

AFTER THE IMAGE

The Synaesthetics of Disappearance

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The world as we see it is passing away

Paul of Tarsus, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*

The unity of the senses is no longer anything but the formal expression of a fundamental contingency: the fact that we are in the world.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*

1.

Sometimes a book is just as good as a quote – from yet another book, destined to remain unread (I haven't been able to find it anywhere) – it shares with us *in passing* .

In Elaine Scarry's succinct yet inspiring treatise *On Beauty and Being Just* , I think, for instance, of the following priceless passage:

“We make a mistake, says Seamus Heaney, if, driving down a road between wind and water, overwhelmed by what we see, we assume we will see “it” better if we stop the car. It is there in the passage.”¹

This is a little bit how (and what) I feel, in a brief summation, when I ‘watch’ both the paintings and films of Roland Schimmel – both of which very consciously and deftly obfuscate the boundaries between the still (painterly) and moving (filmic) image, and hence also between ‘watching’ (I watch movies) or ‘looking’ (I look at paintings) and ‘seeing’ (I see art) as such. The images, i.e. the “it” of Schimmel's art, are quite literally “in the passage”, that is, in the exchange between both modes of viewing and types of motion (a still image is really only a *very* slowly moving one) – and our experience of these

¹ Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* , Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999, p. 51.

images precisely in the nimble footwork of “the glance” as our eyes stealthily dart across the painted surface or, alternately, casually scan the luminous, immaterial bodies of projected bundles of light. I do *not* see it better when “I stop the car” of my gaze, i.e. concentrate on an illusory ideal of ‘the’ image in front of me – and there is no getting “out of the car” (my body) either: my experience of the image is wholly conditioned by the charge of embodiment. I am a *body* looking at the world, always moving *in* and *through* the world.

I have ‘seen’ Roland Schimmel’s work on a number of occasions, but the crucial experience in this respect – and *experience*, of course, is the key term here – has been that of his monumental semi-murals, executed and installed at the Museum Boijmans-van Beuningen in Rotterdam in the summer of 2006 (“Blind Spot”) and at Culturgest in Porto in the spring of 2007 (“Psychoscope”). Indeed, in these overwhelming, immersive works, differing primarily in the curvature of their quasi-circular embrace², I rightly wonder what “it” is I am supposed to see: the subtle interplay of shimmering colour nuances? A virtuoso display of airbrush technique, or the artist’s sfumato

² The curvature of Rotterdam’s *Blind Spot* was only faintly visible, but no less ‘effective’ because of it; if this work retained a stronger painterly character, this was primarily so because it was easier to retain the standard spectatorial position that has helped to define painting as an art of surface, flatness and depthlessness: one simply stands “in front” of it. Porto’s *Psychoscope*, however, was a much more immersive affair, and much less unilaterally ‘painterly’ because of it: the piece consists of a perfect *theatron* (literally a “place made for seeing”, as in Ancient Greece’s Epidauros) which one has to *enter* rather than merely observe from afar, thereby thoroughly unsettling the behavioral limits of the experience of painting. It is literally a painting which one has to walk into, its architecture thus invoking both the critique of ‘theatricality’ that was levelled, four decades ago, against the sculptural practice of Minimalism as part of its challenge of the dominance of colour field painting in American art (a paradigm which in a sense also informs our view of the work of Roland Schimmel), and the tradition of the *panorama* as an early predecessor of cinematic modes of viewing – the precise historical juncture where painting’s art of the still image is subsumed into the cinematic apparatus of the moving image; we will be returning to this dialectic shortly.

variation on the modernist paradigm of the grid? Those elusive, bewildering black holes perhaps? The paintings' quasi-architectural structural support?³ *The barrage of after-images which all these elements in the work convene to produce?* This process of perceptual wonder and resultant self-questioning in itself strongly resembles "the passage" which Heaney talks about (by way of Scarry): once again, contemplating *Psychoscope* is a little bit like driving through a 'fuzzy' landscape, where stopping the car and getting out to get a better look or view will only reveal that the fuzziness was never *in* the landscape, but a consequence of the complex interplay between the speed of the car, the contingency of my perceptual inclinations at that very time and place, *and* the appearance of the landscape under these conditions. Similarly, *Psychoscope* as a work of art is both a perceptual machine *and* the hypothetical totality of all the perceptual experiences it calls forth; the art is both *in* the painting and *in* the viewing – or in the passage from one world (that of the painting's material conditions) into the other (that of the immateriality of the spectacle it engenders). Spending some time inside the dreamworld of *Psychoscope* – I will be coming back to the temporal dimension of Schimmel's work shortly – I dream up a number of questions, such as: *What* exactly did I see, and was it always there at all – or just in the eyes of the embodied beholder? And if the latter is true, am I allowed to conclude that I did not see *anything* at all? *Where*, then, is the artwork – in the image, which may be said to exist (I see it there, "before my eyes"), or in the after-image, which may be said to be nothing but a figment of our neurogenic imagination (I *also* see it "before my eyes")? In short, does an image really exist as an autonomous, extraneous entity, or does it really only come into being *by my laying eyes upon it?*

³ In the Rotterdam work in particular, the crudely architectural flipside of the painting seems to have been an integral part of the installation piece; the viewer was granted an insight into the actual building process, thus challenging the work's implicit claim of seamless ("trompe-l'oeuil") opticality – another reason why (see also note 4) Roland Schimmel's work escapes the narrow functionalism of classical Op Art, a 'genre' which it of course refers back to.

Of course, these questions arise primarily *because* of the well-defined, quasi-scientific nature of Schimmel's painterly method, to which we must now summarily turn; they are the side-effects (or, more appropriate still, *afterimages*) of the artist's technique of choice: the meticulous, time-consuming (and dizzying) application of several layers of airbrushed paint on a slightly curved surface to form an even grid of flickering colour fields into which a number of perfectly circular black dots – of a matted, deep blackness that absorbs all light – are 'inserted'; the black orbs inevitably become the focus of the viewer's attention, causing the surrounding tapestry of primary colour nuances to ripple with the shimmering motion of image and afterimage, of "visual images that remain briefly after light stimulation has ended". [As I write this down, I am again reminded of the severe limitations of descriptive language, which become all the more glaringly apparent when the object under consideration is a *machine for sensory overload*; perhaps the only way for language to counter this deficit is by producing its own 'overload', which would be *poetry* – a fact all too cannily understood by Elaine Scarry.] Watching both *Blind Spot* and *Psychodrome* thereby become positively hallucinogenic experiences that easily outclass the mechanistic painting-by-numbers effect of much psychedelic painting or Op Art; the sheer size of the paintings – they are *murals* after all, and thus partake in an art history that is beyond the immediate grasp of psychedelia⁴ – makes for an experience of

⁴ For one, the history of mural painting is closely connected to that of the transformation of public space; the mural is the most easily politicized of all painting formats and tropes, and its most emblematic practitioners are also painting's most political figures: Diego Rivera, David Siqueros, José Orozco. Other, anonymous examples – their anonymity further proof of the depth of their roots in an experience of communality – include the famed murals of Belfast and Angeleno gangland graffiti. In contrast, the historical phenomenon of Op Art (and much of its three-dimensional double, kinetic art) was strongly connected to ideas of interiority and the bourgeois private sphere – it worked perfectly (and primarily) in private interiors ("head space"), and moved effortlessly into the realm of commodities, that is, of interior design objects. Op Art always fulfilled its promise of desorientation and perceptual deregulation on the easily controlled, comfortable scale of *home entertainment*. It must be added here, however, that, interestingly, quite a few Op Art practices where

immersion and perceptual loss that is not easily accomplished in the two-dimensional realm of painting (or even sculpture, for that matter).

Psychoscope does not so much *require* a distinct mode of viewing – it *produces* and seduces us into it. This spectatorial mode seems closely connected to a particular experience of time and temporality – or, more poignantly still, of *timelessness*. Both *Blind Spot* and *Psychoscope*, by virtue of their size as well as their dioptrics, beg the following question already hinted at above: *where* do I look? [Or: *where* is the artwork?⁵ Both questions can easily be rephrased – in accordance with the reigning view of quantum physics – as follows: *when* do I look, and *when* is the artwork?] Like some of the best Op Art – the early works of Victor Vasarély come to mind, as do Joseph Albers and Bridget Riley of course – *Blind Spot* and *Psychoscope* succeed in replacing the question of the *object* of art with that of the *event* of art, asking of us no longer “what” art is, but how, when and where art *happens*. The experience of art as provided for by these artworks is no longer merely located in a tightly circumscribed object, but literally in our time spent in front of or inside this object. Sitting in front of/inside *Psychoscope* – it is worth stressing here once again to what extent the irresolvable ambiguity of my position with regards to the work plays into the hallucinogenic quality of

rooted in the utopian notion of collective art making, such as the Italian Gruppo N and Gruppo T; their work was perhaps the most straightforwardly ‘scientific’ of all Op Art microgenres, necessitating the team spirit that is typical of most ‘hard’ scientific activity. Similarly, the peculiar ‘hardness’ of certain aspects of Roland Schimmel’s work – the hard edges of his black dots, for instance – reveal a certain positivist streak in the man’s view of art (he is an avid reader of neuroscientific literature, after all).

⁵ Incidentally, the question of art’s ‘location’ strongly mirrors that posed by German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk with regards to Man in his magnum opus *Sphären* (which remains, scandalously, untranslated into English to this date): not *what* but *where* man is, is contemporary culture’s most pressing question. The figure of the sphere (bubble, circle, dome, globe, orb, pod) is an evidently recurring theme in Sloterdijk’s book, which of course squares rather felicitously with the shape of the black dots in Roland Schimmel’s mural paintings – the exact optical devices that lead our eyes to wonder *where* they should be looking next.

my experience of it – wondering where or what to look for next and whether I am *really* seeing those dazzling bubbles of white light emerge out of Schimmel’s oneiric panorama, I am in fact *waiting*; I am waiting, primarily, for the string of afterimages to subside, or for the next optical illusion to happen. I bide my time, and a mild paralysis of the body and mind – they cannot help but become one, after all, in the *Psychoscope* – starts to kick in. Inevitably, my eyes wander off, and with them also my mind; I lose the focus⁶, alertness and attentiveness that is generally associated with the experience of viewing art, and in doing so also lose track of time as that which co-conditions the relative quality of that exact experience. [A stringent economy of time rules the realm of aesthetic experience as a whole: it is time graciously squandered, as the Kantian doctrine of so-called disinterestedness asserts, but this time-wasting is really only allowed on condition of our total surrender to the work of art – an act that requires, precisely, the heightening of our attention, or “work”. Attention is a form of secular devotion, and its opposite, *distraction* – easily translated back into “entertainment” – the bane of all art.] I start staring instead of looking (let alone *seeing*), upon which I enter a dream-like state of definite absent-mindedness – and that of all the accordant experiences of trance, reverie, daydreaming and loss of awareness that come with it. In short, “I” seem to have *disappeared* – I am now “after the image”.⁷ To conclude: Roland Schimmel’s is not merely an aesthetic, but a *synaesthetic of disappearance*. The abysmal depths of *Psychoscope*’s radiating black dots – the eyes of a certain storm, described in the extensive quote below – enact this perceptual drama of bodily dissolution: by looking into these black holes (and away again, tracing the hypnotic trail of their

⁶ “What is actually fixing one’s gaze? From the point of view of the object (...), it is interrupting the *total life of the spectacle*” [my emphasis]; “this attitude does away with the spectacle properly speaking”. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Paris: Gallimard, 1945, p. 263.

⁷ Note the fortuitous homophony of “I” (*ego*) and “eye” (*oculus*): the dissolution of self is strongly connected to the idea of the dispersal of sight or the destabilization of the gaze as the organizing principle of spatial self-identification – and do the black dots in Roland Schimmel’s warped murals not resemble *eyes*?

rotund silhouettes across the shimmering expanse of Schimmel's mural), we become undone mind, body, and soul/spirit. On a related ('ocularcentric') note, here is what Hegel could have said, had he lived to 'see' *Psychoscope* – an experience I am sure he would have loved to encounter, if only for the salience with which it 'proves' the reality of the mind's possession of the image:

"When I look at something [*the word he uses is, of course, Anschauen*], what I look at *is in me* – for it is I, after all, who look at it; it is *my* looking. Spirit [*Geist*] steps out of this looking, and looks at its own looking – it looks at the object as its own. In this looking, Spirit *is* the image. (...) It becomes clear to Spirit that it is in and for itself [*an und fur sich*] – but to begin with, in looking, Spirit is only *an sich*. It complements this being-in-itself with being-for-itself – with negativity and separation from the in-itself – and goes back into itself. It takes its first self as an object, i.e., the *image, and Being as mine, that is, as negated*.

This image *belongs* to Spirit. Spirit is in possession of the image; it is its master. It is stored in Spirit's treasury – in its Night. The image is unconscious; it is not displayed as an object for representation. *The human being is this Night*, this empty nothing that contains everything in its simplicity – an unending wealth of representations and images, none of which belong to him, or which are not present. (...) *One catches sight of this night when one looks human beings in the eye – into a night that becomes terrifying* [this, finally, is Hegel's fabled "Night of the World"].⁸

2.

And why do I hear *music* when sitting in front of Roland Schimmel's *Psychoscope* ? Why does the impression or imagination of *sound* come naturally to the beholder sat 'inside' the artist's purpose-built Dreamachine?⁹

⁸ G. W. F. Hegel, *Jenaer Realphilosophie 1805-1806. Manuscripts for the Philosophy of Nature and the Spirit*, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1969.

⁹ The reference here is to the 'original' Dreamachine, a stroboscopic flicker device built by Brion Gysin and Ian Sommerville in the early sixties – the visual stimuli of which were best experienced when 'viewed' *with eyes closed* . The Dreamachine has become something of a cult object in contemporary art circles, and has resurfaced repeatedly to claim a central place in many exhibitions dedicated to synaesthesia and psychedelic art, such as *Sons & Lumières: une histoire du son dans l'art du XXème*

Because the sense experience of sound is by definition that of an immersion *in* sound, of *ambience* ? Indeed, unlike the image, which is always – no matter how close by – “over there”, there is no way to be “opposite” sound – sound is *around* us, envelops and engulfs us in ways that are literally un-imaginable for vision and image alike, a ‘fact’ that has been made overwhelmingly clear by the most important revolution in sound design of the last couple of decades – that of the home entertainment industry’s so-called “surround sound” technology. And what *I*, at least, seem to be ‘hearing’ inside the *Psychoscope* are precisely ambient, environmental sounds; nothing too linear or song-like to be sure – it would be hard to imagine a human voice emerging from the tightly woven, shapeshifting mosaic of colour fields that make up Schimmel’s immersive mural – but a hypnotically steady hum and drone that inevitably bring to mind the long history of ‘incidental music’, of sound devised for *seeing* as much as *hearing* (as is the case, for instance, in the sound pieces composed by David Lopato for Roland Schimmel’s *Blind Spot* film triptych, which were included in the ROMA Publications group show held in Lisbon’s Culturgest exhibition spaces in the spring of 2006 – incidentally, my first ever exposure to the work of Roland Schimmel).

Or am I merely hearing the hum and drone of the *building* that houses *Psychoscope* – a reminder, instead, that every space comes with its own acoustic, which the work of art installed inside it will either (using methods that are very hard to describe) amplify or diminish? Yes, maybe: if the mere experience of being inside and/or merely seeing *Psychoscope* thus enables the transformation of an optical environment into a truly multisensory one, the work of art becomes a machine for synaesthesia – for simultaneously seeing

siècle at the Centre Pompidou in Paris (2005), the aptly titled *Visual Music* at the Hirschhorn Museum in Washington (2005), *Timewave Zero/The Politics of Ecstasy* in the Kunstverein Graz (2002), and in the proverbial mother of all such exhibitions, *The Responsive Eye*, held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1965.

Additionally, British artist Cerith Wyn Evans has also made his own version of Gysin’s Dreamachine, keeping the title of the original device even; this work was shown in the 2006 exhibition *The Projection Project* at MuHKA in Antwerp, on the occasion of which Roland Schimmel’s *Blind Spot* film triptych was also screened.

sound and hearing light, and for a whole proliferation of bodily sensations that contaminate and undermine the impossible ideality of 'pure', disembodied visual experience. In this regard, my response to the perceptual mechanics of Roland Schimmel's work strongly resembles the cinematic experience of the movie-goer; hence the artist's own interest, no doubt, in the phenomenological basics of the film medium, the most emphatically synaesthetic of all art forms: it is precisely cinema's in-built appeal to a truly synaesthetic mode of viewing ('sensing') that has made film into the quintessential art form of the modern age – and the filmmaker the envy of many an aspiring artist who stubbornly holds on to the arch-modern Wagnerian dream of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* ...¹⁰

While on the subject of (nineteenth-century) music, moreover: for some reason or other, I am (again) reminded here of Fernand Khnopff's "En écoutant Schumann", a masterpiece of late nineteenth-century Belgian symbolism now on view at the Musée Royal des Beaux Arts in Brussels, depicting a young woman of impeccable bourgeois stock sitting in a sumptuous fin-de-siècle décor *listening to Robert Schumann* – a visual representation of the sensation of organized sound. The title of the painting suggests no work of his in particular, but I'd like to imagine it must either be the Kreisleriana or his Fantasiestücke. Why piano pieces? It takes a trained eye to discern, but all the way in the upper left corner of the painting, the viewer will come across the bodiless right arm of a piano player – a true test of vision, as it requires him or her to literally *look away* from the drama at the centre of the picture and allow his or her eyes to wander off towards the edges of the painting, where *looking* inevitably turns to *seeing* and 'attention' becomes duly dispersed – a dialectic of decentralization that in turn reflects that of Schimmel's own work. Indeed, my gaze leisurely and quasi-

¹⁰ It was precisely the magisterial, totalizing 'illusionism' of the Wagnerian operatic apparatus that Theodor Adorno, an avowed life-long enemy of Hollywood film culture, found so objectionable and (stretching his criticism a notch or two) proto-fascistic; of all cinematic illusions sprang upon the 'captive' audience, moreover, it was that of *immersion* which he found most perfidious – the two-timing trademark of an art that hides the machinations of its own artness.

automatically strays off into the artwork's blurry 'surroundings' much like the pianist in Khnopff/Schumann's piece descends into the chasm on either side of the standard tonal repertoire, where high- and low-frequency sounds mutate into ethereal tinkling and chthonic rumbling respectively. In other words, the visual experience of the picture seemingly mimics the auditory experience of "surround sound" (that of Schumann's piano music in this case) – of losing oneself ('disappearing') in the experience of listening/hearing much as one may lose oneself in thought or in the precise thoughtlessness of, say, an orgasm. Khnopff's painting, in short, is a monument to music's spellbinding powers of absorption – and I find this *depiction* of the drama of absorption to be strangely corresponding to my own experience of sensory absorption in the work of Roland Schimmel. The crouching listener's obvious desire to simply disappear in the physical exposure to sound, or otherwise dissolve into the sheer oceanic experience of music engulfing the mind – in the painting, she shields her face from the viewer's penetrating, voyeuristic look, thus becoming a monumental lump of blackness not unlike James McNeill Whistler's *Mother* – in some sense also presages the pop culture utopianism of sixties psychedelic culture which so many contemporary art practices continue to reference, and which, in its turn, partly serves as a (humming) backdrop of sorts to my own reading of Roland Schimmel's *Psychoscope* : the (imagined) drone inside the *Psychoscope* definitely relates, in my experience of the work, to the (actual) drone inside the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall at the time of Olafur Eliasson's *Weather Project* , when an eternal man-made sunset drew thousands to the Tate each day for what looked like a post-utopian be-in. [I am glad to say that *Psychoscope* , in contrast, allows for a far more individualized, solipsistic experience of art – like Adorno, I get anxious around art experiences that require crowding around the work, or, worse still, where the artwork is *in* the crowding...]

The *Psychoscope* , in short, is a space between the ears – not just like being inside a painting, but like being *inside a head* .

Consider, by way of conclusion, the following passage from a famous tome of late twentieth-century philosophy:

“Significance is never without a white wall upon which it inscribes its signs and redundancies. Subjectification is never without a black hole in which it lodges its consciousness, passion, and redundancies. Since all semiotics are mixed and strata come at least in twos, it should come as no surprise that a very special mechanism is situated at their intersection. Oddly enough, it is a face: the *white wall/black hole* system. A broad face with white cheeks, a chalk face with eyes cut in for a black hole.”¹¹

The book, of course, is *Mille plateaux* by the great but late doyens of “French Theory”, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari; the chapter is titled “Year zero: Faciality”, and its characterization of the “abstract machine of facialization” not unlike my earlier description of Roland Schimmel’s *Psychoscope* : two black dots (however unevenly proportioned) on a white wall equals a face, simple as that – a fact immediately and intuitively grasped when one comes, quite literally, face to face with the *Psychoscope* . Interestingly, the artist himself also refers to the work – and this is no mere manner of speech – as an animate being rather than a thing or object: come night – the *Psychoscope* is illuminated by filtered daylight, coming in from above through a glass ceiling – it is as if ‘he’ or ‘she’ goes to sleep. As the sun starts to set and its light becomes more diffuse, the orb-like discs (‘eyes’) lose their absorptive, dizzying blackness, and the hallucinogenic effect of the mural starts to slow down and give way to a subdued, dispersed sense of drowsiness; all of a sudden, *Psychoscope* seems to be blinking and squinting, and I wonder what the work looks like at night – *does it close its eyes ??*

In this suggestion of ‘faciality’, we feel as much looked at as active onlookers

¹¹ Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *Mille plateaux v. 2: capitalisme et schizophrénie* , Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1980; translated by Brian Massumi as *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* , Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

ourselves; *Psychoscope* returns our gaze with a revenge – that of hypnosis and trance, of what I have already referred to as mild state of paralysis. To return, once more, to Hegel’s originary phenomenological intuition: when I look at something, what I look at is (already) in me. This looking is a bodily, i.e. synaesthetic gaze: painting speaks not just to the eyes and the visual brain, but to the body as a whole – to *my* body, that “fabric into which all objects are woven”¹², as my vessel in a world of multiple sensations.

¹² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, op. cit. Part 3 of said book, “The World as Perceived”, is particularly fruitful for deepening one’s appreciation of the work of Roland Schimmel; the opening sentence of the chapter in questions reads as follows: “Our own body is in the world as the heart is in the organism: it keeps the visible spectacle constantly alive”, p. 235.