Lacan on Gaze

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Abstract

Thanks to Jacques Lacan, gaze has now become a very important subject not only in the field of psychoanalysis, but also at once in the field of politics and film theory. Despite a lot of treatises on gaze have already been published since Lacan discussed the subject at great length in his seminar XI, there still remains many unsolved riddles and enigmas to be cracked. What is the gaze? Why the gaze is the object a in the register of the scopic drive? What relation is the gaze to eye? Why does Lacan assert that "I" am a picture in the scopic field? Then what is a picture, and for what does a painter draw? We can never truly understand these enigmas before the gaze in Lacanian sense get an exhaustive research.

Key Words: gaze, eye, picture, desire

In 1964, from February 19th to March 11th, Lacan delivers a course of lectures on gaze in his Seminar 11 under the title "Of the Gaze As *Objet Petit a*". As we know, before Lacan deals with this subject, both Satre(in *Being and Nothing- ness*) and Merleau-Ponty(in *Phenomenology of Perception* and *The visible and the Invisible*) have already explored the concept of gaze. Lacan's concept of gaze is very different from that of them despite that he benefits much from their excellent works. Now, the gaze has already become a concept of most vital importance in psychoanalysis, political theory, and film theory. Speaking in the final analysis, this should be mainly credited to Lacan. So, it is inevitable for scholars interested in gaze to have an exact understanding of his gaze theory.

If the Lacanian gaze is very hard to understand, it is mostly because it is totally different from the concept of gaze in common sense. The gaze in common sense is no more than my stare or the stare comes from the others. In any case, the ordinary gaze stands a close relation to the eye, especially to the eye full of tender affection. However, the Lacanian concept of gaze has nothing to do with eye. Gaze, but has nothing to do with eye! How is that possible? In view of the common sense, it is certainly absurd. However, if we hope to grasp precisely the essence of Lacan's gaze and make some true achievements on this subject, we must suspend firstly the gaze in common sense instead of satisfying ourselves with it.

The Eye and the Gaze

Before elaborating his concept of gaze, Lacan reaffirms Satre's contribution made in *Being and Nothingness*, that is, the differentiation between the eye and the gaze. Satre's excellence in research into gaze consists in the fact that it is at the ontological level instead of the level of everyday experience that he takes the gaze into account, and consequently thinks about the relationship between the subject and the other in view of gaze. In his opinion, the subject, the other, and their relationship are displayed first in the scopic field. Defining "the other is on principle the one who *looks* at me", he will definitely refer to the radical relationship of self to the Other as "my permanent possibility of being-seen-by-the–Other": "In a word, my apprehension of the Other in the world as probably being a man refers to my permanent possibility of *being-seen-by-him;* that is, to the permanent possibility that a subject who sees me may be substituted for the object seen by me. 'Being–seen–by- the-Other' is the truth of 'seeing-the-Other.'"[1] It is because the other is on principle the one who looks at me that Satre thinks the preoccupation is to differentiate the gaze from the eye: "Of course what most often manifests a look is the convergence of two ocular globes in my direction.

[1] Jean-Paul Satre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hanzel E. Barnes, The Philosophical Library Inc., 1993, p 257.

But the look will be given just as well on occasion when there is a rustling of branches, or the sound of a footstep followed by silence, or the slight opening of a shutter, or a light movement of a curtain."[2]

Accordingly, for someone who is gluing his ear to the door or looking through a keyhole out of jealousy, curiosity or some vice, the gaze is the sound of a footstep arise from within silence, for a hunter who is hunting absorbedly in a thick forest, the gaze is the rustling of branches come from behind, for a soldier who is crawling through the bush, the gaze is a white farm-house which is outlined against the sky at the top of a little hill. According to Satre, therefore, we should never refer the sound of footstep, the rustling of the branches and the farm-house to the actual eye, they are in themselves already eyes. That is to say, the gaze and the eye are never one and the same. Nay more, in the opinion of Satre, the gaze and the eye are mutually exclusive: "If I apprehend the look, I cease to perceive the eyes; they are there, they remain in the field of my perception as pure presentations, but I do not make any use of them; they are neutralized, put out of play; they are no longer the object of a thesis but remain in that state of 'disconnection'…The Other's look hides his eyes; he seems to go *in* front of *them*."[3] Satre has in common with Lacan the differentiation of the gaze from the eye (it is worth noting that this distinction has not been researched further by Satre). However, what they have in common with each other ends here, because they have completely different view with respect to the essence and the function of gaze.

When I glued my ear to the door or looked through a keyhole out of jealousy, curiosity or some vice, says Satre, "I am alone and on the level of a non-thetic self-consciousness. This means first of all that there is no self to inhabit my consciousness, nothing therefore to which I can refer my acts in order to qualify them. They are in no way known; I am my acts and hence they carry in themselves their whole justification. I am a pure consciousness of things, and things, caught up in the circuit of my selfness, offer to me their potentialities as the proof of my non-thetic consciousness (of) my own possibilities…Hence from this moment 'I do what I have to do.' No transcending view comes to confer upon my acts the character of a given on which a judgment can be brought to bear. My consciousness sticks to my acts, it is my acts; and my acts are commanded only by the ends to be attained and by the instruments to be employed."[4]

To put it simply, I will always loss myself in the world in these cases since my self-consciousness is drunk in by that which I desire to listen to or watch. In these cases, I am not myself, not a subject, I am not anything but nothing. But all of a sudden, I hear footsteps in the hall. It is at this moment that the entire situation has been change radically by the fact I feel someone is looking at me! That is to say, the gaze occurs on that moment. What does it mean, however, by the fact that the gaze occurs or that I feel someone is looking at me? To this question answers Satre, "It means that I am suddenly affected in my being and that essential modifications appear in my structure---modifications which I can apprehend and fix conceptually by means of the reflective cogito."[5] To put it bluntly, I come into being as a self by means of the reflective consciousness on the very moment when I feel someone is looking at me. According to Satre, it is only due to the gaze of the Other that I get the reflective consciousness. Moreover, "only the reflective consciousness has the self directly for an object. The unreflective consciousness does not apprehend the person directly or as *its* object; the person is presented to consciousness *in* so far as *the* person *is* an object for *the* other. This means that all of a sudden I am conscious of myself as escaping myself, not in that I am the foundation of my own nothingness but in that I have my foundation outside myself. I am for myself only as I am a pure reference to the other."[6]

As far as the gaze is concerned, Satre makes three contributions for us. Firstly, he discovers that the gaze plays an essential role in human experience in which the other as an object is radically different from any other object in that it is always looking at me as it is being looked at by me. Secondly, he rightly maintains that what is at issue in the gaze far transcends the literal presence of the Other's eyes. Thirdly, it is only by virtue of the gaze of the other that I can get self-consciousness. Unfortunately, fourthly, this acquisition has a negative byproduct: it is on the very moment when I get self-consciousness that I am reduced to an object of the other. As Richard Boothby put it, Satre grounds his theory of the gaze on the Hegelian dialectics of master/slave which presumes that the relationship between the self and other is essentially dyadic.

[2] Jean-Paul Satre, *Being and Nothingness*, p257.
[3] Jean-Paul Satre, *Being and Nothingness*, p258.
[4] Jean-Paul Satre, *Being and Nothingness*, p259.
[5] Jean-Paul Satre, *Being and Nothingness*, p259.
[6] Jean-Paul Satre, *Being and Nothingness*, p 260.

"This binary model raises a number of problems, among which is Sartre's tendency to assume an either/or relation between the two poles it identifies: either the other retains his rights as a subject by objectifying me with his look, or he is himself rendered an object under my look."[7]

According to Lacan, however, there is nothing to prevent both positions from being occupied in simultaneity. In order to prove how the self or the other, in the gaze of each other, can occupy simultaneously both positions of subject and object, Boothby takes the cover-girl face as example. On the one hand, For the purpose of some commercial interest, extraordinary care is taken to produce a kind of unthinkable flawless beauty. The result is that the cover-girl presents before every viewer as a desirable object of uncommon fascination. On the other hand, the cover-girl always typically looks back at the viewer with an overwhelming intense gaze which makes viewer fall prey to her as an object. For this purpose, "reflective highlights in the eyes are strategically placed in order to produce an electrifying stare. Whatever the captivating attractiveness of the rest of the face, these glittering, jewel-like eyes stand out with such unmistakable brilliance that they exert an arresting effect all their own."[8] Let us conclude this summarily: the cover girl is both a fascinating object and an arresting subject. As the former, it strengthens the viewer's subjectivity. As the latter, by virtue of the brilliance in its gaze, it presents itself as a powerful subject. Moreover, these two opposite effects strengthen each other in dialectic way: the more the viewer is arrested by the fascinating cover-girl, the more s/he is a desiring subject and vice versa.

With respect to the gaze, there is a radical distinction between Satre and Lacan. Despite that I have not said a word about Lacan's concept of gaze as yet; I will summarize herein this difference in advance: As far as the relationship between the eye and the gaze is concerned, with Satre the gaze is not necessarily same as the eye, whereas with Lacan the gaze is definitely not same as the eye. As far as the structure of the gaze is concerned, with Satre it is dual including only the subject and the Other, whereas with Lacan it is triadic including the subject (the one who sees), the visual object (the Other who is seen), and the gaze (a third locus). As far as the function of the gaze is concerned, with Satre, the gaze deprives the subject of his/her subjectivity and reduces him/her to an object, whereas the reverse is true with Lacan. Taking a voyeur as an example: when he is looking through a keyhole, all of a sudden, some footsteps arises in hall and surprises him, disturbs him, overwhelms him, and reduces him to a feeling of shame. This footstep is nothing but gaze. But this never means that the gaze is originally in the relation of subject to subject, in the function of the existence of others as looking at me. So, what the gaze really is? "Is it not clear that the gaze intervenes here only in as much as it is not the annihilating subject, correlative of the world of objectivity, who feels himself surprised, but the subject sustaining himself in a function of desire?" [9]

It is the gaze that makes it possible for the subject to sustain himself in a function of desire. But what does this mean after all? In order to understand this question, we must grasp what the difference of the gaze from the eye signifies for Lacan. "The eye and the gaze—this is for us the split in which the drive is manifested at the level of the scopic field." [10] However, we must first grasp the function of the eye before answering the question what is the gaze. This is an inevitable detour.

The Eye as the Screen of the Gaze

As far as the gaze is concerned, both Satre and Merleau-Ponty have certain influence on Lacan. However, the latter has been mentioned by few people except Antonio Quinet. As pointed out in preceding statements, Satre defines the *other* as the one who looks at me whereas Merleau-Ponty defines the *I* as the being who is looked at. This difference means far more than it seems to do at first sight. Merleau-Ponty's main thesis of *The visible and the Invisible* is the discovery that there is always a preexisting gaze, a kind of staring at us by the outside world. According to Lacan, It is by virtue of this revelation that Merleau-Ponty indicates us some ways that will lead us to not only the order of visual phenomenology but also the discovery of the pre-existence of the gaze: "I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides." [11]

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[7] Richard Boothby, "Figurations of the *Objet a*", in *Jacques Lacan: Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory (II)*, ed. Slavoj Zizek, New York: Routeledge, 2003, p169.

[8] Richard Boothby, "Figurations of the *Objet a*", in *Jacques Lacan: Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory (II)*, p170.

[9] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis (The Seminar Book , 1964)*, trans. Alan Sheridan, London: Penguin,1979, pp. 84-5. Hereinafter referred to as "*The Four Fundamental Concepts* ".

[10] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* , p73.

[11] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p72.

Why is the gaze pre-existent, if not that "I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides"? However, despite Lacan benefits much from Merleau-Ponty's this thesis, he is very unsatisfied with his presupposition that the visible depend on the eye of the seer. Because, as Quinet points out, the introduction of a seer indicates that there is a Platonic perspective with an absolute being that is all-seeing. For Merleau-Ponty, behind the eternal gaze is always an imaginary being. Yet such a being doesn't exist. What exists is the split between what one sees and the gaze that is forever erased from the world.

Despite he fails to discern the split between the eye and the gaze, Merleau-Ponty reveals correctly the pre-existence of the gaze which is central to Lacan's gaze theory. The pre-existence of the gaze is nothing but the pre-existence to the seen of the given- to-be-seen. That is to say, the subject is destined to live in the stare of the Other no matter whether he is aware of it. The pre-existence of the gaze, or the given-to-be-seen is the radical ontological horizon of the subject. However, the paradox is that it is because of the pre-existence of the gaze and it's ubiquity that it is excluded from the consciousness of the subject. It is in this sense that Lacan teaches us, "In our relation to things, in so far as this relation is constituted by the way of vision, and ordered in the figures of representation, something slips, passes, is transmitted, from stage to stage, and is always to some degree eluded in it—that is what we call the gaze."[12] To put it simply, the gaze is screened by the eye. Why will the gaze be always screened, excluded and lost from our relation to things constituted by vision?—Since vision "is satisfied with itself in imagining itself as consciousness,"[13] no doubt the gaze in the filed of the unconsciousness is excluded.

The split of the gaze from the eye is, in the final analysis, the split of the unconsciousness from the consciousness. According to Lacan, the eye stands in close relation to the representation, the consciousness and the subjectivity whereas the gaze stands in close relation to the image, the unconsciousness and the *objet a*. As far as the scopic field is concerned, there is a most imperceptible fact: it is only because the fact that "I am someone who is looked at" is erased that I can constitute my consciousness. In other word, it is only because the gaze is veiled, screened by the eye that my consciousness and subjectivity can come into being. As Lacan points out, in its existence in the world, the subject not only looks, it also shows. For whom it shows? Of course for the Other. However, it is not the same in the waking state as in the world of dream. In the so-called waking state, the subject knows that he is looking but is not aware that it is showing. In the field of the dream, however, it does nothing but shows. In order to elucidate this proposition, Lacan makes a creative reference to Chuang-tsu's butterfly dream in a very astonishing way:

In a dream, he is a butterfly. What does this mean? It means that he sees the butterfly in his reality as gaze. What are so many figures, so many shapes, so many colours, if not this gratuitous showing, in which is marked for us the primal nature of the essence of the gaze…When Chuangtsu wakes up, he may ask himself whether it is not the butterfly who dreams that he is Chuang-tsu. Indeed, he is right, and doubly so, first because it proves he is not mad, he does not regard himself as absolutely identical with Chuang-tsu and, secondly, because he does not fully understand how right he is. In fact, it is when he was the butterfly that he apprehended one of the roots of his identity—that he was, and is, in his essence, that butterfly who paints himself with his own colours —and it is because of this that, in the last resort, he is Chuang-tsu.

This is proved by the fact that, when he is the butterfly, the idea does not occur to him to wonder whether, when he is Chuang-tsu awake; he is not the butterfly that he is dreaming of being. This is because, when dreaming of being the butterfly, he will no doubt have to bear witness later that he represented himself as a butterfly. But this does not mean that he is captivated by the butterfly—he is a captive butterfly, but captured by nothing, for, in the dream, he is a butterfly for nobody. It is when he is awake that he is Chuang-tsu for others, and is caught in their butterfly net. [14]

It is for the sake of breaking through the fixation on the oppositions between the objective and the subjective, the real and the illusory, the true and the false, as well as the life and the death that Chuang-tsu creats this beautiful allegory. Distant as it may be from his theory, Lacan finds a striking echo in this text of Chinese culture. In so far as it has a potential relation to psychoanalysis, the doubt Chuang-tsu brings forward to himself is neither a poetic question nor a romantic imagination.

[12] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis,* p73.
[13] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p74.
[14] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis,* p76.

As well known, the one of the most important insight into human character of psychoanalysis is that man is not born to be a subject and the subjectivity results from social constitution step by step. That is to say, the subject can only come into its being in way of alienation. If not this, what does it mean when Rousseau argues that the social man has always lived outside himself? It is in this sense that Lacan claims that Chuang-tsu must comply with the identity imposed on him by the society in the awaking state. This imposition of identity on the subject is certainly, in the scopic field, carried out by the gaze (i.e. being looked at from all sides). The gaze, the being-looked-at-from-all-sides is nothing but a large piece of net which captures a subject as easily as it captures a butterfly. It is not surprising that Chuang-tsu suspects he is a butterfly.

On the contrary, what is really strange is that he has always been firmly convinced that he is simply Chuang-tsu. If that is the case, it will prove nothing but that he is a madman. However, as Lacan put it, Chuang-tsu does not fully understand how right he is because he does not know it is only when he becomes a butterfly that he can understand that his being as Chuang-tsu is simply the result of social representation. In the awaking state, it is only for the sake of the other that Chuang-tsu is Chuang-tsu. On the other hand, in the field of dream, in the field of the unconsciousness, he is a butterfly for nobody.

As regards the gaze, we have said both too much and too less. So less that we haven't even come to the point of the gaze at all. What is the gaze? In order to answer this question, we'd better make a immediately reference to lacan: "the interest the subject takes in his own split is bound up with that which determines it —namely, a privileged object, which has emerged from some primal separation, from some self-mutilation induced by the very approach of the real, whose name, in our algebra, is the *objet a*. In the scopic relation, the object on which depends the phantasy from which the subject is suspended in an essential vacillation is the gaze."[15] That is to say, the gaze is the *objet a* in the scopic relation. But what is the *objet a*? To begin with, let us make a investigation into the algebra of *objet a*. Firstly, that *a* is the first letter of the French word autre (other) indicates it stands in the close relation to the other. Secondly, that it is also a function of variables in mathematics seems indicate that there may be many counterfeits to represent the *objet a*. lastly, in Lacan's works, this letter is always lower case and italicized, this shows not only that it denotes the little other in opposition to the capital 'A' of the big Other but also that it can never be attained.

According to Lacan, before the oedipal stage, the infant stays in the dual relation between itself and the mother (put aside Lacan's discussion of the "imaginary triad" in pre-oedipal stage for a moment), satisfying itself with a kind of imagined wholeness. With the coming of the Oedipus complex, however, the infant realizes both the mother and itself lack something. The mother is marked by lack, otherwise she would not desire. The infant itself is also marked by a lack, since it cannot completely satisfy the mother's desire. In order to fill out what the mother and itself lacks, the infant imagines itself as the phallus that which the mother lacks. With the intervention of the father, however, the law is imposed on the infant by forbidding it access to the mother. That is to say, the law of the father forbids the infant imaging itself as the phallus that the mother lacks. By virtue of the law of the father, from then on, the infant has been introduced into the language, the symbolic order. The advantage of entering the symbolic order is that it has been henceforth able to occupy a position of its own in the society. In other word, henceforth he will obtain a social status and become a man. However, all this is at the cost of being castrated, of giving up the supreme primary pleasure which derives from the unity of the infant and the mother. It is for this reason that Lacan says, "The *objet a* is something from which the subject, in order to constitute itself; has separated itself off as organ. This serves as a symbol of the lack, that is to say, of the phallus, not as such, but in so far as it is lacking. It must, therefore, be an object that is, firstly, separable and, secondly, that has some relation to the lack."[16] Speaking in this sense, the *objet a* is the phallus, the primary pleasure.

In so far as the primary pleasure is indispensable for the subject, thus he will spare no effort to seize it. However, this struggle is doomed to failure for a fundamental reason: the subject in the symbolic order has no means but language to seize or capture the primary pleasure he craves for, but the language as the absolute other is itself in any case marked by lack. That is to say, there is always something that is absolutely beyond the power of the language.

[15] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, P83.
[16] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p103.

It is also for this reason that Lacan defines the desire as follow: "Desire begins to take shape in the margin in which demand becomes separated from need"[17] Or as Dylan Evans put it, desire is thus the surplus produced by the articulation of need in demand.

According to Lacan, the *objet a* is something from which the subject has separated and has to separate itself off as organ in order to constitute itself. As regards psychoanalysis, this something from which the subject has to separate itself off is of course the phallus. *The objet a* is the symbol of the phallus. What we should always keep in mind is, however, that the phallus is neither an object nor the penis as the genital organ, it is the signifier of the desire of the Other. Moreover, what mostly characterizes the phallus as a signifier is that it is an empty signifier. That is to say, the signifier of the phallus has no corresponsive signified. According to the modern linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure, a sign is composed of a couple of the signifier and the signified, and there will necessarily be a signified where there is a signifier. So, why does the signifier of the phallus have no corresponsive signified? Why is it an empty signifier, or in terms of Lacan, a pure signifier?

The answer lies in the fact that what the phallus signifies is that which can satisfy the desire of the subject once and for all. As put it in preceding statements, it is impossible for the subject to seize an object of this sort because it has already been cut off forever by the language. It is for this reason that we have such truth as that desire has no rest or that greed is hard to satisfy.

The two most challenging aspects of the *objet a* are its liminal character and retroactive character. As regards the former, "First, the *objet a* is strangely suspended between the subject and the other, belonging to both and neither. It simultaneously designates what is most other in the other, yet is intimately bound up with subject itself."[18] That is to say, the *objet a* is a paradoxical thing since it is both inner and outer with respect to the subject. It is inner in that it is the very phallus which the subject lacks and around which all the drives of the subject move. It is outer in that the phallus that the subject lacks is actually the phallus that the other lacks. In other word, it is only because the Other wants this phallus that the subject wants it. It is perhaps in order to stress this oddity that Lacan coined the phrase "extimate" by reference to "intimate". It is on this basis that we can understand why the gaze always strangely belongs to both the subject and the other.

The retroactivity is the second elusive character of the *objet a*. What is at stake in this effect of retroaction is nothing but the constitution of the subject itself. According to the common sense, the subject who desires is absolutely prior to the object that is desired for. On the contrary, Lacan insists on the priority of the desired object to the desiring subject. That is to say, the *objet a* is not the object of the desire of the subject but the cause of it. What does this mean if not that the *objet a* is the cause of the subject? It is for this reason that Lacan, in contradiction to Satre, argues that the gaze intervenes not so much to annihilate the subject as to sustain, to constitute it in a function of desire. As regards the paradoxical character of the *objet a*, Boothby has a wonderful summary as follows: "The object that functions as the cause of desire is a primordially lost or essentially lacking object, a profoundly negative object which is absent before it can be present, whose nonbeing precedes its being."[19]

To sum up, the *objet a* is both inner and outer, both indispensable and impossible, both derives from symbolization and resists symbolization. It is a perfect incarnation of paradox. However unthinkable it is, what we must bear in mind is its relation to the desire, because it is around this absent center that the drives revolve. Besides the elusive character of the *objet a*, there is another fact that makes it very hard to understand, that is, at the mention of *objet a*, we tend to associate it with some concrete objects rather than the nearly abstract impalpable gaze. However, "Although both the gaze and the voice are intangible and abstract, they are palpably material in their effects and in the associations they catalyze in the infant."[20] In short, it is not impossible for us to break through this barrier if only we take hold of the relation of it to the desire. What we must always bear in mind is that the gaze is the *objet a* in the scopic field. The *objet which* provokes the desire has always slipped away from the consciousness without being perceived. To put it briefly, the gaze is rather screened by the eye than repressed. It is for this reason that Lacan stresses that, in so far as our relation to things is constituted by the way of vision, the gaze slips away from the consciousness from stage to stage.

[17] Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits*, trans. Bruce Fink, New York: Norton, 2006,p311.
[18] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p160.
[19] Richard Boothby, "Figurations of the *Objet a*", in *Jacques Lacan: Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory (II)*, 161.
[20] Ellie Ragland, *Lacan and the Philosophy of Psychoanalysis*, Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987, 44.

However, the eye won't get the better of the gaze all the time since the latter will appear suddenly yet disappear instantaneously in dreams, symptoms, and slips of the tongue and bungled actions.

In order to illustrate the gaze, Lacan narrates an autobiographical story that tells about his youthful encounter with a Breton fisherman: In his early twenties, being a young bourgeois intellectual, Lacan wanted desperately to get away from his reality to see something different, throwing himself into something practical. One day, he was on a small boat with a few people from a family of fishermen. As they were waiting for the moment to pull in the nets, an individual known as Petit-Jean pointed out to him something floating on the surface of the waves. It was a small sardine can. It glittered in the sun. And Petit-Jean said to him, "*You see that can? Do you see it? Well it doesn't see you.*" Petit-Jean found this incident highly amusing whereas Lacan less so. Emerged herein an interesting question that provoked Lacan to think about it deeply: "Why did I find it less amusing than he?" after some thought he made a conclusion as follows:

The point of this little story, as it had occurred to my partner, the fact that he found it so funny and I less so, derives from the fact that, if I am told a story like that one, it is because I, at that moment—as I appeared to those fellows who were earning their livings with great difficulty, in the struggle with what for them was a pitiless nature—looked like nothing on earth. In short, I was rather out of place in the picture. And it was because I felt this that I was not terribly amused at hearing myself addressed in this humorous, ironical way.[21]

The value of this story lies in the fact that it bears witness to the gaze that is usually veiled by the eye. As Lacan pointed out in preceding statements, in everyday life, we are always looking without knowledge that we are being looked at from all sides. In this story, however, as far as Lacan is concerned, he, as a subject indulged in looking, was suddenly aware that sardine can is looking at him all the time. How could it happen so? To this question replies Henry Krips as follows: "the scrutiny that the young Lacan directs outwardly at his surroundings encounters resistance from the blinding light reflected by the tin can; and as a result the scrutiny 'turns around', that is, reflexively turns back upon Lacan, at the same time as it switches from active to passive voice – from 'I look' to 'I am looked at'. To put it in general terms, because it encounters an uncomfortable resistance, a conscious look that is directed outwards transforms into a self-consciousness that returns to its agent as anxiety in relation to the scrutiny of an externalized anonymous other."[22] So, it is by virtue of the blinding light reflected by the tin can that Lacan all of a sudden began to be aware that he was always under the gaze of the other. As a result, the gaze made it possible for him, a bourgeois intellectual who will not take care of creature comforts, to think about his identity in relation to those fishermen who were earning their livings with great difficulty thus creating in him a palpable and excessive anxiety, even shame. It is because of this strong contrast between him and those fishermen which is aroused by the gaze that lacan found it less amusing than the fisherman.

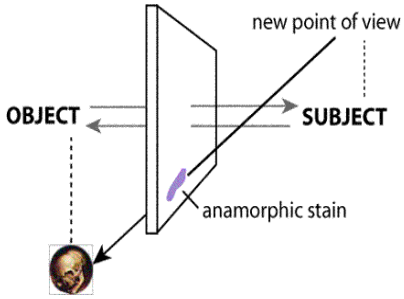
No doubt, it is in order to illuminate the decisive role of the eccentric gaze in the subject that Lacan tells this story. At first thought it seems that what is at stake here has nothing to do with the desire, but it is not---since the anxiety, even shame arises herein stands the closest relation to the desire of the Other. As far as psychoanalysis is concerned, the anxiety or the shame has in any case an immediate yet elusive relation to the desire of the other. Why do we feel anxiety if not because we fail to make certain the desire of the other? Why do we feel shame if not because we fail to satisfy the desire of the other?

As Lacan put it, in the so-called waking state, in the field of the conscious- ness, the subject always abandons himself to seeing, seeing only from one point, without being aware that he is looked at from all sides. However, it is because the gaze, the being-looked-from-all-sides is omnipresent and everywhere that it is paradoxically elided, excluded from the field of the consciousness. More- over, according to Lacan, the seeing of the subject that looks like active is actually at the mercy of the gaze of the Other---we have to look at ourselves and the world in accordance with the gaze of the Other, we have to conduct and mold ourselves in the light of the gaze of the Other. "What determines me, at the most profound level, in the visible, is the gaze that is outside."[23]However, this is only possible on condition that the gaze is veiled. Maybe it is in this sense that Lacan points out that it is only a fantasy if we, facing to a mirror, like Valery's young Parque, believe what is happening is that I am seeing myself seeing myself. The truth is: standing before a mirror, it is not that I am seeing myself seeing myself but that the Other is seeing myself seeing myself.

[21] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p.96.
[22] Henry Krips, "The Politics of the Gaze: Foucault, Lacan and Žižek", *Culture Unbound*, 2010, Volume 2, 93.
[23] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p106.

Take for example those women who spend much time everyday in adorning themselves before a mirror, every laugh and sigh, every dab at the face, every stroke at the eyebrow, every motion and movement, all without exception are practiced in the light of the other. If the feminist feels harmed by this statement, I will appease them by adding that it is the same case for the man. A gentleman is ready to die for his friends, as a woman beautifies herself for the man who likes her. What can we find in this old Chinese adage if not the essential function of the gaze? However, we will make a mistake if we think accordingly the gaze is completely negative. As Ellie Ragland point out in one of her early works, "In the most extreme case, one could even view autism as the attempt to win approval by self-annihilation, whose symptom often appears as a refusal of the gaze, as well as of the proper name."[24]

What the sardine can is in this case? According to Lacan, it is in essence a stain. "If the function of the stain is recognized in its autonomy and identified with that of the gaze, we can seek its track, its thread, its trace, at every stage of the constitution of the world, in the scopic field."[25] Maybe it is not strange that most of readers will feel much confused about this metaphor. In order to illuminate further this argument, Lacan refers us to Hans Holbein's *Ambassadors*. This picture depicts two wealthy, educated and powerful young men. The objects on the upper shelf include a celestial globe, a portable sundial and various other instruments used for understanding the heavens and measuring time. Among the objects on the lower shelf is a lute, a case of flutes, a hymn book, a book of arithmetic and a terrestrial globe. The strangest thing in this picture is the brown-gray smear near the bottom of the painting. When we look at the picture in a direct frontal way, it appears as a meaningless stain. However, when we change our position and look at the picture askew, that is, from a point just above the top-right corner, it is revealed to be a very realistic human skull. Accordingly, the anamorphosis is very helpful for Lacan to demonstrate why the gaze is always elided or sliding away from the consciousness. The anamorphosis is an excellent metaphor of the gaze as *objet a* in the scopic field. "This is *objet a*: an entity that has no substantial consistency, which is in itself 'nothing but confusion,' and which acquires a definite shape only when looked upon from a standpoint distorted by the subject's desires and fears …*objet a* is the strange object which is nothing but the inscription of the subject itself into the field of objects, in the guise of a stain which acquires form only when part of this field is anamorphically distorted by the subject's desire."[26]

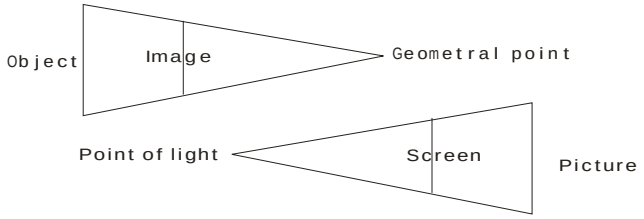


The gaze is no more visible from normal perspective than the fake of the *objet a* is understandable under normal conditions. The importance of a fetish to a pervert is unthinkable unless we take correctly his desire into account, as the stain is unreadable unless we look at it from a standpoint distorted by the subject's desires. Then, the special value of the anamorphosis or the stain lies in that it makes it easy to provoke the desire of the subject and no sooner is the desire provoked than the subject falls under the gaze of the Other. As far as *the Ambassadors* is concerned, the Other is none other than the Death. In short, Facing a picture with a stain, usually, we cannot help wondering what it is or what it veils. It is at this moment that the gaze emerges. Speaking strictly, there is nothing but will look at you if only you look long at it. So it is no wonder that Nietzsche says, "if thou gaze long into an abyss, the abyss will also gaze into thee."[27] As regards *Ambassadors,* once he begins to wonder what the stain is, the beholder could not stand at an aloof distance from the picture any more. From now on, he has been involved in it profoundly. Now, it seems that the skull is speaking ironically: it is not that you are looking at me but I am looking at you. Of course, that Lacan refers to this picture is not in order to explain it but to elucidate how the external gaze has always played internally a crucial role in the subject.

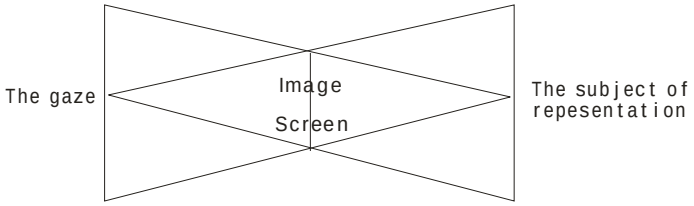
[24] Ellie Ragland, *Essays on the Pleasures of Death*, New York: Routledge Press, 1995, 129.
[25] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p74.
[26] Slavoj Zizek, "Troubles with the Real: Lacan as a Viewer of Alien".—I get this article online.
[27] Friedrich Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil, trans. Helen Zimmern, NY: Tribeca Books,2011, 91.

The Picture and the Gaze

As regards psychoanalysis, the most important function of the eye is to screen, veil the gaze. The question we must answer is how it does this? For the sake of this answer, Lacan provides for us two schemas. Let us take a look at the first one:



The left upper triangular bears witness to the functioning of the eye: at the geometral point stands the subject of the representation, on the left hand line is situated the object which the subject looks at, and the image of the object is on the middle line. On the other hand, the right lower triangular bears witness to the functioning of the gaze: at the point of light stands the other/gaze, on the right hand is situated the picture of the subject of representation, and the eye as the screen is situated on the middle line. However, these two systems is not separate each other but superimposed, that is to say, they take their courses simultaneously. So we have Lacan's second optic schema and we'd better refer to his own interpretation:



The first is that which, in the geometral field, puts in our place the subject of the representation and the second is that which turns me into a picture. On the right-hand line is situated, then, the apex of the first triangle, the point of the geometral subject, and it is on that line that I, too, turn myself into a picture under the gaze, which is inscribed at the apex of the second triangle. The two triangles are here superimposed, as in fact they are in the functioning of the scopic register.[28]

Now it is very clear that not only the object but also the subject itself is turned into a picture by virtue of the eye as screen. Under the gaze of the other, the subject is turned into a picture. By doing so, however, the gaze itself is screened by the eye. I am a picture, says Lacan. We must have surprised at this statement without exception. However, it doesn't seem so surprising as it is at first glance. As regards psychoanalysis, isn't the I, the subject a picture? Aren't all the efforts that I have made to shape me in light of the gaze of the other? For the sake of the gaze of the Other, I design elaborately my hair style, take good care of my skin color, choose carefully my clothe. In a word, I do my best to make all my actions and movements, all my laugh and sigh in light of the gaze to please the other. It is in this sense that Lacan says as follows:

I must, to begin with, insist on the following: in the scopic field, the gaze is outside, I am looked at, that is to say, I am a picture. This is the function that is found at the heart of the institution of the subject in the visible. What determines me, at the most profound level, in the visible, is the gaze that is outside. It is through the gaze that I enter light and it is from the gaze that I receive its effects. Hence it comes about that the gaze .is the instrument through which light is embodied and through which—if you will allow me to use a word, as I often do, in a fragmented form—I am photo-graphed.[29]

The most important discovery of psychoanalysis is the split of the subject, the split between the consciousness and the unconsciousness. In the sense of philosophy, it is that between the Cartesian subject and the Lacanian subject. In the field of language, the split is that between the subject of statement and the subject of enunciation. In the scopic field, it is that between the eye and the gaze. To the eye corresponds the subject of representation whereas to the gaze corresponds the *objet a*. In the scopic field, the subject that lives on the level of consciousness is none other than a picture.

[28] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*,pp.105-6.
[29] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p106.

It is from this point that Lacan gives new consideration to mimicry and painting. It is obvious that the capacity for mimicry is not peculiar to human beings, many animals can imitate too. According to Roger Caillois, the mimetic activity can be divided into three type, travesty, camouflage, and intimidation. The travesty can be found in many animals, especially in most birds. The most striking feature of it manifests as the close relationship to sexual lure. However, Lacan reminds us there is some- thing more than sexual aim itself. On the other hand, the intimidation has much to do with the fight, and as the travesty, it also involves the over- valuation that the subject always tries to attain in his appearance. What is at issue is that neither the travesty nor the intimidation has anything to do with imitation. The most typical mimicry is the camouflage found in some of butterflies, lizards and snakes. For example, the chameleon can change its color in response to its local environment at any time, and the Kallima inachus can pretend to be a piece of dead leaf, etc. Why will animals camouflage if not, at first glance, for adaptation to their environment?

However, Lacan predicates all these facts have nothing to do with adaptation. Even in the case of camou- flage, according to Lacan, "It is not a question of harmonizing with the back- ground but, against a mottled background, of becoming mottled."[30] At bottom, "Whenever we are dealing with imitation, we should be careful not to think too quickly of the other who is being imitated."[31] If mimicry has nothing to do with adaptation, then with what it get to do? Why will animals imitate its back- ground? The adaptation is not as reasonable as it looks. In opinion of Lacan, the nature of imitation consists in that it is in order to escape the gaze that the animal inscribes itself into a picture. When an animal camouflages itself by changing its color and shape, "It becomes a stain, it becomes a picture, it is inscribed in the picture. This, strictly speaking, is the origin of mimicry."[32] Consequently, following Roger Caillois, Lacan assures us that the mimicry in wild animal is to some extent similar to what is manifested as painting in the human being. The only difference between the mimicry of animal and the painting of human being lies in: "Only the subject—the human subject, the subject of the desire that is the essence of man—is not, unlike the animal, entirely caught up in this imaginary capture. He maps himself in it. How? In so far as he isolates the function of the screen and plays with it. Man, in effect, knows how to play with the mask as that beyond which there is the gaze. The screen is here the locus of mediation."[33]

To put it bluntly: First, the relationship between the mimicry of animal and the gaze, or escape from the gaze, is no less close than that between the painting of human being and the gaze. Nevertheless, second, man won't be, unlike animal, entirely caught up in this imaginary capture. Last, man has a peculiar capability to sublimate the mimicry into painting art.

As far as psychoanalysis is concerned, in the scopic field, the subject is none other than a picture. It has to be a picture, and the author of this picture is itself. However, there is another author, and the lead author, that is, the Other, or the gaze of the Other. It is for this reason that Lacan gives a new definition of painting: "What is painting? It is obviously not for nothing that we have referred to as picture the function in which the subject has to map himself as such."[34] To put it simply, to paint is to construct a Descatian subject in the scopic field. However, in so far as it is in the context of psychoanalysis that we are talking about this matter, to construct a Descartian subject is nothing other than to annihilate a Lacanian subject. So Lacan has been trying to hammer in this fact: "The mode of my presence in the world is the subject in so far as by reducing itself solely to this certainty of being a subject, it becomes active annihilation"[35] Accordingly, we will say that to paint is to annihilate the Lacanian subject in the scopic field. When someone is engaged in making a picture of him, that is to say, in putting into operation something that has the gaze as its centre, asks Lacan, what is taking place? In general, we are told that the artist wishes to be a subject. Therefore, the most striking feature peculiar to art of painting seems that, in the painting work, it is as subject, as gaze that the artist intends to impose himself on us. This is true for the Descartian subject, whereas for the Lacanian subject, the converse is true. That is to say, what is happening here is the annihilation of the subject. Consequently, the function of the picture is identical to that of the eye: to screen, veil, block the gaze. As regards this question, we'd better refer to Lacan's own explanation:

[30] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p99.
[31] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p100.
[32] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p99.
[33]Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p107.
[34] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p100.
[35] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p81.

The function of the picture—in relation to the person to whom the painter, literally, offers his picture to be seen—has a relation with the gaze. This relation is not, as it might at first seem, that of being a trap for the gaze. It might be thought that, like the actor, the painter wishes to be looked at. I do not think so. I think there is a relation with the gaze of the spectator, but that it is more complex. 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! He gives something for the eye to feed on, but he invites the person to whom this picture is presented to lay down his gaze there as one lays down one's weapons. This is the pacifying Apollonian effect of painting. Something is given not so much to the gaze as to the eye, something that involves the abandonment, the laying down, of the gaze. [36]

We can summarize two points in this paragraph. Firstly, the function of the picture, except for the expressionist paintings, has always stood to some extent a relation to the gaze. Looking at a picture, even those most short of the gaze, in which any representation of the human feature is absent, such as the Chinese landscape painting, we will always see in the end something so specific to its painter that we will feel the presence of the gaze. More important, unlike the actor, it is not for the sake of setting a trap for the gaze but of taming or subduing the gaze of the Other that the painter takes up his brush. How can he do this? He achieves it by giving something for the eye to feed on, thus making the spectator lay down his gaze as lay down his weapons. Why must the painter tame the gaze? Because the gaze as the *objet a* is something from which the subject desires to escape. The subject must keep a safe distance from the gaze, otherwise this glaring beam of light will burn it into ash. Lacan refers to this function of the picture as *dompte-regard* (to tame the gaze) which is achieved by *trompe-l'œil*, that is, by deceiving the eye. Therefore, the essence of the function of the picture is to tame the gaze by deceiving the eye. It is worth noting that the painter deceives not only the spectator's eye lest the Other gaze at himself but also his own eye lest he see the glaring gaze of the Other.

In order to tame the gaze of the spectator ("who must stand in front of his painting"), the painter gives something to feed the spectator's greedy eye. Once the spectator's eye get this something, it will lay down his gaze as lay down his weapons. In order to tame the gaze the painter must deceive the spectator's eye. However, what should the painter do if his purpose is, on the contrary, to deceive the spectator's eye? Nothing but to provoke the gaze of the Other. We will understand this once we can think through the classical tale of Zeuxis and Parrhasios who are both famous painter but don't admire each other. One day, they decide to fight for mastery. Zeuxis takes the lead in finishing his work---he draws some grapes that are so lifelike that some birds are attracted to pick at them. On seeing this, all the spectators think the winner is no doubt Zeuxis, and the latter is also showing the winning attitude. Beyond all expectations, however, Parrhsios wins the game. What does Parrhasios draws? He paints on the wall a veil, a veil so lifelike that Zeuxis, turning towards him said, "well, and now show us what you have painted behind it." Why does Parrhasios triumph over Zeuxis? Zeuxis succeeds in deceiving the birds whereas Parrhasios succeeds in deceiving Zeuxis. However, is it only for this reason that even the smarter Zeuxis, compared to the birds, is fooled that we declare the winner is Parrhasios? No, not so! For Zeuxis, It is by drawing the grapes lifelike that he deceives the birds. But it is not enough for Parrhasios to deceive Zeuxis only by draws the veil lifelike. Why Zeuxis' eye could be deceived? It is not so much because the veil is so lifelike, despite this is very important, it is rather because Parrhasios has succeeded in deceiving Zeuxis into believing there is something behind the veil, thus bringing about some desire in Zeuxis, desire of seeing that which is behind the veil. Actually, there is nothing behind the veil, since the veil itself is the painting. How could Zeuxis be deceived if without the gaze of the *nothing* behind the veil? It is for this reason that Lacan claims the triumph of Parrhasios over Zeuxis is that of the gaze over the eye.

Consequently, as regards the painter, if his purpose is to deceive the spectat- or's eye, the best way is not so much to make the representation as lifelike as possible as deceive the spectator into believing the painting is something else. It is for this reason that Lacan asserts this tale may be helpful in showing us why Plato protests against the illusion of painting. "The point is not that paint- ing gives an illusory equivalence to the object, even if Plato seems to be saying this. The point is that the *trompe-l'œil* of painting pretends to be something other than what it is."[37]

There is always something else, that is, the *objet a*, in every picture except the expressionist. However, unlike Parrhasios, it is not so much to provoke the gaze as tame the gaze that the painter takes up his brush to draw.

[36] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p101.
[37] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p112.

The essence of artistic creation consists in taming the gaze in form of deceiving the eye. Whose eye is to be deceived? Of course, it is the eye of the viewer. Why must the painter deceive his eye? Certainly, it is to prevent the viewer seeing the desire of his own. Thus, the painter provides the viewer with a picture which is at once a lure and a feast for him. Once the viewer begins to enjoy this visual feast, his gaze or the gaze of the Other is laid down. Why will the viewer's eye be deceived if not that in the painting there is something else attractive and satisfying? What is it? It is, of course, the *objet a*. Consequently, we find here a paradox: On the one hand, it is precisely in order to make the viewer lay down his gaze at the *objet a* of the painter that the later provides him a picture. On the other hand, it is only because there is in painting the gaze as *objet the* viewer can be attracted. According to Lacan, the painting is in essence a dialogue between the painter and the *objet a*. Without this knowledge, stopping involuntarily before one picture, we could neither grasp the real motive that makes the painter set about drawing it or the motive that makes us stop involuntarily.

According to Lacan, therefore, the principal function of the painter is some- thing quite different from the organization of the field of representation. More- over, thanks to what Merleau-Ponty has shown with the example of Cezanne, *with those little blues, those little browns, those little whites*, Lacan detects that the painter's brushstrokes are not so much the result of a natural action as that of some gestures. In so far as the function of the painting is rather to tame the gaze in the form of deceiving the eye than play with representation, our first imperative is to remember "that the painter's brushstroke is something in which a movement is terminated."[38] That is to say, the painter's brushstroke is not an act but a gesture. Moreover, "It is by means of gesture that the brushstroke is applied to the canvas."[39] But what is a gesture? "It is certainly something that is done in order to be arrested and suspended."[40] It is worth pointing out that this definition of gesture is to some extent misleading because it tends to suggest that it is the subject who arrests and suspends the movement. As far as the painting is concerned, however, it is not the painter but the other who arrests and suspends the movement. The painter operates under the remote control of the gaze of the other which transforms the painter's movement into a gesture.

If the painting can make the viewer lay down his gaze, it is because there is some desire in the eye of the viewer. Speaking more exactly, it is because, in so far as man's desire is the desire of the other, there is some desire of the other in the eye of the viewer. If painter's brushstroke is essentially a gesture, it is because the gaze of the other arrests it. As regards the gaze of the other, there is no more vivid figure than the eye filled with voracity, the evil eye.

The gaze in itself not only terminates the movement, it freezes it…What is that thrust that time of arrest of the movement? It is simply the fascinatory effect, in that it is a question of dispossessing the evil eye of the gaze, in order to ward it off. The evil eye is the fascinum, it is that which has the effect of arresting movement and, literally, of killing life. At the moment the subject stops, suspending his gesture, he is mortified. The anti-life, anti-movement function of this terminal point is the fascinum, and it is precisely one of the dimensions in which the power of the gaze is exercised directly. [41]

As put in the preceding statements, the gaze of the other is not only something that the subject desires to possess but also something he must ward off. The evil eye as fascinum is nothing but the avatar of the gaze of the Other. Once he really falls under the gaze of the other, not only is his movement arrested and suspended but also his life is killed. In the word of Lacan, he is frozen. When will he be revived and unfrozen if not at the moment of seeing? At the terminal time of the gaze the subject is killed or frozen, whereas at the moment of seeing he will be revived or unfrozen. Why? Because the moment of seeing can suture the imaginary and the symbolic, thus restarting the dialectic of temporal progress that Lacan calls haste, thrust and forward movement.

Lacan's lectures "Of the Gaze" involve not only psychoanalysis but also philosophy, even physiology. Moreover, in order to illuminate the gaze, he employs some tales, allusions and metaphors which are at first glance totally unrelated. Combined his obscure writing style, all these make it very difficult for reader to grasp his theory. In order to have a comprehensive and profound apprehension of his gaze theory, I engage myself in cutting out a path in his very confusing labyrinth of text. I'm not sure to what extent I have achieved this objective. After all, there are still many things yet to be explained. Nevertheless, I presume that this article is to some extent helpful for those interested in this subject.

[38] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p114.
[39] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, pp.114-5.
[40] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p116.
[41] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, pp.117-8.

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