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Displacement. Interpassivity of the Gaze

Doctoral Dissertation Summary

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DISPLACEMENT

The word for displacement in French is *décalage*, and it means “a gap,” but also “a difference,” while colloquially it appears most frequently in the expression *décalage horaire*, which means “jet lag.” Slavoj Žižek, the Slovenian psychoanalyst, philosopher, and cultural critic, in his book *Lacrimae Rerum. Kieślowski, Hitchcock, Tarkowski, Lynch* discusses the concept of *displacement* using the example of Krzysztof Kieślowski’s decision to abandon documentary film making for fiction. With a desire to tell stories about emotions, Kieślowski could no longer exploit the documentary, because viewing authentic emotion on screen was unbearable and, in some sense, obscene. In order to obtain full intimacy, the director stages it artificially (in a fictional film) and confers with the actors on how to play emotion. This is how the film becomes a stage where characters, props, and feelings are purely contractual. A motion picture is a plane of understanding on which the author tells his or her story and the viewer reads the story imposing upon it his or her own experience. Only through the result of this process does the viewer experience the actual story. Using the examples of Kieślowski’s films, Žižek also discusses the concept of narrating parallel realities occurring simultaneously to show various possibilities for resolving the action and multifaceted portraits of the characters.

The strategy of displacement interested me as a tool for distancing myself from emotion in the search for my own artistic identity. Just like feelings exhibited and viewed in a documentary sound false, so too the naked expression in a portrait elicits resentment and embarrassment.

Jacques Lacan, the French psychoanalyst and philosopher, and in his wake his famous interpreter Žižek, repeatedly underscore the impossibility of exploring the identity of a person writing about the murkiness of another human being beneath whose image lurks an indescribable abyss.

Isolating segments of reality in order to close them up within the frame of an image and subject them to analyses is reminiscent of pinning a butterfly into a display case. In the interim, the rich, fleshy, living tissues of reality cannot be tailored harmlessly back into the previously presumed format. This is why the application of displacement is an alternative in the search of a more adequate image.

INTERPASSIVITY OF THE GAZE

An anecdote about the young Jacques Lacan most pointedly explains the concept of the interpassivity of the gaze. When, one sunny morning, as he was in a boat on a lake, the fisher who was rowing teased him that the floating can they both were looking at was not impressed with the educated youngster. And here is the crucial observation: Lacan defiantly states that the can floating in the water in the sunshine was indeed gazing at him. This observation became the departure point of Lacan's theory of the gaze, which altered the traditional logic of viewing in that the object designs and sets forth the coordinates of the looking and places the subject within the space presented. In her book entitled *Cialo otwarte* [Open Body], Monika Bakke underscores that what is important in this story is that the can was shining, reflecting light. The description of the phenomenon of the subject gazing upon the surroundings causes the entire space to gaze and absorb the subject through numerous points of light.

Lacan himself explained the concept of interpassivity in the series of writings known as *Le Séminaire* from 1960, which were based on classical Greek tragedy with a chorus that does not participate in the action narrating the course of events. The presentation assumes the role of the viewer in the expression of emotions and the moral assessment of the events, while the feeling of emotion is transferred from the viewer to the image. Art and philosophical theory provide me with the tools to challenge thought patterns, shift meanings, and refresh the gaze on artistic undertakings. Thus, I do not anticipate that each idea will occur to be the only true one; rather, each one will refresh and enrich my perception of the world. What is important to me within the concept of the interpassivity of the gaze is that it transforms the habitual relationship of the gaze between the subject and object, in which the subject is traditionally the dominant party and subjugates the image to prior assumptions. The aim of applying this mental tool is to revive the image, impart it with greater significance, and provide it with emotional autonomy.

IMPACT OF THE IMAGE

The Lacanian concept of understanding humans through language ordered my thinking regarding existing and utopian models of functioning in the world. If language defines how reality is perceived, then the founding texts of Christianity have had a decisive impact on the culture of the West. Utopian images of Biblical paradise function as the matrix that produces subsequent social systems. Another example of the impact of the image is the continual presence in the tradition of painting of the propaganda image—an image created under contract to a patron with the aim of solidifying an existing power system or for justifying the use of violence and oppression.

Władysław Strzemiński's notion of the impact of the image also sits very comfortably with the concept of the function of the portrait of the man in culture. According to his *Teoria widzenia* [Theory of Seeing], representations of the face of the god-man were made as early as in the Paleolithic Age along with the practices of the first shamans. To justify and retain power, the shaman created a mask—a terrifying face—that was at once the image of god and a symbol of his deputy in the person of the shaman. For centuries the image of the face of man represented power, impacting the religious imaginings of the cosmic order and the social systems on earth. In my work, I contrast the portrait of the man with the figure of the woman, which is represented in European tradition primarily as a sexual object. This fundamental difference in the presentation of women and men, according to me, impacts the shaping of subjectivity, the relationship with one's own body, and with social behavior.

PROJECT AIMS

The aim of the doctoral thesis is to redefine the representation and image of the woman using Lacanian concepts interpreted by Sławoj Żiżek, and precisely the concepts of “looking sideways” or displacement. In this sense the confrontational gaze reduces the image of reality. This is particularly significant to me as it answers the question posed in my master's thesis entitled *Rzecz o trzech drogach wiodących do obrazu* [The Thing about Three Paths Leading to the Image] inspired by the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. In the conclusion of it I put forward the idea that only the insane are given to cognizance, while reasonable people circle around things without touching on the truth. However, that idealistic, even fundamentalist way of thinking, reduced imaging to nothing and visions of

reality to death. In this sense, the insane and the “holy” saw the undepicted: trauma and nothingness of the untranslatable on life experiences. The materialistic ideology of Žižek, along with his sideways gaze through displacement made it possible to create presentations, and thus creativity itself.

METHODOLOGY

My interest in the identity of the woman and the female artist and visibility and clarity of her image has led me towards psychoanalysis and cultural anthropology. Jacques Lacan defines the subject as a speaking being—*parlêtre*. Speech, according to Lacan, defines both that which is conscious and unconscious. Perceiving the subject as a speaking body has two consequences. The first is the polemic with a dualistic conception of the body and mind since speech is born of the body. In this concept, the body gains significance because, according to Lacan, the body says more than the subject knows. The second consequence of Lacan’s concept is the placement of the subject and its perception of reality in linguistic structures. The order of language, its grammar, and vocabulary are linked closely with the social order that the subject shapes. Language defines who the subject is and how it perceives the world. Here Lacan’s theory coincides with Judith Butler’s concept of socio-cultural gender construction.

However, according to Julia Kristeva, the French linguist and psychoanalyst, language is the border separating that which is corporal and affective (semiotic) from that which is intellectual and linked to social order and defined by the symbolic dimension. These two impulses collide in the subject’s speech, but they cannot exist without each other. The semiotic impulse, to which the entire preverbal sphere of desires, drives, affects, and emotions belong, is, according to Kristeva, the remains of the relationship with the Mother. Kristeva situates song, dance, and painting in the semiotic. Just as the symbolic dimension of speech is common to society, the semiotic impulse represents an emotional uniqueness that is associated with the statement of the individual experience of the body. In this light, body language is richer than the knowledge of the mind because it goes beyond what is defined and what is named. Body language is manifested in continual becoming and relentless transformation, and it becomes an inexhaustible source of discovery. Signals originating from affective life refer back to existential experience that leads the subject to continuous and dynamic unpreparedness.

AS CONSCIOUSNESS IS HARNESSSED TO FLESH

The model of developing representation, in which I open up to the impact of the symbols referring to existential experience rather than implementing a prior concept of the mind, conflicts with conceptual tendencies in art. However, in my terms, implementing concepts does not offer similar opportunities to explore. It is Lacan's concepts (and especially as Kristeva has developed them) regarding speech, the body, and the surplus of meaning produced by the body that have permitted me to gradually peel back auto-censorship from my own artistic concepts and visual language. This has resulted in a shift towards actions that I consider to be relevant to my personal existential experience.

I struggle as an artist with the dichotomous thinking that separates the body and the mind, and which always places the body in opposition to reason. Even when setting to one side the development of knowledge about evolution, my experience with artistic work not only contradicts the reasonableness of this division, it also highlights the falsity and harmfulness of separating the body from the mind. In the work of painting, which embodies an idea, an intuitive vision, painterly gesture, as well as control over the material, the fusion of all the forces of the body seems to be particularly important. The awareness of one's own body is conditioned by the continuous experience of reality, which is the relentless verification of concepts, prejudices, and assumptions. Caring for the body—cleansing, moisturizing, oxygenating, and strengthening it—has a direct impact on the quality of experience, and, hence, on the ideas to which it gives birth. In contrast, cutting off the mind from the body leads to ideological ossification.

Another aspect of the philosophical dichotomy between the body and the mind in European culture is the assignment of women to the category of carnality and men to the privileged category of people acting on the authority of reason. This stereotypical assignment, internalized by both sexes, results in women being suspicious of their own and other women's bodies, in feelings of guilt, a lack of confidence in the public sphere, and a lack of faith in intellectual and creative endeavors. In men it can lead to the neglect of the body, a lack of contact with one's own sensitivity, overconfidence in oneself, and an aversion to confronting one's own views and ideas. The traditional, and seemingly archaic medium that is painting, if we accept Kristeva's position that it belongs to the semiotic order, can turn out to be living, pulsating tissue coming from the dynamics of the body that reacts on impulses that transcend the limits of rationality. So, the resulting image is not a closed illustration or text, but a

shimmering, active surface in a unremitting process. The presentation is not evaluated by the viewer, but rather initiates his or her feelings and thoughts. Current trends combine painting with performance—as a set design for performative actions or to highlight the processual of the creation of the image itself—signaling the revival of this mode of expression. A return to the intuitive application of painting in conjunction with dancing or singing, more as a means of communication rather than as an end in itself, moves the medium away from the mechanisms of knowledge and power and reconnects it with the vital realm of carnality.

DIGRESSIVE IDENTITY

A drawing of a lady, the main and practically only defining characteristic of which was an unimaginably tight corset and an overly voluminous dress, that I drew obsessively in childhood has returned to my adult creative output. The figure of the lady is a significant motif in the search for my identity as a creative woman. However, in Lacanian theory the lady represents both the woman and creativity. The main characteristic of the lady is her costume—a dress that is supposed to lend charm, to seduce, and to expose her sexual attributes while simultaneously covering her body and protecting her from rape. Additionally, with the aid of corsets, boning, and hoops that restrict movement, the dress becomes the desired synonym of femininity and a yoke to bear. The model of a lady who is difficult to identify with as a living being, results in alienation from and distrust of one's own image. The woman is the object of her very own gaze: her body and femininity haunt her like an irritating, overbearing presence, and yet they are never real enough—there is always the suspicion that they are only a costume, under which a person hides.

THE VISUAL WORK: A DESCRIPTION

The central element of the installation *Displacement. Interpassivity of the Gaze* is the video-performance *Swinarska jako Akt III Kobro* [Swinarska as a Nude III by Kobro], which is exhibited in the form of an artifact. I decided to use my own body as material and embody myself as a nude – *the Nude III* by Katarzyna Kobro. I do this in order to do justice to the female body as a functional object. The reason for my engaging in this action is not only the problem associated with the estheticization and objectification of the female body, but also the problem of the use of that body. The experience of wearying, daily work and the experience of sexuality, pregnancy, and birth are inscribed on the body, which becomes the

raw material of a sculpture, a sculpture that was despised by the artist (Katarzyna Kobro) herself and consigned to the fire in time of war.

Wyodrębnienie ciała [Extracting the Body] is an attempt to construct my own identity out of fragments of representations that function in mass culture: pictures of old masters, fashion shows, film footage, and private photographs. Supplementing the figures with painting makes them run into each other, puts them in motion, and gives them a narrative dimension. A central feature of the work is the transparency of its material, which makes possible a layering of levels, and a demonstration of subsequent versions of a figure in the form of its own shadows, marking the issue of the existence of parallel realities. However, this transparency is, above all, a manifestation of the inadequacy of existence and the lack of clear boundaries between figure and surrounding space.

Hegel maintains that a good portrait looks more like the person depicted than the subject him/herself. In the cycle of portraits of my female protagonists (Dorota Nieznalska, Anna Baumgart, Paulina Ołowska, Bogna Burska, Anna Reinert, and myself), I distance myself from the issue of similarity and of reflection of the expression of the subjects of the portraits, in order to find the reason for painting, the logic of representation, and the power of seduction within the picture. The female protagonist becomes the inspiration and the patron of the portrait, which is conducted further independently of her. The cycle of pictures is an attempt to displace the center of gravity within a system of values—values that customarily are a cause of the aggrandizement and eternalization of the subject's appearance. Disregarded aspects of existence, such as the charm of freckles on a face's translucent skin, or blood rushing to the head at a moment of danger— become the main subjects of my paintings.

Inspiration for the whole project was drawn from the film based on a documentary of interviews with female artists. I used two standards when choosing artists: personal relationship and undeniable recognition within the field of art. The main characteristic of the artists chosen was heroism that is seen in both their artistic undertakings, as well in their life views. As a result of subsequent edited versions, I decided to show a film comprised of portraits of three women artists, whose body language is the most striking and the utterances the clearest. The material is close to my subjective gaze, while the film refers to the installation *Displacement. Interpassivity of the Gaze* in a narrative character.

CONCLUSIONS

The book *Lacrimae Rerum. Kieślowski, Hitchcock, Tarkowski, Lynch* by Slavoj Žižek drove me onto the road of realizing the project *Displacement. Interpassivity of the Gaze*. *Lacrimae rerum* means “tears of things” in Latin, which Kuba Mikurda interprets as the moment the subject returns following trauma in the symbolic structure (which is culture, language, and social order). For me *lacrimae rerum*, in accordance with the theory of interpassivity in which the presentation feels emotion instead of the viewer, is tears of the image. However, *tears of things—tears of the image* does not arise as a result of the faithful reflection of reality, as the ancient art theoreticians understood. Tears of things arise from the structure of the image and tensions within the representation.