



## Shut your eyes and see!

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From the moment we wake up, we blink our eyes the entire day. We don't even notice it, but without this simple gesture, our blinking, we cannot see. It keeps the mucous membranes of the eye's surface moist. What we see happens in rhythmic gaps between the blinking, that is, we have mere glimpses of it. We don't even realize that we blink, even though we acknowledge it.

Blindness between gaps of sight or sight between gaps of blindness: that is how we see, claims Jacques Derrida in his *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-portrait and other Ruins* (DERRIDA, 2010). Seeing, therefore, complies with the rules of glimpses: what we see is the "in between" and blindness is part of the experience of seeing. In the same book, Derrida says this experience is like traveling beyond the limit while, at the same time, recognizing and establishing new boundaries. This leads to the idea of seeing as recognition but also as discovery.

Hence, I believe seeing is to move beyond recognizable boundaries, as in some kind of memory-becoming game. But how much memory lies on immediate seeing? Is there memory on immediate seeing?

Shut your eyes and see, says James Joyce in *Ulysses*.

Ineluctable modality of the visible: at least that if no more, though through my eyes. (...) Limits of the diaphane. But he adds: in bodies. Then he was aware of them bodies before of them coloured. How? By knocking his sponce against them, sure. Go easy. Bald he was and a millionaire, maestro di color che sanno. Limit of the diaphane in. Why in? Diaphane, adiaphane. If you can put your five fingers through it it is a gate, if not a door. Shut your eyes and see. (JOYCE, 1966, p. 41-42)

Thought through the eyes, in the rhythm between the diaphane and the adiaphane, attuned to see the bodies before. Seeing seems to imply recognizing on the “in between”. But do we see or do we think we see? I believe that both considerations are present in the act of seeing, since seeing also implies not seeing. At some point, amid the blinking, seeing is the memory of what we just lookewd at.

Plato’s cave paradigm (GINSBURG, 2014, p. 223-261) to seeing somehow blinds and limits our thinking on this. There, lucidity and clarification were the conclusion and the purpose of the speleologic experience. However, by accepting the Platonic idea, we close our eyes to the blindness that is inherent to the experience of seeing.

If we take the Derridian definition of experience, we assume that just being in the light isn’t enough to see, but recognizing the limits of the seen made possible by glimpses, amid the moments of blindness, is required. Despite being limiting in a certain way, I’m fond of Robert Morris’s definition of *presentness*. This artist believed in a change to the perception of time. Thus, the artists-sculptors of his generation experienced time as duration, unlike artists-sculptors from the earlier twentieth century. To him, the condition of minimalist sculpture was that of spatial experience, as the perception of space was impregnated in the very nature of the work. And even further: this perception acted as a sort of “mental space”, analogous to the world, but without a location within the body; yet, it would be this virtual space, placeless inside and outside of the body, the one responsible for the consciousness.

The artist based himself on the research of an American psychologist Julian Jaynes<sup>1</sup>, that suggests that subjective consciousness was developed in relation to the linguistic development of human beings. Morris discriminated two different types of spatial perception that are always interrelated in spatial experiences of any nature: the immediate and the memory. The latter is always linked to imagination, fantasy, reflection, which makes it completely different from immediate experience. The memory scenario is made of static images like time *stills* - here is where I point out the limitation in Morris’s *presentness*, namely, the static image or the photography as an “it was”, as the capture of a moment through a single image, as if memory

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1 Julian Jaynes (1920-1997) – American psychologist whose most prominent book *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* elaborates the theory that human beings didn’t have the self-awareness characteristic of consciousness before the development of language. Julian claims that it is resultant of the linguistic development on humans beings.

was a fragment, a ruin, but one belonging to a perfect past. Well, memory is dynamic, fluid, as filmic in its perception as immediate experience. Because it is ruin in its very origin, there's no perfect and structured past in which it takes part on, unified, static – whereas immediate experience happens in movement. The spatial perception is always a product of the relation between the two ways of perceiving space (or, as Morris would rather describe, the binary opposition of the two modes of perception), that is, the flow of what is experienced and the stasis of what is remembered in the processing of imagery. It is a double operation, as is the self. "The self's presentation to itself, a more complex operation involving the extensive use of language as well as imagination, also maintains an opposition between the static and the dynamic" (in FERREIRA, G. et al, 2006, p. 403, translated by Lucas Demps).

Morris also borrows from American philosopher George Herbert Mead<sup>2</sup> the division of the self into the "I" and the "me", the former being the present-time experiencing self and the latter the self reconstituted from various remembered indexes, therefore taking part on the memory and imagination. *I* and *me* can't ever coexist with immediate experience, but accompany each other as particles, pieces. The idea of *presentness* is closely related to this division of the self, as for Morris it is the intimate inseparability of the experience of physical space and to that of a continuously immediate present.

As such, if the real can only be experimented in real time, then a body in motion alters perception as it alters the points of view on the vertex of time, as though it was a focal shift – language, memory, fantasy and reflection don't accompany the immediate experience of space because it only happens in real time, immediate, here and now. However, focal shifts evoke the spatial experience just lived as memory.

Hence, Morris relates the two types of self – *I* and *me* – to the two types of spatial perception, the *I* being the spatial perception of the continuous present, immediate – experience of the space in motion. And the *me* being the retrospective constituent, the lived, memory of what has been or just been. *Me* always establishes a parallel to the *I* in spatial perception even though they never meet. The artist

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2 George Herbert Mead (1863-1931) – American philosopher who, along with William James, Charles Pierce and John Dewey was part of the American philosophical movement *Pragmatism*.

stretches this idea to think about the apprehension of objects in space, since this operation is memory and present time simultaneously: the object is static, as image on memories, regardless of its surroundings.

Morris goes beyond by stating that the perception of space is an *I* type experience that is transmuted to the *me* domain, for memory is its operative element. He justifies it invoking Roland Barthe's words on writing about the self:

I myself am my own symbol, I am the story which happens to me: freewheeling in language, I have nothing to compare myself to; and in this movement, the pronoun of the imaginary, "I", is *impertinent*, the symbolic becomes literally *immediate*... (BARTHES in EAKIN, Paul John, *Touching the World: Reference in Autobiography*, 1992, p. 6).

Demanding physical motion and duration, spatial experience interposes an extension between the two modes – *I* and *me*. The dimension of time prevents them from coinciding. Artistic experiences cease in *me* type experience.

The "Mental Space", as Morris conceived, is a space that doesn't exist as a real physical space; this space with no depth is possibly represented in an object, thereby carrying in it *I* and *me*, its construction and deconstruction, present time and memory, as the aspects of perception change in time accordingly to the spectator's point of view.

Spectator's relation to the work of art is, therefore, a ruin in its origin, due to *presentness* – it is the memory as it is in immediate time<sup>3</sup>. This relation accumulates different times or times of different natures, without ever meeting. Their coincidence is to be in the object, one and another, undecidable.

*Presentness*, as conceived by Morris, isn't a gestalt related experience, that either belongs to the gaze realm or is instant oriented, but a behaviour and temporal experience at a time. Works of art operate the coexistence of both the piece and the viewers space, in a game of multiple points of view possibilities and usage of wide distances and spaces that highlight the importance of time and the premise of subjective aspects in perception. For the artist, those are features that shift

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<sup>3</sup> Although it's not going to be addressed in this article, it might be important to mention the Freudian hypothesis of *bahnung* as the representation of memory elaborated by Jacques Derrida in the text "Freud and the scene of writing".

the works of art to a Baroque sensibility and experience without binding to its imagery: the work that 'stages' *presentness* as a conscious experience, that is, as a first access to spatial experience, which is always I type, is immediately converted in memory schemata – type *me* perception. This way, the experience with the artwork precedes memory imagery. However, despite that, it's not possible to separate experiences/perceptions of I type from *me* type – they never meet, but happen concomitantly, time and image, me and I in a parallel; at the very moment of its occurrence, it is already a ruined image, memory, although it's filled with imagination and residues, marks, spectra.



Frame from the movie *La Jetée*, Chris Marker (1962)

The film *La Jetée* (The Pier), by cinematographer Chris Marker, made in 1962, pushes the *presentness* point – on memory as static images – to the limit, as well as it raises a hypothesis: that photography has always held cinema at its core, even when it was still yet to be invented. After all, a film is a succession of fragments, the frames, i.e., static images that, when projected in sequence, give us an idea of motion.

*La Jetée* is a science-fiction film, created almost completely with photographs – its film print holds just a couple of seconds of image in motion. The main character,

held prisoner during a fictitious third world war that turned the world into an uninhabitable place, is chosen to sleep and dream about his past precisely for his capacity of remembrance (under the surveillance of his keepers even in dreams). Those time travels sought finding alternative energy sources to save a humanity doomed to live underground as a result of the warfare. Marker considers that half of the film we watch is black screen. Between every frame projected through the film print, there is a transition time, black and imperceptible, that only exists within this time in between images. It's not in the film print, nonetheless it's fundamental for seeing any image at all.



Frame from the movie *La Jetée*, Chris Marker (1962)

The structure of the film, with the photograph stills and a couple of seconds of image in motion, is a commentary on seeing and cinema. The most intense memory of the protagonist is a lady that, in an appearance in the middle of the film, stares at the camera and blinks. This image – the only one in motion for the whole 28-minute-long movie – unfolds the metalinguistic game played by Marker through the film, on his understanding of cinema and also as a philosophical commentary on seeing.



Frames from the movie *La Jetée*, Chris Marker (1962)

As in blinking, that switches our vision from seeing and not seeing, the black periods in the film are the condition to a possibility of seeing. When projected, the sequence conforms to a rhythm of blacks and images, just as blinks do to a rhythm composed with the invisible. This corresponds to a species of acoustic and temporal wave identified by Derrida as a supplementary trope: seeing would be like a blind man holding the hands of a seer, supplemented by rhetoric (or rhetoric as otherness). Keeping an attentive gaze like that of a hunter offers no guarantee of a good visibility because we need to blink in order to hold our eyes open.

To see as a hunter, one needs to be in a facing position. For that a certain distance is assumed between what sees and what is seen – distance is the condition to visibility. In the text *Penser à ne pas voir : écrits sur le art du visible*, Derrida points out that human eyes are in the front of the head, facing, seeing the horizon or horizontally. To face something frontally anticipates it. However, the thing itself always escapes, since we can't ever see in totality, we always see through visibility and blindness, through glimpses.

Hence seeing is more a matter of believing on seeing, of faith or the seeing assumption. If the thing itself always escapes, we contemplate a *metaphoricity*<sup>4</sup> of the "real", a sort of "what if" of the thing. Nietzsche claims that the relation of mankind to the world is interdicted from the beginning. He then conceives a relation of man to the world, as if man weaved a web, a hive over the world, as

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4 As Nietzsche builds a relation to the world, he creates the idea of *metaphoricity*, which isn't the rehabilitation of the metaphor and presumes a withdraw, a step aside or even a deflection in order to correspond to the movement of escaping, the game of uncovering veils.

there were veils between thought and truth (in this case, between thought and thing, the object or art experience), so that seeing was like a game of uncovering veils in which there is always another veil keeping this distance, this remoteness to the possibility of visibility. In other words, the *metaphoricity* of the real as a condition of visibility.

As in the book *Memoirs of the Blind: the self portrait and other ruins*, to see that which is obscure it would be necessary more than sight, but touch. To touch the darkness in order to perceive what is there to see. In this book, Derrida discusses the blindness of the draughtsman. At the very moment of drawing, albeit in the presence of the model, the artist needs to withdraw his eyes from the referent and draw from memory. The moment of itself of drawing is blind and impregnated of ruin originally. It is as if the draughtsman could have eyes at the tip of the fingers, almost touching memory to trace the paper. This moment of blindness is not only lived by the draughtsman, but by almost every artist. By the end of the book, the philosopher concludes that the eye isn't ultimately destined to see. The inherent to the eye, or its essence, is the tear, since it is at the moment of the blinding by the water that is revealed the truth of the eye, the revealing blindness.

Only man knows how to see this [voir ça] – that tears and not sight are the essence of the eye. The essence of the eye is proper to man. Contrary to what one believes he knows, the best point of view (and the point of view [point de vue] will have been our theme) is a source point and a watering hole, a water point – which thus comes down to tears. The blindness that opens the eye is not the one that darkens the vision. The revelatory or apocalyptic blindness, the blindness that reveals the very truth of the eyes, would be the gaze veiled by tears. (DERRIDA, 1993, p. 126.)

But this blindness to which Derrida refers isn't just revealed because the tear veils the sight. That is also because, at the very moment of the drawing, when the pencil touches the paper and is just memory, it is ruin. However, that which ruins isn't what lies in front of the one person who looks but the experience itself. It's a ruin filled with spectra, loaded with phantoms that makes a feasible visibility, and for it is of utmost spectrality, it is rhetoric – visibility is apparent at the reverberation of multiple voices.



The act of memory presents itself as the operation of drawing. When the gaze of the draughtsman dives into the deep abyss of the blank paper, that is the chance of the artwork. And what results of this operation, or what returns in the drawing, is the spectra of the invisible, a form of incompleteness since what is seen is the own experience of ruin. Derrida tells us that ruin is memory as a slit upon the eye blocks one from seeing anything, "there is nothing of the totality that is not immediately opened, pierced, or bored through" (DERRIDA).

Shut your eyes and see for blindness and foresight are supplementary. More than confrontation, it is necessary to master the slant gaze, the seeing without sight so that the events can occur. Prior to seeing ourselves being seen, the gaze of the other pervades us uninvited. One must be blind and unaware of being seen so that an unabashed gaze can be set over them. To the blind alone we can set an unashamedly continuous gaze. Yet when not seen by the other, we don't touch them. It's necessary to be seen by this other so you can touch them. But what exactly do we gaze at, the eye or the gaze of the other? And through glimpses, when gazing at the other do we see in blindness or vision? Do we see or do we believe we see?

Perseus needed a ruse when confronting Medusa in order to defeat her. If he looked straight at her, facing her, he would be turned to stone. Through the reflex of his shield he could see her without looking at her thereby allowing him to behead her, slantly. More than a view hypothesis – than believing to see – the Greek hero sought support in an abocular hypothesis, that is, blinded by his shield, what was seen by Perseus was a movement of *différance*. His victory came about through the conquering of the eye by craftiness.

On the ineluctable modality of the visible, on the limits of the diaphane,

– "If you can put your five fingers through it it is a gate, if not a door" (JOYCE, 1966, p. 41-42).

– "I don't know, one has to believe. (...)" (DERRIDA, 1993, p. 129).

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### Filmography

LA Jetée. Director: Chris Marker. Production: Anatole Dauman. Actors: Jean Négroni, Hélène Chatelain, Davos Hanich e others. Script: Chris Marker. Soundtrack: Trevor Duncan. Paris: Argos Films, Radio-Télévision Française (28 min), black and white.