Juli Carson

That Obscure Object of Gender
Kerry Tribe's »Critical Mass«

As part of her contribution to the 2010 Whitney Biennial, Kerry Tribe restaged Hollis Frampton's 1971 film »Critical Mass« as a live performance (fig. 1).[1] And with this gesture of repetition, the question of the gaze – a keystone concept of gender and film studies since the early 80s – once again entered the picture. And yet, Tribe's »Critical Mass« provided an anamorphic twist on the subject of the gaze. To best understand how this happens, we must first set the scene.

Ever since Barbara Kruger's iconic image »Your Gaze Hits the Side of My Face« interrogated the ubiquity of female imagery in discourse – what Laura Mulvey proscribed as that object given-to-be-seen – a polemic among feminists has ensued. Does one re-situate the female image, a la Cindy Sherman?[2] Or simply discard it, a la Mary Kelly?[3] This is the so-called »male« gaze predicament – one based upon Jacques Lacan's notion of the Imaginary – that was put forth in the 1980s. However, a subsequent generation of artists – one informed by conceptualism and feminism – believe that gender positions can't be interrogated in their place, be it in pre-feminist or feminist contexts, where »male« and »female« signs are stable. Rather, when the question of subjectivity is addressed within a more permeable space – one bordering on the intangible – we more accurately glean (psychoanalytically) the gendered object: not an object of desire, but an object cause of desire. Significantly, this (unfulfillable) desire entails the fantasy of being whole in one's identity. This is the theory of the »formless« gaze – one based upon Lacan's notion of the Real – that another branch of feminists embraced in the 1990s. And it is this notion of the gaze that surfaces in Kerry Tribe's version of »Critical Mass.« In advance of explicating how this happens in the work, a schematic philosophical etiology of the gaze is helpful (fig. 2).

»I saw myself seeing myself,« are the words Lacan used to describe Jean-Paul Sartre's Cartesian notion of the gaze, one »by which the subject apprehends himself as thought.« This describes the »bipolar reflexive position [...] by which as soon as I perceive, my representations belong to me.«[4] In this configuration of the gaze, the looker is situated at the geometral point of Lacan's scheme, the object being transformed into a representation that the looker possesses and controls. In the real world, this is instanced both by the Camera Obscura (where the subject masters the image vis-à-vis the point of light) and Camera Lucida (where the subject masters the image vis-à-vis geometral perspective). However, should the bearer-of-the-look lose control over his object, which is to say, if the possessive quality of the gaze is inverted, then the looker becomes embodied, transformed into an object in the Field of the Other. For Sartre this was imagined through the sound of rustling leaves when he thought he was alone: »What I apprehend immediately when I hear the branches crackling behind me is not that there is someone there; it is that I am vulnerable, that I have a body which can be hurt, that I occupy a place and that I cannot in any case escape from the space which I am without defense – in short, that I am seen.«[5]

Sartre's notion of the gaze is therefore a spatial one, a phenomenon previously described by René Descartes in his text »Dioptrique.« An illustration for a 1724 edition of Descartes's treatise displays a man, blindfolded, negotiating his way through a landscape with the aid of two sticks. Referring to this illustration, Denis Diderot remarked: »Neither Descartes nor those who followed him have been able to give a clearer conception of vision.«[6] Simply, Descartes had provided the quintessential example of embodied sight by which even a non-seeing person could »see himself in space« along the primary axes of figure versus ground. This is what Laura Mulvey (and Barbara Kruger) were getting at through their Sartrean interpretation of a woman's objectification under the bearer-of-the-look, whereby: »Your gaze hits the side of my face.« Moreover, from this Cartesian perspective we see the origins of Sartre's perceived castration as he fell under the gaze. Although, it is still crucial to point out, in both cases – be it the Cartesian or the Feminist case – that the subject still apprehends itself as occupying a place – vulnerable though he or she might be in that place.

Subsequent to Mulvey's foundational notion of the male gaze – the definitive axiom of British film theory and gender studies – Joan Copjec pioneered another theory of the gaze, one centered around Lacan's notion of an »objet petit a.« Simply, the »objet petit

Fig. 1
Images from Kerry Tribe's performative reading of Hollis Frampton's film Critical Mass, staged in conjunction with the 2010 Whitney Biennial. In each image, on left Jasmine Woods, on right Reed Windle

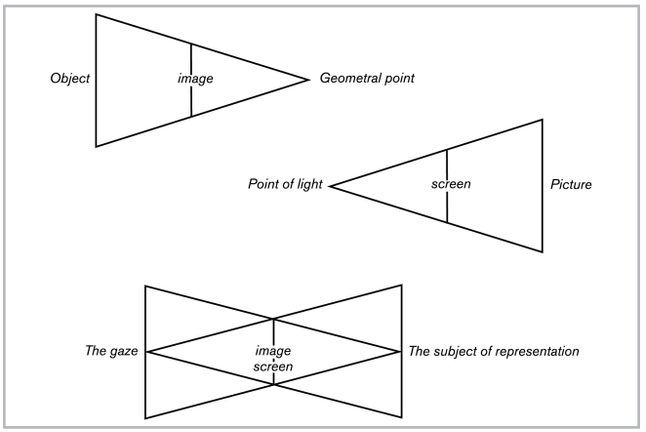

Fig. 2 Lacanian Gaze Schema, 1973

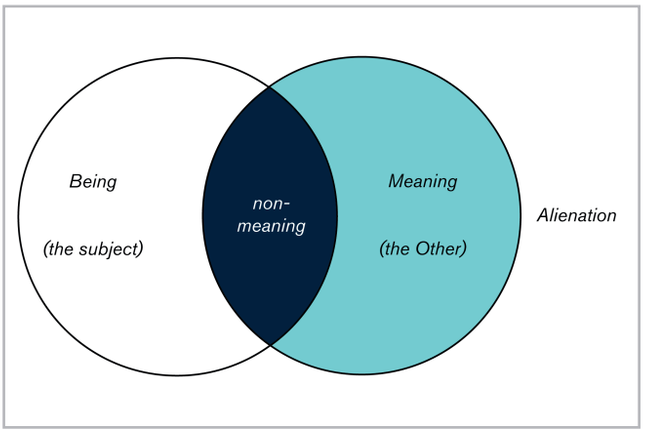

Fig. 3 Lacanian Venn Diagram, 1973

a« is not an object per se but a function. It stands in for that phantasmatic or »impossible« object that the subject perceives to be primordially lost to him/her but which, in fact, can never be retrieved. The impossibility of the phantasmatic object's retrieval insures that the subject's drive remains active and his or her consciousness desirous. In the case of the scopic drive, it ensures that the subject continues to look beyond what he or she is given to see in the space of the image. Here is how Copjec differentiates the two notions of the gaze: »In film theory, the gaze is located ›in front of‹ the image [...] The subject identifies and coincides with the gaze. In Lacan, on the other hand, the gaze is located ›behind‹ the image, as that which fails to appear in it and thus as that which makes meanings suspect. And the subject, instead of coinciding with or identifying with the gaze, is rather cut off from it [...] When you encounter the gaze of the Other, you meet not a seeing eye but a blind one.«[7]

In Copjec's scenario, the subject is thus neither in the position of the »looker« nor the »object« but elided between these two positions because, in this case, Cartesian sight fails. Simply, I do not see, because I am not seen. And if meaning is suspect in this case, it is because one has fallen into the space of non-meaning, which Lacan's Venn Diagram posits as the space between pure being (the Subject) and pure meaning (the Other) i.e. between existence and representation (fig. 3). This is the experience of the gaze underscored by Lacan's complete Gaze Diagram wherein the Imaginary points of the »Camera Lucida« triangle (the geometral point) and the »Camera Obscura« triangle (the point of light) are imbricated, creating a space of elision, a space of non-sight. Consequently an instance of non-meaning is produced because the concepts of self versus other – which is to say the axes of figure versus ground – begin to fray. This is the gaze behind Lacan's famous anecdote recounted in Seminar XI that entailed his being at sea on a small fishing boat with the young fisherman Petit-Jean, the latter of whom mockingly pointed out to the good doctor: »You see that can [glimmering in the sun]? Do you see it? Well it doesn't see you!« The point of this little story, Lacan explains, is that »at that moment [I ...] looked like nothing on earth. In short I was rather out of place in the picture.«[8]

Which brings us to the question of anamorphosis, the conceptual scaffolding of Kerry Tribe's reworking of »Critical Mass.« In »The Ambassadors« of 1953 – the most famous example of the anamorphic object in the Western canon – Hans Holbein depicts two men surrounded by the trappings of a learned society, what Lacan would call subjects of the Symbolic register. In the lower part of the painting you'll see an elongated object that slashes upward and to the right of the picture plane. Should we move to an oblique angle, the object is revealed to be a skull produced by the process of anamorphic perspective. i.e. »the representation of an image that is copied square-by-square into a distorted grid.« What's unique about Holbein's anamorphic object is that it is interjected onto – or flies across – the geometral perspective that is the Ambassadors's Symbolic domain. Consequently, we can never see the learned men or the skull at once – one exists at the expense of the other. Against Durer's Camera Lucida – whereby the viewing subject is squarely positioned in front of his object so that he might represent this object point-by-point as his possession – Holbein's Ambassador's inverts the geometrical perspective so that what we have is not a restoration of the world onto the image but the distortion of it onto another surface. Moreover, the viewer can never see both points-of-view at once from one position. As such this produces a stretching of the representational world through which Symbolic meaning is challenged.

Indeed, if there's an equivalent anamorphic perspective to Tribe's »Critical Mass,« it can be located in the act of her stretching Frampton's film into a distorted one-to-one repetition of the original projection (then) onto a two-part performance (now). Accordingly, if you only see the Frampton film, you don't see the Tribe performance. But once you've seen the Tribe, you never quite see the Frampton again from the same perspective. Instead, the original film flies across Tribe's performance retroactively redefined.

But let's begin again. Grammatically speaking, the object in Tribe's performance is Frampton's film, to which her actors direct their mimetic actions. In the original, a couple improvises a break-up, their argument reflecting the trials and tribulations of the sexual revolution. Frampton filmed the argument as a whole and then edited the footage into a series of stutters and repetitions (which is how the film exists today). In Tribe's redux, her performers reenact both aspects of Frampton's film. In the first part of the performance, the audience witnesses a verbatim reenactment of the original argument that was improvised by Frampton's actors. In the second part, Tribe's performers reenact the film's dialogue, complete with the interruptions and stutters produced by Frampton's disruptive edits.

Now, if we were to posit Frampton's »Critical Mass« as the »distancing point« of Tribe's reenactment – that is, if Frampton's film is the historical point whereupon two imaginary parallel lines in space meet – what we then have is an anamorphic re-presentation

of 70s avant-garde film (the object of art) and feminist politics (the object of gender) in the present. Moreover, if Tribe's performance stages an anamorphosis, it's because when we see Frampton's perspective – in the space of Tribe's performance – we first and foremost see an avant-garde critique of cinematic narrative in the guise of what Stan Brakhage called a »universal« work of art that »deals with all quarrels.«[9]

This is Tribe's first operation, whereby the restaged argument is performed so naturalistically in situ that the audience at first mistakes the performance for a real quarrel: »Just another day in New York City.« Paradoxically, this misidentification entails a visceral identification on behalf of the audience with either party of the argument: »Oh, yes, I've been there before [...] That's me!« This is the »I see myself seeing myself« aspect to the first half of Tribe's performance, whereupon we encounter a Sartrean notion of the gaze that latent in Frampton's film even though his work was dedicated to »casting out« that »specter of narrative« haunting cinema.[10] And yet, in Tribe's hands, this universalist, identity-based aspect of the gaze is undone as soon as the performative nature of the couple's outburst is recognized, which is to say, as soon as the original »Critical Mass« re-enters Tribe's mise-en-scene as an anamorphic object.

This is Tribe's second operation. It is the moment that a paradoxical object arises in the performance. As surrogates for the subject caught and split within the language of his/her gender position, Tribe's actors – »given-to-be-seen« – are objects of the audience's simultaneous identification and dis-identification with a spectacle that's both real and reconstructed. Furthermore, if »we see ourselves seeing ourselves,« it is in the aphasic moment between the subjects with whom we identified only moments ago. In this moment of great artificiality – one in which the cacophony of stutters and breaks exchanged by the performers signifies this event as a representation – the viewer's embodied identification with the event is elided. And instead of providing us with an object of gender, upon which we gaze and with which we can identify, Tribe's performance gives rise to an object cause of desire – an object at which we can aim but not possess. For without a clear point of identification, the geometrical gaze of sight is short-circuited, and as a consequence this representation »fails to belong to me.«

To be sure, one way out of this scenario is for us to cast our Symbolic net back onto the avant-garde moment of Frampton's historical film, in which case the linguistic bravado of Tribe's performers can be visualized and embraced. We imagine how hard it would be for us to perform these lines. But this move is another anamorphosis – a reaction formation through which we can nostalgically suture our gaze back onto the avant-garde and gender as universal objects of desire – ones we can see and possess. The more critical viewing of Tribe's performance entails the suspension any of the polarities at hand – »then and now,«[11] »real and fictive,« »self and other« – in a play of petrified formlessness. This happens when (and because) such play entails the elision of the viewing subject's capacity to form universalist identifications, at which point the more radical notion of a gaze – a blind one from which we are cut off – momentarily arises.

Notes

1 It's important to note that Tribe's feminist return to »Critical Mass« was conceived for the Whitney Museum of Art. As such, there was a level of institutional reflexivity embedded in the event due to the site-specificity of Frampton's interdisciplinary practice, one based in the New York Avant-Garde art scene throughout the 60s. Many modalities of Tribe's performance, which this paper will explicate, underscore the critical, rather than nostalgic, notion of site-specificity at hand. However, I thank Isabelle Graw for directing me to account for institutional aspect of Tribe's performance. I should further note that this institutional component is specific only to the Whitney performance and not Tribe's subsequent restaging of »Critical Mass« at the Hammer Museum and LAXART in Los Angeles.

2 See Cindy Sherman's »Untitled Film Stills« (1977–1980), a series of photographic »self portraits« in which the artist-woman is presented as a simulacrum.

3 See Mary Kelly's »Post-Partum Document« (1973–1979), a six-part series of altered readymades, in which the artist-mother is presented indexically rather than pictorially.

4 Jacques Lacan: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis. Transl. by Alan Sheridan. New York 1973, p. 80.

5 Jean Paul Sartre: Being and Nothingness: An Essay on the Phenomenological Ontology. New York 1956, p. 256.

6 Denis Diderot: Lettres sur les aveugles, cited in Jonathan Crary: Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century. Cambridge 1992, p. 60.

7 Joan Copjec: Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists. Cambridge 1994, p. 36.

8 Lacan 1973 (note 4), pp. 95–96.

9 Stan Brakhage cited in »Circles of Confusion: Hollis Frampton (Part 2),« Los Angeles Filmforum, URL: http://www.lafilmforum.org/index/Winter_2010/Entries/2010/1/15_Circles_of_Confusion__Hollis_Frampton_(Part_2).html [09.05.12].

10 Due to the tenaciousness of narrative, Frampton argued that it was inevitable even in the most abstract film work. Given narrative's persistence, the avant-garde filmmaker had always to be on guard against it: »A specter is haunting cinema: the specter of narrative. If that apparition is an Angel, we must embrace it; and if it is the Devil, then we must cast it out. But we cannot know what it is until we have met it face to face.« Hollis Frampton: A Pentagram for Conjuring Narrative. In: Avant-garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism. Ed. by P. Adams Sitney. New York 1978, pp. 281–289, esp. 181.

11 The anamorphic nature of temporality at stake in reperforming »Critical Mass« should also be noted, whereby a simultaneous instance of a »then« and a »now« is impossible to view from the same (psychic) position in time. This is contrary to Hegel's notion of time, whereby the present and the past are discrete moments that can nevertheless be perceived, simultaneously, from one contemporary position. The aforementioned psychoanalytic notion of time – one based upon what Freud called Nachträglichkeit or deferred action – would instance a temporal anamorphosis, whereby the past and present are completely imbricated even though they appear to be discrete. In the subject's everyday life, the »past« unconsciously flies across the plane of the »present« and vice versa. Tribe's »Critical Mass,« as I have laid it out here, attempts to make this latent operation conscious for the viewing subject. I thank Pamela M. Lee for asking me to tease out this aspect of anamorphosis in Tribe's work.

Photo credits

New York, Whitney Museum of American Art: 1 (Photographer: Tiffany Oelfke). – Robert Plogmann: 2–3.