

Hanneke Grootenboer's *Treasuring the Gaze*

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Un chien andalou (still) users.design.ucla.edu¹

On initial reflection, the subject of the gaze in the late eighteenth century seems completely removed from the traumatic metaphors unfolding in that sequence from Buñuel and Dalí's surrealist short *Un chien andalou* (1929), in which Simone Mareuil's eye is slit open with a razor—this after a thin cloud crosses the surface of the full moon. Hanneke Grootenboer's *Treasuring the Gaze* takes us into another territory—



Georgian Eye Miniature, c. 1800, <http://www.vam.ac.uk/users/node/2136>

that of the Georgian eye portrait and its instantiation of an ornamental, precious, and excruciatingly intimate material culture in which love, longing, mourning, adornment, representation, and the psyche collide and coalesce.

Yet if I begin by gesturing toward Buñuel it is because, over and against the sense that Grootenboer's work is a superlative example of microhistory, her two epigraphs belie the ambition to stay within the narrow contextual confines of her subject. The first is a citation from Locke's 1689 *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, and the second, from Nabokov's 1930 novella *The Eye*. Why this juxtaposition? Locke, for whom vision instigated aesthetics as well as knowledge of self and world, would be challenged by other sensorialists like Condillac, for whom touch was the only sense "that in itself could judge exteriority." Enlightenment sensorialist polemics like these give historical credence to Grootenboer exploration of how the optic and haptic dimensions are, in fact, radically conjoined in objects like these in which one loses oneself in the lover's gaze just as one grasps Klein's partial object, Winnicott's transitional object, Lacan's *objet petit a*—the miniaturized replacement, in short, for the absent object of desire. Hence, Grootenboer can propose that "the merging of image and gaze, subject and object, and the consequences for the viewing subject (are) clearly mapped out by the eye portrait..." (152).

¹ [Editor's Note] Professor Naginski's text refers by title to the slides she showed as part of her presentation. For the sake of intelligibility, we have added those images that are readily available on line.

Nabokov, on the other hand, whose disaffected protagonist in *The Eye* speaks of wanting to “observe, to spy, to watch ... to be nothing but a slightly vitreous somewhat blood-shot unblinking eye” takes us to the *blasé* modernity of the early twentieth century—and to the degraded, physiologized version of monocular vision that is watching and yet, as Grootenboer writes, “is *lost in a look* ... creating a kind of space in which one is alone with oneself—lost from the world.”

Astonishing here, then, is how the complexity and reach of Grootenboer’s theoretical terrain—which, rather breathtakingly, encompasses Gaston Bachelard, Jean-Luc Nancy, Jacques Lacan, Mladen Dolar, Gérard Wajcman, Joan Copjec, Norman Bryson, Adrian Stokes, Marcia Pointon, Jürgen Habermas, Georges Didi-Huberman, among others—metes out the lineaments of a psychoanalytic approach working to be held in balance with an art historical lens that is extremely tightly focused on circa 1800. The vast theoretical armature weaves exegetically around the singular object type in order to accomplish four distinct goals.

First, to parse what Grootenboer calls the eye portrait’s “structure of address” as it oscillates between public and private as well as participates in a gift economy (in the full anthropological sense) of epistolary exchange and intimate looking.² Second, to focus attention on the “sex of sight” in a cultural context defined by an increasingly secular and domesticated vision.³ Third, to account for the rhetoric of tears as an exemplification of the cult of sentimentality; and fourth, to unveil the full analytic complexity of the gaze as part object.

The pressure of high theory on the historical object is enormous. But where portraiture (however miniaturized) appears, there is a tradition out of which such a pressure rightfully emerges—and this is *because* we are dealing with portraiture. This tradition takes us from the nineteenth-century Vienna-School art historian Alois Riegl to recent thinkers such as the literary critic Harry Berger whose works have developed the premise of dramatic fictions in Dutch group portraiture.



Franz Hals, *Banquet of the Officers of the St. George Civic Guard* (1616) from Wikimedia

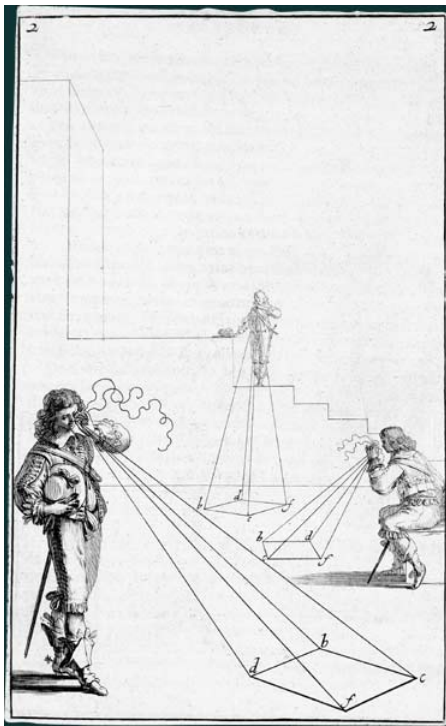
In contrast to most interpreters of portraiture as genre (and this applies not just to the Dutch context), Berger does not privilege questions of identity *per se*. Instead, he seeks to stress the fictionality—as opposed to the literality—of the sitter’s pose. Such a stipulation allows him to underscore the constitutive *theatricality* revealed by poses and the painting of poses as well as to draw on the legacy of the Renaissance concept of *sprezza-*

² See Francis Wheatley, *The Miniature* (or *Portrait of Clara Maria Pope*, 1787-1788).

³ See Richard Cosway, *Eye Portrait* (c. 1800).

tura: that is, the appearance of effortless nonchalance described in Baldassare Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier* (1528), which masks real desires and thoughts. Hence Berger's story of portraiture explores the premeditated artificiality of the sitter's address to painter and viewer alike, the *prospective* drama of a projection beyond the canvas, and the dynamic formalism of a performative circuit of gestures and gazes in space and time in which subject and object are made to confront each other. It is to exactly this kind of prospective drama that Grootenboer introduces desire, gender, and voyeuristic ways of looking as well as the idea of "push back" from the image, which reciprocates as a *dompte-regard* or "taming of the gaze."

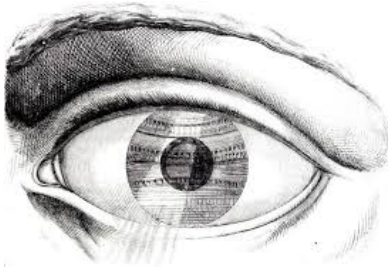
For the architectural historian, there is another history at play whose benchmarks might be brought into interesting tension with Grootenboer's understanding of the gaze as intimate vision. It starts, pointedly, in 1425, as part of the so-called "Baptistry experiment" in which the Florentine architect Filippo Brunelleschi's "demonstrated" the truth of perspective by matching up a reflection of a painted representation with the actual eleventh-century Tuscan structure by means of his own line of sight. From that point on, perspective became akin not simply to the disembodied monocular vision of the Renaissance humanist but, with the arrival of Cartesian space, to the mechanistic deployment of abstraction and to the rationalization of the world through ever-expanding geometric grids.



Abraham Bosse, *Les Perspectiveurs* (1648) expositions.bnf.fr

In this kind of expanded field, something like Abraham Bosse's the *Perspective Makers* emerges, if I may be so anachronistic, as the philosopher Immanuel Kant's dream come true. A plate like this one does a wonderful job of staging the human volition to schematize, the mind's eye's capacity for *Bildungskraft* or the "power to make images"—as if we all walk around with the machinery for an ordering Imagination always already inter-

nalized. And for all the Renaissance claims to the naturalism of seeing in this way, the artificiality and highly constructed aspect of this scopic mode of proceeding was obvious: “To prove,” Bosse writes, “that one must neither draw nor paint as the eye sees.”



Ledoux, “Coup d’oeil sur le théâtre de Besançon” www.larousse.fr

It was exactly this reach—newly cast in the eighteenth century as the reach of Reason—that allowed the French visionary architect Claude-Nicolas Ledoux to turn his gaze back out from the stage through the proscenium to the very theatre he had designed at Besançon. In the so-called “Glance or quick survey of the theatre of Besançon,” an architectural form stages mass spectacle only to refract and swallow up the spectator’s gaze. Here it is the architect’s eye that takes over as it scans the multi-tiered auditorium with its perimeter-defining Doric colonnade. The point of view moves from microcosm to macrocosm, from individual vantage to universal space, with the subject envisioning him or herself by means of the collective for which it performs identity.

And this is what brings us round full circle: “By fixating on the object of sight,” Ledoux’s is another way of turning, as Grootenboer writes of *this* kind of object, “the beholder into an image.” My sense is that these eye portraits do a lot of theoretical heavy lifting—this is a good and challenging thing—and so the question that remains, for me at least, concerns the ways in which an isolated episode—a cultural fashion circumscribed in time—might also be related to a history of the gaze—of the point of view—that falls into the *longue durée*. Would we see these objects as radically negating a Western post-Medieval visual paradigm that, as Hubert Damisch has argued so persuasively, belongs squarely to a theory of psychic consciousness in which the abstract and the real, the authority and fragility of the gaze, are axiometrically interdependent? And if this is the case, why does it happen at Enlightenment’s end?