

# Interactions – The Bulletin of I.A.W.I.S. No. 14, April 1995

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**David Scott**, *Paul Delvaux: Surrealizing the Nude*, London: Reaktion Books, 1992, 136 pp., 60 ill., GBP 11.95.

As I was thinking about the book under review here and of the many things that could or should be said about it, I casually asked colleagues, friends and acquaintances what they thought about Paul Delvaux (1897-1994). It turned out that nobody seemed to like Delvaux's art-in fact I was unable to find a single person who enjoyed his work.

While this impromptu survey may not be too representative, it still suggests that David Scott's book on Delvaux, *Surrealizing the Nude*, focuses on an artist who may at this moment be quite out of fashion, and on material which seems rather far from current concerns. This is one of the major achievements of David Scott's book: to look where others turn away and to ask and inquire patiently when most seem to have lost patience-because it seemed too obvious that Delvaux was all about "wide-eyed nudes and train stations" ...

Delvaux's work lends itself to psychoanalytical interpretation (such as Jacques Sojcher's *Delvaux ou la passion puérile*, Paris, 1991), to biographical and anecdotal exegesis, and obviously to art-historical investigations into the adaptation of precedents in the history of figurative art: *Surrealizing the Nude* resists all that. Instead, it takes the artist's visualization of his desires and anxieties as a guide to the questions underlying all representational art and all looking at art. The chapters 'Lines of Tension,' 'Surrealist Academism,' 'The Obsessive Detail,' 'Loving Perspectives' etc. take up the artistic (painterly?) devices (foregrounding and backgrounding, perspective and so on) and the visual vocabulary (i.e. the artist's specific iconography as well as the use of tradition) to look into the more fundamental problems of representational art.

The nudes who inhabit the dream stages of Delvaux's paintings must be close relatives of the female forms who can inhabit that mysterious planet *Solaris* as its creations, and who are described so hauntingly by Stanislaw Lem: they are as real as those whose imagination projects them-the skin of the soles of their feet is "soft, like that of a newborn child." It is perhaps not unfair to say that one of the qualities of Delvaux's paintings, their perfect rendering of pure and intensely soundless vision-that is

vision and sight and gaze *cleansed* from the sensory messiness of our other senses-is taken seriously by the author, both as the artist's and the beholder's analytical tool and mirror. Along these lines the achievement and limits of Delvaux's art become apparent.

One of the strengths of Scott's thought-provoking analysis is that it asks the right questions. If we go along patiently with the dream mode characteristic of Delvaux's mature work, a surprising twist seems to suggest itself. Assuming that the unconscious cannot be conscious but is always acted and reenacted, that dreaming in Freudian terms is 'dream-work,' the act of painting, its being part of a 'symbolic form,' the artistic and intellectual analytical processes themselves come into focus. "By exploiting some of the responses taught us by the academic tradition of painting, Delvaux is able to bring us by a more circuitous and absorbing route to the profound questions he poses"-this is from the author's conclusion-and it is hardly surprising that it is (to quote King René, an artist-dreamer and wanderer of earlier times) *Ardent Désir* that makes him and us follow this route.

No matter what you think of Delvaux's art, David Scott's book on it deserves to be read.

Charlotte Schoell-Glass

**Martin Jay**, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-century French Thought*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994. 632 pp., paperback USD16.

There can be little doubt: We live in a visually oriented world. This becomes obvious not only if we consider the nature of today's preferred media, Television, Cinema, and Video, which are obviously primarily optically oriented but also if we remember that our culture has undergone a massive shift over the past centuries from being predominantly oral to being primarily typographical and with that, visual.

Language itself, too, testifies to this tendency in that it abounds with visual metaphors ranging from obvious ones such as "to keep an eye on" for "to be fully attentive" to much more covert ones like "illustrate" which derives from the Latin "illustrare" < "in" + "lustrare" "to make bright." [1] And then there are those innumerable cultural, religious and psychological "observables", from *apotropeia* to *Zeno's paradox* that bespeak the importance of human vision.

At the same time, however, the twentieth century also witnesses a strong counter-current, an almost violent tendency in theoretical thinking to call into question the alleged nobility of the eye. This is the focus of Martin Jay's remarkable book.

*Downcast Eyes* offers an expansive account and an astute critique of what Jay calls "ocularcentrism," that is the epistemological privileging of vision in the widest sense. Jay is no newcomer-he had already dealt with the philosophical and political role of vision and the term "ocularcentrism" in a series of articles in the late eighties and early nineties. [2] *Downcast Eyes* differs from his earlier investigations primarily in scope. In that sense, the subtitle is somewhat of an understatement, because the book is not only an account of what might be called, alternately, the debunking, deconstruction or denigration of vision in modern French thought, but also, in a sense, a history of vision. After all, the first three chapters (i. e. roughly one-third) of *Downcast Eyes* are an account of ocularcentrism from the Greek philosophers, through the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Age of Enlightenment up to Bergson. It was Bergson, Jay holds, who disseminated ocularcentrism more widely and gave it a significance that it had not had before.

Now, the emphasis is clearly on modern and contemporary French attitudes towards visual primacy. Jay continues with a chapter on Georges Bataille and the Surrealists who profess a new, more radical critique of vision and a companion chapter on the phenomenology of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. These two chapters prepare the ground for the second half of the book which probes the numerous different critiques of the “nobility of the senses” asserted after World War II. Jay probes a number of canonical theorists, including, among many others, Lacan, Foucault, Barthes and Derrida for their attitude towards vision and visuality.

Jay shows how Lacan’s re-reading of Freud (whose work, too, shows distinctly antivisual tendencies), notably his discussion of the “mirror stage” with its critique of the visual constitution of subjectivity contributed to the antiocular discourse. While Lacan explored the significance of vision for the individual, other French intellectuals of the sixties and seventies, particularly Michel Foucault, investigated the socio-political aspects of vision. He, who according to Deleuze “never stopped being a *voyant*” concentrated instead on the negative effects of what he perceived as an omnipresent gaze of surveillance, the *malveillance*, warning of its undetected presence and its pernicious effects: “Our society is not one of spectacle, but of surveillance.”

The next of Jay’s focal points of is the French theoretical interest in the new visual technologies, film and photography, notably Roland Barthes’ comments on the photographic image as signs of a lost past. Jay follows Barthes’ notions to their culmination in *Camera Lucida* where the photographic image becomes a sign of the ultimate loss, of death.

Not surprisingly, the investigation of Derrida’s complex “readings” of ocularcentrism is complicated by his recalcitrance to privilege one “reading” over the other. Jay is careful to point out that while Derrida teaches suspicion against the hegemony of vision in Western culture-and was indeed instrumental in the deconstruction of its privileged position in Western culture-he does not offer a forthright and unreserved critique of ocularcentrism. Instead, he acted as a condensation nucleus for the radicalization of feminist anti-ocularcentric stances.

Martin Jay’s *Downcast Eyes* is easily the most comprehensive contemporary account of 20th-century criticism of vision available. Although the book’s emphasis is clearly on present-day French thought, its scope is still broad enough for it to be most useful. A formal feature that makes a taxonomically bent publication like *Downcast Eyes* particularly useful is the scrupulous attention paid to documentation. Every reference of any relevance is identified in the abundant notes. (In fact, many pages resemble those of scholarly editions where the notes take up as much space as the text itself or even more). What I particularly like about the layout of the book is the placement of the notes at the bottom of the page rather than after each chapter or at the end of the book. I wish, more publishers would follow this laudable practice, relieving countless readers of the frustrating chore of continually having to turn the pages between text and notes.

These features together with Jay’s sensible reading of the pertinent texts make *Downcast Eyes* a standard reference for anyone interested in modern theory of the visual.

Martin Heusser

[1] Tracing the etymology even further back, we find that “illustrate” in turn derives from an Indo-European root *leuk-* “light,” “brightness” [Greek: *leukós* = “bright,” “light,” “white,”] of which other important derivatives are: light, luminary, luminous, illuminate, lunar, lunatic, luster, lucid, elucidate, translucent.

[2] See, for example, “The Rise of Hermeneutics and the Crisis of Ocularcentrism,” *Poetics Today* 9.2 (1988): 307-326; “Scopic Regimes of Modernity,” *Vision and Visuality*, ed. Hal Foster, Seattle: Bay Press, 1988; “Ideology and Ocularcentrism: Is there Anything Behind the Mirror’s Tain?” *Intellectuals and Politics: Social Theory in a Changing World*, ed. Charles C. Lemert, Sage Publications, 1991. Parts and earlier versions of a number of chapters have appeared as articles in journals and essay collections.

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