Revisioning Modernism
By Shane Nakoschisky
Ronald E. Krauss,
The Optical Unconscious.

From impressionism to abstraction via the upwardly linear route of neo-impressionism, fauvism and cubism, the positively progressive story of mainstream modernism nicely and unproblematically unfolds. Delinited by the infamous American art critic, Clement Greenberg, in the 1960s and exemplified by the work of Manet, Picasso and Pollock, this particular trajectory of modernism has long been the ideology of artists, art historians, critics and theorists, as well as the rite of passage for many students of art history, undergraduate and graduate alike.

Greenberg's formulation of modernism's self-critical capacity extolled the peeling away of reality, illusionist art (an "art to conceal") and the actualization, almost the evisceration, of an "art to call attention to art." In pursuit of "purity" by means of an ever-increasing emphasis on flatness, two-dimensionality and the properties of pigment, modernist art revealed and exhibited the conditions of vision itself, as these were understood abstractly. As Greenberg wrote, modernist painting "no longer permit[s] sculptural illusion, or trompe-l'œil, but it does and must permit optical illusion.

Paintings such as Pollock's One (Number 31, 1950) (1950) embraced wholeheartedly the modernist aesthetic championed by Greenberg because eye and object connect instantly. In fact, so rapid was the connection that neither eye nor object seemed attached to a carnal body. It is this occurrent book mark with no 'before' or 'after' but a retouched 'now' that epitomized the modernist ambition. In its hermetically sealed environment, it exhibited completeness, silence and atemporality.

In The Optical Unconscious, Krauss argues for an alternative history to the above Greenbergian narrative based on vision itself. Not rejecting what she calls the 'official story,' Krauss rigorously reworks the modernist narrative through Freudian and Lacanian insight. Akin to the slippages of the tongue, the daydream, or the fantasy that threatens the eye's stability, Krauss' counter-narrative speaks of those 'other' moments in the visual arts that challenge the hegemony of this modernist logic.

The Optical Unconscious functions as a template composed of a rich tapestry of diverse narratives. Ranging from the theoretical to the art historical, and from the anecdotal to the fictive (such as her envoi-drawing on Roger Fry and John Ruskin), these various narratives punctuate the text at select moments. With a dizzying array of some well-worked and creatively employed concepts such as image, mimicry, the uncanny and banal from theorists such as Bataille, Callis, Deluze and Lyotard, Krauss analyses the 'other' works of modernist artists such as Ernst's collages, Duchamp's rosetteblots, Man Ray's photograms and Giacometti's sculptures. These works, borrowing from popular culture as much as from the avant-garde, exploit the idea of a separation of the senses in order to relocate vision in the entire body.

In this sense, Krauss exposes modernism's underlying visual functions and implications by rethinking the modernist paradigm through Saussure's notion of meaning (vision in this case) and the Klein Group's thesis that for every social absolute there is an accompanying shadow correlate. Krauss's semantic square maps out four points: ground, fore-ground, not-ground and non-foreground. The opposition between the first two terms, the distinction of object from ground, produces realism and visual perception. The last two terms simultaneously preserve and cancel their distinction, creating abstraction (grids, all-over painting, collage, or colour-field painting) and a vision that is self-reflexive and pure fantasy.

The structural emphasis affirms modernism's closed-endedness, its ahistoricity and its self-generated repetitiveness. Krauss' analysis of Duchamp's Rotoreliefs in chapter three illustrates the dynamics of her thesis. Obsessed with the physiology of vision for fifteen years, Duchamp called himself a 'precision ocularist.' Vehemently opposing the work of 'realism' painters whose primary concern lay with the patterns of colours and lines, which were autonomous visual images and detached from the social, Duchamp's interests lay in creating an art form that appealed to the 'grey matter.' His primary interest was in the area of the cerebral cortex in which both exterior and interior stimuli meet, where the eye and brain encounter each other in a visual act. According to O'Neill, it 'does not form a system but a block.' It is also erotically stimulating and repetitive, which accords with the concept of the cinema. The work of Ernst or in Picabia's studies of Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe après Manet (1862), known only through the figuration in fantasy, is to be found (and not out of the figure) and into real time, it appears in the form of a rhythm or pulse, thus, this oscillating presence and absence of pleasure shows the moments in which desire is caught in the formal music of dreams and symmetries. Atkin to the theorists of desire, who say of the Freudian slip, it shows the fragility of the gestalt as the death drive tries to break through.

In her last chapter, Krauss switches from the analysis of early 20th-century European artists to such American artists as Jackson Pollock and his generation, who in one way or another "decode" his drip paintings. Focusing on a multiplicity of often fragmentary, often insufficiently articulated theories (sublimation, mimickness, baseness, to name a few), that at times seem to confuse rather than corroborate the main thesis of the book, Krauss nonetheless provides some illuminating and rather creative interpretations.

For instance, she briefly theorizes Pollock's move from the floor (where he executed his works to the wall (where they were exhibited) through Freud's notion of sublimation, paralleling the human evolution from human vision to verticity in which vision becomes the privileged sense. Pollock's obsession with surpassing Picasso's genius is theorized through triangulated desire and mimetic rivalry. Through the notion of occlusion, that is, through the modes of the detective story in which the murderer always unconvincingly leaves a clue behind for the detective to create another narrative from, Krauss ends up focusing on each of "Jack the Dripper's" bouts seized a particular aspect of his work from which to create their own art. Attracted to Pollock's fame and the form of his work, Wainol executed Fon Painting (1961) on the floor, which takes the notion of liquid gesture literally one step further. Wainol was inspired by Saarinen (1959) who extends the operations of gravity by allowing the stain of colour to take control of the canvas. Greenberg's analysis of Pollock's work focuses on the collapse of foreground and background in which, by "avoiding the cut" as Greenberg remarked, Pollock created a totally immediate visual field. Robert Morris' Untitled (1967-8) re-roads the notion of the cut of continuity in the canvas by disturbing all geometrical planes with its soft sculptural forming of black clay falling upon the gallery floor.

While these interpretations are indeed innovative, I have made some problems prevalent, affecting the overall framework of the text.

First, Krauss seems to contradict her self by basing the decoding of Jackson Pollock's work on the notion of repetition. Arguing against Freud's point that "Among the important American painters who have emerged since 1940, Pollock stands alone in his refusal to repent himself," she argues for repetition, remarking, "Isn't repeating oneself precisely what painting allows one to do, especially once one has found one's particular language, the stylistic invention that will allow one to move inside it and inhabit it, growing and changing within the new system one can call one's own? This seems to contradict her earlier comments in chapter one on modernism. Also, trying to mimic the theme of repetitiveness in her writing style, her repetitive use of a certain anecdote concerning an earlier encounter with Greenberg soon loses its effectiveness after several readings.

Second, while critical of modernism's linarity, Krauss nonetheless proceeds in the same type of trajectory citing one Greenbergian approved modernist work after another. Of course, the exception is Lee Krasner's U.S.A. (1952), in contrast to some of the 'other' modernist artists' works, such as Duchamp's rosetteblots or Ernst's collages which do not form part of the Greengbrian canon. Krauss in her last chapter reverts to canonical artists and their celebrated works.

Is it thereby in chapter five add with the earlier chapters? Possibly because many of the earlier chapters are reworkings of such previous essays as "Cahis, "The More Man" and "'The Gruesome," which for the most part are reproduced in The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths (1988). Krauss, "The Im/Pulse to See," is reproduced almost verbatim in Vision and Visuality (1988). Containing few surprises, The
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The Future of Illusion

BY Julie Adam


Idea permeates everything: the more we protect this ideological truism the less we have to sustain, neutrality, universality and other forms of political (ideological) blindness — the more ideology controls us, shapes us, in us. To All Appearances attempts to evade the shadow of ideology while trying to capture it, for "all performance occurs in an ideological blur," says Herbert Blau.

Blau, known for his work with the experimental KRAKEN group and his critical books on theatre (The Impossible Theatre: Take Up the Bodies; The Eye of Prayer; The Audience), uses "ideology" to mean both consciously and unconsciously biased structure of belief, with hidden or open partisan objectives, and "performance" to cover theatrical practices from the proscenium to the street, and even the stages of politics. Not only do ideologies perform on the boards of history, but performance, itself an ideological act,

invokes questions of property ownership, hierarchy, authority, force, and what may be by another's recasting (or according to Nootske: the will to power). While tracing the ideology of performance and the performance of ideology in the twenty-first century, Blau distances himself from both Marxism and feminism (considering the latter "one of the most threatening discourses of recent years to those with any investment in... systems and conventions, habits and refusals"), but admits to hav- ing "been stimulated by... [Marxist's] revisionist discourse" and the critical insights of some feminist theorists and academics. Blau sees ideology as a series of disputes and believes that, rather than "ide- ological analysis," he is engaging in "a kind of speculative double take on aspects of performance, with attention to the particular circumstances or variable conditions that put them into question."

Specifically, what interests him is the instance of emergence or transformative moment at which any practice, in the theatre or elsewhere, becomes like ideology itself, something other than what it appeared to be, like the other itself before it identified itself: that is, before it could be distinguished for better or worse from whatever it is not was. It is here...that theatre blends with ideology at the most disturbing level of demystifying thought, for when we think about the question of priority, whatever it uses appears to be theatre. His disjoined, untamed investigation of theatrical practice ranges widely and wildly over territory from Shakespeare to Kathakali, Meyerhold to Robert Wilson, Marx to Shaw, Nietzsche to Baudrillard, Aristotle to Brecht, rushing broadly over Tadasu Suzuki and Pina Bausch, Banaka and Anne Sprinkle, the ANC and E.T... It is postmodern criticism that is guaranteed to enchant some, infuriate others and put to sleep a few more.

In exploring the constantly changing ideology of illusion in a decimated postmodern world, Blau must consider the illusion of ideology as well as everything else a skeptical approach to both ideology and performance (as concepts and practices) entails. As he says in the foreword:

"...[the book's] partial subject is ideology. It is a book written on ideology, but also is simply a book written within and about it. That, rather, a sense of things, derived (I think) from years of working in the theater, a form which claims to be neutral in any other is both nurtured and disturbed by, or subject to, the contingencies of appearance."

Certainly it is a book with a rich sense of many things, "to use Blau's own moder- nist term, but it is questionable whether it is successful in its double address, both to people in the theatre, possibly unaware of theatre, possibly hostile to it, and to those interested in theory but hav- ing little knowledge of theatre. The latter will not have it easy. A quick reading up with Blau's usual, aphoristic forays into the theatrical world, where he is no doubt comfortable at home, in spite of some intellectualized formulations to the con- trary; conversely, I doubt that too many theatre practitioners, with the exception of theorists/academics like Blau himself, will be at ease with Blau's view- ing the stage through (unfocused or refocused; here fogged-up, there smudged); once removed from the blinding ideology lens of his theatrical binoculars."

However, To All Appearances raises a number of important questions, for both theatrical practice and cultural theory. If in the theatre all is appearance and all is illu- sion (expression; character; mask and costume; imaginary time and space), and at the same time all is concrete material and organic reality (reality); actor/body; real time and space), what does performance reveal? What does it conceal? And what is its relationship to reality? How do we perform reality? Is reality the performance or the perfor- mance? If both, where is illusion? And what is the illogic of illusion and illusionism? The performative process itself, Blau believes, is an appearance based on ideology, an appearance that determines our reality, itself an illusion. Appropriately, Blau explores various dramatic representations of ideological processes (realism and a number of counter movements, including expressions, epic theatre, agit-prop, happenings, performance art, imaginary theatre), and several prominent European theo- ries and techniques of action (Stanislavski's, Meyerhold's, Brecht's, Groteskw/). He also discusses, as well as specific (ideological) issues of perfor- mance, for instance, in the action The Surpassing Body, 'historical concerns with the body and the body political,' and in Distressed Emotion, 'thematic chang- ing relationship to the emotional life of texts, characters, actors, audience. His analyses are both diachronic and syn- chronic, often in one phrase. To All Appearances has special signific- ance for those practitioners of theatre who think of themselves as politicized, for it both describes and embodies (through its own ironic mocking, brack- eting, double-seeing) the complexity of ideology and its shadowing in performance. Blau traces the legacy of early twentieth-century ideology (in the theatres of Stanislavski and Meyerhold) through Brecht and leftist American the- atrical practice in the thirties to happenings in the sixties, and postmodern performance in the eighties, with shifts in focus from class to gender to race to body to language and back again, always with an eye to the problematic of illus- trion. Unlike many commentators, not to mention practitioners, Blau brings his erudite historical perspective and shrewd skepticism to postmodern per- formance. He is well acquainted with the emperor and he has seen his new clothes. Earlier powers, it seems, were more potent.

...the verbal content and incipient dra- maturgy of many performance pieces seem to me, with whatever avant garde, postmodern, or political commitments, retrograde in comparison to various segments of Pinter's drama. And that, like Beckett's, are virtual models of solo performance or other aspects of performance art.

This is no news to those of us who long for something innovative but know that so many "innovations" are simply, themselves, illusory. Newness, like everything else, of course, is ideologically construed. And what avant garde is it anyway? There is much to enjoy in Blau's at times theoretically, at others casually, advent in ideology and performance, and that, if one can rise above (wade through) the logorrhea, the frequent self-conscious and self-satis- fied cleverness, the forty-something-line sentence (I prefer Molly Bloom's...), the unnessiveness of ideas and styles. In Places To All Appearances reads like an uncredited journal, in others like a lurid lecture. But some of Blau's statements on modern and postmodern theatre are memorable in their crystalline simplicity, as for instance the following observation:

So far as the theatre is concerned, it has always seemed to me as if Beckett's practice occurred, with a cer- tain virtuosity, in the empty, the precipitous silences, of the drama of Chekov.

The sentence forces one back into/onto the early stages of modern drama to consider 'realism,' that most complex of ideological spectacles. (Perhaps now when students ask what the breaking string in The Cherry Orchard signifies — yes, they are still asking and we are still answering — we can say the hopeless- ness of Vladimir and Estragon.)

To All Appearances reminds us that everything is ideology; everything is illusion; illusion is ideology; illusion is ideology; reality is ideology; reality is reality. We perform ourselves on the shifting sands of ideology... to all appearances.

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