

SEE WITHOUT LOOKING

LOOK WITHOUT SEEING

The light goes out, you open eyes that do not exist.

Principium individuationis

“The only truth is poetic truth”
(Robert Musil)

In her 1964 essay “Against Interpretation”, Susan Sontag defended the antithetical notion that the real mystery lies on the surface, in the appearance of things. Plato saw all art as a mere *trompe-l’oeil*, a shadow, as opposed to the truth of ideas, any representation of which could never be more than a sad parody. This notion gave rise to the equally illusory distinction between content as essential and form as accessory, and to our warped obsession with interpreting images, as if translating an image into words—normalising it as an object of language—somehow made it more noble, or as if making it comprehensible had something to do with making sense of what cannot be comprehended. Sontag warns that the search for meaning in artwork has replaced the immediacy of the aesthetic experience, which primarily targets the senses, and adds that, in order to restore the power of art, we do not need hermeneutics but erotics: a return to the innocence that existed before the theory, transparency as “the highest, most liberating value in art”. She then deliberately mentions the work of two exemplary filmmakers, Bresson and Ozu. Sontag believes that cinema, with its irresistible seductiveness, its vitality and its ability to incorporate accidental truths, is the medium that holds the secret to the survival of the image, aside from the meanings that critics claim to see in it or the supposed “messages” their own creators take such pride in conveying.

Yet you are still torn between words and things. You wonder if it’s possible to discuss art without making a diagnosis, noticing the flavours, forms and processes and adjusting your own voice to match that of the image without attempting to tame it, exhaust it or speak for it: like Barthes with Sade, Blanchot with Paul Celan, Auerbach with Homer or Callois with Saint-John Persé. You ask yourself if you can dialogue without taking over the discourse, without forgetting your place as a spectator, attentive to the description of the pure act of perception and true to your deepest gut reactions. You know you have to find a position beyond the reach of the work’s spellbinding power in order to discuss what is happening around it without the bewilderment that comes from getting too close, in any language except that in which the work addressed you. You follow Schopenhauer’s advice and embrace the *principium individuationis*; you try to focus on lucid isolation, regarding things as mere phenomena.

Grisaille

“No longer is it a matter of speaking about space and light, but of making space and light, which are there, speak to us”

(Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”)

You’ve arranged to meet María Dávila so she can show you some of the pictures in the exhibition. You notice how deftly the artist handles her own works: how she holds them, organises them, points to them, looks at them. You find a painter’s vision of her own paintings quite telling. Her eyes retrace familiar paths, linger over certain details and leap from one fragment to another, revealing unforeseen connections. You sense that, for her, the act of looking at a picture is like looking at her own gaze—an exercise in *looking at looking*, which for María Dávila has become a theme of her work.

While you take notes, you ask her a few questions. You want to know more about her working methods. You’re convinced that the smallest actions, the most involuntary movements and gestures of the creative act are the reflections of unconscious urges which, in one way or another, end up trapped inside the picture. You suspect that every studio session leaves a trace of its character on the physiognomy of the finished work.

You discover a “realist” style of painting which, oddly enough, is not based on reality but on intermediate images, representations of representations. You realise that this decision is an exercise in the self-reflection of the image. You pay particularly close attention to the faces, the poses, the relationships you sense exist between the different

protagonists of this *dramatis personae*, in which you begin to see a certain kinship, faces that demand acknowledgement of their unique existence, situations that seem to spring from the depths of your own psyche. This world strikes you as both familiar and strange.

Although derived from a secondary reality—the “fictional reality” of a film—you automatically perceive it as if it were an “absolute reality”, on an equal footing with what you would call the “really real”. The painting thus reasserts itself as a shadow of other shadows while also referencing other earlier shadows, releasing a shock wave of futility whose expansion threatens your own existence, the mere reflection of a string of projections with no point of origin. Hence the odd melancholy that overtakes you on observing these paintings, so similar to the feeling of vulnerability that the pseudo-lives of automatons have always inspired in you.

Automatons, dolls, mannequins, puppets, impassive as furniture—there is something obscene, too explicit, about them, which nevertheless fascinates you. In their insolent parody of human existence, they convey more truth than any attempt at lifelike representation. Nothing affects them in their impeccable indifference. They are aloof, invulnerable in their fragility. For Kleist, puppets are not a metaphor for alienation but an example of freedom that does not stem from the self-interested consciousness of an ego but from an older, deeper source that allows them to exist in a state of perpetual harmony with their environment. The theatre visionary Gordon Craig proposed an acting method that aspired to replicate the perfectly neutrality of a lifeless doll. His notion

of the actor as an “über-marionette” was inspired by the automaton that inhabits your outer shell, your most purely formal self—that which Artaud experienced in the flesh, as a vivid nightmare, which he described as “the totem of being, tossed outside of the self by the piercing infinite outside”. The self-absorbed characters in María Dávila’s paintings also seem to behave like über-marionettes, *vanitas* that call out to you in their silence.

María is an artist with an insatiable intellectual curiosity, and her painting is just one part of a larger whole that feeds off of the paintings of others and drinks from readings, writings and films, shaping a spiritual geography you would like to explore. You even think that her painting might be a response to the emotional upheaval inspired in her by the works of other artists. You assume that, on this occasion, the clues will have to be sought in early *Nouvelle Vague* films, influenced by the simultaneous reading of certain key texts related to existentialism—Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Blanchot, etc.—that converge, by clairvoyant accident, to produce the peculiar creative atmosphere in which her paintings are immersed.

In contrast to the slow incubation of the themes, her painting process seems quick to you. It is essentially a classic example of *grisaille*, reminding you of the old black-and-white films. The technique is astonishingly simple: on top of the wood, a smooth ground prepared with white primer is concealed by layers of black oil paint slightly tinged with colour: crimson, ochre, Prussian blue... While the paint is still fresh she rubs it with a rag to reveal the light areas, from radiant brightness to near-opaque shadows in a progressive gradation of *chiaroscuro*. *Pentimenti* are not an option; her method requires determination and skill. Any mistake would mean erasing everything and starting over again. So the artist must act with courage, but also with moderation. Your gaze penetrates the image with the same dexterity and confidence with which it was painted.

Don’t you think this method of painting by “unpainting” is closely connected to the way memories are formed? To remember is to reveal, undress, unwrap, clear away clutter and weeds, unearth, tear down, excavate, clean, sweep—actions that attempt to restore an original situation, a partial return still covered with a thin coat of dust from the homeward journey. To remember is to return to the void, but you only go halfway, leaving one part of yourself still in the present. A compromise between nothing and being. Razing, emptying, etching, erasing, drawing on a fogged surface... all are forms of that “doing by undoing” that stops just shy of total annihilation, still bound to the world of sensations. “One does not create by adding, but by taking away,” Bresson said.

Actions have their own expressiveness. You can take away or add, clean or stain, fill in order to empty, dress in order to undress, or go away to find yourself. Different actions leave their marks on matter. Every painting is, in essence, the product of marks made by a series of actions, a sensory surface on which you can relive an entire experience in your mind. In that sense, paintings are very similar to movies.

You notice that the objects and spaces become equal—and on the same level as the people—in the monochrome image, like fragile metaphors, empty forms abstracted in the same wordless lethargy: “waiting, waiting, waiting” in the stillness of a silent poem.

Certain motifs resonate in your mind with the force of a categorical statement:

- Walls, doors, draperies that cut you off, enforcing their boundaries
- The suspension of meaning, the unutterable, that which pushes you towards the image and plunges you into pure visuality
- The feeling of sudden exile when you look down at your own hand, dark mirror, sightless face: as Goethe said, “The hands want to see, the eyes want to caress.”
- Expressionless hands that touch, point and hold with leaden gentleness
- Empty characters, lost souls
- Tedious poses, the tedious gravity of bodies in their myriad inertias: falling, yielding, obeying, sinking, collapsing, ignoring each other despite the exuberance of two bodies meeting
- Gazes that seem willing to become the objects of your gaze, shifting to one side, downwards, inwards, towards the endless void of things, towards anywhere outside
- Frames delimiting the territory of the sensory: what emerges from within and what remains outside, half- suggested, orbiting around the dense core of the image that also captivates you with its magnetism
- But, above all, the choice of painting as a medium for imitating, not the world, but its most accomplished representation: the reality of the silver screen. With its mysterious substance, painting transforms what it imitates, a metamorphosis that primarily affects the visible realm: visibility itself is at stake. In *The Divine Mimesis* (1975), Pasolini discovered that the copy of a copy is a device capable of inspiring a “neo-existential poetry that confounds the indolent”, putting discarded material back into circulation in new contexts that are more open to the emergence of unexpected associations.

Diegesis

“There is a sort of indifference in my paintings which makes them more violent, because with any objects in them it is as though they had been erased, cancelled out”

(Luc Tuymans)

María’s painting is not theatre or photography or cinema, but in its determination to resemble them, it reminds you of the same kind of concise fetishism. But this time there are no tricks; you are the trickster’s accomplice, allowing you to see and yet maintain a critical distance as co-author. A painting does not attempt to hide its artificiality; on the contrary, it flaunts it shamelessly, with the emphasis that its own presence as a physical object makes. In both her paintings and her own writings, María Dávila reflects on the act of painting as a “way of seeing” built into the body that goes beyond the purely optic function of vision. This is in line with the idea expressed in Merleau-Ponty’s final essay, “Eye and Mind” (1960), where he wrote that, in painting, “the body sees itself seeing”, abolishing the distinction between senser and sensed.

The Greeks made a distinction between mimesis and diegesis. While mimesis aims to faithfully reproduce the facts in the manner of an objective description, diegesis, though actually a form a mimesis, is more like a personal narrative that develops a plausible fiction according to its own rules. In other words, diegesis passes itself off as a copy of the real, while actually offering a biased version. However, that “bias” is precisely what Merleau-Ponty was advocating when he proclaimed the supremacy of painting over photography and its derivatives as a tool for capturing phenomenological truth, which is, after all, the only expressible truth: as Paul Valéry would say, “The painter takes his body with him.”

Copying “by eye” is a clear example of diegesis: what ends up emerging is always different and new. Imitation exaggerates and omits, adds and subtracts. Everything seems the same, but something is missing or doesn’t fit, and those absences and oddities urge you to finish the work, to organise and complete it using your own imagination.

In Auerbach's work, the concept of mimetic representation is not limited to the comparison of like objects; mimesis entails an operation that affects the very codes of representation, creating an expansion of the expressible by juxtaposing processes and contexts foreign to those of the original. And so, under the guise of the familiar, the unsettling presence of the strange is manifested.

Zahir

“The Other is always the Same, and only the movement of time can create an illusion of difference”

(Pierre Klossowski)

Similarities jump out at you, so constantly that you wonder if the very mechanism of perception is based on the search for likeness: a rushing stream of recognitions that make you experience the world as an allegory. Your memory holds the key to that recognition. When you recognise an object you *introject* it, incorporate it, and it starts to behave as just another of your memories. At that moment you experience the situation from the inside, making it your own; it seems to have been made by and for you. Thus, in every waking moment reality appears

to you as a personal *projection* that demands interpretation. Goethe was convinced that all things in the world are affected by the same formative structure—“the same drama”—and that this structure could be recognised in any fragment of reality. The ancients thought the same when they understood that every circumstance could be viewed as an oracle. Your eyes come to rest on any ordinary object, and you sense that, at that very moment, everything suddenly falls into place.

Look closely enough at any real-life situation, and you can recognise, despite its altered appearance, the same *mise-en-scène* of a personal event in your own intellectual life. In his celebrated study of the morphology of folktales (1928), Vladimir Propp noted that, although the characters and situations may seem different in each tale, the actions are essentially identical, and he reached the conclusion that all imaginable folktales could be reduced to 31 recurring narrative functions and 7 character types. The mere process whereby one action flows into another to form a whole blinds you to this lack of variety, giving you the impression that you are hearing a new story each time. Appearances and names may change, but actions do not. Propp suggested a combinatorial system with a very simple structure, which might explain our perception's allegorical tendencies and the efficacy of tales as emotional substitution mechanisms. His observations can also be applied to films; if you ignore narrative continuity and focus on each of the individual frames that make up a sequence, where time is frozen for an instant, the same simplicity is revealed. A mere handful of arrangements are repeated over and over again, in different disguises, and each appeals to an analogous experience already lodged in your memory, as if reality itself could only handle a limited number of combinations. From that perspective, your own life could be seen as the invention of a polymorphic identity.

At the same time, all possible tales are latent in every tale and in every fragment of that tale. Borges describes “the Zahir” as the opposite of “the Aleph”. While the Aleph is capable of containing the universe in a single point, in the Zahir infinite appearances are reconciled into one. The complex is fully manifested in a simple object that absorbs all of its qualities and myriad nuances. Anything you see can be a Zahir: a door, a corner, a book, a shadow, a cinema screen, a suit lapel, a face, a small ornament on the wall, a keyhole, a dress, a glove, even your own hand. A Zahir ends up captivating your thoughts, like a ray of light in the darkness, like the bright spot at the end of a tunnel, like a mirror in an empty room.

You recall that the photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto, known for his masterfully straightforward use of time, repeated the same experiment on several occasions: he placed his camera in the seating area of a cinema, facing the screen, and kept the shutter open. The exposure began when the screen flickered to life and ended when the movie was over. The result, entirely unadulterated, was always a blank screen that contained the sum of all the images projected, a blank produced by the juxtaposition of all possible images—the same “common ground” from which María Dávila's pictorial universe emerged. Her personal Zahir is a void of plenitude onto which your conscious mind projects its own shadow theatre.

Tableau Vivant

“How did you come to me? In what shape, what disguise?”
(Terrence Malick, *The Tree of Life*)

Your fantasies need to maximise their outlets for expression in order to become reality. What Bazin called the “need for illusion” requires that additional dose of “realism” which characterised Baroque painting and finds its most effective vehicles in photography and film, where the illusion of reality no longer has to be constructed from its most elemental materiality using realistic strategies, because now it is physically contained in the image, transferred in the form of an indelible imprint. As in the reliquaries of old, the photographic image preserves the immediacy of the encounter; it is steeped in reality.

The blurred quality of María’s painted characters underscores the spectral origins of the photographic image. In earlier times, photosensitive material was used to corroborate the existence of ghosts, to render visible the invisible. In the late 19th century, William H. Mumler became famous for his photographs of spirits. These images have a rare beauty and, aside from the question of trickery and deception, undoubtedly managed to capture something supernatural. Photography lends an air of mystery to everything it captures: people and things seem wrapped in a transfiguring aura.

In a world saturated with hyper-realistic phantasmagoria, Baroque voluptuousness was replaced by a taste for asceticism, a restraint that is the antithesis of sensuality, as illustrated by Bresson’s films. And it is precisely in that desert of expression where you sense that the vestiges of true life resurface. Pessoa defined the concept of “static theatre” as a form in which the dramatic intrigues are not based on a plot, where the players no longer act and do not even have the sensory ability to produce an action. This poetic theatre without a plot merely composes a series of motionless *tableaux vivants* that reveal snapshots of the soul.

Un homme qui dort

“[...] I was paralysed, I couldn’t say a word. I was staring at a little Khmer statuette [...]”

(Sartre, *Nausea*)

Everything begins in your consciousness, that dual ego Blumenberg was so obsessed with: the simultaneity of being a witness to your own existence, of being inside and outside of a situation at the same time. You observe your dramatic shipwreck from the imperturbable safety of the shore. You are the spectator watching yourself act on the stage of the world.

You keep a diary; you carefully record every occurrence in painstaking detail, delivering a monologue as events unfold; you feel that these actions reinforce the separation that is the very substance of your consciousness. But deep within that exultant act of “realising”, paradoxically, a kind of doubly dreamy unconsciousness emerges, where what you perceive becomes less important than the slow process of crafting a true story of the world of phenomena for yourself, depicting it down to the smallest detail. It is as though everything had to pass through your thoughts before becoming fully real:

“I opened my hand, looked; I was simply holding the doorknob”

Far from the dazzling certainty of *seeing*, you are in the intentional territory of *looking*. Your consciousness, in its blindness, draws you into a world where you must feel your way. Your gaze is now that long passageway stretching from things to the *why and wherefore*. The world slows down like a text you must memorise through appropriation and repetition. The process is made evident in the characteristic impassivity of the face staring at you in the mirror. Lost in its own projections, your gaze is a *seeing* that has run aground on its objects, that retains without perceiving until memory finally acknowledges and names it.

Literature could not afford to overlook this process, especially since writing is its most obvious manifestation. Writing is the word made visible, the word that has been stabilised and turned into the object of our gaze. Seeing transformed into reading. Your eyes are used to thinking, and you tend to see the world as writing. Being a reader of your own writings, you mould yourself in the likeness of the very images you have created.

Literature has given us accurate psychological portraits of that self-consciousness which ends up taking on the appearance of extreme alienation, a monologism that contaminates everything it touches and to which no one, not even the narrator, is immune. It's like in Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1853): a character with no will of his own, lost in contemplation, impelled to do nothing, foreshadowing the paradigm of the modern man who, in his emptiness, has a front-row seat to a reality in which he is incapable of intervening, and which Kafka made the symbol of erratic contemporary identity. Dostoevsky's characters watch the world as if it were an internal theatre, built by constant inner murmurs that make it impossible to see the true forms outside. From Bakhtin's perspective, the dialogism that permeates the Russian novelist's work is an example of the polyphonic, almost schizophrenic nature of his characters' unstable identities. His prototype is the first-person voice of the protagonist in "Memoirs from the House of the Dead" (1864), which continues to resonate in Sartre's *Nausea* (1938). Other important 20th-century novelists have felt the same urge to venture into the labyrinths of self-absorbed writing: Proust, Joyce, Beckett, Musil, etc.

Determined to reunite the gaze with the "beauty on the far side of the void", in 1974 Georges Perec wisely decided to write and direct the film *Un homme qui dort* [The Man Who Sleeps], an adaptation of his eponymous 1967 novel, with the help of filmmaker Bernard Queysanne. The result is a portrait of the *I am* of excruciating truth and rawness. Who is speaking to you? Who is experiencing what's happening to you? Who is looking at whom? The use of second-person narrative creates an ambiguous interplay of identities—narrator/actor/spectator—and an indifference towards the subject that twists the whole meaning of language.

- The voice says: "You are alone [...] learn to see like a man alone."

Ellipsis

"The obligation to let something be lost, to reveal only partially and imperfectly, is inherent to the nature of expression"

(Giorgio Colli, *Filosofia dell'espressione*)

"No *subject*," Giorgio Colli wrote, "exhibits heroic nihilism, wiping out with one fell swoop all previous knowledge based on a point of view that has now been vacated: if we speak of something, we are speaking of an *object* [...] the knowledge exists, but not the knower." The subject is relativised to the object: the subject is caused. You always perceive reality as a representation, because if you *see* it you stop experiencing and immediately withdraw from life. The core of life is always, of necessity, external to what you are expressing; it is untouchable, ineffable. "You know you have experienced it without knowing it while you experienced it." You try to fill that enormous void with the simulacra of art—your eye *sees* to the extent that it represses what it sees—stimulating your ability to remember with elusive images. The essential is still left *outside the frame*: you are the one who is speaking.

María Dávila's work comes out to meet you in the form of an *ellipsis*: a disjointed narrative, a time lapse, the gap that allows your imagination to dream of completing its before and after without leaving its present continuum. You must deduce what has been silenced. The point of a mystery is not to solve it but to maintain the intensity of suspense while you persist in your efforts to unravel it, seizing even the smallest opportunity to do so. All of her images hold that strange power of fascination exerted by everything that excludes you, everything you are denied and that denies you.

Et in Arcadia Ego

"He looks with silence"

(Rilke, *Notes on Hammershøi*)

The separation begins at the moment you attain self-consciousness and the *subject* appears, immediately revealing the reality of *objects*. You become aware of the undifferentiated inertia of what surrounds you versus the omnipotence of the *ego-subject*, superior to everything perceived as its subject. Where one ends, the other begins. But sometimes, when that certainty of supremacy wavers—despite the fact that your consciousness is fully awake, or perhaps because of it—you experience what Freud called "the uncanny", and *objects* morph into potential *subjects* with a life of their own that threatens your identity. At that point, you become a witness to your own shipwreck on the shoals of contingency, conscious of being an *object* among *objects* rather than the possessor of a permanently differentiated utopian identity.

María Dávila knows how to choose the moments when the ability to identify with the represented is at its peak: when what is enacted is the very act of *looking*. When you *look at looking*, the subject-object relationship goes into loop mode and short-circuits. The knowledge that you are looking at *looking* makes it hard for you to differentiate between what you are looking at and your own self-perceptions. Magritte illustrated this in his *Portrait of Edward James* (1937), which Percec upholds as a sacred effigy in *Un homme qui dort*. It is also present, though less didactically and more cryptically, in the back-facing figures of Friedrich's paintings, and you find it once more in the ambiguous calm of the scenes depicted by Danish painter Wilhelm Hammershøi, where you've often felt as though you had one foot inside the picture frame. The theme of the observer who crosses over into the realm of the observed is nothing new: "Et in Arcadia Ego". You, too, are among the things in Arcadia or, to put it another way, in the reality you face and look at; you can only know it as a self-representation. In the pictorial interpretation of Guercino (1621-23) and later in Poussin's two versions (1629-30 and 1638-39), once again, you catch yourself contemplating those who are themselves lost in contemplation of the mysterious object of their own fate. The picture inside a picture. You glimpse interiority at the bottom of exteriority. In the words of Jean-Luc Nancy, "I can 'resemble myself' only in a face that is always absent from and outside of me, not like a reflection but like a portrait brought before me, always in advance of me."

Masque

"Those grey or sepia shadows, phantomlike and almost undecipherable, are no longer traditional family portraits but rather the disturbing presence of lives halted at a set moment in their duration, freed from their destiny; not, however, by the prestige of art but by the power of an impassive mechanical process"

(André Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*)

André Bazin, the passionate ideologue and founder of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, often thought of film in terms of its relationship with other visual arts like painting or sculpture, which he called "embalming arts", seeing them as the most emphatic manifestation of the desire to preserve the appearances of a thing or being. "Realistic" images are not just a gratifying exercise in mimesis; there is something more involved, an unforeseen side-effect which might be the reason why the act of copying, as Aristotle noted, is rewarded by nature: imitation gives you pleasure. Every representation, in addition to pointing towards the thing it imitates, also creates an autonomous existence. In representation, the world is played as a character by an actor, but that actor has a life of its own that transcends and coexists with the life of the character being played. You are therefore witnessing two realities at once, and in that sense re-presenting actually entails a *double presence* rather than the presence of a double. In your childhood games, you assigned roles to things and made up your own stories, recreating a *phantasmatic* exteriority that completely altered reality, although the outward appearances never changed. A similar mechanism governs your dreams, but in this case real forms are, for lack of a better term, "abducted" by imaginary beings without losing their own identity.

In *Masque* you see a close-up of the face of a young woman with light-coloured eyes, high forehead and hair (probably blond) held off her face by a glittering diadem that falls in a cascade to graze her bare shoulders. She is looking at her own hand, which she is holding up at a certain distance from her face, fingers loosely separated and sheathed in a dark glove with snaking ornamental details. The hand partly blocks the light source in front of her, casting its Chinese puppet shadow on her face. This description is a copy, and yet it is obviously a far cry from its model: it omits a thousand nuances and offers only relative statements. In fact, it doesn't show you anything at all; it merely points to the possible common grounds where language loves to frolic. Without the image before you, this description is nothing but a suggestion designed to stimulate your imagination and memory. Now you have before you the original still that María used as a model for her painting. When you compare the two images, the differences are glaringly obvious: everything has been subtly simplified. The decision to paint "by eye" is already imposing involuntary differences that effect a radical transformation. But there are other, more conscious elements that denote an expressive intentionality: the backgrounds are simplified, the landscapes are blurred, decorative elements disappear—the mouldings, the lock on a door, the button on a blouse. Once again, Dávila's technique is characterised by the act of *taking away*. Even the painted subtitles, which give the image that air of a solemn *emblem*, are simplified to make the meaning stranger and less familiar.

Instead of:

"One must wait, wait.

Wait for it to come"

the statement remains indeterminate:

"One must wait, wait".

Omnes ad Unum

“[...] the depth of life is entirely revealed in the spectacle, however ordinary, that we have before our eyes”

(Charles Baudelaire)

The great stage designer and director Robert Wilson often tells how, in the late 1960s, he worked with psychologist Daniel Stern, watching hundreds of films about the relationship between mothers and their babies. The film footage documented real-life situations that had to be analysed, frame by frame, looking for details that might otherwise go unnoticed. They observed how, in a fraction of a second, the expression on a mother's face could run the entire gamut of emotions, from love to hate. These observations ended up having a tremendous influence on Wilson's innovative theatre productions: “When you slow the film down and look at it frame by frame, you see [...] something very complex is happening [and] in the next two or three frames something else happens. [...] If you're Romeo and you say you love Juliet, it's very, very complex.”

There it is again, that double reality: the reality of the expressive continuity of the whole in motion, and the reality of the heterogeneous, contradictory expressive autonomy of the individual fragments that comprise it.

Wilson delves into the secret life that lurks beneath every visual impression: the primordial language revealed by gestures, actions, poses, faces or hands, an undreamed-of multiplicity of micro-movements, micro-structures and micro-expression that slow motion lays bare as undeniable truth. He explores the possibility of an art that does not strive to express but to expose, as neutrally as possible, the sights that are present but tend to go unnoticed, eclipsed by an interpretation of the world that is largely a slave to meaning. In the case of movies, the tyranny of the storyline, with its constant demands for coherence, blinds us to much of the rich dramaturgy of the moment.

For Godard, cinema has always been a collection of frames that the mind strives to organise, stitching them together with the conceptual thread imposed by a linear conception of screen time. But there are many other possible combinations. When the reel stops moving, right before the acetate catches fire, the image goes into a trance and reveals its profoundest existence.

Your eyes are so impatient, so accustomed to chasing the fleeting moments and yet doomed to evanescence. Your gaze is useless for retaining anything; the most it can do is make a quick sketch, which is why you derive special pleasure from the static images that painting offers you. You look, moving about freely and running back and forth in your voracious race to take it all in. Before picking up her brush, María sources, selects and singles out fragments of films in order to reinstate them as paintings. She, like Duchamp, uses painting to “delay” reality. The point is not the image in motion but motion in the image.

Fountain

“But there is yet another gaze that looks if it does not look and does not look if it looks”

(Roberto Juarroz, *Sexta poesía vertical*)

Your act of looking, unlike your seeing, is very intentional. In looking, you state your intentions. Looking is always excessive, even more so than desire, and it is therefore a powerful weapon you must handle with care. In fact, when an image looks back at you, the effect is intimidating. Titian's *Venus of Urbino* and Manet's *Olympia* are two famous cases in point, censured not for their brazen nudity but for the even more threatening nakedness of their open stares. When a character looks at you from the screen, you feel that the illusion of fiction has been shattered; you feel singled out and the cinematic spell is broken.

Being looked at makes you lose control and start to act like an *object*. Awareness of the *object* leads you to the awareness of *being an object*. To the extent that you look, you can also conceive the possibility of being looked at, and at that moment you are. Duchamp, sensitive to the “rebound” effect of all representations, was able to capture this subtle mechanism of redress in images of almost comical simplicity, such as *Fountain* (1917) and *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919), in which the lookers end up being possessed by the object of their gaze, like the hunter becomes the hunted in the myth of Actaeon. When that happens, you can recognise yourself, from the other side,

like a conscious automaton. You are surprised by the unsettling sense of having awakened only to see yourself sleeping—or, in reverse, having seen yourself sleeping and awakened as a result. While the things you look at appear to you as living creatures, you yourself, as the observer, are being reduced to a *look-at-able* object.

When María Dávila selects the film stills she intends to use as models for her paintings, she searches for that character-as-witness, the one who *looks* within the scene, the one you find it easiest to identify with, for the action she represents—the act of *looking*—is in fact your own. But it is an alienated looking, immobilised by the spell of paint, trapped in compulsive self-absorption. It is as if a pool of total unconsciousness were concealed at the very core of the consciousness that governs your looking, as if what you thought of as your will were nothing more than the ironic mask of a *Deus ex machina*, the pinnacle of a world ruled by fatalism.

Fade to Black

“People stared in bewilderment at the face of this charming spectre, who seemed to see them and yet did not, who was not at all affected by their gaze, and whose laughter and waves were not meant for the present, but belonged to the then and there of home—it would have been pointless to respond”

(Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain*)

In *The Magic Mountain* Thomas Mann, with his exuberant, meticulous style, gave us an unforgettable description of early cinema shows and the audience’s mixed feelings of pleasure and impotence at the sight of “a million photographs brought into focus for the briefest of moments” and projected at lightning speed. The uncomfortable silence and embarrassment of finding themselves in an empty room when the show ended and the lights came up. The thrill of anticipation and longing to plunge back into darkness and succumb to the spell once more.

Willing to surrender your will, you close your eyes just a second before you fade to black.

Theatrum Mundi

“Alas for Latin Add to our worries This Latin lack!”
(Anne Carson)

When an author decides to use Latin titles, it is a fairly good indication of rampant anachronism, the promise of inhabiting a timeless present, untouched by changing fashions and customs. María Dávila’s work steps out of time in more than one sense, because the references on which it is based are deliberately drawn from a recent past that already seems “old” to us, but above all because her paintings literally act like “frozen images”. *Dramatis personae* is a Latin phrase used to refer to the cast of characters in a work. *Personae* refers to the “persona” as a masking of identity, the character behind which an actor hides. The phrase also evokes the idea of an “inner theatre” with psychological connotations, that chorus of voices of the ego which Bakhtin interprets as a “dialogical and polyphonic” entity and which an author like Pessoa embodied in his numerous heteronyms, erasing the boundaries between life and representation. There is no contradiction: when you look at these paintings, you recognise the characters as something alien to you, and at the same time you sense that the drama they are enacting is actually mirroring your own internal drama. Finally, *dramatis personae* can also be associated with any real context in which roles are assigned, something which, according to Erving Goffmann, happens all the time in daily life, in any circumstance and on every scale. All of your relationships with people and things could be analysed as aspects of a theatrical performance; every circumstance creates a tacit stage, and everyone who enters that dramatic universe is given a role to play.

This idea of alienated characters following the unwritten rules of every situation has been faithfully portrayed in paintings, particularly sober compositions that treat the characters and the spaces they occupy with the same cold indifference, as if together they formed a single entity, indivisible and empty. You have experienced the strong empathy of these bleak yet simultaneously compassionate and serene visions in the paintings of Hopper, Hammershøi, Julio Sarmiento and the “gabardine images” of Juan Muñoz— feelings that now come rushing back as you face the paintings of María Dávila.

Dramatis Personae

Every work of art maintains a dialogue with the culture that spawned it, and in María Dávila's case that dialogue is of critical importance. One of the many possible functions of a critical essay is to serve as a bridge between the artist and his/her sources, identifying affiliations and affinities with other creators. Such references are usually found scattered throughout the essay, in the footnotes or in the bibliography. In this case I have preferred to present that inventory of names, all together, in the form of *dramatis personae*. This seemed to me a more practical approach to gaining a general understanding of her work and offering a broader view of the creative landscape we are attempting to explore.

Michelangelo Antonioni	Pipo Hernández
Antonin Artaud	Edward Hopper
Richard Artschwager	Roberto Juarroz
Erich Auerbach	Franz Kafka
Mijail Bajtín	Johannes Kahrs
Roland Barthes	Naomi Kawase
Pina Bausch	Karen Kilimik
André Bazán	Pierre Klossowski
Samuel Beckett	Jacques Lecoq
Albert Béguin	Zbigniew Libera
John Berger	Roy Lichtenstein
Ingman Bergman	René Magritte
Maurice Blanchot	Chantal Maillard
Hans Blumenberg	Terrence Malick
Alejandro Bombín	Louis Malle
Jorge Luis Borges	Thomas Mann
Michael Borremans	Gabriel Marcel
Duchenne de Boulogne	Chris Marker
Robert Bresson	Herman Melville
Gustave Caillebotte	Maurice Merleau-Ponty
Jordan Cantor	Justin Mortimer
Merlin Carpenter	Muntean & Rosenblum
Paul Celan	Juan Muñoz
Chema Cobo	Robert Musil
Jean Cocteau	Paul Nougé
Giorgio Colli	Miwa Ogasawara
Claude Chabrol	Pier Paolo Pasolini
Jean-Martin	Georges Perec
Charcot	Fernando Pessoa
Carl Theodor Dreyer	Raymond Pettibon
Georges Didi-Huberman	Elizabeth Peyton
Fyodor Dostoyevski	Richard Phillips
Bracha L. Ettinger	Francis Picabia
Sigmund Freud	Richard Prince
Caspar David Friedrich	Jarek Puczel
Jean-Luc Godard	Alain Resnais
Erving Goffman	Gerhard Richter
Edward Henry	Éric Rohmer
Gordon Craig	Julião Sarmiento
José Luis Guerin	Jean Paul Sartre
Vilhelm Hammershøi	Wilhelm Sasnal
Eberhard Havekost	Arthur Schopenhauer
Michel Serres	Shaun Tan
Susan Sontag	Andréi Arsényevich Tarkovski
León Spilliaert	Wolfgang Tillmans
Jean Starobinski	François Truffaut
Hiroshi Sugimoto	Luc Tuymans

Alain Urrutia
Agnès Varda
Johannes Vermeer
Jeff Wall

Aby Warburg
Robert Wilson
Frances Yates
María Zambrano