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THE GAZE AND THE EXPERIENCE OF THE FOREIGN

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ABSTRACT: What is more foreign to us than our own unconscious, showing us a limit to what can be seen and said? The author shows that not only is the foreign inscribed in the gaze, a gaze that cannot be reduced to the visible, but that it lies at the very heart of the human subject. Its irruption at various occasions, including when travelling between different countries, confronts us with what divides us and remains an enigma. This challenging experience mobilises our subjectivity, calling for a unique solution. Far from always being a sign of pathology, it can lead to inventive action, as shown by artistic and rite-of-passage experiences. The author's approach relies on what is transmitted to us by psychoanalysis, primarily highlighting the work of Freud.

Keywords: foreign; the gaze; the unconscious; depersonalisation; inventiveness; rite of passage.

Resumo: O olhar e a prova do estrangeiro. O que poderia causar um sentimento de estranheza maior, ao ser humano, do que seu inconsciente que lhe mostra os limites de sua capacidade de ver e dizer? Esse artigo procura demonstrar que o estrangeiro não está apenas inscrito no olhar, um olhar que não se restringe ao visível, mas que se encontra no âmago do sujeito. Sua irrupção, a cada evento ocasional, inclusive ao mudar de país, confronta o sujeito com o que o divide e se torna um enigma para ele. Esse enigma representa uma verdadeira prova que mobiliza a subjetividade do indivíduo e a necessidade de um recurso singular para lidar com ele. Essa prova não revela necessariamente uma psicopatologia. Ela pode dar origem à inventividade, como mostram as experiências artísticas e iniciáticas. Para embasar a sua abordagem, a autora toma, como ponto de apoio e como horizonte, os conhecimentos da psicanálise, principalmente a contribuição freudiana.

Palavras-chave: estrangeiro; olhar; inconsciente; despersonalização; inventividade; experiência iniciática.

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The clinic of exile shows us that when trying to describe the difficult experience of confronting the unknown and its transformations, most individuals spontaneously speak about “the gaze”. Their words suggest that it is precisely the gaze that registers the weakening of the points of reference, of the framework that usually enables each individual to recognize himself and be recognized as a member of the human community. I would like to show that not only is this foreignness, revived at this precise moment, located in the gaze of others, a gaze that cannot be reduced to the visible, but that it is also at the very heart of the subject. Its emergence mobilises the subjectivity of each individual and the need to find singular solutions to the confrontation with this difficult challenge. This experience is not necessarily a sign of pathology and can in fact lead to highly inventive solutions, as shown by many artistic and initiatory experiences. To make my argument, I will build on the theoretical framework of psychoanalysis, but also on Graziella Magherini’s work on the power of artistic images.

THE FREUDIAN CONTRIBUTION

It is precisely its relationship to the foreign [l’*étranger*], that gives the gaze its paradigmatic status in analytic theory, showing the full significance of the Freudian theorisation of the drive, which, as the mainspring of desire, remains at the foundation of all subjectivity and perception.

Freud’s revolutionary discovery was to show that the foreign concerns all human subjects due to the fact of their psychic division. This foreign dimension inhabits us all yet, at the same time, remains outside our control. Throughout his life’s work, Freud tried to bring this foreignness, one that has an impact on the gaze beyond the veil of the image, into focus: whether it was in the gaze of Medusa, in Oedipus blinding himself for having seen something he had always known, or in hysterical blindness. However, it was above all his own experience of the foreign that allowed him to elaborate his theory and open a new clinical perspective, one that goes beyond the omnipotence of the visible. It is worth remembering two crucial events that marked Freud’s own journey:

- First, his fascination with Michelangelo’s *Moses*, a work of art he thought expressed “the angry scorn of the hero’s glance” (FREUD, 1914, p. 212), reproaching the artist for having betrayed the First Commandment. He was intrigued by the spectator’s paralysis before the image of the man who formulated the prohibition of all representation, and he made this enigma the very object of his study. Together with Oedipus, Moses became a key mythical figure, occupying a central place in Freud’s theory. It was Moses whom Freud chose for the final chapter of his work, an oeuvre that restores to the father his alien nature and demands its reader to understand the visible based on the invisible it both contains and is transcended by. What Freud tells us in *Moses and Monotheism* (1939) is that the origin of a people is always sustained by the foreign, and this foreign influence, in terms of both the people’s sense of belonging and future destiny, is then deployed from one monotheism to another.

By showing us that the father was always Other and that the symbolic murder was a fact of language, Freud distanced himself from the deadly traps of “total vision”, of omniscience and omnipotence. He pointed out that all acts of naming were necessarily inhabited by the unspeakable, which humans have always tried to subvert: not without causing havoc and chaos, and always using the means of their day and age.

- Second, we remember Freud’s troubling experience in Athens in 1904. When he unexpectedly found himself standing with his younger brother Alexander on the Acropolis, he was suddenly seized by a doubt as to what he was seeing: “By the evidence of my senses I am now standing on the Acropolis, but I cannot believe it [...] ‘*What I see here is not real*’” (FREUD, 1936, p. 223-226). Before the temple in Athens, Freud’s vision became blurred. It was not just a *fausse reconnaissance*: he discovered what he had seen, as a child, in the pictures of the Acropolis, but also realised that he had refused to believe in this reality, which seemed so inaccessible. Later, he interprets this moment of derealisation, closely resembling depersonalisation, by relating it to a fundamental human “psychotic trait”, which calls to mind what Lacan

articulates as the other type of “foreclosure of *sens*” (LACAN, 1975-1976, p. 320). Because of this characteristic shared by neuroses, psychoses and perversions, “derealizations and depersonalizations are intimately connected” (FREUD, 1936, p. 227). He writes that these feelings of strangeness “arise very frequently in certain mental diseases, but they are not unknown among normal people, just as hallucinations occasionally occur in the healthy” (*idem*). What they all have in common is that they are defense mechanisms, trying to “keep something out of us” (*idem*). However, he explains, the new elements that can trigger a defense reaction “approach the ego from two directions—from the real external world and from the internal world of thoughts and impulses that emerge in the ego. It is possible that this alternative coincides with the choice between derealizations proper and de-personalizations” (*idem*).

STENDHAL SYNDROME

This feeling of strangeness¹ cannot but remind us of what the Italian psychiatrist Graziella Magherini has called “Stendhal syndrome” (1990), referring to a curious episode experienced by the French writer and described in his book *Rome, Naples and Florence* (1987). While visiting the Basilica of Santa-Croce for the first time, Stendhal suddenly felt strong anxiety while contemplating Volterrano’s frescoes. He was only able to calm down by reading Foscolo’s poem *Sepulchres*, which was inspired by the Basilica, the burial site of some of the most illustrious Italians. According to Magherini and as reported by A. and G. Haddad (1995, p. 84), many of the travellers visiting Florence have experienced a malaise similar to Stendhal’s. “Their mood sinks, they become depressed and sometimes have a strong feeling of their limits becoming blurred, a feeling of fragmentation and a sense of leaving their body.” This temporary disturbance, linked to the emotional impact of the work of art, the “power of the image”, is subject to cultural differences. For example, an Italian who has lived all his whole life surrounded by religious images would be less affected by them than travellers from other backgrounds. Likewise, an American, whose gaze is supposedly framed by other mythological references, experiences this “image shock” much less intensely than a European. The expressions of this disturbance or emotional reaction vary across cultures, but also depend on the ways in which individuals uniquely participate in them and can take on different and less spectacular forms (such as speechlessness).

Magherini writes that Stendhal syndrome can trigger a mental confusion, which in some cases turns into a hallucinatory episode. Nevertheless, we cannot put such cases and the experience of derealisation, which is not necessarily pathological, into the same category. The disturbance described by Magherini can manifest in any individual confronted with the experience of exile or with a new element that disrupts his or her routines and changes the way he or she sees the world.

This irruption of the foreign, which is none other than the unconscious and can only be experienced, disconnects words from things, the signifier from the signified. It abolishes the categories of time (the unconscious knows nothing about chronological time) and familiar perceptions, making space for a strangely intimate feeling of not having a unified self, leading to a state of confusion. What is stranger to a human being than his unconscious, showing him the limits of what can be seen and said?

This foreign dimension concerns all human subjects, regardless of their psychotic or neurotic structure. However, in psychosis, what would otherwise be repressed is instead encountered in the real, via hallucinations or as a delusion.

In neurosis, the return of the repressed leads to the formations of the unconscious, showing us that what is most intimate to us can simultaneously appear as the most alien. Freud shows that the emergence of the unconscious in dreams, slips of the tongue and witticisms but also in certain encounters and works of art, are

¹ [Translator’s note: The author uses the expression *sentiment d’étrangeté*, the habitual French translation of Freud’s *Entfremdungsgefühl*, which the Standard Edition renders as “derealisation”, for example in *A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis*. Where appropriate and in keeping with the author’s larger argument, I have also used a literal translation to maintain the resonance with *l’étranger* as the foreign, as radical otherness.

presented to us as riddles to be deciphered, making us wonder, after the fact: *What has just happened? What does it mean?* or think *No, this cannot be me.*

Freud often said that in regard to this enigmatic other place, artists tend to be the avant-garde. This other place, which influences all creators, is inherent to any representation; however, it also constitutes its “beyond”, because all creative works also transmit something unspeakable, something that needs a form to make itself be seen. This unspeakable is conveyed, for example, by the rhythm of a song or the lines of a poem. In this sense, the creative process resembles dream-work.

THE ORDEAL OF THE FOREIGN AND INVENTIVENESS

According to Freud, both dreams and works of art are “the imaginary satisfactions of unconscious wishes” (FREUD, 1925, p. 112) and subject to the same processes. The dream initially consists of visual, sonorous and tactile images, which are then related through speech and interpreted. It is by virtue of emerging from oblivion that the memory of a dream can be interpreted.

If the dreamer, the subject of this unconscious desire, is located on the side of the signifier, i.e., following the logic of lack rather than logic of meaning, what can we say about the artist’s relationship to the unspeakable?

He or she translates it into a unique aesthetic form, metaphorises it via an image, in the sense that Plato defines it in *Timaeus*: “Since even the conditions of an image’s occurrence lie outside the image itself – since it is an ever-moving apparition of something else – it *has* to occur in something other than itself (and so somehow or other to cling to existence), or it would be nothing at all” (PLATO, 1970, 52c3-5). The work of art transmits an enigma that testifies to the “relation with the unknown” (ROSOLATO, 1978), yet imposes on it the limits of a particular form, using a language that, while possibly shared with others, does not foreclose this enigmatic dimension. In this way, it can leave the chaos of formlessness from which it has emerged, and a work of mourning begins, eventually allowing the author to consent to a loss. This opens up the possibility of sublimation, which is not an end in itself, but, in a movement from loss to discovery, rekindles desire, pointing it towards new horizons.

This movement from formlessness to the shaping of the work is always unique. It has been described by certain authors as the difficult ordeal of the foreign, a path of initiation that transmutes the relationship to the unknown, trans-forming it into a relation of inventiveness. It is worth listening to each author speak about this process him or herself; however, I will only focus on a few key points.

For Michel de M’Uzan, the creative work carries a trace of the psychic state that presided at its birth. He describes the creative pathway as a kind of moulting, a genuine metamorphosis, a dramatic rather than idyllic experience (DE M’UZAN, 1977, p. 4). Its struggle stems from the fact that it is not just the life drives that are at work in it, but also the death drive. M’Uzan distinguishes between:

A moment of “shock” [*saisissement*] (*ibidem*, p. 6), which he describes as traumatic. This is an initial moment of inspiration, in which the real emerges, disrupting the subject’s “economic peace” and threatening his identity. This involves new demands coming from the drives and requires a change in the subject’s position towards himself and the world. There is a feeling of strangeness and a “blurring of boundaries”.

The second moment, which is of vital importance and appears as a pressing need, corresponds to a movement “from discontinuity to continuity” (*ibidem*, p. 8). This period stages the scene of the subject’s “confrontation” with the mass of excitation threatening to overwhelm him or her. The beginning of a new arrangement creates new possibilities by elaborating the traumatic experience and translating it into forms and images.

The third moment is the return “to a new reality of a radical metamorphosis, which still betrays the chaos and violent conflicts over which order has been established” (*ibidem*, p. 10). We should nevertheless keep in mind that although M’Uzan describes the creative process as following a certain logic of meaning, it should by no means be seen as linear or as leading from a beginning to an end. Grasping its beginning can only be a kind of

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illusion. What it shows us is nothing other than the ordeal of the foreign, in other words, the experience of a new loss, based on which something beyond the known will occur by means of an oeuvre, via a nomination.

Anton Ehrenzweig speaks about the creative process as a temporary madness that transcends the limits of rational thought. He uses the term unconscious “scanning”, alluding to not only subjective dispersion and chaos, but also the idea of scansion (EHRENZWEIG, 1971, p. 9). To him, the creative process also consists of three stages:

The “schizoid” and persecutory stage, where we see the emergence of chaos and a partial fragmentation of the ego, the parts of which are then projected into the work.

The “dedifferentiation” stage (*ibidem*, p. 33) or “unconscious scanning”, which, akin to romantic passion or mystical ecstasy, destabilises the limits between the subject and the world, stripping objects of their concrete materiality. During this stage, Ehrenzweig also speaks about a “manic ocean limit”, referring to the wave of excitation that sweeps over the artist, while deep down the creative process is already at work.

The **moment of the return** to oneself: consciousness returns and something new has emerged from the chaos. However, this return to reality triggers a depression, which requires strength to resist the “almost anal disgust that would make us sweep the whole mess into the waste-paper basket” (*ibidem*, p. 103). The anxiety of persecution is superseded by the anxiety of loss and a sense of failure, because the object can never be grasped fully.

Finally, Catherine Clement (1990), taking up Ehrenzweig’s analysis, speaks about a “syncope”, a dissolution of the subject, to describe this confrontation with the foreign as a precondition for the production of an oeuvre. This “syncopated and fertile moment” is also marked by an “unspeakable enjoyment”, which provokes the fading of the subject and leaves behind a remainder: the work of art that marks a cut, the *objet a* of Lacan’s formula, the “object-cause of desire”, always missed and impossible to name.

These different approaches demonstrate that each creative experience contains, at its core, a dimension of the unknown, whose emergence profoundly challenges the subject and whose intensity corroborates the link Freud makes between the derealisation and depersonalisation. If this confrontation is to be effective or creative, it has to be mediated through language via a form, image or a name, albeit without being reducible to either of these elements. Hence the possibility of reinvention, of perpetual reconstruction, each time creating a new opportunity of a crossing over, a moulting or a renaissance, opening our gaze to what lies beyond the visible and welcoming the world that has been made anew.

In this way, the foreign, the unspeakable, is given a form in a work this movement reminds us of initiation rites, which are, as I would now like to show, highly instructive.

THE EXPERIENCE OF INITIATION

The creative experience is in fact very close to initiation in the cycle of mutations and metamorphoses. Initiation is both an opening and a defence against the ungraspable dimension of the human subject, both within and outside us. It is concerned with what has been celebrated by naming, images and symbols since humans invented language. It creates and renews the social link.

For Eliade, all initiation rites include a ritual death, followed by a resurrection or a rebirth (ELIADE, 1959, p. 144). This moment of transformation makes it possible to bring the past onto the scene of the future.

The ritual death, often symbolised by the shadows or a cosmic night, has to do with the chaos, an exemplary expression of “the paradoxical point of passage from one mode of being to another” (*ibidem*, p. 26).

Yet all creation is a kind of regeneration, Eliade writes. The regeneration described by him is often compared to a mystical experience. The great Sufi mystic Ibn Arabi (1994) speaks about this symbolic rebirth as a contemplative journey, reflecting on oneself and the world, the existence of which depends on perpetual

transformation. He distinguishes between the horizontal dimension of this journey, which concerns its spatial geography, and the vertical dimension as a movement from the outside towards the inside and beyond, towards transcendence, towards the unknown. This verticality, the very foundation of the movement of existence, is a form of renewal.

In his view, the voyage (*Safar, asfar*), the Arabic root of which contains the notion of unveiling (*isfar*), can bear spiritual fruit (*natya, natay*), evoking the idea of childbirth.

The unveiling gives the traveller access to “the most mysterious secrets, as its light dispels all illusions”; it suggests a movement from the inaccessible aspects of the divine (symbolised by *ama* or blindness) to the manifestation of attribution conceivable by created beings (1994).

“God can be grasped by neither intellect nor speculation” (*ibidem*, p. 75). Because of human weakness, this voyage, which Ibn Arabi describes as perplexity (*hayra*) or bedazzlement, is not without its dangers: “However, whoever sets off on this journey is immediately seized with natural worry, a tightness of chest and with fear, because from the very beginning of his path he can see his weakness approaching. But this weakness gives him dignity and force” (*ibidem*, p. 76). What the traveller discovers is that this indefinitely approachable Other is both attractive and terrifying, manifesting right where it escapes us, already vanishing as it appears.

This movement of presence/absence, of veiling/unveiling, should not be understood, the author writes, via the dualist logic of thesis/antithesis or negation/affirmation. It can only evoke the subject’s division, a division that cannot be reduced to any discursive contradiction.

Ibn Arabi’s journey is also a voyage of the gaze. Yet it is equally a voyage of the breath, of movement, sounds, of the voice which, while being subject to the laws of language, constantly transmits, in myriad different forms, something beyond what can be perceived. Because the unknown permeates all human constructions, the traveller cannot become affixed to any one of them. He becomes the container of all forms, because the naming possibilities of language are infinite. In language, like in the unconscious, we are always already displaced, always far away from home.

This is also revealed by the aesthetic vertigo of the creative act. Contrary to common discourse, which tries to conceal any perception of what cannot be understood, the creative act invites us to go precisely where meaning comes undone. It alludes to the unthinkable: *Look at what you cannot see. Listen to what has no meaning. Speak about what you cannot say.*

Isn’t this unthinkable also carried by each unconscious gesture and perception, which the logic of meaning seeks to conceal?

However, the logical discourse should not be confounded with *signifiance*, which highlights what is constantly stealing away and escapes all codification. Linked to the founding lack of being, this continuous seeping away of meaning is sustained by what Freud calls the primary process – a process of displacement and condensation, of perceptions and sensations which continues to mark its presence throughout our lives, day and night, in each of our dreams.

The creative act, which requires us to “let go”, is a response of what escapes us. It is the guarantor of the unknown. There can be no creative act without a cut, which means that nothing will be as it was. This act restores to language its enigmatic nature, welcoming it with open arms.

Should this dimension, which artists are so good at relating, not be given more attention in an age dominated by the cult of the visible? Not as a kind of standardised interpretative framework, but as a new theorisation of the unthinkable, the non-representable, that which cannot be perceived but instead marks each perception, regardless of its kind: visual, auditory, olfactory, cutaneous, motoric, etc.

This detour through the questions of creativity and the initiatory experience has shown us that the way in which subjects or collectives manage their relationship to the foreign testifies to the strength of their constructive and creative abilities. It can therefore have a pacifying influence, stirring us towards inventiveness.

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However, what about the effects of fear or anxiety that can bring ruin or even disaster? In this case, the foreign is no longer recognized as part of oneself or as a vehicle of openness. Instead, it is projected outside or perceived as a threat to be dealt with. This refusal has nefarious effects on both the subject and the social link, as evidenced by everyday clinical experience with individuals who perceive the enigma within themselves as a handicap, one that they sometimes try to displace onto others not like them, in a furious effort to draw a line between the inside and the outside, to fetishize difference (STITOU, 2012). In my experience, their suffering often manifests as an inhibition, an inability to construct or create. This subjective position is at times fuelled by the social gaze, which sees the foreign as a danger rather than a potential asset.

This foreignness, constantly veiled and unveiled, remembered and repeated in new contexts, with each new hardship, constitutes the rebellious aspect of each human subject. However, it also refers to the obscure point of any civilisation that humans struggle to understand or reject, and which is at the origin of our suffering, our creativity and also our ruin.

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