

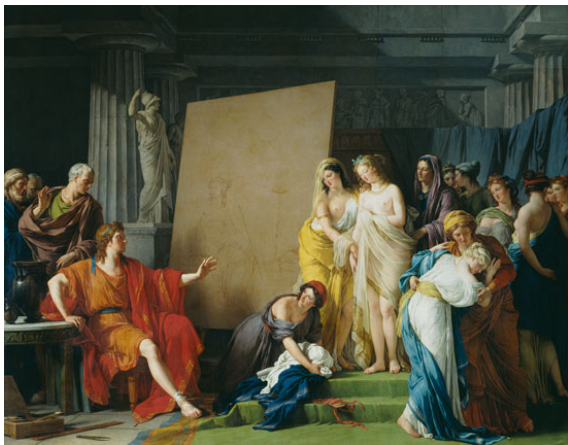
zeuxis and the partial object

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The famous Greek painter Zeuxis figures in two important anecdotes relating to Lacanian themes. In the first, the painter is exiled to a remote island where the women are notoriously ugly, but he assembles a painting of 'the most beautiful woman in the world' by selecting comely parts from a number of models. In the second, he is the loser in a contest with a rival, Parrhasius, who instead of painting a realistic scene depicts a curtain, which the judges presumed to be a part of the contest apparatus. In the later case, we have the prototypical partial object, the 'inside frame', a spatial division projected by the subject. In the former we have the more accustomed example of a body part, isolated and eligible for an 'ideal reassembly' through the devices of the artist. Either way, we have good illustrations of this difficult Lacanian concept but also an indication that, as a concept, it's been around for quite a long time!



In the contest between Zeuxis and Parrhasius, the master Zeuxis had to concede when Parrhasius's painted curtain was taken as a fixture of the exhibition and not his competition entry. Zeuxis's bowl of fruit was so realistic that it had fooled a bird, who flew into the painting, breaking its neck. Similar themes of transgressing the boundary between reality and the world of artistic illusion followed Zeuxis, whose exile (Seriman's anecdote) and death (Pliny's anecdote) involve acts of semi-magic.



Zeuxis's more famous act of composing a portrait of Helen from the parts of five virgins became the inverted story of his exile on an island populated only by the ugly, where he managed to paint an equally beautiful composite portrait by choosing details ('partial objects') from the island's female inhabitants. A much more interesting version of the Helen story, exile here correlates to the general property of monstrosity engendered by the boundary between reality and art: that what is created calls for a passage of the viewer into the viewed, a condition that is itself a version of the theme 'between the two deaths'.

1. exile

The apocryphal story of Zeuxis's crime and exile is set up to demonstrate the painter's mastery of a difficult situation.¹ With no beautiful women to be had, the painter could not duplicate his famous construction of the portrait of Helen by combining the virtuous forms of multiple virgins. This logic is inverted, however, in Zeuxis's solution. He was able to find, amidst the otherwise unbeautiful models, single perfect features. Assembled, the result was an inverse of an inverse, a beautiful 'monster' of composite construction. This strategem becomes a metaphor for beauty in general: that it doesn't exist in any corruptible single model or definition, but must always and ever be a 'reconstruction' out of parts lying at hand, a kind of *bricolage*.

The theme of exile is also important. In the 'positive version' of this anecdote, one more legitimately connected to Zeuxis's official biography, the painter selects ideal parts of five virgins to compose an ideal composite portrait of Helen of Troy. The idea is similar but not as interesting as Seriman's conflation, where the problem is to find beautiful parts concealed on the persons of otherwise ugly women, and where the artist's punishment has been to live on an island populated entirely by such. Finding beauty among beauties is not challenging. Finding beauty amidst non-beauty is more in keeping with the artist's wit and a key to the entire genre of the grotesque. 'Exile' stands for both Zeuxis's 'punishment' (which compares to the fate of B'rer Rabbit in the Joel Chandler Harris tale of the same name) and for the project of monstrous beauty, both in the sense of beauty concealed within non-beauty and beauty as assembled from disparate parts.

2. contamination of reality by the dream

Another prominent feature of Zeuxis's legend has to do with the purported realism of his paintings. Zeuxis had lost the contest with Parrhasius because Zeuxis had fooled a bird but Parrhasius had fooled an artist. The use of art as a kind of deception, a 'camouflage' manipulating belief and behavior through altered appearance, was a common theme in ancient literature. Zeuxis was purported to have died by choking because he could not stop laughing at a portrait he had painted of a grotesque old woman. Like the story of Pygmalion, a king of Cyprus who fell in love with an ivory statue he made and prayed to Aphrodite to breathe life into it (She did), art transgresses when it becomes representational, and even religious icons, which purposefully forsake literal semblance, intend to transport the viewer into another realm (cf. Roussel's *La Vue*). Naturally, this subject's origins are to be found in the remote mists of sympathetic magic, the construction of images, effigies, etc. that have an effect on their real-world counterparts.

The question is like that of mimesis, stated by Plato: the creation of semblance is also at the same time the creation of a *separate world*, and the issue is what *separates* these worlds — what is the 'condition of passage' that allows in some cases influence to flow in an illicit reverse direction? Semblance is a boundary issue.

When the phenomenologist Mikel Dufrenne posited the conditions of art involving transport of the viewer into the viewed, he re-stated the condition of 'stereognosis' — an exchange of 'real-world' eyes for the eyes of the painting, ordinary feet for feet used inside the work, natural breathing for the kind of respiration required beyond the frame. Clearly, there is stereognosis (knowledge of the world through touch) enough in the ordinary world, but it is particularly in the case of the boundary transgression required by art that qualifies for a more accurate use of 'touch', not as a simple tactile sense but as a transubstantiation of the world into a 'left-right' order that dissociates left and right from the coherent body and 'cosmologizes' left and right and evil and good, low and high, etc.

¹Zaccaria Seriman, *Viaggi di Enrico Wanton*, Gilberto Pizzamiglio, ed., 2 vols. (Milan: Mazzorati, 1977).



The story of Pygmalion, popularized in romantic art (here by Jean-Léon Gérôme) is also the theme of the Golem, the automaton, the *tuché* (encounter with the Real), and the entire disruption of the structure of causality presumed by art's structure of the boundary between life and art. The recovery of the roots of this boundary transgression in the practices of sympathetic magic (effigy, mandala, etc.) shows that the animus-anima relationship, the 'sharp point' of wit (*caelum*) is necessarily the 'blind sight' of the monocular divine eye.

3. stereognosis and propriocept

We have learned elsewhere to connect stereognosis (knowledge of the world through touch) with propriocept (the mind's awareness of the body). The case of Zeuxis confirms and extends the importance of this connection. Stereognosis and propriocept construct a continuum based on knowledge, from mind to body to world. Yet, they relate to each other through the dialectic that places propriocept within the uncertainty of the 'partial object'. Before the mirror stage, the child has difficulty in conceiving the unity of his/her body. Organs, limbs, the senses do not operate within the 'consolidation' of the unit of the person. After the mirror stage, unity is achieved, but only at the price of constructing an 'Other' whose gaze in effect 'fixes' the body-object and interpellates it through location ('finding one's place' in the family, society, a profession, etc.). The unification problem still exists for the subject and can be achieved only with the 'help' of the partial object — in whose relationship the subject must interpolate between alternatives, in a characteristically 'metonymical' manner of relating parts to parts. The problem of unification in Zeuxis's terms is the magical creation of the artistic Golem, the ideal achieved in art that, in life, can be found only in fragments. Zeuxis's interpolation (the portrait of Helen, the portrait of the beautiful woman on the island of the ugly) creates an 'impossible-Real' object that has the power to enchant and destroy (Pygmalion), just as Zeuxis's painted bowls of fruit had lured birds to their death and just as his own comic caricature led to his own 'death by laughing'.

The mind/body/world continuum is a condensed version of Aristotle's causal chain connecting *materia* to intentionality. In the same way, the structure of propriocept/stereognosis is 'short-circuited' (the chain becomes a complex of circles within circles), but in this case the reason for this topological conversion is clearer. Propriocept and stereognosis so clearly involve the 'operator' logic, where signifier (artifact, contingency) *takes the place of* the signified (representation, form), that it is even more evident than it is in Aristotle's causal structures (material, efficient, formal, final) that the dialectic of contingency (*tuché*) and anamorphosis are evident.

What is the 'operator logic' for Zeuxis? The answer is much clearer than in the abstract cases of Aristotelian cause or the technical terms of clinical diagnosis, stereognosis and propriocept. 'The signifier taking the place of the signified' is the Golem, the composite 'monster' of beauty that enchants the living into the zone between the two deaths, the most perverse of art's names. The theme of exile and ugliness, supplied apocryphally by Seriman², makes this clear. What is also clear is that the interpellation that repositions the signifier is the call that effects passage, the inner element of ventriloquism and also the name that identifies the 'lover' (in Pygmalion's case, the *literal* lover!) of art, is the twin and complement of the interpolation of the artist in the wilderness, a reminder of the centrality of Francesco Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (1499). If we return what is literally an account of 'stife in a dream' (*hypnerotomachia*) we can see the outlines of the Freudian point, that the dream protects sleep. We can also see the shadow that falls across this defense, the anacoluthic structure that Pavel Florensky (*Iconostasis*, 1996) asserts for the dream's reversed time logic.

The son returning to the father's side (in Freud's account of dreams), the composite subject created by Dr. Frankenstein, the pets and other dead beings that return from Stephen King's *Pet Sematary* — it should be clear from the insistent re-working of popular culture that, even at the level of 'folk-awareness' the theme of *return* is essential to the theme of *composite form*. This return is a *tuché*, a contingency, a conspiracy, a chance operation. Automaton as 'return' is also the automaton of the created form into which life is breathed by request — a call — begging for passage: the 'password' that, as Mladen Dolar argues in his book, *A Voice and Nothing More* (2006), is 'pure voice' lying outside the descriptive reach of phonemic linguistics and semiology.

²Thanks to Marco Frascari for his advice on Seriman, and for the elaboration of Seriman's work in *Monsters of Architecture: Anthropomorphism in Architectural Theory* (Savage MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1991), pp. 33-50.