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Nietzsche and Visuality

Gary Shapiro
University of Richmond, gshapiro@richmond.edu

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Those who take Friedrich Nietzsche's thoughts about the arts and related matters seriously have usually stressed his significance as a critic and theorist of literature, rhetoric, or music. From a biographical point of view, Nietzsche's notoriously poor eyesight would seem to make him a bad candidate to play a similar role with regard to the visual. His optical disability can also be turned into an asset by those who have been critical of the alleged ocularcentrism of Western thought. From that perspective, the philosophical tradition has been dominated by the model of what Plato called "the noblest of the senses," a model that, in the critics' view, is misleading insofar as it suggests that the world is completely open to and masterable by our gaze. The model is said to promote the notion that the seeing subject is independent of the object seen; analogously, the subject of knowledge would maintain a distance from the object that would allow for a purely theoretical (i.e., spectatorial) cognition. Vision is said to support the metaphysics of presence, understood as the notion that what is genuinely real and knowable must be capable of being made totally manifest. The metaphysics of presence, as understood by Martin Heidegger, begins with the Platonic conception of the Forms as that which can really be known, and proceeds to produce other candidates for that which is clearly and intrinsically present: God, the Cartesian cogito, the data of sense as conceived by empiricism, the will in German philosophy. It is such associations that have led thinkers such as Heidegger and John Dewey to question the traditional role of vision in philosophy. From the metaphysics of presence, it is a relatively easy transition to an aesthetics of presence that would comprehend and evaluate aesthetic and artistic experience in terms of their approximation to the ideal of full manifestation. This model of vision is also sometimes said to be complicit with a specifically male or sexist bias (phallocentrism), according to which it is the

male gaze that objectifies the world and, paradigmatically, the bodies of women.

One can distinguish two different ways of challenging this traditional notion of the primacy of vision. One, which finds ample support in Nietzsche, emphasizes the importance of the other senses, especially touch, taste, and smell, stressing the way in which they require intimate involvement with their domains and do not produce the illusion of totalizing comprehension (a stimulating reading of Nietzsche on these senses is to be found in Eric Blondel (1991). Another route, which also runs through Nietzsche's texts, involves rethinking the nature and aesthetics of vision in such a way as to challenge the Platonic model of that sense. The "overturning of Platonism" of which Nietzsche spoke can then be accomplished on the aesthetic plane by two complementary moves: dethroning vision from its position of primacy, while suggesting that vision itself has been misconstrued. Once one realizes that Nietzsche is making both of these moves, one should be able to read what he has to say about the role of vision in the arts in a more sympathetic way.

Vision and the analysis of a visual scene appear at a crucial point in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra,* the work that Nietzsche regarded as his most important. The chapter titled "On the Vision and the Riddle" introduces the crucial thought of the eternal recurrence of all things. But, as the title indicates, the chapter is concerned not only with the riddle of recurrence but with the riddle of vision itself. The visual setting of the episode is highly specific. Zarathustra trudges up a difficult mountain path in twilight, weighed down by a dwarf who represents the spirit of gravity. When they reach the top, they engage in a dialogue about the meaning of the visual scene before them, whose centerpiece is a gateway inscribed *Augenblick.* This term, conventionally translated as "moment," is the name for that which recurs in the recurrence. In German, *Augenblick* is highly visual, meaning a moment of vision or a twinkling of the eye. In reading this dialogue on the *Augenblick,* much depends on whether one construes the term within the metaphysics and aesthetics of presence, according to which it would name a discrete, bounded, and distanced experience. The alternative that Zarathustra suggests is that the *Augenblick* be seen as infinitely deep, as having the complexity and indeterminacy of the abyss. When Zarathustra challenges the dwarf to explain the meaning of the two paths that confront one another at the gateway, he receives this response: "All that is straight lies," the dwarf murmured contemptuously. "All truth is crooked; time itself is a circle." This is a reductive vision, one that fails to apprehend the gateway or the *Augenblick* as such. Zarathustra suggests the alternative with his question: "Is seeing itself not—seeing abysses?" The abyss in German is the *Abgrund,* that which lacks a ground or foundation; there is no getting to the bottom of it, and so there is no totalizing vision, no God's-eye view that would reveal the visible in its entirety. To see abysses is to become aware of the failure of the ground, of the giving way of all boundaries, and the impossibility of any presence that would fully manifest itself; it is to realize that there are only perspectives giving way to other perspectives. The abyssal structure is marked in the episode with the dwarf by the *mise-en-abîme* structure in which the moment is inscribed with its own name, a name that the dwarf fails to read. This inscription doubles the meaning of the moment of vision. Although Zarathustra recognizes that abysses tend to produce vertigo, he calls for a courageous vision that confronts the bottomlessness of the visual. If one recalls Nietzsche's project of overturning Platonism here, one can juxtapose the infinitely deep, abyssal *Augenblick* with the vision of the Forms or the Good that is evoked in Plato's dialogues. In each case, a figure of visual aesthetics is employed, but to the different ends of establishing an ascending hierarchy founded on complete presence for Plato, or of acknowledging the endless complexity of the moment of vision.

With this perspective in mind, we may turn to Nietzsche's best-known text in aesthetics, *The Birth of Tragedy.* The familiar distinction between the Apollonian and the Dionysian is often thought to be resolved in favor of the Dionysian, where the two gods are typically identified with light, vision, and the dream (Apollo) or with music and intoxication (Dionysus). Nietzsche devotes much attention in this work, however, to the theme of the visual, especially in explaining the role of the audience and its relation to the chorus. He offers a synchronic (perhaps a structuralist) account of the relations of audience, chorus, actors, within a space divided into *theatron* (the space for the spectators), *orchestra* (the circle within which the chorus sings and dances), and *skene* (the rather small and narrow space from which the individual actors emerge and within whose precincts they remain). Here the architecture of the Greek theater (using the latter word now in the broad, contemporary sense, which would include the *theatron*) is itself neither Apollonian nor Dionysian. The theatrical matrix is described in a specifically visual way, and much of what it makes possible is itself visionary. The chorus itself in "its primitive form" (but it is implied that the identification persists) is said to be the self-reflection or self-mirroring *(Selbstspiegelung)* of Dionysian man. Nietzsche sees the event in the theater as a nested set of visions: the actor "sees the role he is supposed to play quite palpably before his eyes" (1967). The chorus, in turn, is a vision of the "Dionysian mass, just as the world of the stage, in turn, is a vision of this satyr chorus" (ibid.). The framing *(Umrahmung)* or setup of the theater blinds the eye to everything else. Nietzsche implies that all visions are framed in some way and that it is essential for aesthetics to articulate the structure of the effective frame. The verb *umrahmen,* which generates the noun *Umrahmung* (frame), may mean either "to frame" or "to reframe." When Nietzsche writes of a transfiguring framing or reframing, he emphasizes the variability of the frame. In

section 8 of *The Birth of Tragedy,* he develops a specific account of how the framing/reframing of the tragic theater works in order to produce a double vision, one that is intrinsically perspectival and so avoids the monocular illusions of the imaginary all-seeing eye. The spectators can look down at the scene, the tragic vision, from their place in the *theatron,* identifying with Bacchants on a mountainside, while, insofar as they identify with the theatrical chorus, they can be virtually looking up, from *orchestra* to *skene.* In tragedy, the frame is transfiguring; setting off the actors in their costumes and masks from the surrounding space, it makes the "eye insensitive and blind to the impression of 'reality'" (ibid.).

In thinking of the framing effect of tragedy and the work of the poet, one must understand the audience or spectators as also being constituted by the frame. What is transfigured is the viewing subject *(Zuschauer),* as well as the visions that are presented. Nietzsche speaks of the spectators as enabled to see beyond *(übersehen)* the world of culture around them, imagining themselves as chorists. *Übersehen* is a complex verb, which can mean "to overlook," in the sense either of scanning and surveying, or of neglecting, failing to see, and forgetting. Given Nietzsche's penchant for emphasizing the active and transformative sense given by *über-* in words such as *überwinden* and *Übermensch,* his *übersehen* may actually combine several of these meanings. The spectators, in their specially arranged and framed space, look beyond the ordinary world of their culture to imagine themselves one with the chorus, whose spectacle they see, and to have the visions had by the chorus as if they were their own. This would not be a mere neglect or failure to see the surroundings; it would rather be akin to the "active forgetfulness" that Nietzsche celebrates in *On the Genealogy of Morals.* Seeing beyond may entail not only having a vision, but also being able to behold a vision within a vision; and this, one might say, is to see abysses. In the tragic theater, on Nietzsche's analysis, vision is not overwhelmed by music but has its own complex structure or framing/reframing that enables a seeing beyond; the birth of tragedy is the condition of a continual rebirth of the visionary.

It is significant, in *The Birth of a Tragedy,* that Nietzsche contrasts the visual sensibility of tragedy with the "one great Cyclops eye of Socrates" that "was denied the pleasure of gazing into the Dionysian abysses." The Cyclops ey. of Socrates is not capable of the complex vision required by the tragic frame, a vision that involves *übersehen* and that identifies with the chorus so as to behold its visions through them. Just as he cannot gaze into the abyss, so he cannot dwell with the shining figures that are projected out of it. He is blind to everything but the tragic plot, which he finds confused. Socrates' maxims—that virtue is knowledge, that no one does wrong knowingly, that the virtuous man is the happy man—all establish the frame of a new setup, which could be called the theater of dialectic and virtue. This is precisely what Socrates plays out in his own life, turning himself into a theatrical figure in the Athenian agora; he constitutes a "new Socratic-optimistic stage world." The aesthetic consequence of Socratism, as Nietzsche sees it, is an intolerance of ambiguity, hidden depths, and complexity; it is the aesthetics of presence.

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GARY SHAPIRO