and reappears as his own doppelganger, a framework of bones. Symbols of vanitas, painted as ants crawling over bony legs, signify mortality, only to be antagonistically rephrased by the narcissus flower that grows from the egg-shaped head.

Annette Bitsch sees in Dali's *Metamorphosis of Narcissus* a translation of the fundamental tension in the Lacanian mirror relation, the "dialectic process of identify-forming and identify-dissolving moments".[21] According to Bitsch, both Lacan and Dali elevate the "heteronomy and virulent paranoia of the ego" to "the status of elementary components in the formation of consciousness."[22]

The Antinomie between the Eye (Subject) and the Gaze (Object)

Lacan's schema of the eye and the gaze involves the ego-conforming seeing of the eye (Narcissus), and separate to that, the seeing of the gaze, scopophilia (*Schaulust*), which functions as a partial sexual drive and comes to us from the outside**.** This distinction between eye and gaze is already present in Freud's 1915 essay on *instincts and their vicissitudes*, where he differentiates between a gaze that preserves the ego, and the scopophilic gaze, *Schaulust*, a sexual partial drive.[23] The gaze serves to recognize one's own needs and wishes in order to survive, while the scopophilic gaze is directed towards the satisfaction of sexual needs.

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[21] Bitsch (2005), p. 362.

[22] Bitsch (2005), p. 364.

[23] "In general we can assert of them [the sexual instincts] that their activities are *auto-erotic;* that is to say, their object is negligible in comparison with the organ which is their source, and as a rule coincides with that organ. The object of the scopophilic instinct, however, though it too is in the first instance a part of the subject's own body, is not the eye itself" (Freud, *Instincts and their Vicissitudes*, trans. James Strachey, p. 131).

Beyond its biological function, seeing enables us to make sense of the world and find our place within it. **In it** we can find "indications of perception"[24] (*Wahrnehmungszeichen)*, which Lacan reformulates into his theory as the "signifier". For Lacan, not only linguistic units but also objects, relationships, and symptomatic acts can function as signifiers,[25] provided they are integrated into a system of meaning and are distinguishable from neighbouring elements. Depending on how a signifier is used, it can be invested with specific meaning. The visual contents of a painting, for example, are invested with distinct meanings by each of its viewers.

There is a separation ("split") between seeing that refers to the unspecific act of looking, and the gaze. The gaze arises when something from the external world looks back at us. The unspecific gaze from without, which always surrounds us, is related to our inner psychic state and to the way we project it outward into the world. A tempting dish that looks back at from a shop window, for example. What looks back at us is determined by our inner world, our psychic reality. In this example it is hunger that brings us to the perceived object in the external world, the dish, which comes to gaze back at us.

We can already sense that in order to see an image - "if we here refer to the object of seeing and of the gaze as an image"[26], there must exist within us an emptiness, or, as Lacan would say, a "lack" (manque).

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[24] Letter to Wilhelm Fliess, 6. Dezember 1896, in: Freud (1986), p. 218.

[25] See Evans (2002), p. 271.

[26] Didi-Huberman (1999), p. 234.

“In [...] the scopic field, the ontological status, is presented by its most factitious, not to say most outworn, effects. [...] The gaze is presented to us only in the form of a strange contingency, symbolic of what we find on the horizon, as the thrust of our experience, namely, the lack that constitutes castration anxiety. The eye and the gaze — this is for us the split in which the drive is manifested at the level of the scopic field.”[27]

For Lacan, castration represents a fundamental state of lack. Over the course of its upbringing, the child is gradually weaned from its autoerotic unity with the breast. Only in retrospect, through the experience of absence, does a sense of difference emerge. “The fish only realises on the shore that it was once in the water.”[28] The experience of separation, of castration, can be found in toilet training, in the prohibition against masturbation or the interdiction of *ludeln,* the pleasurable sucking of one’s own body parts which Freud describes in *Three Theories on Sexuality* (1905).[29] Nothing in our lives will ever come close to that feeling of unity which we only retroactively recognize. Only through its loss is the experience of unity first constituted. To give this lack a name, Lacan introduced the lost “object of desire”[30], calling it Object *a* (for the little *autre*).[31] This object marks our

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[27] Lacan (2015), Seminar XI, p. 79

[28] Oral citation from August Ruhs.

[29] See Freud (1905d), p. 80 f.

[30] See Lacan (2015), Seminar VIII, p. 286.

[31] The object *a* does not exist and if defined by it’s non-existence. It is always already lost.

earliest, primal losses (the separation from the breast, the gaze, excrement and the voice), and is defined by castration,[32] it is what "sets desire in motion".[33]

Lacan describes the subject who ignorantly [naively?] gazes as follows: "In so far as the gaze, qua objet a, may come to symbolize this central lack expressed in the phenomenon of castration, and in so far as it is an objet a reduced, of its nature, to a punctiform, evanescent function, it leaves the subject in ignorance as to what there is beyond the appearance, an ignorance so characteristic of all progress in thought that occurs in the way constituted by philosophical research."[34]

The gaze always comes from the outside, in the form of another's eye or reflected light directed at me. Even a reflection from a window pane can appear to look back – that, too, is a gaze.

For Lacan, the scopic field, the field of images, is the foundation of the psyche, the ground on which the ego function develops. "This is also suggested by the terminology used by proponents of Concept Art, where 'to think', 'to reflect', 'to abstract' are recurring terms. [...] In part, [...] these concepts could almost be

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[32] "[A] privileged object, which has emerged […] from some self-mutilation induced by the very approach of the real […] is the *objet a*. (Lacan*: The Four Fundamental Concepts*, trans. Alan Sheridan, p. 83).

[33] Evans (2002), p. 205.

[34] Lacan*: The Four Fundamental Concepts*, trans. Alan Sheridan, p. 77.

described as 'training of ego functions'."[35] Lacan, however, disagrees with analytics approaches that see strengthening the ego as the goal of therapy.[36]

As desire, by definition, always longs for something other than what it has, we are never fully satisfied with what we see. The gaze searches for something that lies beyond the visible, for what might be found behind the image. As Rapson notes in her exhibition text: "During temporary exhibitions, a wall has more than a front and more than a back."[37] For viewers of art, the question arises, what is this "more" that lies beyond what we see?

Even before the subject is born, and long before it can speak, "it is spoken by another subject that exists outside of itself, such as the mother or the family tradition, and it is seen before it can see"[38]. The primary moment, then, does not lie in the experience of experiencing oneself seeing, for this experience is preceded by a seeing that is suffered – a being-seen that leaves an irreducible**,** if largely unconscious, trace within every act of seeing.

The Object *a* describes something that does not exist. Around this non-existence, phantasms form that unconsciously guide our perception of the world. Rapson's minimalist art works with emptiness, with the loss of representational content. She performatively stages a confrontation with the lost object. In viewing her

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[35] Rauchfleisch (1984), p. 335.

[36] See Evans (2002), p. 143.

[37] Rapson (2022), n.p.

[38] Ruhs (2010), p. 110.

works, one enters immediately into relation with the object *a.* Her exhibition denies identification from the start – both the narcissistic identification with the content of the images on the canvas, and with potential reflections, as the artist intentionally refrains from using electronic lighting or glass vitrines. There are no reflections. And yet, it is reflection, the "gleam in the mother's eye"[39], on which are at first dependent in order to find ourselves, undivided, in the Other. The gaze of the mother and the gaze of the child do not initially constitute a separation. The connection is shown in the child's experience of its bodily image, as Françoise Dolton explains: "Hence we understand that the bodily image develops through seeing the mother's gaze, and through the sensory orientation provided by the mother's repeated presence"[40]. Only the awareness of the separation of the gaze releases us from this fusion.

At Rapson's exhibition in Vienna, I was seized by unease and restlessness, an uncanny feeling of being watched, of repulsion and fascination, a fixed gaze unable to believe what it saw: that I saw so little, almost nothing. One almost felt exposed to an untamed, instinctual, even sinister gaze. And exactly from this experience arose my need to understand what I could not see.

Pliny tells a story about the competition between the painters Parrhasius and Zeuxis, an anecdote from his *Natural History,* about the conscious deception of the eye. Zeuxis, who paints grapes so lifelike that birds try to peck at them, is

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[39] Kohut (1973), p. 141.

[40] Dolto (1988), p. 78.

outdone by Parrhasios, who, through his naturalist**ic** painting, is able to simulate a curtain that even his opponent Zeuxis tried to draw back to see what lies behind.

Every encounter with art raises the question: What does the artist mean? What hides behind the image? And how is human desire deceived?

A Preconscious Method

Dali's own instructions for viewers of *Metamorphosis of Narcissus* call for "a certain distracted rigidity"[41], a state meant to induce the proper mode of perception. - "It is precisely at this moment that the metamorphosis of the [Narcissus] myth occurs"[42]. Dali's aim was to represent the unconscious. Yet he remained within the realm of the pictorial, as both his imagery and the resulting painterly techniques were consciously devised methods. The "fixed rigidity" with which Dalí wished his painting to be seen recalls the dimming of consciousness in hypnosis – through monotone sounds or the voice, a reduced state of awareness is achieved, not revealing the unconscious directly, but making the subject more susceptible to suggestion. Considering Dali's explicit painterly aim, that follows an analytic pull, it is not surprising that he chose Freud as his hero. From 1926, Dali had the opportunity to study Freud's work translated into Spanish (Biblioteca Nueva).

"At this period I had just begun to read Sigmund Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*. This book presented itself to me as one of the capital discoveries of my

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[41] Dalí (1974), p. 280.

[42] Dalí (1974), p. 280.

life, and I was seized by a real obsession with self analysis; not only of my dreams but of everything that happened to me, however accidental it might seem at first glance."[43]

Inspired by Freud's revolutionary *The Interpretation of Dreams,* Dali sought, by means if his so called "paranoiac-critical activity"[44] or method, to consciously bring dream thoughts into waking life and thereby to extend it into consciousness, to produce hallucinations without drugs, to simulate madness while also subjecting it to systematic delusions. In this way, internal and external worlds were to be deliberately blended. Dali established for himself and for his surrealist movement the method of a "systematic investigation of the irrational"[45], which he attempts to explain as follows:

"Paranoiac-critical activity is an organizing and productive force of objective chance. [...] everyday surrealist events: nocturnal pollution, false recollection, dream, diurnal fantasy, [...] etc., etc., [...] are associated, by the mechanisms of paranoiac-critical activity, in an indestructible delirious-interpretive system [...]. Paranoiac-critical activity organizes [...] the [...] possibilities of the systematic association of subjective and objective phenomena, [...] exclusively in favour of the obsessing idea. By this method paranoiac-critical activity [...] makes the world of delirium pass tangibly onto the plane of reality."[46]

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[43] Dalí (1974), p. 205.

[44] Dalí (1974), p. 365.

[45] Dalí (1974), p. 364.

[46] Dalí (1974), p. 366.

Dali defined the *Metamorphosis of Narcissus* as his first successful example in which the paranoiac-critical model reached "unrestricted application."[47] Yet psychoanalyst Ulrike Kadi concludes – similarly to Freud's own position – that the surrealist's paintings can only give form to "(pre)conscious phantasies."[48] In Freud's view, as expressed in a letter to Stefan Zweig following their meeting, the "quantitative proportion between unconscious material and preconscious processing"[49], in the proclaimed artistic method, is not such that it could approximate analytic work.

Psychoanalysis works with mental images, memory images, dream images – in short, with fantasies and phantasms that, in analytic practice, generally emerge as verbal material from the preconscious and unconscious. In the context of a given cultural moment, visual art renders the inner world visible, offering us insight into the unconscious. In this way, art and psychoanalysis share a common path. Freud's fundamental rule of psychoanalytic treatment is free association, where the unconscious is given time and space to unfold in the spontaneous flow of thoughts. Contrary to his declared intention, Dali's technique does not actually capture the unconscious. The dream contents are formalised and subject to the intentions of the surrealist artist. Dali presents us with optical illusions and visual puzzles, what Kadi would call "ambiguous images, reversible images", that, like the *Metamorphosis of Narcissus,* are "broken into parts".[50]

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[47] Dalí (1974), p. 280.

[48] Kadi (2022), p. 329.

[49] Freud (1968), p. 465.

[50] Kadi (2022), p. 328.

Even though Dali was convinced that he was working with the unconscious, his decision to assign irrationality the same status as the rationality of the external world is anything but unconscious. Dali strove to promote irrationality through rational methods. To realistically paint an unknown fantasy is impossible; the unconscious cannot be rendered realistically. Manifestations of the unconscious, like free association, slips of the tongue and dreams, cannot be made to appear in a systematically controlled way, as Dali proposes. They arise spontaneously from the unconscious. Dali's painterly work is sustained by the system of the preconscious. Preconscious content is governed by the reality principle, characterized by logical thinking and rational decision-making. While the boundary between the preconscious and the unconscious may appear fluid, for Freud the difference between the two is essential. The separation of the unconscious and preconscious domains is made clear by “censorship”, whose prohibitive function is responsible for disguising and transforming the psychic material of the unconscious.

The Beginning of the Gaze

What is the relationship between the emptiness on the canvas, the resulting loss of possibilities for identification in the image, and the gaze? Sarah Rapson’s empty canvases directly evoke the unconscious. As Georges Didi-Huberman puts it: “What we see looks back at us”[51]. The gaze that looks back at us from the empty canvas offers no reflection; instead, we are thrown back upon ourselves and our

[51] Didi-Huberman (1999).

own phantasms. In this way, Rapson enables viewers to emerge as subjects (of the unconscious), freeing themselves from identification with the other.

There is something uncanny in the denial of representation, the pallid light of the exhibition space, and the viewer' search for points of reference. Although there are no images looking back at us, and although no one is needed to see us, the feeling spreads that "it" is watching me.

Rapson's anonymous objects have set a desire to understand in motion within me – a desire arising from what was not visible. I found myself confronted with something partly uncanny, something unknown, something confusingly appealing. Didi-Huberman writes of the "phantasmatic force of effect" of such images that draw us into an "uncanny familiarity" with "non iconic devices".[52]

After visiting the exhibition, a colleague, when asked for her immediate impression, free-associated: "Where are you? I can't see you. Let me see you"[53], a response described as expressing her desire "to approach the empty space"[54]. My own thought was: "The exhibition is looking at you". And a third visitor remarked: "It both draws you in and withdraws, like my dream last night. The message needs time to turn – briefly hung up, then taken down again, the nail remains."[55]

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[52] Didi-Huberman (1999), p. 106.

[53] Haas (2022b), p. 18.

[54] Haas (2022a), p. 193.

[55] Oral citation from Anatol Möller after visiting Rapson's exhibition.

We see canvases of varying sizes stretched over wooden frames, occasionally marked with strips of tape, here and there a seemingly carelessly pasted on black and white photo depicting unidentifiable people, offering little that might serve as a surface for projection. Between them, vitrines contain associatively composed pages on art and artists, with passages painted over, barely legible. The visual impression that we are offered is not easily accessible.

Across many periods, artists have understood their role as showing us how they see the world. Lacan writes: "The painter gives something to the person who must stand in front of his painting which, in part, at least, of the painting, might be summed up thus-*You want to see? Well, take a look at this!*"[56]

Where, then, does Sarah Rapson take us with her "Ode to the Psyche"? What does she give us to see? Our gaze meets something invisible, something that only through this encounter becomes visible. For Lacan, the gaze never means that I myself see something.

Emptiness casts us back upon the traces of our own wanderings, the paths we circle in the search for the origin of our desire. The experience of the castration of the gaze, and the ensuing feeling of lack, opens up the possibility of our own inner images coming to light – the images that we ourselves create.

Rapson leads us "to the sources of intuition concerning the visible and the in-visible, to come back to that which is prior to all reflection, [...] in order to locate the emergence of vision itself"[57].

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[56] Lacan*: The Four Fundamental Concepts*, trans. Alan Sheridan, p. 101.

[57] Lacan*: The Four Fundamental Concepts*, trans. Alan Sheridan, p. 81.

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