

REVIEW

Gary Shapiro, *Archaeologies of Vision: Foucault and Nietzsche on Seeing and Saying* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). ISBN 0226750477

Exceptionally conversant in both philosophy and art history, Gary Shapiro addresses a number of fundamental questions related to language, power, spectatorship, visual resistance, iconoclasm, the culture of the museum, fantasy, panoptical surveillance, self-transformation by virtue of the ways in which we see things, postmodern media, and the role of visual images in the works of Nietzsche and Foucault. One might understandably conclude from this lengthy but incomplete list that Shapiro's *Archaeologies of Vision* substitutes a broad range of interests for detailed, critical analyses. Fortunately for the readers, this is not the case. In the following review I will touch upon three interrelated motifs that are crucial to the ways in which Shapiro responds to the above questions: 1) vision is complex, layered, reversible, shifting, and incomplete; 2) vision borders near an infinite recurrence of non-meaning; and 3) the affirmation of the first and second motifs requires that we overcome ourselves in a process of self-transformation. My concluding remarks, while critical, are only intended as a supplement to what I perceive as a decisive line of argument in the *Archaeologies of Vision*.

Shapiro rejects the aesthetics and metaphysics of presence, but at the same time he argues that we ought to move beyond an absolute dichotomy between ocularcentrism and its nonocular antithesis. A critique of both traditional and nontraditional regimes of vision (whether we have in mind Plato or late capitalism) need not be reduced to an anti-visual form of resistance. Vision, like power, is marked by different sets of historical practices. It is shaped and constructed according to a variety of complex values, none of which is immune to change. For precisely this reason Shapiro affirms the inherent instability of *all* perception: "In a time that takes the thought of difference so seriously, there is an anomaly in thinking of vision as always the same, always identical, and so opposing it to other forms of perception and sensibility, which, it is claimed, offer more finely nuanced,

more engaged, more historically sensitive ways of engaging with things.”¹ He makes his argument along several fronts. Foucault’s analysis of Manet’s *Masked Ball at the Opera*, for instance, brings together flatness and repetition, reality and imagination, the vertical and the horizontal. The lower edge of an upper balcony, as well as a seemingly endless row of black top hats, depicts for us precisely what cannot be depicted: the emptiness of every moment and the death of self-contained, autonomous subjectivity.² This way of looking at the painting is not equivalent to a gaze. As opposed to inviting us to fix or determine the essence of his subjects, Manet is unsettling our habitual ways of seeing. The absence of depth in *Gare St. Lazare* and *The Balcony* likewise communicates an impossible reality, one that Shapiro describes as an abysmal vision or twinkling of the eye (*Augenblick*). Sight, in this respect, becomes its own obstacle: what is visible is invisible and what is present is hidden, disguised, or multifaceted. Nietzsche’s source of inspiration in Claude Lorrain’s *Landscape with Acis and Galatea* is equally instructive.³ The radiant sun, whether it is rising or setting, is ultimately sublime. We cannot fathom its depths any more than we can ascertain the difference between the sea and its many waves: in each case distinct moments in time converge and separate without being reduced to anything logical or visible. It might even be said that the past is the future and the future is the past, because the entire movement of time is an evanescent moment of nothingness. Although we cannot think without using distinct categories of consciousness, the apparently antithetical terms of presence and absence (truth and falsity, vision and blindness) are ceaselessly reversible. So while it is certainly valid that Shapiro does not subscribe to a reified notion of the visible, it would be wrong for us to assume that his only option is to sacrifice all things related to the realm of seeing.

The ambivalence between finite recognition and eternal recurrence is irreducible to either side of the equation. Although we cannot capture the essence of that which has no essence, of that which transcends every concrete historical determination, it is likewise true that we are continually drawn to an outside force of transcendence that endlessly repeats itself. There is no unconditional point of reference for Shapiro: human subjects are temporal subjects. But even as we are constituted by a complicated set of historical assumptions and practices, the fragility of every moment opens up to our own frame of tragedy. This line of thought is rigorously developed in Shapiro’s final chapter which, among other things, contrasts Danto’s and Foucault’s thinking on Warhol. The brilliance of the latter, as Danto puts it,

1 Gary Shapiro, *Archaeologies of Vision: Foucault and Nietzsche on Seeing and Saying*. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003), 6.

2 Shapiro, *Archaeologies of Vision*, 306-08.

3 Shapiro, *Archaeologies of Vision*, 41-49.

turns on the question of theory: Brillo boxes and Campbell Soup cans function as works of art only insofar as they have been theoretically recontextualized. The visual content of art is in this way diminished. Historically speaking, this content is subsumed within a dialectical movement of transformation: the particular is reinscribed and reinterpreted as the universal. Comedy, in Hegelian fashion, triumphs over tragedy because the end of art finds its purpose in a totalized and totalizing dimension.⁴ To make the same point somewhat differently, the material substance of art is subordinated to an artistic breakthrough that is no longer grounded in the very material substance out of which it arose. Hence, the conflict and disorientation which tend to be associated with concrete particularity are smoothed out according to a higher, sublimated function of discourse. Foucault, however, takes a different approach. To the extent that Warhol's post-1962 work turns toward the production of multiple, repeated images, it can be said that the meaning of those images has been emptied out: "The images are freed of the bond of resemblance to their 'original' and 'refer to each other to eternity'; they do not ever *say* anything, because there is no longer a subject to which they refer and about which they would speak."⁵ The loss of an unconditional referent is the ineluctable consequence of Warhol's playful repetitions. Hence, the tragic element pertains to the death of subjectivity. Meaning, rather than being consolidated, is opened up to its own demise. If there is no longer any predetermined, unmistakable source of meaning, if all meaning participates in the eternal recurrence of new signs and new passageways,⁶ then it seems to follow that comedy has been or will be reintegrated with tragedy.

But this line of thinking has its double aspect as well. The tragic dimension of time, as expressed in Nietzsche's *Augenblick*, can either be affirmed or disavowed.⁷ One form of vision is light-hearted, happy, generous, and healthy, while another is associated with repression and *ressentiment*. The world looks very different to these two forms of vision: the first repeatedly dissolves itself in the beauty and splendor of all things, whereas the second reduces every good fortune to a miserable state of melancholy. Even as the second form acknowledges the vertiginous cycles of happiness and regret, ascent and fall, it cannot truly behold the abysmal depths of sight.⁸ By attempting to ground these cycles in a simulated world of nihilism, whereby all differences are assimilated to self-sameness, the melancholic person

4 Shapiro, *Archaeologies of Vision*, 351-52.

5 Shapiro, *Archaeologies of Vision*, 357.

6 Shapiro, *Archaeologies of Vision*, 363, The "new" is not precluded by repetition.

7 This opposition, as with the others, is volatile and astatic.

8 Shapiro's introduction is aptly entitled "The Abyss of Vision." Failure to see this abyss, without thereby capturing its essence, places us in a position where we simply cannot understand certain "pre-modern," iconoclastic reactions to images which take those images to be either sacred or violently unholy (pp. 2-4).

refuses to see the tragic element as invigorating. Perception, in this way, is oblivious to its instability. It transforms this instability into a simple category of lifelessness. When speaking of the evil eye, Nietzsche elaborates on such forms of seeing: “The evil eye seeks to reduce the object of its envy to the lowest common denominator; in philosophy it sometimes manifests itself in the claim that something is ‘nothing but’ a devalued or neutral thing (as in the claims that mind is nothing but matter, universals are nothing but words, and so on).”⁹ The neutrality of perception reflects a kind of detachment from the world, and from stronger types as well, which cannot see any worth in human existence. Self-transformation is thus precluded. The refusal to be affected, deeply and poignantly, by an outside reality that exceeds our everyday human domain is to ignore the possibilities of change. It should hardly surprise us, then, that the typical object of envy is the person who sees and sees vividly.

It is not clear, however, how we should think of the above-mentioned “outside reality.” In many ways it simply designates the fact that vision is an indefinitely complex phenomenon. Gary Shapiro interprets the abyss of perception as being related to its own groundlessness, to the idea that “even in the twinkling of an eye there is layer after layer, perspective upon perspective.”¹⁰ But this certainly is not the only way of thinking about infinity.¹¹ The disappearance of the center, the absence of meaning, and the death of the subject are affirmed by Shapiro in the sense that every act of vision is “framed in a larger context of which we may or may not become aware.”¹² While this does not perforce imply a sophisticated version of linguistic idealism, we may nonetheless infer that “visual interpretation and imagination... goes all the way down.”¹³ The position developed here is intended to represent not only Shapiro’s argument but Nietzsche’s and Foucault’s as well. It seems to me, however, that such a position requires further elucidation. What, for example, is at stake in distinguishing it from Bataille’s approach? What is achieved by saying that Bataille’s thinking of recurrence, especially as related to vision, is the “devilish inversion” of Nietzsche’s?¹⁴ If the inversion comes about through a linkage of punishment and guilt with eternal recurrence, then why are these concepts being rejected? If we read Bataille closely it becomes evident that punishment and guilt are

9 Shapiro, *Archaeologies of Vision*, 179.

10 Shapiro, *Archaeologies of Vision*, 176.

11 I am using ‘outside reality’, ‘infinity’, ‘abyss’, and ‘emptiness’ as interchangeable terms as I discuss the irreducible element of eternal recurrence. This only reflects *my* usage, and I do not wish to conflate this temporary line of thought, as it applies in this context, to other viable options as deployed by Shapiro and others.

12 Shapiro, *Archaeologies of Vision*, 20-21.

13 Shapiro, *Archaeologies of Vision*, 24.

14 Shapiro, *Archaeologies of Vision*, 20.

not intended to reinforce either moral or religious imperatives, but rather to underscore how we are viscerally attached to our socially invested determinations of self-identity. They do so by gesturing toward a certain primordial anxiety at the heart of human self-transformation. Anxiety arises for the very reason that this process of self-transformation involves an irretrievable loss that cannot be reabsorbed by the social body. Such a primordial sense of rupture can be explicitly found in Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* and some of Foucault's earlier writings.¹⁵ If the regime of the sovereign gaze can be contested through a constant play of differences and simulacra,¹⁶ by an ever-expanding affirmation of nothingness,¹⁷ then perhaps we cannot avoid a continuation of this logic beyond the established confines of multiple perspectives.

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15 For instance in the "Preface to Transgression" Foucault writes, in the spirit of Bataille, that transgression relates us to an unmediated substance (*Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977, p. 30.). Although he is much more careful in later writings, especially by the time of *Discipline and Punish*, to avoid using the language of 'repression' and 'juridical subjectivity' (and likewise certain interrelated concepts such as 'truth' and 'substance'), it is uncertain whether he rejects an absolute outside or merely the fact that we cannot assimilate it to discourse, to some kind of neutral subject-position unaffected by various discipline-mechanisms.

16 Shapiro, *Archaeologies of Vision*, 346.

17 Shapiro, *Archaeologies of Vision*, 345.