Revisioning Modernism

BY Shane Nakoneshny

Rosalind E. Krauss,
The Optical Unconscious.
Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993.

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. Delineated 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 realist, illusionist art (an "art to conceal art") and the intensification, almost the exacerbation 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'oeil*, but it does and must permit optical illusion."

Paintings such as Pollock's *One (Number 31, 1950)* (1950) embraced whole-heartedly 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 disincarnated look with no 'before' or 'after' but a reified 'now' that epitomized the modernist ambition. In its hermetically sealed environment, it exhibited completeness, silence and atemporality.

In *The Optical Unconscious* (resonating with Benjamin's "A Small History of Photography" (1931) and later, Jameson's *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Art* (1981)), Rosalind 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 re-works the grand narrative through Freudian and Lacanian insight. Akin to the slips of the tongue, the daydream, or the fantasy that threatens the ego's stability, Krauss' counter-history 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 eavesdropping on Roger Fry and John Ruskin), these various narratives punctuate the text at select moments. With a dazzling array of some well-worked and creatively employed concepts such as informe, mimicry, the uncanny and bassesse from theorists such as Bataille, Caillois, Deleuze and Lyotard, Krauss analyzes the 'other' works of modernist artists such as Ernst's collages, Duchamp's rotoreliefs, Man Ray's photographs and Giacometti's sculptures. These works, borrowing from popular culture's obsession with optical devices, exploit the idea of a separation of the senses in order to relocate vision in the entire body.

In chapter one, 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 shadowy correlate. Krauss's semiotic square maps out four points: ground, foreground, not-ground and not-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. The structural graph 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 oculist.' Vehemently opposing the work of 'retinal' painters whose primary concern lay with the patterns of colours and lines, which were autonomous visual images isolated 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 the process of forming objects. Occurring within the body, thereby restoring vision to its carnal support, Duchamp's work undermines modernism's claim to vision's autonomy, purity and transparency.

Similar to the phonographic record, Duchamp's rotoreliefs, *Chinese Lantern* and *Goldfish* (both of 1935), create an erotically soothing, yet almost disturbing, three-dimensional pulse that is produced for the viewer's eyes. Specifically addressing vision's relation to desire, the images of a rising balloon or a fish swimming resemble the body parts of a breast (*Chinese Lantern*) or eye (*Corolles*), while their thrusting and parrying quality mimics the rhythm of substitution as informed by Lacanian theory. *Corolles* acts out an endless array of substitutions from one part-object to another: from eye, to breast, to urinary tract, to sexual penetration. Ernst's 1930 collage novel , *A Little Girl Dreams of Taking the Veil,* shows the pulse or beat connecting the interior image of the girl to the exterior form of the zootrope. Constructing a gestalt only to deconstruct it, its rhythm is jerky. The to and fro swing of Giacometti's *Suspended Ball* (1930-1) shows anything but modernism's claim to stillness or indivisibility.

For the artists of the optical unconscious, the beat is deep inside vision. Invisible and transgressive of the constitutive intervals of discourse and distances of representations and hence, akin to the primary process of the unconscious, it is figural but in a unique sense of the word. Called the matrix, according to Lyotard's *Discours, Figure*, this third order of the figural, known as "bad form," is the heteroclite, unimaginable space of the unconscious. Recognizing no difference, it has no stability, identity or order — which is exactly what Greenbergianism (and the Symbolic Order) relies upon. Analogous to Freud's case, "A Child is Beaten" (1919), in which one sentence/ scene contains several contradictory and overlapping sentences/ scenes, the pulse may also have many places in one place. According to Lyotard, it "do[es] not form a system but a block." It is also erotically stimulating and repetitive, which accounts for the on/off beat in the work of Ernst or in Picasso's studies of *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe après Manet* (1962).

Known only through the figuration in fantasy, to be pushed out of the figural 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 matrix of dreams and symptoms. Akin to those moments 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 followers, who in one way or another "decode" his drip paintings. Focussing on a multiplicity of often fragmented, often insufficiently articulated theories (sublimation, mimicry, bassesse, 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 horizontality to verticality in which vision becomes the privileged sense. Pollock's obsession with surpassing Picasso's genius is theorized through triangular desire and mimetic rivalry. Through the notion of abduction, that is, through the model of the detective story in which the murderer always unconsciously leaves a clue behind for the detective to create another narrative from, Krauss re-reads how each of 'Jack the Dripper's' heirs 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, Warhol executed *Piss Painting* (1961) on the floor, which takes the notion of liquid gesture literally one step further. Morris Louis's sublime *Saraband* (1959) extends the operations of gravity by allowing the stain of colour to bleed down the canvas. Greenberg's analysis of Pollock's work focused 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-reads the notion of the cut of continuity in the canvas by disturbing all geometrical planes with his soft undulating forms of black cloth falling upon the gallery floor. While these interpretations are indeed innovative, two larger problems prevail, affecting the overall framework of the text.

First, Krauss seems to contradict herself by basing the decoding of Jackson Pollock's work on the notion of repetition. Arguing against Fried's point that "Among the important American painters who have emerged since 1940 Pollock stands almost alone in his refusal to repeat 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 syntax 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 linearity, Krauss nonetheless proceeds in the same type of trajectory citing one Greenbergian approved modernist work after another with, of course, the exception of Warhol. Interesting too, and in contrast to some of the 'other' modernist artists' works, such as Duchamp's rotoreliefs or Ernst's collages which do not form part of the Greenbergian canon, Krauss in her last chapter reverts to canonical artists and their celebrated works.

Why then is chapter five at odds with the earlier chapters? Possibly because many of the earlier chapters are reworkings of such previous essays as "Grids," "No More Play" and "Corpus Delicti," which for the most part are reproduced in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (1986). Her essay, "The Im/Pulse to See," is reproduced almost verbatim in *Vision and Visuality* (1988). Containing few surprises, *The*

Optical Unconscious appears as a logical extension of Krauss's earlier work. Notwithstand-ing this, the employment of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis is for the most part well articulated. The tapestry of narratives is refreshing and cleverly employed because while undermining the authority of the author, it covertly supports the author's point of view. Moreover, these various fictive moments strategically offer the reader a breather from a heavy dose of theory. But her colourful, repetitive use of anecdotes from Michael Fried and Clement Greenberg in and out of the text (they have appeared time and again elsewhere in her writings and public talks) seems strangely and suspiciously therapeutic for Krauss.

For many students of art history, Greenberg's story has always been problematic. Devoid of context and 'other' considerations, the narrative is still strongly contested as well as militantly defended. Krauss's re-working of it (especially with the theme of visuality, which has become extremely popular since the 1980s) — not rejection of it — provides an alternative that one has always envisioned, but been afraid to see.

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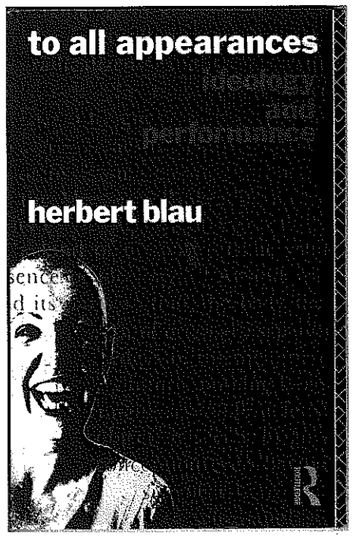

The Future of Illusion

BY Julie Adam

Herbert Blau, **To All Appearances: Ideology and Performance.** New York and London: Routledge, 1992.

Ideology permeates everything: the more we protest this ideological truism — insisting on neutrality, universality and other forms of political (ideological) blandness — the more ideology controls us, shapes us, is 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 seminal books on theatre (*The Impossible Theater; Take Up the Bodies; The Eye of Prey; The Audience*), uses 'ideology' to mean both consciously and unconsciously biased structures 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, "involves questions of property ownership, hierarchy, authority, force, and what may be the source of ideology according to Nietzsche: the will to power."

While tracing the ideology of performance and the performance of ideology in the twentieth century, Blau distances himself from both Marxism and feminism (considering the latter "one of the more threatening discourses of recent years to those with any investment in...inherited systems and conventions, habits and reflexes"), but admits to having "been stimulated by...[Marxists'] revisionist discourse" and the critical insights of some feminist theorists and academic Marxists.

Blau sees ideology as a series of disguises and believes that, rather than "ideological 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 theater or elsewhere, becomes like ideology itself, something other than what it appeared to be, like theater itself before it identified itself; that is, before it could be distinguished for better or worse from whatever it is it was not. It is here...that theater blends with ideology at the most disturbing level of demystifying thought, for when we think twice about the question of priority, whatever it *was* appears to be theater.

His disjointed, untamed investigation of theatrical practice ranges widely and wildly over territory from Shakespeare to Kathakali, Meyerhold to Robert Wilson, Marx to Jameson, Nietzsche to Baudrillard, Aristotle to Brecht, rushing breathlessly over Tadashi Suzuki and Pina Bausch, Bunraku and Annie 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 decentred 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:

> ...if [the book's] partial subject is ideology, it is a book without a thesis. It has, rather, a sense of things, derived (I think) from years of working in the theater, a form which more than 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 modest term, but it is questionable whether it is successful in its double address, both to people in the theatre, possibly unaware of theory, possibly hostile to it, and to those interested in theory but having little knowledge of theatre. The latter will not have it easy keeping up with Blau's casual, aphoristic forays into the theatrical world, where he is no doubt comfortably at home, in spite of some intellectualized protestations to the contrary; conversely, I doubt that too many theatre practitioners, with the exception of theoreticians/academicians like Blau himself, will be at ease with Blau's viewing the stage through (unfocused/refocused; here fogged-up, there smudged; once rose-coloured, then blackened) ideological lenses of his theatrical binoculars.

However, *To All Appearances* raises a number of important questions, for both theatrical practice and cultural theory. If in theatre all is appearance and all is illusion (representation; character, mask and costume; imaginary time and space), and at the same time all is concrete material and organic reality (presentation; 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 performed? If both, where is illusion?) And what is the illusive and elusive nature of ideology? The perceptual 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 perceptual processes (realism and a number of counter movements, including expressionism, epic theatre, agit prop, happenings, performance art, imagistic theatre), and several prominent European theories and techniques of acting (especially Stanislavski's, Meyerhold's, Brecht's, Grotowski's). He also discusses, as well as specific (ideological) issues of performance, for instance , in the section 'The Surpassing Body,' historical concerns with the body and the 'body politic,' and in 'Distressed Emotion,' theatre's changing relationship to the emotional life of texts, characters, actors, audiences. His analyses are both diachronic and synchronic, often in one phrase.

To All Appearances has special significance for those practitioners of theatre who think of themselves as politicized, for it both describes and embodies (through its own ironic doubting, bracketing, double-taking) 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 theatrical practice in the thirties to happenings in the sixties, and postmodernist 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 illusion.

Unlike many commentators, not to mention practitioners, Blau brings his erudite historical perspective and shrewd skepticism to postmodern performance. He is well acquainted with the emperor and has seen his new clothes. Earlier powers, it seems, were more potent:

> ...the verbal content and incipient dramaturgy of many performance pieces seem to me, with whatever avant-garde, postmodern, or political claims, retrograde in comparison to various segments of Pinter's drama 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 themselves, illusory. Newness, like everything else, of course, is ideologically construed. And whose avant-garde is it anyway?

There is much to enjoy in Blau's at times theoretically dense, at others casually anecdotal, adventure in ideology and performance, that is, if one can rise above (wade through?) the logorrhea, the frequent self-conscious and self-satisfied cleverness, the forty-something-line sentence (I prefer Molly Bloom's) ... the unevenness of ideas and styles. In places *To All Appearances* reads like an unedited journal, in others like a turgid 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 theater is concerned, it has always seemed to me as if Beckett's practice occurred, with a certain virtuosity, in the space left 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 simplicities in theatrical practice. In the silences of a world on the edge of disaster we discern the murmurs of a fragmenting universe. (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 hopelessness of Vladimir and Estragon.')

To All Appearances reminds us that everything is ideology; everything is illusion; illusion is ideology; ideology is illusion; ideology is reality; reality is illusion; illusion is reality; reality is ideology; ideology is illusion.

We perform ourselves on the shifting sands of ideology ... to all appearances.

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