

Excerpts from:

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A Deflection from Distraction
The Subject of Voice

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The personal embarrassment that the i experiences in the midst of an audience in the dark when its work happens on the screen, is just a (minor) reflection of a larger embarrassment that inheres art. The artistic voice that manifests itself in the work of art is embarrassing because it embodies the artistic pretension of a subject that claims that their artistic voice is not only a private mouthing, but a voice of art – and it is not only an artistic voice, but a mouthing of the private.

There are strategies to ease this embarrassment. The first is to deflect from the voice by putting forward an object of speech – the object that (an) art (work) seems to address or speak about. The second strategy escapes into a juxtaposition of the embarrassment, exposing that the artistic voice is so embarrassing that the one who produces it can handle the embarrassment only with (self)irony. By pointing to the embarrassment by taking a distance to it irony eliminates anything else (but the embarrassment) and is consequently nonsensical and apolitical because it disables any position to speak from, the basic condition of a statement.

We tried neither to deflect from our voice nor to make fun of it, but to accept it as our subject. The attempt to untie the image from what it shows will lead us to the act of seeing, or more generally, it will lead us from a representational regime of art to an aesthetic regime of art. But first we will take a closer look at some film works:

Observations of specific moments and characters in neorealist films, such as Antonioni's *L'Avventura* and *Professione: Reporter*, or more recently Angela Schanelec's *Marseille*, lead us to describe them as 'dis-tracting'. What we term dis-tracting is described by three interrelating main features marking these shots: distance, evading or shifting a center and idle periods.

The "dis-" in dis-traction refers to both distance *and* to distraction, *from* the English "-traction" (which relates to pulling towards or from a center or poles) *towards* a meaning derived with the German *zer-streuen*: scattering (this relates to dispersing in different directions without a center or poles). These moments often operate at a distance and evade a center, which is to say they don't serve the principle of central perspective dominating classical cinema with, for instance, a main character or climax as vanishing point. Although two of the three films mentioned above clearly employ a central figure, all these figures are experiencing a crisis of identity, suffering from existential alienation. They are driven by a directionless desire to leave or disappear from their present life (as a central figure).

In *Professione: Reporter*, the character David Locke's attempt to take on someone else's identity resolves in his death. Citing *Professione: Reporter*, Deleuze describes Antonioni's figures as "suffering less from the absence of another than from their absence from themselves" (Deleuze, 2000, p.9).¹ As does Sophie, who doesn't literally disappear from her present life – although her trips to Marseille are rather escape attempts than vacations – but rather seems not to have a life, being absent from herself as well as absent from the film: the film follows her, circles around her, rambles through her social environment, but she permanently slips from the film (and from the viewer).

A Journalist from *The Hollywood Reporter*, recalling the audience reaction to *L'Avventura*'s first screening in Cannes, notes that distance is not only established by actual distance between camera and object:

With a pretentious shooting style and obscure narrative whose characters never get introduced and key moments occur off screen, "Marseille" by German director Angela Schanelec fails to engage the viewer at any level. (...) [the] story's non-resolution and lack of clarity leaves a viewer with little to chew over other than why the film was ever made. Lack of any music, lighter moments or interesting camera angles only further distances the viewer from the film. (Honeycutt, 2005, www.hollywoodreporter.com)

Indeed, rare character-bound focalizations and long shots that expand in time – often to display the image of a scene already before the figure enters the frame – do not invite a viewer to identify with the gaze of the camera. They do not employ a human gaze to mediate and veil the camera, but rather highlight the border between auditorium and screen or stage. *Marseille* literally points to the distance established by the classical theatre of the picture stage, showing the full-length repetition of a theatre rehearsal, which is interrupted by the invisible voice of the director. Like *L'Avventura*, the takes of *Marseille*

¹ "ils souffrent moins de l'absence d'un autre que d'une absence à eux-mêmes" (Deleuze, 2005, site.voila.fr/cineclub); the inexact german translation by Klaus Englert "sie leiden weniger unter der Abwesenheit eines anderen als vielmehr unter einem mangelnden Bezug zu sich selbst" adds the aspect of ‚lack' to the ‚absence' which will come into play in the following (Deleuze, 1999, p.21).

stay at a reporting distance and last much longer than is necessary to tell what they show. At the end of the film Sophie gets involved in a mysterious crime that the film omits. We only see her interrogation at a police station: “She sits, then she talks, then she does not talk for half a minute. She is asked what it is she photographs. The streets, she says after what seems a very long time.” (Knörer, 2005, www.jump-cut.de). Sophie’s confusion (not knowing how to answer) when asked about the subject of her photographs might give a signal to Honeycutt’s confusion about why this film was ever made. Viewers of *Marseille* don’t get involved in what they see but rather in their own activity of watching and seeing.

L’Avventura radically breaks central perspective, neither Claudia nor Sandro, who’s relationship we follow till the end of the film, convincingly claim the central role – they remain in the shadow of Anna’s absence. The figures in *L’Avventura* are driven by scattering forces, as illustrated in the scene on the island where all the characters disperse to search for Anna, who was introduced in the beginning of the film as a central character but disappears on the island soon after. This scene paints an image of the whole film through which the figures float like disconnected islands without moorings.

The lack of a center foregrounds on the plot level by Anna’s unsolved disappearance that gives her an almost magical presence through her absence for the rest of the film. Her absence becomes the omnipresent image of a missing center that is filled up with an accumulation of idle periods for which the film becomes a prime example in film history.

What catches our attention in *L’Avventura* is a slight camera movement in the take where Claudia and Sandro leave the uninhabited village Noto, where they have gone to search Anna but only find an image of inanimate emptiness. From the distant perspective of a narrow street in the shadow we see a car on a sunny square in front of a concrete cube next to a modern church missing the bell in its tower. Between the concrete building and the façade of the last house left of the street we are given a little vista on the surrounding mountainous scenery. The shot lasts about 38 seconds: after the first two or three seconds we see Claudia and Sandro walk to the car, get in, reverse and disappear behind the last house on the left at about second 18. The remaining 20 seconds show nothing we haven’t already seen, interrupted once for two or three seconds where we briefly see the car crossing the vista.



00:00



03:15



17:00



25:00



30:11



38:04

Also many of the previous takes of that scene last longer than required to recount the history of Claudia and Sandro, but their overlong duration can be read to serve the narrative account in one or another descriptive way: to locate the scene, to give graphical descriptions of the architecture and the emptiness of the village, descriptions of the states of Sandro and Claudia or even to show that nothing happens by displaying time. But the unspectacularity of this last image of the scene doesn't obviously reveal any other narrative purpose than to say: 'they get into the car and leave'. Still more than half of the time of this take is used to tell something else than their leaving, that is nothing really or at least something which is not part of a narrative mode of telling.

It is conspicuous that the camera takes a voyeuristic position in the darker street as if hiding in the shadow. The perspective from the street with buildings on both sides (later in the shot a dark hill and bushes take over the function of blocking the view of the building on the right) reduce the space of narrative action, the sunny square with the car, to a cut out in the size of less than a quarter of the frame in the beginning of the shot that grows to more than half of the frame towards the end when the action has long since passed. The building on the left becomes especially active in blocking the view onto the street where we believe the car has reversed. A view seconds after the beginning of the take the camera starts to move forward towards the space where the action had taken place. Now at the latest the shot ceases to be an objective viewpoint/report as we got used to with previous images, the movement emphasises the subjective perspective, both draw the attention to the camera and the one seeing, the view and the owner of the view.

Comparing eye with mouth a subjective view can be seen as the visual equivalent of direct speech: we hear that they leave through the direct speech of the speaking subject or we see them leave through the eyes of the seeing subject. Indeed, as we have noticed before, more than half of the shot doesn't show anything, but it speaks: action has shifted its mode from an action being shown (or told) to an action of seeing (or speaking). Here direct speech becomes the action itself, but something is uncomfortably wrong: it misses the subject who speaks. We suddenly see with someone's eyes, but we don't know who these eyes belong to, where they come from. This uncertainty is never solved nor developed further - like in horror films where invisible (because seeing) monsters are created by employing an economy of the gaze - we never come back to the village. Solving it for instance by showing at some point another figure, say Anna, inhabiting the village would complete the sentence by delivering the subject post festum. In this virtual case the subjective view would be embedded in a narrative mode of telling, which would *show* us, using direct speech, that Anna had seen Sandro and Claudia leave.

But this is not the case here - the subject is lacking, though at the same time it is called upon by that it is, paradoxically, speaking. What is called upon is a subject without a body, whose presence is called into being through its voice, its view. Direct speech inhabits the village with a presence that points to an absence - absence becomes visible, so to speak. But what is absent? On a narrative layer Anna's omnipresent absence immediately comes to our mind, tempting us to think that it is the idea of Anna who speaks (in place of her lack). Although it might be true there is no proof for such an interpretation and, since we have already left the narrative mode by the shift from an action being shown to an action of speaking, this will not satisfy us.

Let's step aside for a moment and look at Kaja Silverman's text on suture. We have to keep in mind that 'speaking subject' here refers to the subject on the side of production, that is the camera, light, editing ect., whereas a fictional character is referred to as the 'subject of speech'. Discussing the shot/reverse shot formation she shows how classical cinema veils the speaking subject from the viewing subject by placing the subject of speech as a mediator between them: "the subject of the speech seems to be the speaking subject, or to state it differently, the gaze which directs our look seems to belong to a fictional character rather than to the camera" (Silverman, 1983, p.202).

Later she examines the sequence in *Psycho* where we see Marion, after she had been entrusted with \$40,000 to bring it to the bank, in her bedroom packing her suitcase, the (not yet stolen) money is lying on the bed:

The privileged object in the shot/reverse shot formations which punctuate the second half of this episode is the packet of money, not Marion. Indeed, the entire spacial field is defined in relation to that spot on the bed where the \$40,000 lies; positioned in front of it, we look for a long time at the contents of the room before its human inhabitant ever casts a significant glance at anything. By privileging the point of view of an inanimate object, Hitchcock makes us aware of what Oudart would call the „Absent One“ – i.e. of the speaking subject. Our relationship with the camera remains unmediated, „unsoftened“ by the intervention of a human gaze. (Silverman, 1983, p.208)

The sequence is very different from our shot in *L'Avventura*: the money is never provided with the power of direct speech, as is the case with the unknown subject in the *L'Avventura* shot. In fact the entire sequence in *Psycho* is focalized partly by Marion, mostly by an external focalizer, which "privileges" the point of view of the money by that the camera is positioned in front of it in those shots. In addition to this privilege the external focalizer directly addresses the money when the camera "moves backward to reveal a corner of the bed not previously exposed, on which lies the envelope of the stolen money" (Silverman, 1983, p.207) and then zooms in on the money. In the following shots it is repeatedly indirectly (internally) addressed by the looks of Marion in the shot/reverse shot formations. From this prospect the entire sequence can be read as a sort of apostrophe to the money. Apostrophe is a rhetorical figure where the speaker turns away from the audience and directly addresses an inanimate object and that way attributes animation to the object - it attempts to make the object potentially responsive, to turn it into a virtual subject. It is the co action of privileging the money's point of view and of addressing the money, both externally and internally, that associates it "with a transcendental gaze, a gaze which exceeds Marion's, and that can see her without ever being seen" (Silverman, 1983, p.208).

Despite their almost oppositional linguistic operations both sequences in *Psycho* and in *L'Avventura* achieve a similar effect on the relationship between camera and viewer. As Silverman has shown in this sequence of *Psycho* the speaking subject, the camera doesn't speak anymore through a mediating human gaze, it speaks 'directly' and in so doing makes aware of itself as the absent one. Our shot in *L'Avventura* does the opposite, and yet something similar: it uses the potential of the camera to become absorbed by a human gaze within the level of fiction in order to invert the very operation of veiling the speaking subject from the viewer: the camera doesn't 'hide' behind a human gaze, but a (potential)

human gaze hides behind the camera, or, as Silverman would answer the question we posed above: the speaking subject seems to be the subject of the speech.

poetic presence

Having another look at our shot from the perspective of focalization we can summarise that it has shifted from an external focalizer that gives objective reports to an internal focalizer that gives a subjective view. Internal focalization is usually bound to a fictional character, the subject of speech. We have seen that the lack of a subject of speech, that of the direct speech, points to the absence of the speaking subject. By that the subject of the direct speech consequently coincides with the internal focalizer, its lack is not only a vector pointing to the camera, the speaking subject, but it is at the same time bound to the level of fiction, to the spoken text of which the fictional character is part of. This means that the lack points at the same time to an invisible fictional character and to the camera; it forms a juncture between camera and invisible fictional character.

Through this double binding the camera is bound, via the lack as a juncture to an invisible fictional character, to the level of fiction. But the camera does not simply insert itself as an invisible character into the level of fiction, instead in the lack, in the juncture, another subject emerges which is neither purely part of the production side (camera) nor purely part of the fictional level (invisible fictional character), but which has access to both, in that it emerges out of a focalizing act which connects the camera with the fiction.

Maybe this becomes more clear if we turn around the temporal vector of character-bound focalization and by that undermine the hierarchy between focalizer and focalized object: the image given through a focalizing character is only third, second is a subject created through the act of focalizing itself, and this action presupposes the image that is focalized as a first. Or, if we turn the order around: first there is the image, then the subject creates itself through the act of focalizing, seeing the image, and then there appears the image through the focalization of the airborne subject.

This is exactly what is demonstrated in the shot from *L Avventura* we discussed earlier: first we see an image of Sandro and Claudia leaving, then through the perspective and movement of the camera an internal focalizer and consequently a subject is created, and then we see the focalized image with the eyes of the airborne subject. What becomes active here is neither a focalizing character or camera nor a focalized object or image, but the relationship between them, i.e. focalizing itself becomes active - that which makes the subject a subject has become the subject. This might sound a bit complicated, but in its paradoxical (non) existence the airborne subject resembles very much the subject which inhabits planet earth, that, in order to be, permanently reassures itself in that it speaks, or sees, or more generally, acts.

act of seeing

The shift from an action being shown to an action of speaking or writing, or more generally, the shift from a narrative mode of telling to a poetic mode of telling, made us think it would be less important what the images depict or show than how they operate linguistically. (...) We ran into several blind-allees that were still attached to an idea of the image as representation of what it shows, we were still searching for actors within the

image before we realized that the image itself would become the actor. This implies that our images had to be non- or less transparent images, we don't look through the image onto what it represents, but first and foremost we see the image itself: an image that represents an image.

This is the case in two photographs: *The Blind Woman* shows a light-coloured dressed woman with a black dog on a lead climbing down some steps leading to a house. It is night but, except for the upper left corner, the image is extremely bright, because a flashlight which is positioned very close to the camera lights the scenery and overexposes the woman's face and cloths which lose any detailed structure in the flat white. *Untitled Filmstill #48* shows a woman with a suitcase next to her standing on an empty countryside highway at dawn. She is turned away from the camera while a flash light falls onto her back.

The use of light in both pictures highlights the act of seeing rather than what is seen. The camera and the light, which is a condition of seeing, share the gaze in these images. This gaze becomes the potential threat for the woman in *Untitled Filmstill #48* because it can see her without being seen – she is at its mercy. The photograph demonstrates how an economy of the gaze can create (invisible) committers and (visible) victims. Although the figure of *The Blind Woman* is turned towards the light and the camera, seeing and being seen are organized in a similar way, she is put under the gaze of someone else who she (and we) cannot see, because the strength of that dominating gaze, the intensity of the light erases her eyes. Here the light claims the gaze, it blinds not only the woman but to a certain extent also the camera, when it screens the woman's face from it.



Annika von Hausswloff: The Blind woman



Cindy Sherman: Untitled Filmstill #48

These images, like the shot in *L Avventura*, are addressing not so much what we see (when we look at these images), than seeing itself. In this respect they can be compared to apostrophe that makes its point by troping not on the meaning of a word but on the circuit or situation of communication itself (Culler, 1983, p.135).

(...)

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