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PYGMAIION’S GAZE

“There always was a gaze behind. But—this is the most subtle point—where does this gaze come from?”

— J. Lacan

Although the myth of Pygmalion is well known, let us recall the principal elements of Ovid’s account: Pygmalion, who had never fallen in love with a woman, succeeded in sculpting “in snow-white ivory” the statue of a woman more beautiful than nature had ever made.1 Amazed by the almost corporeal beauty, Pygmalion fell in love with her, so much that he caressed her, held her in his arms, and covered her with kisses. Venus then granted that the “ivory virgin” be transformed into a real virgin, whom he made his spouse.

If the creation of works in the plastic arts has something to do with desire, it is understandable that Pygmalion should have been made the emblematic figure of the artist—at the very least of the plastic artist. Not so much because the work created by art eventually rivals the living reality of a product of nature (there are other myths, such as the story of Zeuxis and Parrhasios, that can embody the identity of the signifier and the signified), but rather because the determining factor in creation here is the artist’s erotic desire for the body which is both his model and the finished product.

Thus, the myth of Pygmalion is not concerned with the classic philosophical problem—principally Platonic—of mimesis (concerning the faithfulness of the copy to its model). Nor is the myth concerned with the modern aesthetic problem of the human body’s ideal beauty. For both are founded upon the absence of desire in the relationship of art to the molded form of the human body. Of course, Plato acknowledged the beauty of another “ivory virgin”: the chryselephantine statue of Athena Parthenos by Phidias;2 but it might have been more for the “pure pleasure” of

1 This article originally appeared as "Le regard de Pygmalion," Savoirs et clinique 7 (2006): 83-94. See Ovid, Metamorphoses, 243-297.
2 Plato, Hippias Major, 290ab.
the ivory’s “pure whiteness” than for the virgin’s beauty itself. The proof is in Socrates’ reply to Hippias, who defined beauty as a beautiful virgin (*parthénos kalé kalon*): by that account, Socrates answered, one might as well say that beauty is “a beautiful mare” or “a beautiful pot.” If one thinks that the distinctive feature of a mare is to be ridden and that within a cooking pot one turns a spoon (which will be the subject of discussion a little later in the text), one can easily guess what Plato’s judgment on aesthetic sublimation would have been . . . Likewise, when Kant affirmed that “the ideal of the beautiful is [ . . .] only to be sought in the human figure,” it was in order to specify right away that this ideal does not allow “any sensuous charm to mingle with the delight in its object.” For Kant, it was unimaginable that an authentic aesthetic judgment could proceed from erotic desire. This is what made it possible for Nietzsche to mock the naïveté of Kant and the Kantians—“the naïveté of a country vicar”—for whom it is possible to “contemplate even statues of female nudes ‘without interest,’” and he added, “The experiences of artists are on this thorny issue ‘more interesting’ and Pygmalion was in any case not necessarily an ‘uneesthetic man.’”

All of this allows us to understand that, in the 17th century, it was possible to name an engraving by Rembrandt *The Statue of Pygmalion*, a print of which is on display in the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Tourcoing (see fig. 1).

What one sees in the engraving is an artist contemplating the body of a female nude, a body as white as ivory. Certainly, nothing permits one to identify this scene with that of Pygmalion, since there is not a single element evoking a sculpting studio; on the contrary, everything in the engraving signals the art of drawing and painting, especially the paper that the seated figure appears to hold on his knees, the canvas resting against the easel, the palm-frond . . . In the museum catalogue, Sophie Raux reports that according to the art historian Emmens, the confusion between the scene represented by the engraving and the legend of Pygmalion results from the fact that the name “Pygmalion” had once applied to vain and boastful artists, a reputation that marked Rembrandt himself. A vanity that, of course, is related to the fact that Pygmalion, in the myth, claims to have produced through art a beauty superior to anything created by nature. The title with which the engraving is displayed in the Tourcoing museum, *Le dessinateur et son modèle*, is therefore undoubtedly more

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1 Plato, *Philebus*, 53ab.
2 Plato, *Hippias Major*, 287e.
3 Plato, *Hippias Major*, 290d.
6 Number 192 in Adam Bartsch’s catalogue (no. 1771 in the Tourcoing museum catalogue). Figure 1 reproduced with permission of Musée des Beaux-Arts de Tourcoing.
Figure 1: Rembrandt, The Painter and his model (around 1639). Collection of Musée des Beaux-Arts de Tourcoing. © Musée des Beaux-Arts de Tourcoing.
fitting for what it portrays; and it is certainly more judicious than the title proposed by Karel Boon in his edition of Rembrandt’s complete engravings: *The Painter Designing Virtue*¹⁰—as if it were necessary to rescue the painting’s obvious indecency by a little moral supplement! For if the scene pictured in the engraving cannot strictly be identified with the Pygmalion legend, it is nevertheless a fact that the young girl, white as the virgin of ivory and flesh, who offers herself to the designer’s gaze does make this painting a kind of allegory—just as the Pygmalion myth is an allegory¹¹—of the enigmatic relationship between an artist and his creation. From this point of view, the formula, *the painter and his model*, has at least the merit of maintaining the indecision regarding the interest that an artist can have toward the naked young woman who presents herself to his gaze.

In fact, in Rembrandt’s engraving, it is impossible to discern the gaze with which the artist looks at his model. There are only a few indefinite lines that mark the placement of the eyes. This is not due to any imperfection of the reprint displayed in the Tourcoing museum; the same imprecision appears in earlier reprints of the engraving. But these earlier editions allow us to grasp the young girl’s physiognomy better; her head slightly turned toward the left reveals a discreetly smiling face. Yet there again, it is impossible to say whether or not the markings represent an eyelid, closed as if to suggest modesty—this modesty would be confirmed by the drape that falls from the young girl’s left arm and conceals her genitals from the artist’s eyes. One thing is sure, however: she does not direct her gaze toward the artist who faces her. In other words, the drawing does not make any gaze explicit. It merely indicates the direction of the artist’s gaze toward his model; and it is only because this model is a female nude that we are permitted to deduce that the artist’s gaze is maintained by a desire similar to that which is believed to have animated Pygmalion’s gaze. Undoubtedly, it is impossible to reduce the scene that the engraving represents to a relationship between two gazes where the onset of a reciprocal desire is at play—as in the theft of desire, recounted by Plato, between the eyes of the lover and the beloved¹²—the advent of a reciprocal desire. The duality of the two represented personnages is not enough to account for the composition of the painting.

Something else is at play here, which concerns the gaze, or rather our gaze above all. For to consider the composition, the spectator’s gaze is caught first by the opposition and the heterogeneity of two planes. The first is the representative plane, the plane

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¹¹ The Pygmalion myth has been read primarily, and for some time, as an allegory for love; it only became an allegory for artistic creation from Rousseau’s version. In Rousseau’s short essay “Pygmalion” (in Complete Works), the statue (called Galathea, etymologically indicating whiteness) miraculously comes alive at the moment when the sculptor, in the complete crisis of his creation despairs of his muse. For this transformation of the myth, see A. Geisler-Szmulewicz, *Le mythe de Pygmalion au XIXe siècle* (Pour une approche de la conscience des mythes), Paris, Honore Champion, 1999, p. 39sqq.

that stages the artist and his model. The clarity of the white dominates to such an extent that it assaults the eyes of the viewer. But it is not the represented scene that is clear or luminous; this clarity is that of the drawing itself that is held together with but a few rapid strokes, sketched out on the white background of the paper, and that requires only an elementary work of engraving—just a few lines left by the burin on the copper. This first plane, the representative plane, is thus made from a few sketches and regrets, lacking both precision in the contours and distinctions between the objects represented (nothing is recognizable in the jumbled lower right of the drawing, and the objects suspended above the artist are not clearly identifiable, even if there seem to be a shield, a scabbard, and a feathered hat, which are found in another of Rembrandt’s drawings, portraying his studio). Only the minimum necessary to signify the scene is present. On the other hand, the second plane suggests, on the part of the engraver, a very elaborate execution in order to obtain the dark color, the denseness of black, the thickness of the shadows, from which only a bust of a woman emerges, resting against what seems to be the corner of a fireplace (some recognize a bust of a child—one may well wonder why—resting against a pedestal). Except for the bust, this background, this backstage (arrière-scène), portrays nothing. The coincidence of these two planes, completely heterogeneous, produces an apparent paradox: from a drawing and engraving point of view, the least worked plane is the representation’s most luminous, the plane of the visible scene; whereas the most worked plane is behind (l’arrière plan), the darker plane, the plane—dare we say—of the autre scène, the one where nothing happens and where, aside from the bust, nothing is represented. But if nothing is accessible in this other scene, it is because it is hidden by the large white canvas at the center of the composition, leaning against the easel. It is this blank canvas, this pure space unsullied by representation, that divides the picture’s two planes and that creates a screen which prevents us from seeing beyond it. Of course, artists have long used the motif of a canvas leaning against an easel, thus forming a screen to the viewer’s gaze; Rembrandt himself made use of this motif in a little painting entitled The Easel.\footnote{Also known as The Painter in his Studio, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.}

But in that case, the screen is formed by the back of the canvas, making it impossible for the viewer to see the painting on the other side. In the engraving under present discussion, however—and this is what accounts for its originality,—it is precisely the recto of the canvas that is seen, it is the visible side of the painting that, being blank, forms a screen to the viewer’s gaze. There is something essential in that engraving that one does not find in the preparatory sketch, where the play of chiaroscuro functions as a means to bring out only the young girl and where the artist almost disappears into the darkened background.\footnote{Rembrandt, The Painter and his Model (1647), British Museum, London.} Between this preparatory drawing and the final engraving, Rembrandt radically modified the structure of his composition; he deliberately chose not to contrast the figure and the background, but two radically distinct planes, separated by the blank canvas.
As such, Rembrandt’s engraving allows us to better understand Lacan’s reflections on the “screen,” which, according to him, is constitutive of all paintings. In his well-known lesson on painting (chapters 8 and 9 of his seminar, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*), Lacan explains that, in every painting, the field where visual perception is at its sharpest is marked precisely by a certain lack, by a certain absence:

Indeed, there is something whose absence can always be observed in a picture—which is not the case in perception. This is the central field, where the separating power of the eye is exercised to the maximum in vision. In every picture, this central field cannot but be absent, and replaced by a hole—a reflection, in short, of the pupil behind which is situated the gaze. Consequently, and in as much as the picture enters into a relation of desire, the place of a central screen is always marked, which is precisely that by which, in front of the picture, I am elided as subject of the geometrical plane.15

It is in this sense that every painting might be qualified as a “trap for the gaze [piège à regard].”16 For, if the viewer-subject, facing the painting, is always called “to map himself as such,”17 to situate his/her own place with respect to the spatial coordinates of the representation (the “geometrical plane”), he/she cannot, however, determine this place; for it is the nature of the painting not to be able to include the subject who is looking at it. The impossibility of assigning a place to the subject corresponds to this “absence,” “hole,” or “screen,” in the painting by which the subject is “elided” from the geometrical plane. This is what allows Lacan to say, “And if I am anything in the picture, it is always in the form of the screen,”18 which is to say that “I” am only present as an absence.

In Rembrandt’s engraving, this screen is completely visible, to such an extent that the representation seems to present it as such, since precisely what the “central field” represents is a panel that masks the background. But this is what accounts for the engraving’s singularity. For it does not seem necessary to focus on that which plays the role of the screen in every representation. So much so that it is not easy to designate the locus that fulfills this function in “every” painting. Moreover, considering all of Lacan’s reflections in the two chapters of the seminar, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, the function of the screen appears not so much an element of the painting as the painting itself. Indeed, the painting—one could really say “every painting”—is itself that which marks the boundary between the representative register, where the optical geometrical space is organized, and that which is beyond (*l’au-delà de*) the representation. But if it is a boundary or a limit,

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painting is also "that which forms the mediation" between what is shown—that is to say, the space of the representation—and what is not shown, what exceeds representation. What is truly unique about Rembrandt’s engraving is that it portrays the function of the screen, at play in every painting, by means of a painting. But in this case the painting thus represented is a painting that [itself] represents nothing, because it is a blank panel, an empty canvas. This blank panel is thus represented as such; it is, with respect to the representative plane, what is untouched by all representation and screens off what is beyond the representation. Anyone who would like to look at the background of the image need only "lay down his gaze there as one lays down one’s weapons": "You want to see? Well, take a look at this." This, that is to say, this blank screen that forbids access to that which is beyond representation (l’au-delà de la représentation).

What is meant by "that which is beyond representation" remains to be explained. If, in Rembrandt’s engraving, this beyond is indeed the composition’s dark and blurry background, if it is this other scene [autre scène] that the blank canvas’s screen hides, then what is the meaning and status of this other scene? Undoubtedly, the expression "other scene" may be understood as the "scene" of the unconscious. But it would not be sufficient to understand it as the hidden scene of repressed, namely sexual, representations. The somewhat unsophisticated psychoanalytic thesis, according to which painting in general is the equivalent of the famous fig-leaf that discreetly covers the sexual organs, would only apply, in Rembrandt’s engraving, to the swathe of cloth that hides the nude girl’s genitalia from the artist’s gaze. It is of course possible to establish a connection with Freud’s remark concerning Medusa’s head, which would bring us back to our Athena Parthenos, since the Medusa’s head figured on the obverse of Athena’s shield—which Rembrandt did not fail to suggest in his painting of Pallas Athena. But if, in the engraving under present consideration, the scene which the blank canvas hides from the viewer’s gaze can be called the other scene, it would mean understanding it as the scene of the Other, in the sense in which Lacan speaks of the "field of the Other" [le champ de l’Autre]. For all that, this scene is not one of unconscious representation because it is devoid of any representation; what it stages [met en scène] is "the void of the Other as such" [le

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22 The painting in question is in the Gulbenkian collection. Also known as Alexander the Great, the decoration on the shield justifies the name Pallas Athena. Note that, in the engraving under consideration as well as the design representing Rembrandt’s studio, the hanging objects appear to be: a shield, a lance, a scabbard . . . However, aside from the dissimilarities between the faces, the different dates of these compositions does not allow the conclusion—and this despite the palm-frond of victory—that the young girl was the model for this Athena.
vide de l’Autre comme tel], in other words, that which, belonging to the Other, can neither be reduced to nor integrated in any representation (although all representation proceeds from it), which is in no way specularizable; in a word: what cannot be shown. Yet, “what cannot be seen,” is the gaze itself, “the split [schize] between the eye and the gaze,” in other words the radical impossibility of reducing gaze to vision (Lacan also speaks, elsewhere, of the “split (schize) between gaze and vision”).

A complete explanation of Lacan’s thesis on the gaze as objet a would exceed the limits of this study, but it is not negligible that his entire reading of the gaze began by taking up Merleau-Ponty’s thesis on the gaze as the invisible that haunts the visible: the gaze is not the visual function; rather it is the invisible gaze that returns from the world toward the subject and thus opens up the space of visibility. It is in this way that the seeing subject is always already seen; and he/she is seeing only insofar as he/she is seen. The gaze as objet a is what supports the subject’s vision without his/her knowing or even perceiving anything about it. In the case of the painting, this gaze is that which comes back to the viewer from the painting and which renders him/her seen. In a way, the viewer’s scopic desire tends to see the invisible gaze that attracts his/her eye toward the canvas—what Lacan calls the “appetite of the eye on the part of the person looking.” But the painting does not show this gaze: the viewer’s eye is caught by and on “something that incites him to ask what is behind it.” And what catches the eye is precisely the screen. The screen, as “locus of mediation,” is both what separates and brings together the plane of the subject or the visual plane and the plane of the Other or the plane of the gaze:

that which forms the mediation from the one to the other, that which is between the two, is something of another nature than geometrical, optical space, something that plays an exactly reverse role, which operates, not because it can be traversed, but on the contrary because it is opaque—I mean the screen.

In Rembrandt’s engraving, this opaque screen is the white panel resting against the easel; that is what catches the viewer’s eye. But for this very reason, this screen gestures toward what it hides: beyond it [au-delà de lui], there is nothing but an indistinct and darkened mass where this invisible gaze that attracts us and allows us

26 For a more precise explanation of Lacan’s lesson on the painting and the gaze as objet a, see Bernard Baas, *L’adoration des bergers, ou de la dignité d’un clair-obscur* (Louvain: Peeters, 1994).
to see, is watching us. It has been said before that the engraving’s originality lies in its explicit and even literal inscription, in the space of representation, of the screen that marks the limits of the representable and which thus constitutes the “mediation” between the representable and the unrepresentable (imprésentable). Thus the white panel is indeed the screen in both senses of the word: both a panel of protection—insofar as it is impenetrable—and of projection—insofar as the unrepresentability (l’imprésentabilité) of the gaze as objet a is made manifest by the absence of any representation.

Yet, since this painting itself, in the representational register, plays on the opposition of the two planes (the luminous plane and the background), it is unsurprising that it stages—represents—the split (schize) between vision and gaze. Indeed, in the composition’s foreground, the artist is contemplating his nude model—his flesh and ivory virgin—and his gaze is stopped by the limit of the visible that is constituted by the swathe of cloth covering the young girls genitalia. But another gaze falls upon him from the painting’s shadowy background: the gaze of the bust, the gaze of this young girl in stone, from whose shoulders falls the material that could veil her. This other gaze, this petrified gaze, is that of the Other, the gaze as objet a. The artist’s gaze proceeds from this hidden gaze and clearly falls on his model, but also comes up against the limit of the visible. This is what Pygmalion can neither see nor understand: he is himself only seeing insofar as he is already being seen.

In this respect, the engraving’s composition brings to light something remarkable: the straight line—perfectly straight—that runs from the artist’s eye to the bust’s eye, passing precisely by the eye of the young girl, as if to signify that the artist, looking at his model, is himself already looked at by this other gaze that comes from beyond that which he is looking at. Without his knowing anything of it, his gaze is caught by the desired object, beyond which another gaze comes to rest upon him, the gaze of the Other that he cannot see and which allows him to see.

The artist’s position in the scene is not negligible as such: of course he is seated; but not seated on the little chair—contrary to the description given in some monographs. Perhaps he is simply squatting, but certainly next to the seat. Now, this empty seat is turned not toward the model but toward the bust. If the artist were seated on this chair, he would see the gaze looking at him. But this is precisely what is not possible. This is why it is important that the chair be empty (what is more, the exact same chair is found in another of Rembrandt’s engravings, The Virgin and Child with a Cat30; there too the seat is empty, and is seen by the enigmatic gaze of a figure in the background of the composition31).

30 Number 63 in Adam Bartsch’s catalogue.

31 On the composition of this engraving, and especially on the gaze, see Baas, 113. It may be the same chair as the one in the drawing of Rembrandt’s studio—but there, it is the model who is seated on it—and in La Sainte Famille, Musée du Louvre—where the Virgin occupies the seat.
Thus, in Rembrandt’s picture, the axis that runs from the artist’s eye to the bust that watches him crosses the axis that runs from the viewer to the darkened background of the composition. The axes’ juncture is at the center of the composition, the screen formed by the blank canvas. For those who are familiar with Lacanian algebra, note that our position as viewers, insofar as, being subjects, we are “elided” from the representative plane, as well as the seated artist’s position, is the position of the subject as $S$ ("the divided subject"); and, for the viewer as for the artist, this elision or subjective destitution obtains from the impossible connection/relationship with the gaze as objet $a$. In both cases, this impossible relationship is marked, in the picture, by the blank screen. That is to say that the screen is the equivalent of the symbol by which Lacan transcribes this impossible relationship: $◊$ ("lozenge"); whence the matheme $S ◊ a$. From the perspective of what it represents, Rembrandt’s picture writes this matheme between the artist’s and the bust’s gaze; and, insofar as it is presented to us, the picture somehow performs what the matheme symbolizes. It is thus possible to schematize this double writing:

The white canvas—the screen of the lozenge—thereby marks, for the artist as well as for the viewer, that which is both barrier and mediation between the seeing subject and the gaze as objet $a$; it marks the limit where the subject’s gaze is stopped so as not to have to sustain the other gaze, the invisible gaze that renders it seeing. In this way, the white panel at the center of the engraving creates a screen between the representative plane and the plane of the "beyond representation." The intersection of the two planes is here signified and performed by the palm frond that, crossing over what is supposed to be the object of contemplation in the represented scene (the young girl), crosses the representative plane and disappears into the background. Thus the frond traces our gaze’s trajectory toward what cannot be seen. In so doing, it visibly doubles the invisible layout that runs, in a straight line, from the artist’s eye to the statue’s eye, passing through the young girl’s gaze—proof that, for Rembrandt himself, the engraving was above all a matter of the eye and the gaze?
Proof, in any case, that the Pygmalion myth, despite its numerous incarnations throughout history—notably in Rousseau\(^\text{32}\) and G.B. Shaw\(^\text{33}\)—cannot be reduced to a dual relationship. Of course, Rembrandt’s engraving is not an illustration, as it were, of the Pygmalion legend. But if it does conserve something of that mythical figure, it is in the sense that the “tableau,” for the viewer as well as for the artist, enters into a relationship with desire. This desire may well seem to proceed only from the subject’s passion for the beautiful object before him—like Pygmalion who could believe that his ivory virgin was alone the cause of his desire; it is nevertheless true that it calls upon, as its true cause—its object-cause—this other gaze, which is both the principle and the end of the scopic impulse, this gaze that one cannot see but which allows something to be shown [	extit{qui est ce qui donne à voir}]:

Modifying the formula I have of desire as unconscious—\textit{man’s desire is the desire of the Other}—I would say that it is a question of a sort of desire on the part of the Other, at the end of which is the showing [\textit{le donner-à-voir}].\(^\text{34}\)

Thanks to Rembrandt for having allowed us to appreciate this \textit{donner-à-voir}.

\(^{32}\) See note 11 above.

\(^{33}\) Shaw’s famous play, and later a musical, \textit{My Fair Lady}. Lacan, who, surprisingly, makes no reference to Pygmalion in any of his works, oral or written, does make an allusion to Shaw’s play: \textit{Le Séminaire}, Livre XIV, La logique du fantasme (lesson of September 30, 1966).