

Fitzgerald's nickel: Stories of stimulus and simulation, from Greenaway to Fincher

'Primates are visual animals above all'

(Stephen J. Gould, *Wonderful Life*, 1989)

Early on in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Last Tycoon* we come across a dialogue—made famous by Kazan's film version of the novel, starring Robert De Niro—between the film producer Stahr and the writer George Boxley:

'Suppose you're in your office. You've been fighting duels or writing all day and you're too tired to fight or write any more. You're sitting there staring—dull, like we all get sometimes. A pretty stenographer that you've seen before comes into the room and you watch her—idly. She doesn't see you, though you're very close to her. She takes off her gloves, opens her purse and dumps it out on a table—'

Stahr stood up, tossing his key-ring on his desk.

'She has two dimes and a nickel—and a cardboard match box. She leaves the nickel on the desk, puts the two dimes back into her purse and takes her black gloves to the stove, opens it and puts them inside. There is one match in the match box and she starts to light it kneeling by the stove. You notice that there's a stiff wind blowing in the window—but just then your telephone rings. The girl picks it up, says hello—listens—and says deliberately into the phone, "I've never owned a pair of black gloves in my life". She hangs up, kneels by the stove again, and just as she lights the match, you glance around very suddenly and see that there's another man in the office, watching every move the girl makes—'

Stahr paused. He picked up the keys and put them in his pocket.

'Go on', said Boxley, smiling. 'What happens?'

'I don't know', said Stahr. 'I was just making pictures'.¹

Were the dialogue to stop here, we would be forced to acknowledge the triumph of the culture industry over the will (or foolish ambition) to exercise creative independence on the part of artists who, either naively or venally, have succumbed to the lure of the great machine. We might even be chivalrous enough to express our approval and admit that, however high a value we may put on good taste, somewhere within us (as within our peers) a primitive curiosity (E. M. Forster's term) has been aroused, the irresistible impulse to listen to a story. By story I mean a sequence of events designed solely to answer the question we ask time and time again: 'And then?'. The question 'why?', on the other hand, according to Forster, is what defines plot, that is, a narration of greater or lesser complexity that addresses our intelligence and memory.²

But as it happens the scene doesn't stop there. And the question, 'What was the nickel for?' introduces the idea of necessity as a selective and organisational principle within the cumulative randomness of events. Stahr answers jokingly ('Oh, yes—the nickel was for the movies'), showing

that he has appreciated the point of the question. A moment earlier he had been pointing out to his irritated and frustrated interlocutor that a listener can be drawn into a story without recourse to characters engaging in duels, falling down wells or cracking dirty jokes. So firstly, cinema is not necessarily an art of stimulation; secondly, the fact that this explicitly metatextual episode is cast in words and gestures suggests that cinema is an art of simulation. The contrast between these two concepts will need to be examined closely. Clearly all simulation provokes stimuli, but here the term stimulus refers to a non-cognitive provocation, a thrust plunging images into the depths of our eyes but not into our gaze. The Lacanian split (schize) between the eye and the gaze will be the leitmotiv of this article.

1. Cinema and imaginary

Psychoanalysis has provided film theory with various models of explanation: some are biographical (explaining the psyche of the director or the characters in terms of traumas, the Oedipus complex, etc.), some linguistic. A model is a metalinguistic construction; but psychoanalysis tends to establish an ambivalent connection with artistic object-languages. On the one hand, it places itself on a higher level, and it is from there, from that distance, that it works out its interpretations. On the other hand, psychoanalysis fails to soar, that is, it fails to reach a metalevel; its focus is on affinities with objects, thus on (horizontal) similarities with literary or cinematic language. This was the research direction that prevailed in the 70s: Jean-Louis Baudry and, especially, Christian Metz suggested that the cinema and our psychic apparatus both functioned in the same way. More precisely, they explored the analogy between watching a film and the formation of subjective identity as linked to the gaze. I shall attempt to summarise their ideas and then go on to point out both the limitations of these works as well as the need to re-examine Lacan's texts within a broader perspective.

Our starting point in this investigation will be the idea of the scopic regime. This is a dimension of seeing, the locus in which identity is formed. And since seeing means seeing images, the scopic regime could also be termed the Imaginary. According to Lacan's theory, we first acquire outline and form through an image—our image in the mirror. At first we are a fragmented body, but from the moment we recognise our image as ours we become 'I'—an imaginary 'I' which may indeed never enter the regime (or register) of the Symbolic, the word, language as social institution. The fact that most people manage to attain this second dimension, however, should not lead us to ignore the difficulty of detaching ourselves from the fascinating power of prime perceptions: disjointed limbs, veiled faces, persecutorial doubles, the whole repertoire of wonderful and perverse visions that are repeated in adult life and which derive their dominant power from the places of their origin.

The primal scene, voyeuristic and fetishistic obsessions and dream work all belong to the scopic regime. But what is the scopic regime in cinema? What does the affinity between the cinematic signifier and the imaginary consist in?

In his attempt to answer these questions, Metz does not forget the differences between the two apparatuses. For example, it is true that the screen can be compared to a mirror, but it is a mirror in which the spectator will never be able to see reflected his/her own body. As regards voyeurism, it seems self-evident that the film-viewer cannot expect any complicity on the part of the other ('the filmic spectacle, the object seen, is [...] radically ignorant of its spectator').³ These differences separate the cinematic spectacle not only from real life but also from other artistic experiences, such as the theatre: 'What distinguishes the cinema is an extra reduplication, a supplementary and specific turn of the screw bolting desire to the lack'.⁴ Compared to the theatrical signifier, '[t]he cinematic signifier lends itself the better to fiction in that it is itself fictive and "absent"'.⁵ The paradox of cinema can be expressed as follows: it offers the spectator the perceptually richest object and at the same time that which is least actual and most absent.

How much of Lacan is there in this concept? In fact, very little. Essentially it is a banal version of Lacan's thinking, reframing it within the philosophical tradition which he had succeeded in breaking away from. This rather harsh verdict may annoy Metz's admirers, but I do not see how it can be toned down. I shall now show in broad outline what I consider its two most serious simplifications:

a) Lacan's imaginary is not simply a 'regime of substitution', that is, a dimension in which the respective image comes to fill up a void. It is a place of conflict, where the conflict is above all between form and formlessness, between fragmentation and unity, between endless duplication and singleness. The tendency here is for everything to become confused and dispersed. The victories achieved by form come with no lasting guarantee. The outline that encloses an object is liable to break up at any moment, the casing can burst open, scattering everything inside; for the imaginary is a whirlpool that tears you into pieces. But Christian Metz, talking about the way in which cinema involves us in the imaginary, takes the view that 'it drums up all perception, but to switch it immediately over into its own absence';⁶

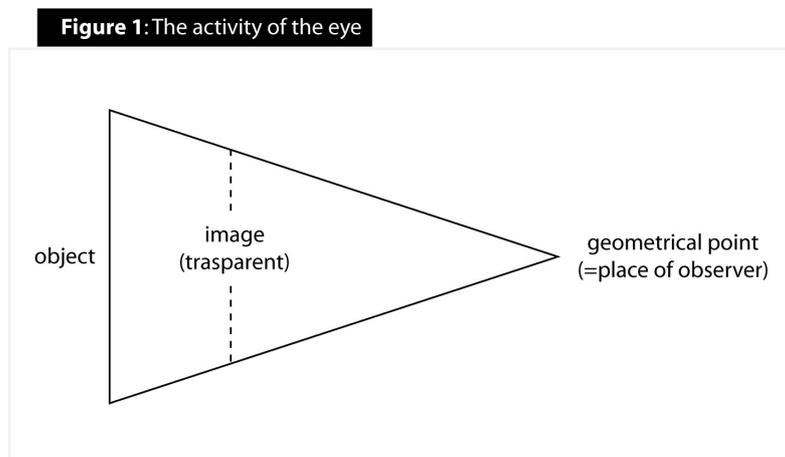
b) desire in Lacan is not simply desire for something (a missing object). For example, what Don Juan desires, what he feels he is missing, cannot be reduced to the woman he is about to seduce, and not even to an entire series of possible conquests. The Lacanian *manque* is rather a lack between, a failure of registers (the Imaginary, the Symbolic, the Real)⁷ to coincide. It is the relationship between registers that resolves the issue of whether Don Juan is simply a *dragueur*, one who

stimulates and satisfies, or an object of desire which, in order to be conquered, asks women to ‘go up a step’.

Metz levelled all that was radically new about Lacanian theory by transforming it back into a traditional dialectic of presence and absence. It is therefore no wonder that *Le signifiant imaginaire*, the text which many believe offers the best exploration of the relations between cinema and psychoanalysis, completely ignores the split between eye and gaze as defined in *The Seminar XI*.⁸ This split reflects the non-coincidence (the gap) between two styles of perception, which are inevitably also two styles of thought. Here we are not dealing with the fissure or frontier running between imaginary and symbolic, but the dividing line that cuts across both the scopic and the verbal regime.

2. Geometry and vision in Compton House Gardens

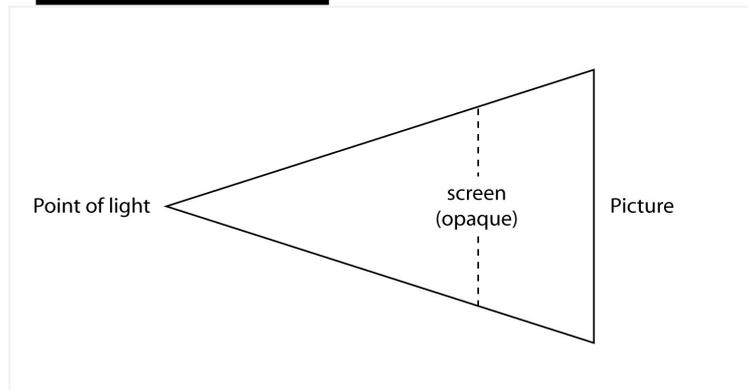
We go to the cinema because we are driven by the passion to see. But what do we want to see? Implicit in this question is another: what are we prepared to see, what are we capable of seeing? *The Seminar XI* distinguishes two modes of perception. The first corresponds to the activity of the eye and can be represented like this:



This diagram is very simple and corresponds to the common concept of seeing: at the vertex (point géométral) we have an observer of some kind or another, who can be an individual or a camera.⁹ The observer reaches out for and captures objects by means of images. Now, if Lacan calls this optical dimension ‘geometral’, he does so in order to point out that it does not cover the entire visual field. This space is tactile and not visual: it could even be explored by the gaze of a blind person. If the action of the eye corresponds, as in the dioptrics of Descartes, to the joint action of two sticks, if vision is not an action at a distance but is triggered by contact, if our eyes swim in the atmosphere and need it as fish need water, then seeing is not in the proper sense of the word a ‘visual’ activity.¹⁰ Renaissance painting and the Cartesian subject, as in Diderot’s *Letter on the*

Blind, have imposed a geometral conception of perspective: the gaze starts from a point and in an instant embraces a transparent and homogeneous space, made up of exactly contiguous portions (*partes extra partes*). This is the mode of seeing that, in Peter Greenaway's *The Draughtsman's Contract* (1982), the painter Neville would like to impose on the residents of Compton House. The visual portion set aside for the picture needs to be cleared for a length of time equivalent to an expanded instant, a static moment in time. The transparency of the image, the cutting action performed by the optical instrument with which the draughtsman frames space,¹¹ the immobility of the easel, the absence of any disturbing elements or any possible hiding-places—all these factors confirm the geometral character of vision, which for Neville is the only possible way of looking. He does not know the difference between eye and gaze; his drawing aspires to the triumph of the eye. Disturbing elements do, however, slip into his 'frames': a torn shirt, a pair of boots, a doublet ripped at the heart. The draughtsman's eye cannot fail to record these details or think about them. So why does his blindness persist? Under what conditions does the eye lose its power to decipher and infer, in other words its capacity to reconstruct an object, to imagine it, to offer it up pre-packaged to language? What can disrupt our field of perception? Lacan answers this question by referring to the technique of anamorphosis. In Holbein's *The Ambassadors*, for example, there is a flat, slanting object floating in the foreground: it looks like a cuttlefish bone and recalls one of Salvador Dali's clocks. When we start to leave the room where it hangs in the National Gallery in London, the form reveals itself: it's a skull, an emblem of *vanitas*. 'At the very heart of the period in which the subject emerged and geometral optics was an object of research', observes Lacan, 'Holbein makes visible for us here something that is simply the subject as annihilated'.¹² The eye that floats in the foreground and baffles the spectator is not simply an eye but the gaze as such. Renaissance perspective asserted itself as an act of rational domination over space. But here as in other cases, 'Dürer's frame' reveals both deformation and fascination: 'the singular object floating in the foreground, which is there to be looked at, in order to catch, I would almost say, to catch in its trap, the observer, that is to say, us'.¹³

Every picture is 'a trap for the gaze'.¹⁴ But if we are to understand how it gives off its hypnotic fluid, we need to look at another diagram:

Figure 2: A trap for the gaze

Where has the observer gone? Well, s/he has ended up inside the picture and is seen by someone (or something).¹⁵ S/he is seen and does not see, and so s/he is, as it were, robbed of his/her gaze. But where does the other's gaze originate? From the point of light (point lumineux), is Lacan's answer. We are in a space that is not geometral, and where light does not propagate in a straight line. Instead '[l]ight may travel in a straight line, but it is refracted, diffused, it floods, it fills [...] it flows over, too, it necessitates, around the ocular bowl, a whole series of organs, mechanisms, defences. The iris reacts not only to distance, but also to light, and it has to protect what takes place at the bottom of the bowl, which might, in certain circumstances, be damaged by it. The eyelid, too, when confronted with too bright a light, first blinks, that is, it screws itself up in a well-known grimace'.¹⁶ One should note the different function of the image and the screen in the two triangles: the image is transparent, the screen is opaque. But only in the simplest situations can we think of the screen as a shield which we can move at will; our defensive capacities vary in relation to the 'nature' of the point of light.

Let us turn back to Greenaway's film in order to verify whether Neville's blindness really does have its origin in the gaze (of the other). The two Lacanian diagrams, whose interaction we shall examine presently, should already suggest the inadequacy of certain remarks made by Greenaway himself about *The Draughtsman's Contract* being a reaction to his experience at art college. The principle he was taught there was 'draw what you can see and not what you know', and according to Greenaway the draughtsman in the film is blind precisely because he wants to draw what he sees and not what he knows.¹⁷

This opposition between knowing and seeing is in fact rather vague. The question that arises with regard to Neville's blindness is: in which story is he the leading character? In what sense does he fail to see the details of a possible murder? There can be no doubt that he does see them: he reproduces each individually in his drawings, and Sarah lists them, thus providing him with a means of linking them together. One of the strange things about this whole affair is the fact that the

solution to the detective story is not hidden at all. Why then does the draughtsman not take it into account? It is not as if he refuses to take any interest in this problem. For example, he justifies the impertinence of his questions by explaining to Mr Noyes, 'I merely pursue an inquiry, maybe helping to understand what is happening in the garden'.¹⁸ Later, talking to Sarah, he says, 'I'll proceed step by step to the heart of the matter'.¹⁹ Why doesn't he do so? Probably because he is overwhelmed by narcissistic pleasures. He thinks he is the master and feels he is outside the game, just in the same way as he deludes himself that he is outside the picture. Moreover, he is more curious about relations of desire (inside the house) than any possible crime. He looks for allegorical explanations, not clues.²⁰ However, as we see in the episode with the three pomegranates, his allegorical skills are not very highly developed.

This suggests that the blind spot in Mr Neville's gaze is in fact quite extensive. The Draughtsman's Contract contains three stories: one is a detective story, another is aesthetic in nature (the 12 drawings) and the third is erotic. It is indeed possible that the painter is blind as a character in all three narrative strands. But being blind as a detective is not humiliating, and does not exclude the possibility that he is an excellent draughtsman. As Proust pointed out, a person can be the most brilliant psychologist in the world and still not realise that his wife is cheating on him with his best friend. That a painter does not know how to use his gaze beyond his professional sphere is nothing extraordinary; and yet the interest in Greenaway's film lies precisely in the interweaving of the three stories and in the relationship between the different types of blindness. If Neville is blind as a detective it is because he only knows how to look at objects whereas in fact there might be gazes; he fails to see the perspective that turns him into an object.

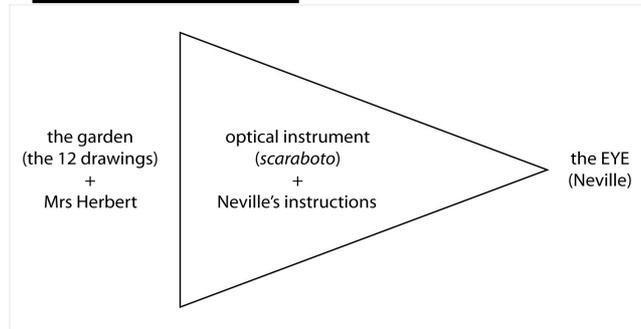
There are, however, reasons for supposing that Neville is also blind as a painter, and that extra-aesthetic blindness has been chosen to 'heighten' and investigate the problem of the gaze. As we know, geometrical optics are within reach of the blind. Geometrical space contains no hiding-places: each place can be calculated and explored using the rules of construction. In order to draw the gardens of Compton House, Neville does not so much need to see as to see his rules respected. The draughtsman's blindness must therefore be placed in relation to the theme of the contracts.

3. How to end up into the screen

The first contract (physically written down by Mr Noyes) brings together the aesthetic and the erotic strands, not in the banal sense that Neville offers 12 drawings in exchange for the sexual favours of Mrs Herbert, but in the sense that both strands are subjected to the same type of gaze and both are 'regulated'. The tactile brutality with which the woman is possessed corresponds to the imperiousness of the instructions with which the draughtsman wishes to define and empty the space

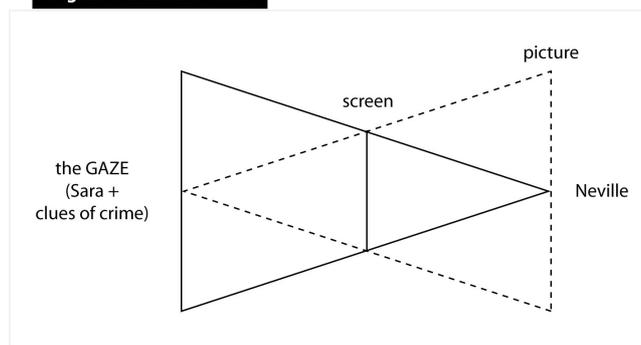
of the drawings.²¹ Significantly, the series of contracts of which this is only the first has been made possible by the departure of the husband/proprietor. The law is absent or suspended, strategies come into play. But Neville thinks he is the master:

Figure 3: Neville as the master



The second contract is proposed to the draughtsman by Sarah, disappointed with her marriage to Mr Talmann. In many ways, this second contract is a reversal of the first. It is proposed by a woman rather than imposed by a man. Its basis is less clear: Sarah outlines the evidential threat which hangs over Neville and offers him her protection ('I propose, since I am in a position to throw a connecting plot over inconsequential items in your drawing, an interpretive plot that I could explain to others to account for my father's disappearance [...], I propose that we could come to some arrangement that might protect you, and humour me').²² By accepting it, Neville undertakes to satisfy every erotic request the woman makes. But the crucial reversal regards modes of vision:

Figure 4: Models of vision



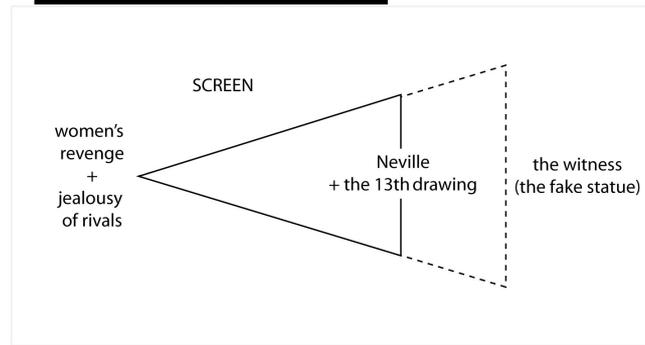
This diagram represents a situation of strategic balance, which is however on the point of being disturbed to Neville's disadvantage. In Lacan's terms, he is about to be, or is already, virtually ensnared, 'caught in the trap'. He is literally called into the picture, and depicted in it as captured. The situation, as we have just said, is still unstable, and Neville could still understand. But if he is so particular as to point out small changes in the landscape, his attention to detail only amounts to asking Mr Talmann to dress in the same way the following day. His pleasures are doubled, his narcissism reaches a climax. He is too arrogant to believe he is vulnerable. This arrogance has a precise epistemological—and aesthetic—origin: the geometral point of view.

The third contract is decided by the widow—again a female contract. But it is preceded by commercial and legal activity: Mr Noyes, for example, is afraid of being accused of the crime and asks for protection (and the 12 drawings) from Mrs Herbert in exchange for handing over the first contract. It will then be up to Mr Talmann to buy the drawings, which contain evidence of his wife's infidelity.

One could say that the last contract comes into being on Neville's initiative, for he is the one who suggests it to the widow. But the very fact that he cannot impose it is the first sign that he is losing his power over Compton House. On his way to the house he meets Sarah in the company of another painter, a Dutchman, who has been given the task of breaking the rigid symmetry of the garden. This intention has obvious symbolic significance, both with regard to the dead proprietor and to Neville, who by a curious coincidence has just been invited to The Hague. The preference for the less geometrical taste of his rival implies disparagement of Neville's style and, upon his return to Compton House, the draughtsman experiences humiliation.

That his power is in decline and that the presumptuous inhabitant of the map becomes increasingly trapped in a net further entangled by involuntary allusions is confirmed by his rash gift (the three pomegranates) to Mrs Herbert. Did he really want to give them to her? The woman doubts it: 'Having been tricked into eating the fruit of the pomegranate, [...] Persephone was forced to spend a period of each year underground, during which time [...] Persephone's mother, the Goddess of fields, of gardens and of orchards was distraught, heart broken; she sulks and she refuses, adamantly refuses, to bless the world with fruitfulness now'.²³ However, what leads to Neville's murder will be the hypothesis that he has returned expressly to marry the widow, and not only to enjoy his pleasures on an irregular basis.

Amid much hesitation, an agreement takes shape which Mrs Herbert maintains she does not consider a contract. This 'nominalistic' resistance to the word 'contract' can easily be explained, however, by her reluctance to be subject once again to the legal conditions of their previous sexual relations. Nevertheless, she asks Neville to dine with her, and proposes to indulge once more in intercourse before the draughtsmans attempt a thirteenth drawing of the southern side of the house. This view, rejected for no clear reason (according to Neville), includes the equestrian monument, namely the site where Mr Herbert's body was found, a coincidence 'that was uppermost in inquiring minds'.²⁴ Despite being spread across segments of the narrative that are not immediately contiguous, it is thus an authentic contract drawn up between the characters in the story. But in this third case many more contracting parties are involved:

Figure 5: The eye is captured by the gaze

The strategic balance has been upset, the eye has been captured by the gaze. The distance between screen and picture disappears and thus also the space available for self-defence is reduced to nothing. Now the victim can no longer screen himself and he exposes himself to his predator with the fixity of a perfectly recognisable blot. At this point we need to turn to the topic of mimicry and its functions. Drawing on Caillois, Lacan expresses serious doubts about the theory of adaptation, dramatically disproved ‘by the observation that one finds in the stomach of birds, predators in particular, as many insects supposedly protected by mimicry as insects that are not’.²⁵ The important point about mimicry is not its use for adaptation or survival; the ‘major dimensions in which the mimetic activity is deployed’ are ‘travesty, camouflage, intimidation’.²⁶ Let us turn briefly to the division to be found in all creatures between being and appearance, between self and the paper tiger offered for view. This is where we find display behaviour (parade), that is, the techniques male animals use to seduce: plumage display, puffing up, face-pulling, etc. One creature offers a mask to the other: ‘[i]t is no doubt through the mediation of masks that the masculine and the feminine meet in the most acute, most intense way’.²⁷ But this is also the point where the differences between the animal and the human sphere emerge. Animal display is rigid and repetitive; in the case of failure, all an animal can do is start all over again.²⁸ Equally rigid exhibition can of course also be found in the human sphere (seducers who know only one strategy, always displaying the same bulging muscles) but humans are also capable of flexible behaviour.

Neville’s attitude is defined as arrogant on more than one occasion. This adjective reflects the tumescence and the rigidity of exhibition which, untouched by failure, aspires to reproduce itself. Neville’s disdainful display reaches its high point in the humiliation he wants to inflict on his partner (and indirectly his rival) in the form of the contract. If the painter can split himself up into self and screen (his paper tiger), this happens because strategies of this type are not inexorably doomed to failure—in real life the eye often enjoys supremacy over the gaze. But this is not the case in the aesthetic sphere, or in the existential sphere when the perfidious and versatile female element has the upper hand. The Draughtsman’s Contract is a tangle of several stories: the triumph of the

gaze over the eye in the strategic (or forensic) story points to the necessity of a similar triumph in the aesthetic story, that is, in the work of art.

How does this happen? It is necessary to pass beyond the apparent identity between the director's and the draughtsman's gaze. Though they share the same fixity—in this film the camera is as static as Neville's easel—they do not coincide. Anyone who has not understood the articulatory superiority of the author over the character²⁹ need only look back over this analysis, which suggests that cinematic art is a narrative of gazes: it narrates what they see and what they don't see, their heterogeneity, their mixture, their conflict. And it is in order to see this narrative, and not only to ask 'And then?' that we go to the cinema.

4. Two types of character and two types of identity

The reason why some of us go to the cinema is not only to look but in order to be looked at. This further qualification in a way corrects the first statement, narrowing down and restoring coherence to my argument. Indeed, the split between eye and gaze implies the negation of any universal theory of the spectator.

The analogy established by Metz between spectator and voyeur is not false, but it only involves those spectators—no doubt the majority—who seek confirmation of their own identity in the cinematic narrative. The screen then really does resemble a mirror; and could a mirror ever repudiate what we are? We are prepared to forgive it some lack of faithfulness (the cinematic mirror is capable of lying) if this infidelity amounts to flattery, that is, if it corresponds to the tumescent gaze of a character with whom we identify. This point seems to me worth emphasising: my image never looks at me, I look at it (crying the same tears, thinking the same stereotypes, duplicating its heroic efforts). Let us suppose, however, that I, the voyeur, am being watched—but without experiencing the shame described by Sartre, without seeing my solitude mortified. We are talking here about a cognitive not an ethical experience. Something twists my perception and my consciousness, disrupts my ego, disturbs 'what I thought I was' (to use a slightly awkward, though not totally inappropriate, expression). That's how you are. That's how you could be (and you didn't know it).

We tend instinctively to think that identifying oneself with a character is the same as 'putting on' his/her eyes as though they were a pair of glasses, and appropriating his/her gaze. This is the way that most characters are 'worn'. But there are characters whose gaze robs us of our own. Identifying oneself with one of them is like turning oneself into an anamorphic object, waiting to find a recognisable form which will however never be the same as the one before. This is the paradox of cognitive art.

Identification can only have cognitive value if one allows oneself to be looked at by a character. But for a character to be able to look at us, s/he must have time to do so, in other words s/he cannot be totally absorbed in his/her own action. One of the most extraordinary examples of this point can be found in Hamlet: 'All Hamlet has to do (if indeed he ought to do it) is chop down Claudius. Avenging the father does not require a Hamlet; a Fortinbras would be more than sufficient. What it was that could have inspired Shakespeare to this amazing disproportion between personage and enterprise seems to me fit subject for wonder'.³⁰ Cognitive effects are also produced by characters who could never rival the complexity of Hamlet. What is important is that there is a dual aspect to the story of a character, that is, that it does not reduce itself to the series of his actions. A magnificent example of this, cited by Deleuze, is *The Passion of Joan of Arc* by Dreyer, which is the story of a trial and of a passion, but above all the story of 'the difference between the trial and the Passion, which are nevertheless inseparable'.³¹ The historical situation embraces social roles and individual characteristics, Joan, the bishop, the Englishman, legal proceedings, the crown, the people—these all belong to the sphere of action and reaction, that is, the world where causes lead to events. As Deleuze states, '[a]ctive causes are determined in the state of things: but the event itself, the affective, the effect, goes beyond its own causes, and only refers to other effects. [...] Made up of short close-ups, the film took upon itself that part of the event which does not allow itself to be actualised in a determinate milieu'.³²

In Dreyer's film, the passion is not simply the emotion we feel as we identify with Joan of Arc. If that were the case, the French heroine would be a character that stimulates identity, as are many moving characters, innocent victims. What, then, is the difference between a stimulator and a simulator? Both types of character belong to the sphere of fiction. But in fiction as stimulus—mainly: violence, sex and tears—simulation succumbs to the reality of emotions; in authentic simulation emotions are investigated as to their truth.

At this point, it could be objected that these films by Dreyer and Greenaway are good illustrations of the necessity of a narrative that is not reduced to a series of actions and of the superiority of the gaze. But is the eye that is enthralled by the cinema screen only the geometral eye? The answer would seem to be 'No'. Many films offer us not only the pleasure of 'being reflected' in images that heighten and satisfy our phantasmic ego—images of stories that are still within reach of the blind—but optical pleasure that depends on the physicality of those images. We would be hard put to it to deny the existence of a space which, though offered to the eye, is not tactile but visual. So one needs to look more closely at the relationship between narration and perception.

Stahr the producer asked George Boxley to write stories and dialogues appropriate to films of stimulation. Would he have appreciated the following story, the one we are told in David Fincher's *Seven* (1995)? A serial killer carries out a sequence of murders, taking inspiration from the seven deadly sins. The deaths he inflicts on his victims are atrocious and the images depicting them are traumatic, but the spectator has difficulty identifying himself with individuals he only sees in the form of mutilated bodies and about whose background he knows nothing. The film follows a predictable path, needlessly slowed down by aesthetic references (Dante, Milton) whose sole function is to provide further iconographic material. The Russian formalists used to say: if in a story someone opens a drawer and finds a gun, sooner or later it will go off. But here the principles of narrative economy and solidarity are subordinated to simple perceptual variations. Dante and Milton serve neither to capture the self-styled executioner nor to shed light on his personality. Stahr (should we again imagine him at work) starts to lose his patience. At this point George Boxley, or the script-writer who re-enacts and embodies his 'actantial' role, has an idea: after committing his fifth murder the criminal gives himself up to the police, or rather to the two detectives who have been vainly pursuing him through the typology of medieval ethics, and for whom he claims to have some admiration. Perhaps because they have finally realised that they do not have to read the texts that the maniac has presumably internalised, that it is enough to keep a check on the users of various libraries. Precisely—who else would borrow a book by Thomas Aquinas in New York, if not a serial killer? On the basis of this audacious and felicitous inference the criminal is almost caught. By this time he has already punished the following sins: gluttony, greed, sloth, lust and pride. So while the two detectives to whom he has promised to hand over the corpses of his two last victims take him to the place where this whole affair will come to an end, John Doe, the Everyman chosen by the Lord, argues for the nobility of his work. I'm no murderer, he declares indignantly to David Mills. All I've done is get rid of a disgusting fat man, a lying, money-grabbing lawyer, a girl who was so horrible inside that she could not bear to live because she had lost her beauty, an infected call-girl and a pederast drug-dealer. And then? In the long minutes during which this conversation takes place—the car moves ever deeper into a waste land dotted with pylons—the spectator has plenty of time to ask him/herself this question, the question asked by those 'thirsty for stories'. And s/he also has the time to intuit what is going to happen next: clearly, the first body to be (totally or partially) handed over will be that of Mills's wife. Now the story acquires a touch of cruel pathos, because this body, unlike those of the other victims, belongs to someone whom we have had time to get to know: a gentle, fragile woman who is expecting a baby. We identify with this innocent victim, and we feel a growing sense of unease at this unjustified, gratuitous act of savagery. It is

gratuitous also from a narrative point of view: in fact, as we listened to John Doe proudly assuming the role of executioner, perhaps in some dark corner of our psyche the more paranoid part of our super-ego conceded him some mitigating circumstances. But how is it possible that a serial killer whose inspiration is rigidly theological should suddenly give up his personality, throw it off as if it were yesterday's shirt? How can a merciless punisher kill and behead an innocent creature only because this helps him to provoke the committing of another sin? The answer lies in a far-fetched coincidentia oppositorum: the saint is himself a sinner, guilty of envy. It seems strange that this chastising superman should be envious of a guy who lives in an apartment which threatens to collapse every time a subway train passes. But let us allow him this envy for a 'normal life'; what does it matter? Our emotions are headed elsewhere: as we scrutinise the face of the character played by Brad Pitt we witness the irruption of excruciating pain. And we absolve him of the sin that the other thinks he is making him commit: Mills's wrath, elicited with such sadism, is the wrath of an innocent man. The fact that John Doe does not understand him, he of all people, the one who chose his victims on the grounds of their undeniable moral deformity, the fact that John Doe thinks he is achieving a masterpiece precisely at the moment he is leaving it incomplete is utterly disturbing. The reasons for this abrupt narrative twist undoubtedly exist: it was necessary to break away from stereotypes, to undermine expectations, to produce an emotional shock. In this the film succeeds, but at the price of a total violation of narrative probability.

My first impulse as I left the cinema at the end of the film was to ask for my money back. I doubt very much whether I would have got it. In the unlikely event of the cashier having a degree in aesthetics—though the probability is on a par with the plausibility of the main character in *Seven*—s/he would kindly have pointed out that criteria such as necessity, coherence, verisimilitude, etc. only need to be respected when the goal is knowledge, when cinema aspires to being an art form, an art of the gaze. But if the objective is entertainment, perceptual stimulation, if cinema seeks to be a sensory art (a compromise between the aesthetic and the aestheticised sphere), if cinema seeks the triumph of the eye over the gaze,³³ then the principle of necessity—itself a flexible principle—must become entirely supple and give way to ever new stimulating effects. This is why one can become so indulgent towards the improbable. The misapprehension I was under—and to which I am most likely to fall victim again—lies at the heart of the seventh art, namely in its privilege of being the perceptually richest art and thus the one most exposed to the temptation of the 'sensible'.³⁴

Notes

Translated by Ian Harvey; edited by Fabio Cleto.

1. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Last Tycoon*, 1941 (London: Penguin, 1965), p. 40.
2. E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, 1927 (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1993), p. 60.
3. Christian Metz, *Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Imaginary Signifier*, 1977, trans. Celia Britton, Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster and Alfred Guzzetti (London: Macmillan, 1982), p. 64.
4. *Ibid.* p. 61.
5. *Ibid.* p. 66.
6. *Ibid.* p. 45.
7. See Giovanni Bottiroli, *Teoria dello stile* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1997).
8. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis (Seminar XI)*, 1964, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Vintage, 1998). In the figures the Lacanian diagrams have been expanded in order to make them easier to understand.
9. The notion that the film camera is the direct heir to the fifteenth-century camera obscura, and that it again advances the idea of space organised on the basis of central perspective, is put forward by Jean-Louis Baudry.
10. Seeing is in fact thinking, deciphering; ‘A Cartesian subject does not see itself in a mirror; it sees a dummy, an “outside”, and reasonably assumes that others see it in the same way’. Merleau-Ponty, *L’oeil et l’esprit* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), p. 38.
11. As Greenaway himself stated, the optical instrument used by Neville—whose Venetian name was Scaraboto—is based on one really used by Dürer and Canaletto. See Giovanni Bogani, *Greenaway* (Rome: Il Castoro, 1995), pp. 60-61.
12. Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*, p. 88.
13. *Ibid.* p. 92.
14. *Ibid.* p. 89.
15. The cinema is marvellous at expressing the sensation of being looked at by ‘something’. In David Lynch’s *Lost Highway* (1997), a man and a woman are mysteriously spied on and filmed inside their own house. There is a scene when the two are in bed; he is shot from the point of view of someone lying on the floor observing him. This point of view is uncanny (*unheimlich*) and thus, at least for a short time, it is a gaze. Its fate—that is, the possibility that it becomes elided and goes back to being simply an eye (albeit an unusual one)—depends on the whole narrative and the richness of its meanings.
16. Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*, p. 94.

17. See Peter Greenaway, 'My Great Advantage over Veronese is that I Can Make the People Move', *Art Newspaper*, vol. 9, no. 2 (June 1991), pp. 10-12.
18. Peter Greenaway, *The Draughtsman's Contract* (Paris: Dis Voir, 2000), p. 77.
19. *Ibid.* p. 80
20. Neville turns his attention for a while towards one of the paintings of Compton House, but to no effect: what he sees is an incoherent narrative, a story of numerous infidelities, perhaps preparations for a murder. The questions he addresses to the lady of the house remain unanswered.
21. Mr Talmann: 'Your Mr Neville, Sarah, has god-like powers of emptying the landscape. It's a wonder the birds still sing'. Sarah: 'If they stopped, I doubt whether Mr Neville would appreciate the difference'. Greenaway, *The Draughtsman's Contract*, p. 47.
22. *Ibid.* p. 82.
23. *Ibid.* p. 121.
24. *Ibid.* p. 116.
25. Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*, p. 73.
26. *Ibid.* p. 99.
27. *Ibid.* p. 107.
28. 'Even when an animal is in a sexually active condition, it does not always react immediately to the partner's courtship. It may take a considerable time to overcome the female reluctance. The zigzag dance of a male Stickleback for instance does not always elicit the female's response at once. She may approach in a half-hearted way, and stop when the male tries to lead her to the nest. In that case the male returns, and again performs his zigzag dance. After a number of repetitions the female may eventually yield, follow him, and enter the nest'. Niko Tinbergen, *Social Behaviour in Animals*, 1953 (London-New York: Chapman & Hall, 1965), p. 29.
29. According to Bakhtin, the dialogic conception by no means implies a passive author who does nothing but create a montage of other points of view: 'The characters speak as participants in the depicted life, as it were, from private positions. Their viewpoints are limited in one way or another (they know less than the author does). The author is outside the world depicted (and, in a certain sense, created) by him. He interprets this entire world from higher and qualitatively different positions'. Mikhail Bakhtin, 'The Problem of the Text in Linguistics, Philology, and the Human Sciences: An Experiment in Philosophical Analysis', in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, 1979, trans. Vern W. McGee (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), p. 116.
30. Harold Bloom, 'Introduction', in *Hamlet* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 1990), p. 4.

31. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, 1983, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (London: Athlone, 1986), p. 106.
32. *Ibid.* pp. 106-107.
33. Unlike Dreyer's, Fincher's technical decisions (commented on by Paolo Cherchi Usai in *Segnocinema*, vol. 15, no. 77, 1995) aim at satisfying the eye. Note that Detective Mills does not fall into a real 'optical trap'.
34. The aesthetic problems briefly touched on in this article are discussed at length in my *Teoria dello stile*, cit.