CHAPTER XX

THE NEW DIALECTICS OF SEEING

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Introduction

In 2018 I was accepted for a research residency with The Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge. As a visitor/researcher to the museum collections, I would be in a position to explore the intuitive and creative nature of looking, which involves the instinctive tug of things forgotten. However, the creativity of looking often remains in the imagination. This residency would allow me to go beyond the boundaries of the imaginary where the act of looking would become the object of an interrogation to uncover the way in which seeing spans the gap between intuitive selection and memory.

The Fitzwilliam collection was a perfect setting for this kind of research because of the personal nature of the collections, most of which has been donated by individual collectors. This offered a relatively comfortable set of objects for me to engage with to research the very private activity of looking. The resulting project was called, *The Conjugated Museum*. I produced some forty digital images, a transparent book, and an animated video interpreting the experience of thumbing through the pages of the book.

The research explored the creative agency of being allowed to photograph within museum galleries, and questioned how such an affordance may be generating new meaning for historical works. I found a resonant intertextual dialectic that manifested through the intuitive act of looking. It was a multiplicity of meanings from an array of influences colliding in the instant of seeing. As such, I found the artworks were speaking for themselves in ways that connected to my personal narrative. The imagery I created during the residency was based in my own fantasies of the works I was seeing, but I discovered these fantasies had a basis in the reality of the origins of the artworks in the museum collections.

One way of expressing this multiplicity through the artwork I created was to draw a parallel between the experience of being a museum visitor—which for some is a reverential experience—and the relationship we have with our smartphones. A connection which is similar to the attachment once reserved for devotional objects like prayer books. For these reasons, I chose to print these images on bible paper. Creating a transparent book of these images in the size of a prayer book became an homage to the attachment we make to objects, while expressing the virtual space of the phone and the memory-space of looking. Attempts to read this book feel like grasping at the impossible task of holding a thought in the hand, and of a displaced temporal suspension between present, past, and future as the turning of transparent pages interferes with looking.

I used my mobile phone to photograph artworks on display in the museum galleries. In doing so, I allowed intuition to guide my decision-making in choosing which works to photograph. My only rule was the work had to draw me in, either through aesthetic appeal or through a kind of repulsive fascination. Intuition also played a significant role in altering the images, in that I simply engaged with the image in front of me, responding visually to it as I worked with it on the computer. It was later through a process of literature review, where I researched the artists, the individual artworks I had chosen from the collection, and in some cases, the metaphorical content of the works, that I found I was picking up on visual clues in the artworks which was leading my creative responses in altering these appropriated images.

In this essay, I'll discuss one work produced for the residency, *Blue Sky Entanglements*, and describe what is happening visually within the image. The title of this chapter is "The New Dialectics of Seeing," so I'll explain the concept of dialectical seeing related to Walter Benjamin's dialectical image, which raises a question of how objects generate meaning outside of their time. And I'll explore the resonance of myth, which is a form of intertextuality in the work.

A philosophy of seeing

In *The Dialectics of Seeing*, one of three key texts underpinning the research I did at the Fitzwilliam, author Susan Buck-Morss[1] meticulously unravels the context in which Walter Benjamin developed his concept of the dialectical image. For Buck-Morss, who formulated a philosophical notion of seeing by extrapolating from Benjamin's copious notes for his *Passagen-Werk/Arcades Project*, dialectical seeing is a process of intuition and imagination, which makes meaning from encounters with historical objects.[2] This process results in what Benjamin called, the dialectical image; a fleeting imaginary image that breaks free from its historical context to enter a different sphere of meaning. Buck-Morss says, for objects to be taken out of their historical continuum and made " 'actual' in the present" involves the mediation of a viewer's imagination and "the active intervention of the thinking subject."[3] The result of this active intervention where such stimulations are acting "[a]s an immediate, quasi-mystical apprehension" Buck-Morss explains, is the appearance of an intuitive dialectical image where past and present collide in the imagination of the viewer.[4]

But how do objects, such as artworks, generate meaning outside of their own time? In her book, *Encounters in the Virtual Feminist Museum*, another key text for *The Conjugated Museum* project, Griselda Pollock[5] says:

> If we approach artworks as propositions, as representations and as texts, that is as sites for the production of meanings and of affects by means of their visual and plastic operations between each other and for viewer/readers, they cease to be mere objects to be classified by aesthetic evaluation or idealised authorship. Artworks ask to be read as cultural *practices* negotiating meanings shaped by both history and the unconscious. They ask to be allowed to change the culture into which they intervene by being considered as creative: poïetic and transformative.[6]

This suggests there is a similar process of communication between artworks and those who engage in looking at them, as there is in language and the written word. Recognising such a process means the act of looking becomes an interpretive event where meaning making is both singular to the individual, and touches on the wider network of cultural context which brought the artwork and viewer together.

Pollock also describes an afterlife of images; this is where an image gets lodged in a personal image-bank of memory. This transformative afterlife of the image and approaching artworks as texts recalls Roland Barthes'[7] notion of the text as "a process of demonstration" existing "in the movement of discourse," and *experienced only in an activity of production*."[8] But such an intervention of cultural *practices* and *activity of production* suggests there is a remainder from the interpretive event; something that allows the inert to pass into the changeable. Gilles Deleuze[9] describes this remainder as *effect*, which is literally on a physical surface, but it is also at the metaphorical boundary edge between something and nothing where ideas are situated. He explains that these effects are separate to simulacra—understood as the notion of instability that problematises and brings about the divergent—because they impassively rise to the surface of things. For Deleuze, this manifestation of effects acting in the place of simulacra happens on the surface of things, because it is in the depths where the simulacrum forces movement and change through a chaotic "plurality of centres, a superposition of perspectives, a tangle of points of view, a coexistence of moments which essentially distort representation."[10] In other words, it is within the virtual space of memory where a multiplicity of translations and transmutations take place forcing an *effect* to surface. Through these effects, the *idea* of a work changes utterly within the act of looking. From the "superposition of perspectives" in "a coexistence of moments," as Deleuze says, I found the artworks I chose in the museum became *conjugated* in real time through the act of dialectical seeing, where an impassive *effect* of attraction was generated by an active simulacra and the divergence it engendered from the depths of my memories, the context of viewing, and the past of the artwork.

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[1] Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).

[2] Buck-Morss, ix. "This is an unorthodox undertaking. It is a picture book of philosophy, explicating the dialectics of seeing developed by Walter Benjamin, who took seriously the debris of mass culture as the source of philosophical truth. It draws its authority from a book that was never written, the *Passagen-Werk* (Arcades project), the unfinished, major project of Benjamin's mature years."

[3] Buck-Morss, 221-22. (I use the word 'viewer' here, but Buck-Morss' word was 'author.')

[4] Buck-Morss, 220.

[5] Griselda Pollock, *Encounters in the Virtual Feminist Museum* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007).

[6] Pollock, 10. Emphasis in original.

[7] Roland Barthes, "From work to text." In *Image Music Text* (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 155-64.

[8] Barthes, 157. Emphasis in original.

[9] Gilles Deleuze, *Logic of Sense* (London: Bloomsbury Academic/Bloomsbury Revelations, 2015).

[10] Deleuze, 67.

Memory, myth and dialectical engagement

The act of looking is an act of dialectical engagement; seeing is a temporal synthesis bringing past into unison with present. Immediacy is not just *of the moment*, it is the temporal disruption which allows history to resuscitate in fleeting fragments, bonding with the fluidity of seeing. For Benjamin, history was not a legitimising structure, it was a source of critical knowledge that allowed for the interpretive power of seeing.[11] It was a result of what he called "the *un*conscious of the dreaming collective"; a collective history he said was "not 'life as it was,' nor even life remembered, but life as it has been 'forgotten.' "[12] This notion of "life as it has been forgotten," suggests a connection to myth, with its polysemy, interlocking codes and logic of ambiguity.[13]

Drawing connections between myth and forgetting in ancient Greece, religious historian Mircea Eliade describes how the goddess Mnemosyne, mother of the muses, confers the power to move between the now and the beyond. Knowing all time, her omniscience is the source of origins. And the artist inspired by the muses, recovering primordial memory, sees into these beginnings: Eliade says, "The past thus revealed is much more than the antecedent of the present; it is its source."[14] This remembering is manifested in mythical origins, and is comparable to the artist evoking the memories forgotten by the dead through the grace of the muses. Eliade says "That is why, insofar as it is 'forgotten,' the 'past'—historical or primordial—is homologized with death."[15] In other words, the past is an equivalent to death.

Benjamin was concerned with these origins, and of bringing the past into the present through the act of seeing. He said, "In order for a piece of the past to be touched by present actuality, there must exist no continuity between them…Truth […] is bound to a temporal nucleus which is lodged in both the known and the knower."[16] This suggests the object and the observer communicate in time, but not in a linear time, it is a collision of temporal constellations made up of past memories, current impressions, and virtual fantasies that propel us into the future.

A new dialectic

In *Blue Sky Entanglements (Figure 1)*, the myth of Hermes, Herse and Aglauros, as presented here by Veronese,[17] is resuscitated in real time through dialectical seeing, and speaks in a new language through digital imaging. Initially, I was drawn to the sexual tension between the two figures, Hermes and Aglauros, on the left of the painting. I was also attracted by the blue sky to the right behind Herse, the sister of Aglauros, and love interest of Hermes.

In fact, the first thing I did with this image was to isolate and replicate the rectangle of blue sky, using it like wallpaper to cover the green walls of the museum setting. There were some museum labels I wanted to remove from the image, and as I worked, I noticed the locations where the programme was bringing in the copied and pasted elements. It felt important to leave traces of these locations visible in the image, which is represented by the various coloured rectangles in the image. I also wanted to do something with the male and female nymphs at either end of the table base.[18] Using a solid black in place of their form seemed right for the image.

Doing research into Veronese, I discovered he was a master colourist,[19] which is probably why I was so attracted by the sliver of blue sky. Then I learned that erotically entwined figures were his speciality—more justification for being drawn to the electric charge of the entanglement of Hermes and Aglauros. Richard Cocke writes, "[h]is mastery of figures in movement and ability to capture the play of light on rich and sparkling textures, the interlocking of figures, their convincing relationship to architectural settings, and their role within a narrative

Figure 1: Blue Sky Entanglements ©2018 Jane Boyer

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[11] Buck-Morss, x.

[12] Buck-Morss, 39. Emphasis in original.

[13] Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Myth and Society in Ancient Greece* (New York: Zone Books, 1996), 216, Monoskop.

[14] Mircea Eliade, "Mythologies of Memory and Forgetting," *History of Religions* 2, no.2 (Winter, 1963): 333, JSTOR.

[15] Eliade, "Memory and Forgetting," 333.

[16] Buck-Morss, 218-19. Bracketed ellipses in original where Buck-Morss connects two notes by Benjamin from the *Passagen-Werk* (Arcades project).

[17] Paolo Veronese, *Hermes, Herse and Aglauros* (Cambridge: The Fitzwilliam Museum Collection, 1576-84).

[18] Anonymous, *Italian Console Table* (Cambridge: The Fitzwilliam Museum Collection, c.1700).

[19] Ball writes, "Paolo Veronese was the undoubted heir to Titian's fulsome use of colour." Philip Ball, *Bright Earth: Art and the Invention of Color* (London: Vintage Books, 2012), 149. Google Books.

are all equally significant."[20] Overall, Veronese was a master of texture and lux sceneries, and all of these elements drew me to this work.

Considering the relationship of the painting to the table within the museum, I found these two objects as inextricably entwined as Hermes and Aglauros, and I worked to capture photographically what I was seeing visually standing in the museum in front of this installation. Using the blue sky as wallpaper in the image solidified the relationship of the painting and the table. While blacking out the nymphs at either corner of the table created a gapping mouth full of devouring teeth.

All of this was an entirely intuitive construction of what I was subconsciously reading; first in the Veronese painting, and then in its relationship to the table. But reading the story of Hermes, Herse and Aglauros in Book 2 of *Metamorphoses* by Ovid. I learned of the curse of consuming envy levied on Aglauros by the goddess Minerva, and of Hermes entry into the scene by dropping from the sky, where Aglauros bars his entry into Herse's chamber.[21] My intuitive construction made sense after reading Ovid's tale.

Conclusion: the resonance of myth

Looking at this image from the point of view of Aglauros, I was struck by the things she would be seeing, which Veronese placed in her line of sight, as she was turned to stone by the touch of Hermes staff: a satyr, which is a personification of evil and a symbol of lust in Renaissance painting;[22] a viol, symbol of the muses,[23] and therefore a link with death through the knowledge of origins, as described by Eliade; a statue in the background of the painting looking away from the scene to the outdoors to the unobtainable, soon to be forgotten, blue sky of freedom; and her sister, Herse—object of envy—dressed in a garment similar in pattern to the sky, which extols her beauty and grace. Everything in this painting is in relation to Aglauros, and her fate of being consumed by lust and envy, at the very moment she is being turned to stone. In other words, *the moment when intuition is corrupted into the death of a forgetful past*.

Aglauros is in the position of in-betweenness, a common feature of the simulacrum. She is the go-between between Hermes and Herse. She bars entry at the doorway to Herse's chamber against Hermes. She is consumed by forgetfulness, the threshold between life and death, as her flesh turns to stone. There is a contemporary resonance for us in the in-betweenness of Aglauros. We find ourselves in a similar position as we become more deeply attached to our digital world, where we enter a virtual space of activity, being neither fully here in the present space of physicality, nor physically there in the virtual space where our minds are engaged through our phones, tablets and computers. In such a space of in-betweenness, our perceptions are made ambiguous.

Just as myth itself slides between meanings as each era interprets and makes use of the symbolism contained within a myth, the dialectical image is not fixed to any particular time or place. It happens in an instant and carries all time within its fleeting interjection. The dialectical image is a manifestation of the *effect* that rises to the surface of a submerged divergence taking place within a multiplicity of influences through the act of looking. This is how new meanings arise, and the foundational stories of myth continue to resonate through time. Therefore, to mythologise: *Blue Sky Entanglements* is suspended between the freedom of a blue sky and the pull of a dark underworld whose entrance is through a hideously gapping mouth. The descent is held in check only by the sites of intersection where time is disrupted by the appearance of a recursion in those prominent rectangles of colour.

Figure 1:

[20] Richard Cocke, "Wit and Humour in the Work of Paolo Veronese," *Artibus et Historiae* 11, no. 2 (1990): 125, JSTOR.

[21] Ovid, *Metamorphosis* (London: Penguin Classics, 2004), 85-7.

[22] James Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols* in Art, (London: John Murray, 1974), 273. Revised edition, reprinted 1995.

[23] Hall, 322.

Figure 2: Blue Sky Entanglements ©2018 Jane Boyer

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