

Assignment 4 Visualising the Other

**"...she is an artist whose medium is other artists."
Jean-Luc Nancy – Heyward, 2016**

"Once there was a mother of
a son. She loved him with a com-
plete devotion.

And she protected him because
she knew how sad and wicked
this world is.

He was of a quiet nature and
rather intelligent but he was
not interested in being loved or pro-
tected because he was interested
in something else.

Consequently at an early age he
slammed the door and never
came back.

Later on she died but he did not
know it.

He Disappeared into Complete Silence, Louise Bourgeois, 1947

Approximate Word Count

Without quotes 2030

With quotes 2650

Contents

List of Illustrations	3
Introduction	5
The Male Gaze	6
A Multidirectional Mirror Stage	7
Collective Authorship	10
Muse Appropriation	13
Conclusion	14
Bibliography & References	15
Appendix	17
Reflection	18

List of Images

Page

1. Phillipe Bazin, 1997, Paris	7
2. William Roppe, 2002,	7
3. Lionel Fourneaux	8
4. J Phillipe Reverdot, 1995, Paris	8

Assignment 4 Topic

Choose one or more of the topics covered in this section and write a 2000 word formal, academic essay analysing and critiquing a visual culture 'text' (image, film, building) or the work of a particular artist or designer from the perspective of that topic.

Explain how seeing is affected by the methodologies we are subject to. Include reference to at least five different five sources - mostly printed (direct quotations won't contribute to the final word count)

Introduction

In 1986 Isabelle Mège asked photographer Jeanloup Sieff if he would take her photograph. Although he didn't do so at first, their encounter was the beginning of a 22-year project during which Mège worked with over three hundred photographers, all of whom made a portrait of her. Anna Heyward's article, *The Opposite of a Muse*, published in the New Yorker in September this year, is the only document available about the work. Only 5 people have seen the final edited collection, which Mège keeps in her house. Mège stores each photograph, signed by the artist, along with any ephemera, in archival boxes. She also asked each participant to sign a contract giving her certain rights, and at no time has money changed hands. Not every artist was well known although many were. A limited number of images are available to view in the article by Heyward. The collection was entirely private before the New Yorker editorial, and a full list of photographers is not on public record, but according to Heyward, (and confirmed in a PDF of thumbnails I have seen) the overwhelming majority of photographers are male.

Roland Barthes' essay *Death of An Author* (1967) reflects an ideology that rejects an "Author-God" and promotes open, collective, anti-authoritarian authorship, manifest in the reading of texts. Language is the container of both positions.

In Assignment 4 I ask whether Mège's work is an example of progressive authorship or an Author-God victory over the momentum to shift away from conservatism.

Has Mège succeeded in evoking feminist philosopher, Luce Irigaray's female subject, an equal but different fellow? If so, does confronting the male gaze help or hinder this process? Or is she merely repeating and entrenching patriarchal language?

Mège always started the process by saying to her intended collaborators, "J'aimerais m'apercevoir à travers votre regard" - I would like to see myself from your point of view. (Heyward, 2016)

The Male Gaze

“Since Irigaray agrees with Lacan that one must enter language (culture) in order to be a subject, she believes that language itself must change if women are to have their own subjectivity that is recognized at a cultural level.”
(Donovan, nd)

To write about this project without addressing the high quota of male artists would be to ignore a structural paradigm inherent in the art and wider world. However, when asked about it, Mège suggested simply, most of the photography she saw at the time was in fact by men; they were the ones working. However, there might have been Nan Goldin, Sally Mann, Mary Ellen Mark, Rineke Dijkstra, Annie Liebowitz, Jo Spence, Lorna Simpson, Faye Goodwin, Sirka Liisa Konttinen, Ingrid Pollard, Susan Trangmar, Joy Gregory, Anna Fox, or Corrine Day, to name a few. It may be their work didn't appeal to Mège, but as a student of structuralism it would be remiss not to seek connections.

It is clear we must consider how the male gaze dominates Mège's project, alongside authorship and collaborative working methods, as well as development of self and narcissistic identity, as each is inherently linked.

A Multidirectional Mirror Stage

“How do others see me?” is a question most of us probably ask ourselves at some point, unless we’re so deeply narcissistic the idea of Others existing at all is rendered irrelevant. There are several things to say about this. Mège certainly seems interested in how others (the photographers, for instance) see her, but perhaps not in the way we have become used to on social media, with the proliferation of vanity driven selfies. And she has kept the project private until now. Some of the images in the collection could be described as unflattering such as, Phillippe Bazin’s (1997) portrait or William Ropp’s. (2002) Many are surreal and you cannot recognise Mège at all in them.

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Illustration 1

Illustration 2

Another point relates to the function of narcissism in human development, which is complex and difficult to understand. But evidently critical, echoed by “Arnaud Claass, an artist who also teaches art history at l’École Nationale Supérieure de la Photographie, in Arles,…” when he said, “It is definitely a project of narcissism, and I do not use that word in a moral or pathological way. Some people have to explore that side of themselves more than others.” (Heyward, 2016) Despite the difficulty, we must dispense with a laymen’s interpretation of ‘narcissism’ and comprehend it in its academic

sense, which is about the development of ego and an ability to recognise the self as whole, as well as seeing separate others

And finally, we must consider whether or not Mège is granted her wish. Do the photographers respond to her initial request, "I would like to see myself from your point of view"? Do they show her what she asks for? Or do they end up showing her themselves instead? Is this an exercise of projection? And if so, the collection, regardless of any original intention¹, is in some sense a metaphysical room where reflections form mirrors on all sides, and takes us into a pre-gestalt, pre-language metaphor. Given how many images are simply fragments, little parts of Mège's body, this is not beyond reason.

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Illustration 3

Illustration 4

If viewed as such, perhaps there is an argument to be made suggesting Mège somehow revisits and then moves beyond a state of gestalt, the position an infant must reach following the mirror stage in order to internalise the Symbolic, i.e. language. And allows herself to be once again un-'constituted' rather than 'constituent' (Lacan, 1992, 620-624), giving up her identity for each artist, as described by Heyward. In doing so she revisits a

¹ Original intentions shouldn't be over-valued and if we agree with Barthes' that authorship is in the reading they are possibly irrelevant.

developmental stage one must enter to reach language. Does she demonstrate the discovery of a new one?

Despite French curator, Jean-Claude Lemagny's, insistence, "this is not a work of psychology but rather of photography²" (Heyward, 2016), this could be seen as compulsion to negate oneself. To become subsumed within an Other's vision of self might be viewed as co-dependent³. Such a pattern of behavior is based within the narcissistic metaphor, linked to Self and Other, and so worth considering in terms of the existential nature of the work, and therefore how the collection might be read. Furthermore, the meaning of 'co-dependency' relates to how individualism operates for and against groups, and is relevant, in terms of how authorship works in our post, post-modern world.

² Today it is difficult to dismiss most things being "a work of psychology" since the science of the psyche delivers so much of the language we use today

³ There is no space here to explore the word 'co-dependent' but it is a behaviour that is considered detrimental to wellbeing, especially when enabling destructive Others. However, when we think about open signifiers and a rejection of sealed symbols, and then consider the idea of seeing humanity as collective, operating in similar ways to how eusocial insects function, rather than viewing people as individualistic, unconnected entities, it becomes more complex

Collective Authorship

“There is no such thing as a single human being, pure and simple unmixed with other human beings. Each personality is a world in himself, a company of many. **That self ... is a composite structure ... formed out of countless never-ending influences and exchanges between ourselves and others.** These other persons are in fact therefore part of ourselves ... we are members of one another.” (Riviere⁴, 1927; Holmes, 1993; 137) There has been, since at least the beginning of last century or before, a conscious drive to dispense with traditional Authorship⁵. Barthes in *Death of An Author* describes Authorship as a modern phenomenon that has passed its usefulness. In terms very similar to Riviere’s he says, **“the text is a tissue of citations, resulting from the thousand sources of culture.”** (Barthes 1967)

Elena Ferrante is a pseudonym used by a writer who has written a series of successful books, known as the Neapolitan Novels. In a letter to her publisher she said, “I believe that books, once they are written, have no need of their authors. If they (the books) have something to say, they will sooner or later find readers; if not, they won’t.” (Ferrante, 1991, 2016)

Ferrante rejects her position as “Author-God”. She seems to understand that texts are like children, to give birth to and then let go of, perhaps never to be seen again as explored by Louise Bourgeois in the quoted poem at the beginning of this essay, regardless of how difficult that might be. (Karshens and Schampers, 2011) The text is authored by many, both in the making and in the reading of it. Nowadays, even Shakespeare, we are ready to admit, was not the sole writer of his plays. (Alberge, 2016) In any case, signs employed in any text are always borrowed: “[A]...writer can only imitate a gesture forever anterior, never original; his only power is to combine the different kinds of writing, to oppose some by others, so as never to sustain

⁴ Joan Riviere was John Bowlby’s⁴, analyst and worked with Anna Freud and Melanie Klein translating for them as well as Sigmund Freud. Her statement precedes Barthes’ *Death of An Author* by over 50 years, although made at the time Bertold Brecht was formulating theatre practise that rejected the tradition of actor-stars, around which everyone else pivoted on stage. Instead, he promoted the ensemble in his epic theatre, a more egalitarian form of company where the ‘whole’ is considered essential

⁵ Bertold Brecht’s development of ensemble was a clear example of collectivism although he seemingly failed to acknowledge his own author-collaborators, many reportedly the women he worked with

himself by just one of them; if he wants to express himself, at least he should know that the internal “thing” he claims to “translate” is itself only a readymade dictionary whose words can be explained (defined) only by other words, and so on ad infinitum...” (Barthes, 1967)

When we reject traditional Authorship we embrace an egalitarian ideology, where the sealed godlike ego is no longer in charge. This is a fundamental advancement to a reality where once royalty, for instance, sat at the top of a triangle, connected directly to God, and the rest of humanity in varying levels below. Or where white men ruled the ‘known’ world. It underlies an important shift in the way in which society has been moving and its relationship with responsibility. And as Barthes says, “To give an Author to a text is to impose upon that text a stop clause, to furnish it with a final signification, to close the writing.” (1967) We have been heading, and continue to do so, despite immense opposition evident in the world’s current political arena, towards a paradigm that values openness, growth, and development, giving readers room to interpret, and where the sealed symbol is no longer considered helpful. We can interpret Barthes’, dead Author, or Nietzsche’s dead God, or as Sarah Lucas suggested, the dead Dad⁷, as a symbol of rejecting fixed, paternalistic signs. (Jones, 2016) (Lucas and Nochlin, 2005)

Although Mège’s work might not, on the surface, look like a feminist undertaking, or indeed be one, the making of it might be seen as a disruption to what we internalized through language, as described by Lacan within the Symbolic Order, an interruption of Power-Over-the-Other (Evans, 1996). Its narcissism may be understood as a search for an updated sense of gestalt, and therefore an attempt at a new language, one where an advanced type of reality continues to emerge. Where ‘Father’ is, or has been, supplanted by more than one subject who can exist within the Symbolic order, whatever the shape of their genitalia or the levels of melatonin their skin.

⁶ Known by whom? The white westerners who appropriated the world *they* didn’t know is the answer. The phrase ‘known world’ is a good example of western hubris in language.

⁷ Sarah Lucas’ work *Dad is Dead* plays with Nietzsche’s famous phrase God is Dead, and can be read as a statement about how the historical underlying paternalistic structure, epitomized in and promoted by Christianity, and which has dominated our society is now over

However, and this is the danger, it could also be seen as a continuation of the old paternalistic ways, where women can only view themselves in terms of objects for a male gaze, echoing Berger's sentiments about female subjectivity; "And so she comes to consider the surveyor and the surveyed within her as two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity." (Berger, 1972; 46) In this case, an Author-God overcomes any attempts by the parents of collectivism, perhaps of Reason, and appropriates its expression rather than the other way around.

Muse Appropriation

"...while Mège appears to have the will of an artist, she distributes the means of creation to others; she is an artist whose medium is other artists (...) It's a selfothermade, (...) not an auto-portrait . . . but it's not a simple alloportrait either." (Nancy, Heyward, 2016)

Why? Since Duchamp first presented an upside down urinal, signed R. Mutt in 1917, the question has been asked. Why would an artist deconstruct art in this way? In this work, whether or not there was volition to do so (one can only guess, and my guess is not), Mège has taken ownership of the passive female subject position. It matters that she was able to. Sonia Boyce discusses her desire to explore racial stereotypes in earlier work, suggesting that by doing so she appropriates the racial undertones that fuel them in the first place (2015). And, ideally, negating the horror. When Mège owns the position herself does she negate the sense of power that infused the originals we know from art history? We cannot know Mège's intentions. We might look for meaning, which is the human way, but there isn't any. She tells us she simply wanted to make photographs and doesn't consider herself an artist. (Heyward, 2016) These are images of a woman, made with language we recognize from history, but with intentions that have little to do with ownership, or with Power-Over-the-Other.

"...by refusing to assign to the text (and to the world as text) a "secret:' that is, an ultimate meaning, liberates an activity which we might call counter-theological, properly revolutionary, for to refuse to arrest meaning is finally to refuse God and his hypostases, reason, science, the law." (Barthes, 1967)

Conclusion

The project had to be a photography project and not a book, TV or film. Apart from anything else, Author-Gods, the vast majority of them male, have historically dominated the medium. Subjects, very often nude females, are viewed as passive, awaiting instruction, or to be 'captured' (the language of victims and photography). Mège chose male photographers because we live in a world where those are the ones we are able to see.

However, in Mège's collection the usually passive Other drives the process, and is active alongside her fellow authors. She invites what we previously might have thought of as the Hegelian master into an atypical photographer/subject relationship, deconstructing what was for so long the norm especially in the proliferation of nudes. It might be viewed as an embodiment of Power Within instead of Power-Over-the-Other. On the other hand the language looks the same as it ever did, even though it may have a different authorship style. Mège in many, many images explores the same form we recognise from art history. In fact she leaves the, mostly male, photographers to use a language they know best. Would Luce Irigaray consider a new language has emerged? Or that Mège has fully evolved as 'subject'? One expects not but there is fundamental shift in the power balance.

Or has Mège merely embraced the Author-God's agenda and done his work for him?

In *Death of an Author* Barthes describes an old ideology, which is embodied in the sealed sign. He promotes a new reality where interpretation is in the domain of multiple authors rather than handed down through time by authoritarian men, possibly unconnected (especially if actually dead) to society from up high. In doing so he explores the idea that anyone and all of us have agency and responsibility, and that we are freer than we have been in the past to understand texts based on who we are and what we need from them. The lack of definition in the sign is complex though and comes with costs as well as benefits. However, if there is no Author-God, there can be no Author-Devil. Without either of those we are obliged to look amongst each other for answers to our questions. When we look at each other, perhaps we will see more of ourselves.

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Appendix

Available only in an offline version – Thumbnails of Isabelle Mège’s complete edited collection (The images are taken from a PDF supplied by Anna Heyward with kind permission from Isabelle Mège, and are only to be used for research. Please do not share publicly as I have not requested permission for that. Many thanks.)

Reflection

Demonstration of subject based knowledge and understanding

There is always going to be more to so much more to know and understand. And more to write too, which was not possible here in 2000 words. I'd like to have included a bullet point list of things I'd covered to make the connections more obvious in the conclusion but perhaps that isn't necessary. Also, I wondered if I'd seen the thumbnails before I started writing the essay, it might have ended up being quite different. One of the things that strikes you when you see the whole collection is Mège's vulnerability which I don't think you get in the article, and that may have affected the way I wrote this. Also, Mège preceded the culture of self-curating, which is how people present their online selves nowadays. That would be worth looking at. In addition it would have useful to examine some of the few female images in more detail in order to see if a feminine, male or indifferent gaze existed in the collection.

Is my knowledge good for a level one course? Probably. I have attempted (with quite a lot of effort) to be structured. I am undecided of about being less emotional although I get it needs to be contained and focused rather than like a tantrum. Does this essay live up to its subject? Unlikely. I was and am particularly interested in the Lacanian Mirror Stage, and the Real, Imaginary and Symbolic but I don't think it entered into the essay in enough depth. I recently saw an Einstein quote on social media (so anyone might have said it), which went, "If you can't explain it clearly, then you don't understand it." And I feel there was a lot of that as I wrote this essay – attempting to explain things that are still muddy and require a great deal more study and thought. I would also have liked to include something about nudity in art. I did not cover projection to and from Other sufficiently. I hoped to do so when decoding of one of the images in the collection but had to cut that entire section out.

Demonstration of research skills

There is so much to read online it can be challenging to stay focused which I tried to do, but wonder if perhaps, in this case, my research is too limited. Saying that, everything I've been looking at through the coursework and associated activities informs what I think here in this essay and elsewhere. I was quite concerned about having to rely on one single source for the bulk of material, Anna Heyward's article. I risked simply repeating her words and not saying anything new – just reporting and not analysing. I was loath to avoid simply repeating what other people, Heyward and others, have already said

in different ways and tried to make connections myself. That was the danger of choosing this particular subject. Furthermore, the Irigaray book I have started is very difficult indeed and it would have been far better to have travelled further along into it before attempting to include some of her ideas – I will get there with her, but its going to take time.

Demonstration of critical evaluation skills

This is one of the most challenging areas to get to grips with as it feels like it is mired in dogmatic practise anyway, and so sifting through examples that are available as guidance can be frustrating. It is true that good analytical and critical writing is immensely difficult. I do think I am at least just beginning to see the difference between styles of writing, even though I don't always see the point in some examples. And I think critical writing risks being an irrelevance in the world, especially when no one can understand it except a few totally disconnected souls. Perhaps too much emphasis, in some instances, is placed on very dry analytical descriptions, which I find puzzling and bizarre. Even Barthes seem to believe it has had its day, "...criticism (even "new criticism") should be overthrown along with the Author" (1967) I wonder if that style of writing offers the illusion of objectivity, so revered in the humanities, and considered to be a way of preventing wild assertions being made, which I know I am guilty of. Whatever one thinks, critical writing will always be a challenge because if I were to pick up a book in a gallery describing a work of art, then the sentences telling me what I can see such as "the lines to the left are diagonal" are highly likely to be the bits I'd skim straight past. Far better to get to the juicy bits that describe historical symbolism and how that might relate to the society the art depicts or to humanity in general, and how it makes one feel about society today.

Communication

My writing style may never suit academia. I think I have certainly benefited enormously from attempting to live to up to the instructions I've been given but I can't think I'll ever satisfy them. I'm not even sure I'd want to. I have reservations about the way some academics write. I don't like rejecting emotive language. I agree self-pity is irritating but emotion itself is interesting. More interesting than a list of descriptive sentences about the directions some lines and light might take. I have been paying close attention to the way people write and found it interesting that OCA student John Umney (2016) switched between the subjective and objective in his dissertation. It encouraged empathetic emotional connections and triggered

thoughts in me about my own family's relationship with the photographic family archive and memory, and how tearing up a few pictures can seemingly obliterate or at least disrupt uncomfortable pasts. It's not just a dry litany of facts and emotionless intellectualising. I am also struck by Irigaray's commentary. Although she certainly doesn't go in for 'blog writing', she does not avoid sarcasm, places exclamation marks after particularly bizarre Freudian claims about the development of little girls, and makes jokes in parenthesis ('don't laugh too quickly') (32). As such we get a clear sense of how extremely damning she is, which I know led to her being 'excommunicated'. To the point, where I actually started to feel a little sorry for Freud and his opinions as they were so clearly coming from someone trying, and making strides in the right direction, but stuck in a different paradigm, as he would be. Dead as he was by the time Irigaray was writing. (At least he admitted the beginnings of an acceptance of the nebulous nature of gender and sexuality). As she painstakingly analyses and criticises his work, highlighting the injustices based in language, which supported the long-continued relegation of women to second-class citizenship, her personality is there for all to see. To remove it would be to remove the strength of her feelings, and she speaks for many. And I feel as if I shall never be able to, nor want to dispense with my own person when I write. Just because the author is dead after the writing has flown the nest, it doesn't mean it should be dead while its being formed. I feel as if that is what is being encouraged. Perhaps I am mistaken. I often have been.

As far as communication goes, I think I have taught myself over the years to write from scratch, that I still have much to learn and am always doing so, and that I communicate how I feel relatively well, but that my writing style is not suited to what is expected in this arena. To summarise: I communicate well enough. Just not in the way people are required to here.

Finally, I'm really not sure I have done what I as mean to do: Explain how seeing is affected by the methodologies we are subject to.