

“The place of the gaze” by Miquel Bassols

It is well known that Lacan adds two new objects to the well-known Freudian series of the oral, the anal and the phallic object (the latter one is always outside the series because it retroactively re-signifies the others. The two new objects introduced by Lacan being the gaze and the voice.

The gaze is not an empirically observable and objectifiable object, it is an object even more intangible, more evanescent, than the voice, much more intangible even than the maternal breast or the excrement. We can record the voice in a material medium (now, for example, in a digital medium), but it is difficult to think about how to locate the gaze in some medium. In fact, it seems impossible to us. We can record images (today we do not stop doing it constantly with new technologies), but recording the gaze as such is not something obvious, not at all *evident* (pun intended). From the outset, in the gaze there is a division, a separation, between the image, which can be registered, and the fact of looking, the gaze, which cannot be registered as such.

And yet, we must emphasize the preeminent place of the gaze in our world and in our clinic, especially when we address the massive presence of screens and the space of virtual reality in which a good part of our activities take place, of our encounters and disagreements with the Other and with the experience of jouissance in the body. Today the gaze is at the very core of the subject's relationship with his body and with jouissance.

However, until Lacan, no one had considered the gaze as an object to capture the drive. There was talk of the drive to see, of voyeurism, of looking, was without a doubt, an activity of the drive. But to consider the gaze itself as an object that offers itself to the drive, that is an invention of Lacan that is only possible if we understand the place that the formalisation of the object *a* has in his teaching, an object that in fact has no fixed representation in the symbolic field of signifiers or in the imaginary field of images.

By the way, it was when preparing this intervention that I realised the large number of words that exist in English linked to the gaze as an object. Not only must we make the fundamental difference between to see and to look at, a difference that we find in a similar way in many languages. “*Look at me, and a thousand violins begin to play...*” —as Ella Fitzgerald sings— but if you only see me, no violins, nothing begins to play. In English, the field of vision is divided into a series of terms that are not so easy to distinguish in other languages. In addition to “to look,” with the whole series of prepositions that are a real headache for someone like me who doesn’t master the English language, we can find to watch, to glance, to gaze, to stare, to take a look, to gape, to peek... Without a doubt you will be able to appreciate it better than me, but there is a variety in English that does not exist in Spanish or Catalan. And there are reasons to wonder if this variety will not also define a diversity of possible drive routes around the place of the gaze as an object.

Let me give you two brief literary examples of the place of the gaze in the subjective structure as an object distinct from vision. The first one is from an Argentinean writer, Macedonio Fernández, in his “Papeles de Recienvenido” where he explains a scene from his childhood. Macedonio's mother was a dressmaker, and he explains:

[“Hasta la edad de seis años, yo entraba y salía de la salita de pruebas y ninguna de las clientas me veía, veía que yo andaba viendo. Todo fue descubrirse en casa que yo había cumplido los seis años para prohibirme la entrada bajo el pretexto de que yo antes veía y ahora miraba.”]

“Until the age of six, I went in and out of the dressing room and none of the clients was seeing me, seeing that I was seeing. But it was only when they found out at home that I had turned six, that I was forbidden to go in there on the pretext that before I used to see and now, I was watching.”

It is not just that the act of looking implies an active position, unlike the act of seeing which can be understood as passive. In fact, the drive is always active in each

subject; it is its *goal* that can be active or passive. At a given moment, a *jouissance* is supposed in the very act of looking, of an active goal of the drive that supposes a satisfaction of another order, sexual without a doubt. It is this dimension of *jouissance* that comes into play with the gaze as an object.

The second example is a short poem by the Spanish poet José Bergamín that shows us the most evanescent place of the gaze, reduced to nothingness:

*Tirabas piedras al agua
a ras de la superficie
para **ver** cómo saltaban.
Y al tercer o cuarto salto
la piedra se sumergía
y tu seguías **mirando**.*

You were throwing stones into the water // at the surface // to **see** how they were jumping. // And on the third or fourth jump // the stone dived // and you kept **watching**.

Watching...what? Watching nothing, watching an absence, watching the lack of the object that has disappeared. There, in the lack of the object, there is the gaze as an object itself. But it is an object that includes the lack itself as the $-f$ (this is the way Lacan writes this lack), the symbolic castration. We can write this important operation in the following way:

$$\frac{a}{-\varphi}$$

If the object (a) does not come to the place of this lack ($-\varphi$), of this loss, of this extraction of *jouissance*, then there can be some disturbances in the subject's reality, as we'll see later on.

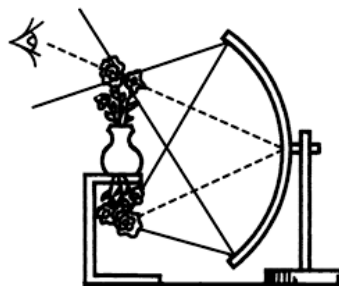
The gaze is, without a doubt, an elusive object when it comes to capturing it with the signifier. Its place in the register of the symbolic is not evident. But it is equally elusive if we try to place it in the register of the imaginary, for example, in the images of a memory. It would seem easier to place it in relation to images and the shape of bodies, as Lacan developed it in the well-known “Mirror Stage.” It seems obvious: the child constructs his own bodily unity by seeing his image in the mirror. At the same time, it is by holding onto the mother's gaze that the unity is confirmed. Thus, the body image and its unity obtains its consistency in the primary identification of the Self. There is, however, false evidence (“evidence,” worth the word) in the immediate capture of the gaze by the imaginary. It is, as that expression of Poe says in his story “The Purloined Letter” that Lacan underlined: “a little too self-evident.” (*Evident*, is a word that comes from Latin *evidens*: “clearly seen.”)

I propose to you a simple experience to question this evidence. Choose a childhood memory, the clearest one that each of you can remember right now. It is an imaginary scene, undoubtedly marked by some special and singular impression. You see yourself there, in a certain place in the scene, whether alone or with some others: you are there (as we find written on some maps: you are here). Now, where are you looking at yourself from within the framework of this scene? You are looking at yourself from somewhere, no doubt, a place that seems external to the scene, as if it were the camera that was recording it for the memory. But then, where you see yourself is not where you are looking at yourself from. The place where you see yourself and the place from which you look at yourself are necessarily two different places. Or also (let's say it slowly): the place from which you were looking at the other in that moment of the scene is not necessarily the place where you are now seeing yourself in it. In any case, it is not possible that you were in both places at the same time, where you see yourself and where you look at yourself from.

This small observation is already a confirmation of that Freudian maxim according to which every memory is a screen memory. The original experience, if we can call it that, has undoubtedly been deformed, transformed, reedited we don't know how many times until now, at the moment of remembering the scene. And

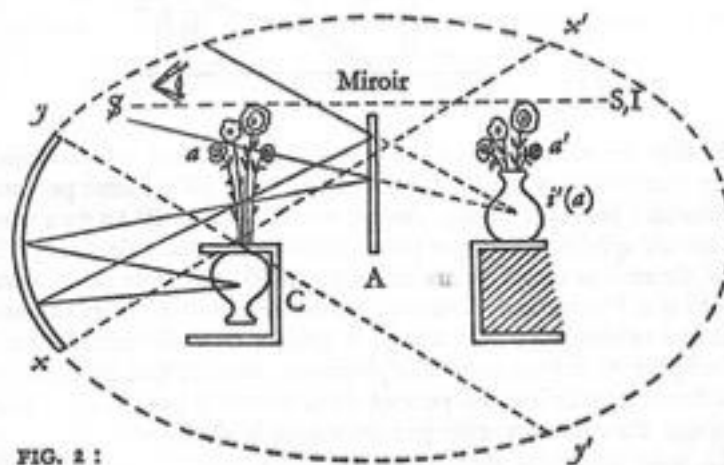
there are reasons to suppose that this difference between the place where you see yourself and the place from which you look at yourself already occurred in the first memory of the original experience, an experience that has then necessarily been lost in the mists of time. There is no way to represent the place of gaze in the scene, a place that is different from the place where you see yourself in the scene itself.

We could symbolize that place, both interior and exterior to the scene itself, with the image of an eye. This is what Lacan already did in his first optical schema of the 1950s where he situated the place of the subject correlative to an embodied gaze, in a undoubtedly deceptive way, in an eye. I say “in a deceptive way” because later, in the sixties, Lacan will precisely distinguish the eye from the gaze, especially in Seminar XI “The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis.” But in his first optical schema, the subject of the signifier and the drive subject are symbolised by the image of an eye. It is the subject reduced to an evanescent gaze, as in that story by Vladimir Nabokov, “The Eye,” where the subject is reduced to an eye after his frustrated suicide. “The Eye” which, as Paul Auster says in his “Autobiography of the Eye,” maintains the ambiguity in English with “I,” the I. When it comes to the register of the image and the gaze, there is always the illusion of self-consciousness, present in all the psychology of our days, a self-consciousness that could only be apprehended in a gaze that is impossible to represent. This self-consciousness would be the voyeuristic subject par excellence, who can look everywhere without being seen anywhere. Well, Lacan places the subject of the signifier and the drive experience in this eye of his first optical schema:



The subject symbolised by this eye is exterior to the image produced by the concave mirror, the image that is equivalent to the image of one's own body. The concave mirror creates an optical illusion that Lacan designates as a “real image,” different from the virtual image that would be produced in a flat mirror. Here the bouquet of flowers, which is hidden from the direct gaze of the subject, is reproduced in an inverted image as a real image that is located right at the mouth of the vase, so that an illusion of unity is produced between the flowers (the object) and the vase (the body). It is the illusion that also occurs in any representation of one's own body, or also in a simple memory. It is a delusion, a kind of *trompe-l'oeil*, because if instead of a concave mirror there were a flat mirror, the flowers could not be seen, they could not be reflected in the image in the vase mouth. This impossibility, which does not occur with illusion or optics of the concave mirror, is what Lacan will note with the *-f* of castration: the object as such cannot be reflected in a flat mirror, it can only be produced as a “real image” by placing itself in a certain perspective. Outside of this perspective, the flowers disappear where we expect to see them. This absence, this lack of the object where we expected to see it reveals to us its true nature as an object, that of being in the place of a lack, of the *-f* of symbolic castration without which the object itself would have no existence in the symbolic world of the subject.

This optical schema will be developed by Lacan in his first seminars as a model of the Freudian psychic apparatus, to show the relationship, not at all obvious, of the subject with his body image and with the drive objects. (See his text “Observations on Daniel Lagache's report ‘Psychoanalysis and Personality Structure.’” I am not going to explain the entire schema. I am only going to underline that the $\$$ (the divided subject) is located at the same place as the eye.



In order to pose the place of the gaze, let's go back to the first schema that is more simple. We can suppose the gaze supported by the eye that symbolises the subject, \$, outside the real image of his body. But we can also suppose the gaze somewhere else in the concave mirror. We can suppose the gaze located in the concave mirror itself, at the spot from where the hidden real flowers could be seen. From there, from this place that is outside the body, the real flowers could be seen, but they would be seen separated from the real vase that is the subject's body. At this point, body and object are separated, they only obtain their unity seen from the place of the eye. From the spot in the mirror they would not form a unity, the object is not located in the body. In any case, the gaze is always outside the imaginary unity of the body.

At this point, we can invert the question: is the subject looking at the flowers or are the flowers looking at the subject? The expression “the gaze of the flowers” can be understood both ways. And it is the second one that interests Lacan to locate the true place of the gaze. In some way, we could say that, in this optical illusion, as in any representation —whether a painting, a memory or reality itself—the flowers are looking at the subject.

This eye in Lacan's optical scheme is just a metaphor for the subject that is outside the body, outside the I, it is an extimate place — to return to the term “extimacy” emphasised by Jacques-Alain Miller — an interior and exterior place at

the same time. It is undoubtedly a concession in the imaginary register of something that has no possible representation, the divided subject of the Freudian unconscious. We usually call this original experience “the real.”

Let us return then to our experience of the screen memory. There was there, at the origin of that scene, what we call an encounter with the real, more or less traumatic, more or less marked by an experience of *jouissance*. But it is very striking that it is through the imaginary scene in the memory that the place of the gaze is presented to us as impossible to represent. If I try to translate it in words, I immediately encounter a difficulty to designate that interior and exterior place of the gaze. It is a difficulty similar to what I might encounter if I want to describe in words, for example, a knot. Try it, try for example to describe in words not only the complex Borromean knot that Lacan uses but a simple trefoil knot (*nudo de trébol*). You will immediately find an impossibility. The imaginary register, the register of the image, is necessary to show the topology of a knot. And that is why Lacan, at the end of his teaching, resorted to the topology of knots and the imaginary to address the real, impossible to represent, of the knot and the object *a*.

In the knot that embraces this place of the object in the structure of the fantasy, there is always an error of account between the subject and the I. In effect, every memory is then a screen memory: you could not be in the place from where you look at yourself. And it is not certain that you were there where you see yourself. The entire space of representations is built around an object that could not be there, it is built around a lack. There is always a *trompe-l'oeil* when it comes to the gaze. The gaze deceives more than any other object, it is, as Lacan points out, “*the one that most completely evades the term of castration,*” that of the lack in the Other.

By the way, and here I am going to resort to a memory from adolescence, there was a fun game, as malicious as it was indicative of this impossibility in the field of sexuality and its relationship with the topology of knots. A girl was asked — it also worked with a boy, but it was certainly different — to explain to us, only in words and in the simplest way possible, how to tie the knot on her shoelaces. It was, of course, something very difficult (I must assume that it is also difficult in English) and the

whole point was to hear it in a sexual way without the narrator knowing: you take one of the cords and pass it over the other, then you do it go under it to the other side, you grab it very tightly and be careful not to let it escape, and then you take the tip of the first one and put it through the hole that has been left in the other one so that you embrace it; and finally you press very hard so that everything is well held and united.

The series of words and expressions immediately took on a sexual significance for those who had the key to the code, the key to the phallic signification, the key to the phallus as the master signifier.

The interesting thing was the place of the gaze in this entire game. By leaving aside any possible recourse to images to show the operations for tying a knot in plain sight, the place of the gaze involved in the scene that each person imagined as best he could appear even more clearly. The game could be done perfectly with closed eyes to make the central place of the gaze appear as an object, even better. Here is also the place of the subject reduced to an evanescent gaze that is at the very core of the relationship with the body and with *jouissance*. Wherever the gaze is presented as an object, there the subject fades away, and where the subject becomes present it is the gaze that fades from the scene.

In fact, this structure —which Lacan will formalise with the formula of the fantasy: $\$ \langle a \rangle$ — already presents us with the paradox evoked by Lacan in his Seminar what we call “consciousness.” Consciousness (or also cognition in its modern version of psychology of our days) is a “*scamotage*,” (a trick), it always has something deceptive with respect to the true position of the subject. Lacan evokes, in a critical reading of “The Visible and the Invisible” by his friend Maurice Merleau Ponty that had just been published, a phrase by Paul Valery in “La Jeune Parque,” where the subject captures himself as seeing oneself. “Je me voyais me voir” (I saw myself seeing myself). In every memory we find ourselves “seeing ourselves” and this is the deception, the *trompe-l'oeil*. At this point, there is always a fundamental deception which is the deception of consciousness itself. When it comes to consciousness, “an avoidance takes place of the function of the gaze,” as Lacan says. There is something that slips in like a necessary and inevitable deception at

the moment in which the subject believes he apprehends himself “seeing himself.” There is, in the space of the gaze, a reversibility that hides the true function of the gaze as an object. When the I of the subject is located in that scene of “seeing oneself” there is always a radical ignorance of the place of the gaze as an object. It is the same lack of knowledge that we must attribute to the very idea of consciousness or the subject of cognition. To the point that Lacan will say that what is inappropriate is to speak of consciousness itself. It is something that still needs to be made understood by the psychology of our days, which continues to confuse the Self and the subject.

This correlative gaze of the subject in the fantasy is, without a doubt, an evanescent object, which can never be completely representable in the field of signifiers, which can only appear for a moment among the signifiers to immediately vanish, disappearing from the representations.

It is, however, an object that we can locate very well already in the Freudian clinic. So much so that we can say that the gaze was for Freud the model of the fetish object par excellence. Let's see, for example, Freud's text on “Fetishism” (1927) where he exposes a very unique case of fetishism, with an object that seems to silently cross the border between languages (English and German in this case). This is the famous example of fetishism exposed in the second paragraph of the text:

“The most extraordinary case seemed to me to be the one in which a young man had exalted a certain sort of “shine on the nose” into a fetishistic precondition. The surprising explanation of this was that the patient had been brought up in a nursery in Britain but had later come to Germany, where he forgot his mother-tongue almost completely. The fetish, which originated from his earliest childhood, had to be understood in English, not German. The “shine on the nose” [in German ‘Glanz auf der Nase’] was in reality a “glance at the nose.” The nose was thus the fetish, which, incidentally, he endowed at will with the luminous shine which was not perceptible to others.” (Freud, 1927, p. 152)

Is there anything more intangible, more evanescent than a shine as a support for the gaze as an object? Freud indicates that the fetish object is the nose, but in

reality it is the nose plus the brightness that supports the gaze (the glance). Surely if that shine appeared in another part of the Other's body it would not have that value as a fetish object, but that shine is what it constitutes the fetish. The true fetish object is the “glance,” a quick short look over the nose. Quick and short, almost nothing, but not nothing. Or even, three times nothing, as Lacan says about the gaze in Dante's meeting with his beloved Beatrice. In Freud's example, it is a momentary object, which is situated in a small interval between two signifiers, between two different languages, an object that appears only to immediately disappear, but which is essential to cause the subject's desire.

There is one element that must be highlighted: the signifier “glance” belongs to the mother tongue that has been almost completely forgotten by the subject and only reappears in the German language through a play on the letter: Glanz – Glance. To the point that we can ask ourselves if the letter itself is not the true material support of that object captured, surrounded, by the signifier. It is something we will have to return to.

Let us also point out the crucial place that the gaze object has in another Freudian case, the case of the Wolf Man, especially in his famous dream of the five wolves sitting on the branches of the tree. We have the illustration that the wolfman himself made to show to everyone after his dream became famous.



Those five wolves are staring ... at who? In reality, Freud tells us, that gaze is the gaze of the subject himself before the primary scene, the scene of the parents' sexual relationship. But then, the good question is who or what are the five wolves looking at inside the dream. It would be too hasty to say that they are looking at the subject, because the subject is not represented in the dream, because the subject is that gaze itself. Lacan points it out in Seminar XI: in every dream something “is shown” but it is impossible for the subject to be able to capture himself in the dream as the one who is looking at: “[The subject] could in no case grasp himself in the dream in the way in which, in the Cartesian *cogito* he grasps himself as a thinking subject. He may say to himself — It’s just a dream. But he cannot grasp himself as the one who says to himself ‘but despite everything I am the consciousness of this dream.’” That is to say, in the dream there is no one who can capture himself as consciousness of that dream, there is no one who can see himself looking as it can happen in a memory, in a way that is undoubtedly always concealing. This impossibility is at the very core of this singular object that is the gaze.

So, Lacan's question in Seminar XI is fully justified: “If the gaze is this reverse side of consciousness, how are we going to try to imagine it?” Of all objects, it is the most impossible to apprehend, to capture.

It is that the reversibility of the gaze in the imaginary space radically hides its place as an object. It is something that does not happen in the same way, for example, with the object voice. I can look at the other and be looked at, at the same time by the other, at the same moment. But I cannot speak to the other at the same moment that the other speaks to me.

As Marcel Duchamp said: you can see (*voir*) looking at (*regarder*), but you cannot hear (*entendre*) listening (*écouter*). Although sometimes we could say that, in the analytical device, it does seem that in the silence of the analyst you can hear someone listening. But it's just a guess. On the contrary, in the field of gaze this reversibility seems evident, but it is a reciprocity that is actually misleading, in fact, as misleading as the assumption of reciprocity in the register of gaze. In the field of speaking beings, all reciprocity is deceptive, and that is why Lacan very soon abandoned the idea of an “intersubjectivity” that he himself had supported, for

example, when talking about transference. There is no possible intersubjectivity, for the simple reason that the subject is always supposed. That is the meaning of the Lacanian expression “sujet suppose savoir,” subject supposed to know: it’s a subject to which knowledge is supposed, but it’s also a subject supposed to knowledge itself.

In the imaginary register of vision, the illusion of intersubjectivity, of reciprocity between two subjects, occurs much more easily than when it comes to other drive registers.

And it is not for nothing that the couch is in the analytical setting. Curiously, it is when the subject lies in the couch that the gaze itself can appear as an object. And sometimes there are subjects who cannot bear this appearance of the gaze as an object; they may experience it as an irruption into reality, and this goes beyond the clinical difference that we can establish between neurosis and psychosis.

I now make a brief observation that is not a simple technical indication. In fact, there are no “technical” indications in psychoanalysis, it is always about the clinical touch that we must have in the singularity of each case. I must say that I have never understood this kind of clinical prescription, an often tacit assumption, when it is maintained that the couch should not be used with subjects for whom we are certain of a diagnosis of psychosis. Sometimes it happens that a psychotic subject can talk more calmly on the couch, without having the analyst face to face. And, on the other hand, we know very well that there are people, who we do not doubt are neurotic, who cannot stand talking stretched out on the couch. Surely sometimes because the analyst has been hasty in offering them to lie on the couch. Or not, but the subject has the need to verify the presence of the analyst who must be there, listening to him. In the case of psychosis, the clinical problem is whether the subject sees himself observed from anywhere (from everywhere) or not, or from where he feels observed.

I will give an example: in a preliminary interview, a subject explained to me that, while on the beach a few days before, he felt that the waves were speaking to him. It was an hallucination, it was not a false perception as someone trained in psychiatry or psychology today might still think. The murmur of the waves became

a hallucination, the appearance of a signifier in the real (we will say repeating Lacan's indication in Seminar 3 on “Psychoses”). It was a message that was addressed to him in what Lacan calls a phenomenon of allusion. It was the moment of an unleashing in which he felt watched by everyone who was on the beach. There, the place of gaze extended to the entire beach as a whole, like a space opposite to the sound of the waves that spoke to him. He couldn't and didn't want to turn around, because there was no need to verify that everyone was watching him, it was a certainty. Furthermore, in his delusion, everyone blamed him for a problem that arose in his family regarding an inheritance and that would take a long time to explain. Then, during the interview, the phone happens to ring and I have a short conversation. Just hanging up the phone, the guy tells me with equal certainty: "It was the police, they saw that I was coming here to talk to you." From there, it was clear that my place in the transference was not easy to handle. I held all the interviews face to face with this subject, although in many moments without looking directly at him, looking a little to the side. But the gaze was there, located as a sign that, at least, the gaze was not everywhere.

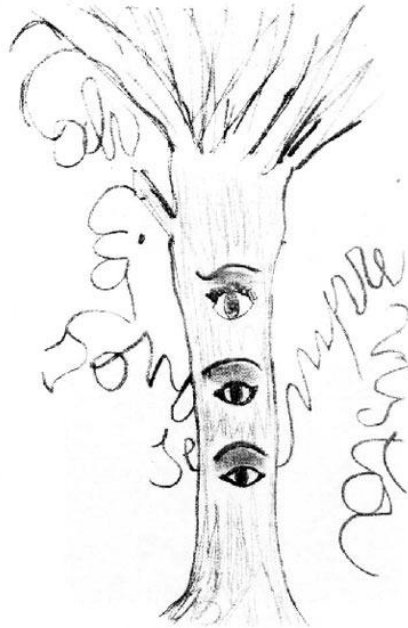
But this case showed me more about the gaze as an object. It showed me that the gaze can be perfectly sustained by a noise, (the waves murmur, the telephone rings or any other thing). A noise can also be the support of a gaze, just as we can experience when we walk through a forest and suddenly hear the crack of a branch: we immediately assume a gaze in that place. The place of the gaze can very well be the place of a sound.

Where, then, is the gaze? What is the place of the gaze? You see that it is the most evanescent object, impossible to represent by any image, it only finally appears as a stain in the painting, a stain that does not see anything but that looks at the subject from that central point of its blindness.

The scopic object is finally this stain, and also a blind stain, but also a stain that is only visible after the subject itself is captured as a gaze.

The subjective structure itself is constituted in the fantasy by the extraction of this object from reality. If that object is not extracted from reality, leaving this blind spot in it, everything can be a sign of a gaze: it is paranoia when it takes the form of

delusion, or schizophrenia when that absolute gaze takes over the subject's own body, as in the example of the case that Lacan evokes in Seminar “Anxiety,” the case known with the Italian sentence: “Io sono sempre vista” (I'm always seen). Here is the drawing that the subject himself made to try to fix that impossible place of the gaze that invaded his body.



This place of the gaze runs through all of Lacan's teaching, although it has its central place in Seminar XI. But it was already very well indicated in Lacan's first seminar, although not developed. The gaze object is homologous to the object that Lacan presents to us very early in his seminar on Poe's short story titled “The Purloined Letter.” Read that wonderful story again taking into account what we have said about the object gaze, read Lacan's text that opens his *Écrits* by doing a precise reading of Poe's story in his seminar, and you will see what is the place of the gaze. You will see it without seeing it, of course, like in the adolescent game that I told you before. In Poe's story, the place of the gaze is precisely the place of the letter that hides itself from the sight of all the characters, except from the insight of Detective Dupin. In fact, Poe's entire story, with its two scenes, is organised around the gaze as an object, an object that is finally in the place of the letter, a place that is visible

to everyone, but also hidden from the view of each one. Its strange topology is the topology of the letter.

In the first scene, the famous and compromising letter is there on the queen's dressing table. The king sees nothing, the queen sees that the king sees nothing, and the minister sees that the queen sees that the king sees nothing.

In the second scene it is the scientific police who see nothing, it is the minister who sees that the police see nothing, and it is Dupin who, seeing that the minister believes he is protected in this game of blind glances, takes the letter. with his gaze well hidden behind his dark glasses.

Let us say, then, that the gaze as an object is in the place of the letter itself, like that “immense woman's body that spreads out in space” —as Lacan remarks.

Conclusion: there, in the place of the gaze supported by the letter, there is a blind spot, there the subject sees nothing. He sees nothing or, rather, it is this nothingness that looks at him to divide him as the subject of the experience of the gaze.