

## **The Abyss of the Gaze: Blind Drawing and the Form of the Invisible**

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### **Abstract**

The eyes, the organ of sight, a portal of exchange between the interior and the exterior. If I see it, then it's real, it exists, we are used to hearing. But there is something, however, that escapes the gaze. There is something that cannot be seen and yet it manifests its presence every day. The invisible that Klee talks about, the same that Antoine de Saint-Exupéry talks about. It is the shadow the daughter of Butades of Sicyon paints on the wall, the form of a presence that is at the same time absence, the form of a dimension inscribed in mnemonic life. Memory as a matrix where the image is cradled and nourished. Democritus of Abdera gouged out his eyes because he considered them a distraction. Similarly, many artists have tried to "see" the invisible by closing their eyes. Robert Morris, William Anastasi, Claude Heath and many others, including myself, through the blind drawing have carried out this research, giving life to images of the unconscious, giving shape to the shapeless.

*Keywords:* eyes, invisible, blind drawing, art

## Introduction

What if seeing was something completely different from what we are used to thinking?

We are ineluctably bound to the organic gaze; we live in the light, and we fear the dark. Shapes, lines and colors guide us. Seeing means being able to untangle ourselves in the material world. And what is not perceptible with the eyes is suspicious, uncertain, vague - possibly dangerous.

However, this has not always been the case across the history of mankind. Initially, the dark was not so frightening; the invisible was familiar, ordinary, *human*.

### The Primitive

The French archaeologist and philosopher Lucien Lévy-Bruhl examined the psychology of early hominids extensively, analyzing in particular the predominant presence of irrational thinking.

The primitive makes no distinction between this world and the other, between what is actually present to sense, and what is beyond. He actually dwells with invisible spirits and intangible forces. To him, it is these that are the real and actual. His faith is expressed in his most insignificant as well as in his most important acts. It impregnates his whole life and conduct. (Lévy-Bruhl, 1922)

Hence, the visible world and the other world form but one. The first human beings would naturally conceive another dimension that shuns the gaze, no less important than the visible one. They would firmly believe in invisible spirits and intangible forces.

Seeing - interpreted as perception of the world - did not therefore concern only the visible world. There was, in fact, another sense that was much more predominant and important in the world of early hominids: the ear.

The famous Canadian philosopher Marshal McLuhan, known as the “father of media studies,” believes it is the writing system that has slowly led vision to predominate over all other senses, towards an increasingly rational perception of reality, with a consequent greater flattening of the same.

The dominant organ of sensory and social orientation in pre-alphabet societies was the ear—hearing was believing. The phonetic alphabet forced the magic world of the ear to yield to the neutral world of the eye. [...] The transition from oral to written communication shifted dominance from the auditory to the visual, influencing thoughts and social organization. (McLuhan, 1964)

For McLuhan, this change in mental landscape led to the emergence of the modern individual, and consequently to individualism and the economic and social system based on it. This is therefore an important change in history, which above all has distanced us from a warm dimension of sounds and sensations and brought us to the coldness of written text.

But what is McLuhan referring to when he talks about the world of the ear? He is talking about tribes, about the songs that guided people, told stories and passed on thoughts. He

refers to the invisible world of sounds - that we could also interpret as the world of sensations - which has always had greater or equal value to the visible world.

Further evidence can be found in cave paintings. Caves were certainly a shelter for primitive man, but they were also an excellent place to propagate sounds. In fact, most ancient musical instruments were found inside caves, and regarding the paintings, it has been understood that they were created at the point of greatest resonance (Reznikoff, 2005).

The points of greatest resonance often coincide with the darkest point. We are generally familiar with scenes depicting hunting or propitiatory rites, but different paintings have been found in these corners. There is another category, still difficult to interpret fully: abstract symbols.

The Canadian paleoanthropologist and rock art researcher Genevieve von Petzinger studied some of the oldest art in the world - Ice Age cave art created by early humans in Europe between 10,000 and 40,000 years ago. Driven by the curiosity of understanding the origin of abstract thought and human development, she collected a large number of abstract symbols in several different caves.

She states that those symbols are not comparable to writing, as we do not see enough repetition to suggest that. Then we're probably not speaking about rational or logical symbols. The most interesting part is that those abstract signs were mostly found in the deepest part of the cave. Little corners where Genevieve had to crawl several meters and crouch down in order to see some of these. Two of the most interesting sites are in Spain: the Cave of Ojo Guareña, Burgos, and the Cave of Cudón, Cantabria, not only for the symbols found but also, again, for their location, as far away from sunlight as possible (Von Petzinger, 2015).

What could have led primitive artists to go so deep? If we try to visualize them painting down there, the image almost evokes a fetus in amniotic fluid. In that world that is not yet a world, in that calm, non-frightening darkness.

It's as if artists have always sought blindness, the abyss of the gaze.

Working in darkness means starting from within, as if darkness were a sort of door, allowing us to reach more easily our deepest dimension: the unconscious.

### **Mythological Perspective**

We have gradually lost this relationship with obscurity, which has slowly been labeled more and more as a mistake or a danger. This loss will reach its peak with the Enlightenment, believing light, therefore the eye, was everything. But mythology teaches us, with the powerful and wonderful story of Eros and Psyche, that light is not necessary to know the truth, that light can be harmful, that it wounds the world of love, of the irrational, the creative impulse.

In the myth, Eros and Psyche, as it is narrated by Apuleius in his work "The Metamorphoses," spend wonderful nights of love together, on one condition: that Psyche never asks to see him. But she will be urged on by her jealous sisters, who tell her to be

careful, that if she has never seen Eros, he could be a monster. Unable to rely solely on her instinct at last, Psyche lights a lamp.

A drop of oil from that lamp falls on Eros, waking him up. Disappointed and angry, he leaves her, and Psyche, heartbroken, must undertake a series of difficult tasks in order to regain his trust.

The image of the myth is clear, beautifully told. Psyche is comfortable in the arms of Eros; her inner world feels warmth and serenity. However, the sisters push with their rationality, driven by envy of Psyche's trust in the invisible, instilling doubt in her about the man she has never seen with harsh, clear eyes.

But there was nothing to see with the eyes; the ear had already *seen* everything. The darkness of Eros was a safe place; certainty was found within.

Going even earlier back in time, another story of desired darkness is that one of the philosopher Democritus in the V century BCE which gouged out his own eyes because he considered them a distraction.

Democritus, deprived himself of eyesight willingly because he believed that his mind's thoughts and reflections in considering the laws of nature would be clearer and more precise if he freed them from the incitements of sight and the eye's mistakes. (Laberius, BCE 106–43)

The philosopher's extreme gesture makes it even clearer to us that seeing is a much deeper concept than it might seem. Ironically, Democritus is also linked to a discovery concerning the invisible, that is, atoms. He was the first to understand, without the tools available to modern science today, that reality was not made up solely of visible things, but that visibility itself was the result of billions of tiny elements that the human eye could not perceive.

### **Between the Eye and the Form**

But how do our eyes actually work?

It is not a direct, linear transition. Simplified, the eyes detect light and transform it into coded nerve signals, which then travel to the brain, where they are transformed into the images we see. In between then, there is our mind, which acts as an intermediary between the world and perception. There is a space between things and seeing, between the external world and internal perception. A space that is anything but empty.

The words of the poem “Entrance to the sense” by the Spanish author Jose Angel Valente, exquisitely describe this space.

Loneliness.  
Fear.  
There is a place  
that is empty, there is a room  
with no way out.  
There is a blind wait  
between two heartbeats,

between two waves  
 of lives there is a wait  
 in which all bridges  
 may have been blown up.  
 Between the eye and the form  
 there is an abyss  
 into which the gaze can sink.  
 Between will and action there are oceans of dreams.  
 Between my being and my destiny, a wall:  
 the fierce impossibility of the possible.  
 And in such solitude, an armed arm  
 that threatens a blow and never inflicts it.  
 In a place, in a room - where?  
 Besieged by whom?  
 The soul hangs only on itself,  
 on fear, on danger, on foreboding.  
 (Valente, 1990)

### The Beginning of Art

The gaze sinks into this darkness that is not blind. And it is in this abyss, in this black sea, where the realm of possibility finds room, where the work of art is born. It is precisely in darkness, vagueness, and the realm of shadows that we find, once again in a mythological tale, the origin of painting: the myth of the Corinthian maid, Kora of Sicyon, daughter of Butade.

The woman, facing the imminent departure of her beloved on a journey from which his return was uncertain, drew the shadow of his profile on the wall. This poetic explanation for the origin of painting was recounted by Pliny the Elder (CE 23/24 – 79).

This story has a depth that is perhaps impossible to comprehend fully. The line of Kora's hand traces the shadow of reality. She does not look at her man while she draws; she looks at something else. And that trace is the memory of a presence, at the same time it is a sign of something that is not there, and yet it has a form. But what value can be given to a shadow? So empty, so elusive?

That is probably *the form of the invisible*. It exists, it is present, and it is what Kora wants to hold on to. What must remain of her beloved is his inner world, the reality that lies beyond all matter. And here, then, is the blindness desired by Democritus, the darkness that Eros demands of Psyche.

### Blind Drawing as a Path to the Invisible

Blind drawing as a possibility of the abyss. Seeking the intimate in the distant and returning to primitive man, the man of hearing.

Almost all artists have encountered this technique at least once. Like a game, like a discovery, a question asked by a child. Among those who have delved deeper into their research is Robert Morris. Between 1973 and 2009, Morris developed the series "Blind Time

Drawings.” As the title suggests, the artist made the drawings with his eyes covered. However, his way of working followed a fairly rigid pattern.

His research arose as a result of the influence of Marcel Duchamp, who famously rejected what he called “retinal” art, abandoning traditional painting. The American philosopher Donald Davidson described Morris's process as an “ambition and search for a basis for drawing that is different from direct representation on the one hand and non-representation on the other” (Surin, 2002).

He scattered, smeared, pressed, and rubbed the marks onto the paper, giving priority to the body before the gaze.

Gilles Deleuze participates in the search for the value of painting and recounts in his writings how art is not a mere representation of visible reality, but rather a process that reveals its depths. For this reason, the eye cannot be the main guide for artists.

[...] the hand has gained independence from the eye, because now it is the hand that imposes itself on the eye. The hand imposes its strange power, which the eye struggles to follow [...] the hand is no longer subordinate to the eye, it acquires complete independence [...] conversion from eye to hand, the triumph of the manual line and the manual stain? [...] we would need to know what this optic is that comes from the hand, that is produced by a pure manual gesture. (Deleuze, 2007)

But perhaps continuing to separate the body and sight is inconsistent with what this research aims to propose, namely that sight and body are one and the same. It is the gaze that starts from the skin that is most often sharper and more truthful, as mentioned above.

Another important artistic contribution is that of William Anastasi, who offers his body as a seismograph. He considers precisely the sound, the vibrations that surround him and that, through blind drawing, can be explored, understood, and *seen*.

He first began to produce blind drawings while listening to music, to explore the relationship between sound and sight. Later in “Walking Drawings” and “Subway Drawings,” Anastasi lets the act of walking and the movement of a subway car guide the movement of his hand.

The artist's intervention therefore, seems to be reduced to a minimum. He is a recorder, leaving a trace of a vibration, of a movement. But isn't that what humans have always tried to do?

The images of the caves return, those first humans get back on their feet, attentive to the sounds and vibrations of their own bodies and the world around them. Art has always been a trace of the invisible. The line is truth, a narration of that which has no form.

The example of Claude Heath shows an exploration of the gesture; he gradually allows the line to reclaim the space around it, as if until now representation had done nothing but suffocate it. Thus, blindfolded, after having traced the limit imposed by the *logos*, he began to break it, fraying it with circular, insurgent, almost violent movements, although the lines took on subtle aspects.

It's difficult to work out what Claude Heath's drawings depict, and there's a good reason for that: he draws them blind. However tangled they appear, even the least intelligible are a tribute to the power and scope of the human mind...that is where the force and fascination of these pictures lies, the way a pursuit of patient exploration hits the limit of what you can get your head round... These images don't just show the world from some kind of unusual angle. They show the human mind, its limits, and its weird ability to outstretch itself. (Lubbock, 2002)

In this way, Heath could see where his unconscious could go, how many steps were left, what limits and what terrain remained to be explored.

Paul Klee also made extensive use of drawing with his eyes closed as a means of gradually working his way towards a more intuitive, profound type of art, directly linked to the unconscious, without passing through the filters of rational thought that deprive and often dry up the fertile and spontaneous image.

### **Conclusion**

The list could go on forever; there are countless examples, each one telling of humanity's desire not to lose contact with the invisible world. We come into the world without words, with our visual perception reduced to a minimum. At first, we cry out. Sound is what gives us certainty of life, our own and that of others around us. Words do not exist, images have their own space, and thoughts do not distinguish between what I see and what I do not see, but rather between what I feel and what I do not feel.

What remains is an infinite sea of possibilities, and the deeper we swim, the darker it gets, the more visible the truth becomes. The further we turn our eyes away from the light, the more the shadow can take over and tell us how much seeing is an inner process. And how art can be the deepest and most truthful gaze.

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