

Modern Specters of Madness

The Passive Eye: Gaze and Subjectivity in Berkeley (via Beckett).

by Branka Arsić

Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2003. Pp.210.

ISBN: 0-8047-4643-5. Paperback, \$19.95

Review by James Manos

In *The Passive Eye: Gaze and Subjectivity in Berkeley (via Beckett)*, Branka Arsić pieces together a narrative of iconographic subjectivity from Berkeley's corpus. Her approach cuts through Berkeley's thought, giving form to "a set of utterances" (Arsić xii) taken to "their extreme" (Arsić xiii). This move sets the precedence for Arsić's text. Throughout she continuously resists the cold mechanistic conjunctions of a "faithful" exegesis and instead takes up a polyphonic reading. She employs the contemporary voices of Beckett, Deleuze, Guattari, Lacan, Derrida, and Merleau-Ponty, as well as Berkeley's contemporaries to help tease out his "utterances." Her methodology situates Berkeley historically, follows his echoes in contemporary thought, and to presents a quasi-Berkeleyan concept of "iconographic subjectivity" as an alternative to the Cartesian subject. Arsić's text is at its strongest when teasing out Berkeley's texts and in illustrating Berkeley's importance for contemporary thought.

For Arsić, the narrative of the modern subject is a story of madness and monsters. The psychoanalytic underpinnings of her text slowly unfold as she presents the "frenzied" paranoid drive of the Cartesian subject and the schizophrenia of iconographic subjectivity. Madness pushes her text forward, and this review focuses on the differing forms of madness and subjectivity she presents.

Arsić begins to detail the madness of the dominant modern subject with a rigorous description of Descartes' optics. For Arsić, Cartesian optics is grounded on geometrical space and projection. Cartesian geometrical space is "the imaginary of real space itself" (Arsić 31). The image of geometrical space is presented to the eye, not the space of the "real." She finds that the imaginary visible of Cartesian optics can be charted; it is "a kind of natural analytic geometry" (Arsić 26) where each "projection projects relations" (Arsić 25). Objects appear as a presentation of rational relations that can be rationally mapped. There is a direct and symmetrical relation-

ship between the real, its representation, and the representation's projected image within Descartes' optics. It is a symbolic order of vision in which the signifier correctly represents the signified "real." The underlying connection that binds the symbolic system of vision in Descartes' optics reveals the subject of reason.

The Cartesian subject is a voyeur. He or she "withdraws into an invisible 'spectatorium'" (Arsić 38). The subject consummates his or her desire through remaining the one who sees but is not seen. Yet, the point from which the subject sees, the central perspective which grounds the idea of both visibility and subjectivity within this perverse structure, is a "mad point" for Arsić. It is a "mad point" because it must remain structurally "blind" to the "blind spot" of subjectivity (Arsić 40). The gaze is blind to itself. Each time the gaze tries to objectify itself it requires another gaze to stabilize it. Yet, nothing can ever anchor this other gaze. The gaze remains blind to its "blind spot" by constructing an imaginary central point that grounds the subject. This subject must secure and maintain his or her fantasies of completeness by projecting a stable point in order to satisfy his or her voyeuristic pleasure. Arsić finds this stable point in Descartes' *res cogitans*: "The monstrosity of modern subjectivity resides precisely in its 'structure,' in the 'fact' that it can be the subject only on condition that it is blind for itself, inaccessible to itself" (Arsić 42). Arsić's narrative of the Cartesian subject describes the beginnings of a paranoid subject; it is a subject that must maintain a constant vigilance over itself so it can see itself.

The iconographic subject provides the underside to Arsić's narrative of modern subjectivity. For Arsić, iconography is characterized by the collapse of the distance between the eye and the object: "iconography is the world seen by an innocent eye, which does not recognize distance or the projection of the vantage point" (Arsić 94). The iconographic subject merges with the world that the eye encompasses; it is a subject that is lost in the pure immediacy of experience. With clear reference to Deleuze and Guattari, Arsić's iconographic subject is schizophrenic; it fails to fully synthesize its experience and encounters the world in its singularities.

The experience of iconographic subjectivity is conditioned by the visual language of God. Whereas the visible is strictly representational and symbolic within the Cartesian universe, for Arsić/Berkeley there is no copy—no form of representation. There is only presentation and simulacrum. Everything is presented in its absolute singularity. Because of this singularity, Arsić finds that "God's visual language thus reveals itself as a schizophrenic language.

Only the one who speaks that language is mad enough to claim that words are things” (Arsić 63). Everything given in God’s visual language is surface. There is no depth to the visual field. Words are things. Because of its absolute singularity, God’s visual language is disjointed—broken. The Berkelian God, on Arsić’s reading, lives in a “lonely room” that “is not connected with other places or spaces” (Arsić 72). The visual world is not the result of a geometrical projection bestowed by a benevolent God, but is the result of a lonely and schizophrenic God who is the “infinite set of all expressions” (Arsić 62) and seems to reside in the space of the Lacanian real (Arsić 70).

As an infinite set of expressions, neither God nor God’s visual language can be comprehended or totalized. Thus, the Berkelian God cannot be assimilated into reality. There are two results from God occupying the place of the “real”: all that appears is the surface of the particulars of God’s visual language and there is an impassable abyss between the “real”—or the place of God—and the picture. The world begins to lose its imaginary and geometrical source of reason. God is beyond God’s own visual language that conditions appearance and experience. Thus, there is no necessary connection between God and what God produces: “[t]he connection between God and idea, therefore is as contingent as the connection between signifier and signified in the artificial language of human beings” (Arsić 68). It is a horrifying world, full of events that cannot be predicted, full of the anxiety of surprise.

Second, for Arsić, experience of the visual writing of God is schizophrenic. Experience is conditioned by an irreconcilable heterogeneity between the visible and the palpable (Arsić 170). On the one hand, “[t]he visible world enters the eye in an absolute intimacy with the eye” (Arsić 153). All distance between sight and object is eliminated. The visible unfolds within the interiority of the subject. This continual unfolding of the visible world is the continual exteriorization of the subject; it is “[a]s if the subject had fallen out of its interiority into an exteriority. As if the subject had destroyed itself and become pure exteriority” (Arsić 129). The subject becomes the unconnected picture-body-things of God’s visual language held together in temporary constellations within the eye; the subject becomes radically heterogeneous. On the other hand, experience is conditioned by a body that is exhausted by its own painful encounter with the world. Spatiality, not visibility, is the realm of distance, for Arsić. Distance belongs in the realm of touch. It is in touching that one moves toward an object and in which, “[w]e feel touched by what we touch” (Arsić 167). Touch eliminates the distance

between the object and oneself; it disrupts the “boundaries between bodies” (Arsić 168). One becomes the object that one sees, that one touches.

This falling into the other continually dismantles the secured paranoid boundaries that cover the blind spot of subjectivity. Iconographic subjectivity is situated between the irreconcilable conditions of touch and sight. The iconographic subject is a split subject which forever holds open its own confused anticipation of the world. The subject springs from an intractable bar between the visible and the palpable, becoming through leaving itself and entering into the other of its experience. “The iconographic subject falls into the icon, into the visual writing of God” (Arsić 163). Arsić’s iconographic subject is radically heterogeneous, passively dissolving into the continually changing constellations of experience.

Modernity’s investigations into subjectivity pulsate with the hidden desires. From the frenzied search for the Archimedean point of certainty to paranoia in Cartesian Optics and from the desire to read the visual language of unconditional divine to the schizophrenic fervor of Berkeley, Branka Arsić’s *The Passive Eye* details the vicissitudes of these desires into forms of madness. She creates a historical conversation that sutures the rift between pre-freudian and post-freudian discussions of subjectivity, while still remaining faithful to the texts she reads. In this sense, Arsić provides the reader with an interpretation of Berkeley that takes him seriously in spite of himself. It is a reading that gives itself over to his texts, accepting and exploring the “radicality” and “madness” of his own words, refusing to reconcile things that stand in stark opposition within the text, while at the same time holding these oppositions in a creative tension (Arsić xii). Iconographic subjectivity emerges from these irreconcilable tensions in Berkeley’s texts and provides an innovative narrative of a disturbingly haunted modern subject.