

Introduction

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Departing late afternoon, the flight from Toronto to Frankfurt is a journey from darkness into light—and on this occasion (6 May 1994), in more ways than one. On our route to two conferences, we make time for a visit to the MMK, the Museum Für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt Am Main, stumbling out of the Hauptbahnhof at what should be midnight to encounter market stalls already set up and morning coffee being served at tables that line the cobblestone street. Hans Hollein designed the MMK as a temple of light, one befitting a sun king: the museum's triangular structure could pass on its exterior, for perspective's "visual pyramid," while in its intellectual interior, it features a complex layout of roof cuts, wall washers, and enormous, vaulting windows. Wandering through this dazzling house of display, the luminous white of its walls seeming to hide their own visibility in favour of the artworks on exhibit, we are drawn to one particular installation, James Turrell's *Twilight Arch*, the only work held in a small room that, much unlike the rest of the museum, is dimly lit. Not a framed painting, we realize only after our eyes adjust to the darkness, but a rectangle of pure light set into a recess on the facing wall, *Twilight Arch* catches us gazing at an absent image, seeing ourselves seeing—and seeing seeing as misperceiving; a show of light that, in the MMK of all places, reminds us of the blindness that belongs inseparably to sight.

It can be no coincidence that, in his autobiographical long poem, *The Hornbooks of Rita K*, Robert Kroetsch recounts the disappearance in the MMK of the poet, Rita Kleinhart, whose life is here being narrated by her archivist and former lover, Raymond. “Kleinhart was invited, during the late spring of 1992, to visit Germany and lecture briefly to the Canadianists at Trier University,” Raymond tells us in Hornbook #99. “On her way back from Trier she paid a visit to the Museum of Modern Art in Frankfurt and while at the museum mailed a number of postcards to friends. She was not seen alive thereafter” (8). Several pages later, in Hornbook #53, Raymond explains that the moment of Rita’s disappearance was a moment of looking:

There in Frankfurt, on the occasion of Rita’s disappearance (and I was standing beside her in that darkened room where one believes one is looking at a framed painting only to discover, as one’s eyes adjust to the dark, that one is staring into a faintly lit recession set blankly into a blank wall), I turned to remark that I found James Turrell’s “Twilight Arch” compelling nevertheless, for all the absence of an image. I turned and she was not there. (37)

One of Canada’s foremost poets, novelists, and critics, RK, over some five decades, questioned how to inherit an old world tradition that, among other things, elevates the author-poet as a seer-creator whose vision is equated with knowing. Born in a homestead dwelling near Heisler, Alberta, on a prairie that is as vast as it is empty, RK asks in *Seed Catalogue* how one “grows a poet” in the absence of the heritage of the sovereign, all-seeing, self:

*How do you grow a past /
to live in*

the absence of silkworms
the absence of clay and wattles (whatever the hell
they are)
the absence of Lord Nelson
the absence of kings and queens
the absence of a bottle opener, and me with a vicious
attack of the 26-ounce flu
the absence of both Sartre and Heidegger (11-12, emph. Kroetsch’s)

Horse barns aplenty around Heisler, but no pyramids, “the absence of the Parthenon, not to mention the Cathédrale de Chartres” (12), and of course, the absence of Versailles, where the Sun King, Louis XIV, was wont to portray the indis-sociability, within the modern European tradition, of the concepts of seeing, know-ing, and possessing. For example, in many well-known paintings of a scene that

Jacques Derrida discusses in the first volume of his final seminar on *The Beast and the Sovereign*, the Sun King himself presides over the 1681 dissection of an elephant at Versailles. “I am speaking, then, of the picture of the dissection of an elephant *under* the orders and *under* the gaze of the greatest of kings, His Majesty Louis le Grand. The beast and the sovereign is here the beast as dead ob-ject, an enormous, heavy body under the gaze and at the disposal of the absolute knowledge of the absolute monarch,” Derrida writes (280, *emph. Derrida’s*). The scene, the “scientific scene, the scene of knowledge,” takes place in the aftermath of the slaughter of the immense animal, the elephant earlier “having been captured by the great king or his servants, soldiers or merchants, in the course of expeditions,” and now in the possession, and at the disposal, of the king, “for his having and his seeing, and for his pleasure [*pour son pouvoir, pour son savoir, pour son avoir et pour son voir, et pour son bon vouloir*].” The chain that links *voir*, *savoir*, *pouvoir*, *avoir*, and *vouloir* can be manipulated in all directions, Derrida suggests, and it is always “mediated by institutions” (281). Invariably, it elevates the spectating subject over the (dead or de-animated) object, whether the context be the domesticity of the family home, the sovereignty of the master over the mistress, or that of the “taming, training, stock raising” of beasts (283). Knowing-how-to-see or being-able-to-see (282) ensures capture, appropriation, possession, enclosure, commerce, the sovereign mastery of man over woman, as over the animal-body-nature to which woman belongs.

Between Louis XIV and Louis XVI, Derrida notes, sovereignty is simply transferred from the king to the people or the nation, such that the chain *voir-pouvoir-savoir-avoir* remains intact: in his words, with the French Revolution, “the walls are destroyed but the architectural model is not deconstructed” (282). The menagerie of Versailles becomes the zoological garden, zoos having much in common with circuses, “also places of spectacle, theaters—as, indeed, were insane asylums for a long time” (283). And of course, the camera lens becomes a diagnostic-documentary tool indispensable to the task of separating seeing subjects from the objects of their gaze, the normal from the abnormal, the able from the disabled, the fit from the unfit. For instance, even in advance of Eadweard Muybridge’s studies of human and animal locomotion, Jean-Martin Charcot, pursuing his dream of classifying every existing neurological defect, used freeze-frame photography (at the enormous asylum that was the late-nineteenth-century Salpêtrière) to document symptoms of abnormality too fleeting for capture by the naked eye. Alluding to the camera’s celebrated enhancement of sight during this period, yet refusing to capture and expose the outlaw figure about whom he writes in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, Michael Ondaatje opens his long poem with an empty frame, a frame that is empty of anything but the white of the white page, offering this caption beneath the absent image:

I send you a picture of Billy made with the Perry shutter as quick as it can be worked—Pyro and soda developer. I am making daily experiments now and find I am able to take passing horses at a lively trot square across the line of fire—bits of snow in the air—spokes well defined—some blur on top of wheel but sharp in the main—men walking are no trick—I will send you proofs sometime. I shall show you what can be done from the saddle without ground glass or tripod—please notice when you get the specimens that they were made with the lens wide open and many of the best exposed when my horse was in motion. (5)

A number of the following essays pose challenges to Western modernity's idealizing of sight, and with that, to what H. Peter Steeves, in the essay that opens this special issue, refers to as:

the myth of the subject, the Cartesian thinking self that pulls at its own mental bootstraps, motherlessly slouching its way toward existence. With the (virgin) birth of the modern subject comes the birth of the object as well: objects to stand apart and at a distance from us; to be used and to delight us; to be owned and exchanged and valued by subjects; to be known through a vision that is thought to obscure—a *seeing* that, in relation to all of the other senses, most requires and celebrates distance from what is known. (emph. Steeves's)

Steeves is interested in work such as the art of Matthew Girson, which attempts "to move painting in a different and self-less direction." As he puts it, "what is consistently most startling in Girson's work is what appears as absent, what is so skillfully made present in its absence—a chance to speak, paint, and *be* without the need for a traditional subject" (emph. Steeves's). For instance, in the scotoma paintings included in his 2006 exhibition, "Satellites and Scotomas: After and Above," Girson overlays white paint on a square at the centre of the canvas, "the spot where we have come to expect the subject, blotting it out like an inverse eclipse of light" (9). To look at these scotoma paintings, not unlike looking at Turrell's *Twilight Arch*, is to see oneself seeing, and to see seeing as a kind of blindness—such as was Steeves's own experience of medical scotoma.

For a tradition that valorizes sight in relation to presence, seeing-as-not-seeing remains strangely compelling: consider Steeves's account of the 1911 theft of the *Mona Lisa*, an event resulting, surprisingly, in record-breaking attendance at the Louvre, "Lines stretch out and around the museum, with pilgrims coming to view the missing painting, shuffling past the empty spot on the wall in tears." Why would crowds "come to see the *Mona Lisa* knowing they cannot see it" (2)? No doubt, there are many answers to this question, some of which this *Mosaic* issue provokes. Another

paradox the issue broaches concerns the Western tradition's rendering of blindness as, to borrow Angelica Duran's words from her essay on Milton, "an ambivalent figure of alterity, bodily impairment held in tension with creative exaltation" (142).¹ In his *Memoirs of the Blind*, Derrida suggests that, in canonical Greek and Hebrew Bible narratives at least, narratives of creative exaltation, "great paradigmatic narratives of blindness," are "dominated by the filiation father/son" (6n1). The question of sexual difference, impossible to remove from "the myth of the subject," is thus at stake in this issue as well.

This issue includes seven drawings by Heather Spears, a Canadian visual artist and writer now living in Denmark. Drawings of blind children Spears worked with at institutions in Denmark and Halifax, these images include studies of pediatric eye surgeries, and of the delicate hand movements of both physicians and their very young, and affectionate, blind patients. Spears has published fourteen books of poetry, exhibits widely, and has won several awards, including the Governor General's Award for Poetry. Among her books are four novels, three books of drawings, and a book about visual perception, *The Creative Eye*. She works in line on a good pile of A4 (letter-sized) slick paper on a clipboard, using a Derwent 6B pencil, which is soft and also keeps its point. Before drawing, she sharpens many pencils at both ends. When she is finished and before looking at what she has done, she numbers the drawings and smudges some tone into them with her thumb, keeping within the contours. She looks later—maybe the following day. To learn more about Spears's work, visit her website: www.heatherspears.com.

NOTES

1/ A brief discussion I had with my eight-year-old grandson on his experience of this ambivalence prompted two ready examples: in the film *Seabiscuit*, the jockey, blind in one eye, becomes the hero of the tale, in large part because of his impairment; while in the film *Spider-Man*, the visually-impaired hero (the same actor as it turns out), bullied at school as a weakling and awkward "misfit," discards his strong glasses once he becomes Spider-Man.

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