In the Absence of Post-

En ausencia de Post-

Mieke Bal *

Resumen

En profundidad, este trabajo presenta una propuesta para formar estudiantes políticamente conscientes y éticamente sensibles, a través de un modelo (establecido en el título "Cristales de tiempo") para un pensamiento que eluda la camisa de fuerza de la linealidad: es un modo de focalización que es particularmente llamado 'post-'. La autora privilegia el concepto de focalización como el más importante en la narratología poscolonial y conduce a los lectores a explorar cómo, mediante la comprensión de la focalización presente y focalización ausente, es posible descubrir nuevas visiones imaginativas y enriquecedoras, en un contexto de una relación íntima y empática entre una lectura interactiva y un lector interactivo. La autora también analiza los conceptos de "mirada" e "iconicidad".

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* Profesora neerlandesa, teórica de la literatura, historiadora del arte y de la historia de la cultura. Desde 1991 ha impartido la cátedra de Teoría Literaria de la Universidad de Ámsterdam. Y desde 1993 es rectora del Instituto de Estudios Culturales de Ámsterdam.

Palabras clave: Post-, narratología poscolonial, lectura interactiva, lectores interactivos, observador, memorias, participación experiencial, focalización presente, focalización ausente, interpretación, representación.

Abstract

In depth, this paper reports a proposal to build students politically aware and ethically sensitive, through a model (set in the title "Crystals of time") for a thought that eludes the straitjacket of linearity: it is a mode of focalisation that is particularly called ´post-'. The author privileges the concept of focalisation as the most important in postcolonial narratology and leads the readers to explore how, by understanding both present and absent focalisation, it is possible to discover new imaginative and enriching visions, into a context of an intimate and empathic relationship between an interactive Reading and an interactive reader. The author also looks at the concepts of "gaze" and "iconicity".

Keywords: Post-, postcolonial narratology, interactive reading, interactive readers, viewer, memories, experiential participation, present focalisation, absent focalisation, interpretation, representation.

Crystals of Time

A postcolonial narratology must not only explore the predicaments of the question of relevance of one body of theory for the understanding of another body of narrative texts. Also, it must demonstrate a surplus value, insights not otherwise gained, for the inter-cultural encounter. This relevance must be demonstrable for both popular narratives and the kind of complicated ones we tend to consider "literary" or "artistic". So, I begin with a novel recommended to me by the bookseller whose judgment I tend to consider apt for the average taste of readers in my neighbourhood. I often buy what he recommends. The popularly acclaimed Bengali writer Jhumpa Lahiri recently republished her earlier novel *The Namesake* (2003). It is part of the growing number of novels of migration, recounting the difficulties of characters that are, either by their own volition or through their parents' earlier decisions, thrown into a world that is culturally foreign to them. The inter-cultural situation of migration has been a central topic in much of my film and curatorial work. This has sensitized me even more to the importance of focalisation: the representation of all forms of the perception of narrative content, regardless of who does the narrating. In this essay, I will privilege a mode of focalisation that is particularly relevant for anything called "post-": memory.[1]

The main character of *The Namesake*, called Gogol for reasons he understands only much later, hates his name and changes it in adulthood to Nikhil. This name has the double advantage of sounding more "Indian" and of being easily Americanized to "Nick". More clarity, then, on both sides. However, when he is already fully "Nikhiled" the narrator keeps calling him Gogol, including when the voice phrases the man's focalisation. This puzzled me. It enticed me to read against the grain. Paying attention

[1] On cultural consequences of migration, see Mieke Bal & Miguel Hernández Navarro (2008; 2011). For my films on migration, http://www.miekebal.org/artworks/films/

to focalisation has always been my primary tool for such reading.[2]

Every single time I read the name in these passages, I felt slightly bothered. Had the author been sensitive to the importance of focalisation, I thought, she would either have matched the character's decision and used the chosen name, or somehow differentiated between the two in ways readers could work with to make sense of the confusion of his identity that is obviously at the root of this name-game. Until on page 241 the two names cross swords. At a party, the following exchange occurs:

> "Hey there," Gogol says. "Need any help?"
>
> "Nikhil. Welcome." Donald hands over the parsley. "Be my guest".

The common English phrase "be my guest", meaning "do as you like" suddenly gets a slightly ironic inflection in which the notion of "guest" is taken literally for just a moment. Gogol does not belong. Not at the party, given by friends of his wife, nor in its very American YUP culture. The passage has no character that focalises. It is narrated in an objectifying tone. From then on, it dawned on me that the persistence of the name Gogol, in all its Russianness, stands for the persistently "Indian" misdirected longing of the character. Born in the US, he is unable to put down roots in either place, that of his parents and his own. So, due to that rootlessness, the Russian name turns out appropriate after all.

I am more interested in the treatment of the main character's mother, Ashima, however. She is the one who is married off from India to an Indian-born man working in the US. Two key moments in her life set her in an intercultural, interlingual plight. The first is giving birth to her son (later to be called Gogol). When the doctor tells her the delivery is going to take a lot more time, she does not understand the key word and asks: "What does it mean, dilated?" (3) It may require a stretch of the imagination that a woman who experienced her entire pregnancy in New Jersey would not have had any prior interaction about it with others; she would surely have come across the concept of "dilation", but clearly, the point is that we see that word anew as strange somewhat threatening, and in need of explanation. The text then describes the gestures the doctor uses to communicate, and all we get is Ashima's vision-based understanding: "explaining the unimaginable thing her body must do in order for the baby to pass." This is a clear-cut instance of character focalisation. Ashima sees the gesture the doctor makes, and she interprets as "unimaginable".

Much later, when Gogol is an adult, hence, at least after twenty years of living and working in the US, Ashima is being told that her husband "has expired". Again, she does not get it, but this time, the lack of understanding is thickened:

Expired. A word used for library cards, for magazine subscriptions. A word which, for several seconds, has no effect whatsoever on Ashima. "No, no, it must be a mistake," Ashima says calmly, shaking her head, a small laugh escaping from her throat. "My husband is not there for an emergency. Only for a stomachache."

While the first lack of understanding might still be due to her relatively recent arrival, the second one retrospectively "explains" the first. In both cases, a form of denial is added to surprise, and to the awkwardness of talking about such intimately bodily things to a man (for the birth) and through a telephone (for the death). Embarrassment, connected to cultural and sexual difference together, is at issue; not linguistic ignorance. The two come together when Ashima ponders: "For being a foreigner, Ashima is beginning to realize, is a sort of life-long pregnancy – a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts." The metaphor is doing the telling, more than the

[2] On focalisation and the other narratological terms used in this essay, see my book Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009.

very American phrase "feeling out of sorts". It is in the equation foreignness – pregnancy that Ashima's focalisation is expressed. She contributes time, specifically duration to our understanding of the experience.

This, it turns out, is elaborated throughout the novel, especially in the form of memories. These are "multitemporal" as well as "multidirectional" memories. Juxtaposing memories of the past, future memories, and acts of memory in the present, the narrator crosses the fine line between memory and the imagination (62-63), all this negotiated through memories of wishes that remain unfulfilled (127). The key memory is of a trip Gogol made with his father, to the end of a stretch of coast. The sentence that ends the chapter is an injunction by the father, who tells his son:

> "Try to remember it always"… "Remember that you and I made this journey, that we went together to a place where there was nowhere left to go." (187)

Now that we have understood the way focalisation functions to cross the bridge and overcome the gaps migration has dug, including between father and son, the entire novel, it seems, unfolds to heed the injunction.[3]

Keeping the attention on memory as a specific form of focalisation, through systematic attention to focalisation we can grasp how multitemporality and multidirectionality join forces in complicating the sense of history as a series of events. The string of events we call history now becomes a constellation from which rays go out in all directions. Futurality itself, then, is multidirectional, encompassing the past as well as the times of others. If subjectivity is porous, however, then memory and history are inseparable. This is why one of the most insightful descriptions of historical time is a perfectly adequate description of memory. In "Theses on the Philosophy of History" Benjamin imaginatively speculates on the *arrest* of thought. This arrest constitutes a break with linearity, with "homogeneous, empty time," a kind of de-automatization and "filling" or embodiment of time. This arrest puts the present forward, making that present both subjective and political. Moreover, it results in a great force, causing a "shock" that, in turn, leads to a crystallization of time into a constellation (1968: 262).

Like crystals of snow, crystals of time offer a model for thought that eludes the straitjacket of linearity that leaves both historical contradiction and subjective experience by the wayside. Instead, the Benjaminian idea of shock, or *choc en retour* of arrested thought allows us "to grasp time as dense with overlapping possibilities and dangers – an understanding of the present as . . . the site of multidirectional memory" (Rothberg 2009: 80).[4]

In such a conception of memory time and direction merge, or freeze, in the merging of focalisation and the image; hence the relevance of the concept for visual analysis. Deleuze puts it thus, in a classical passage that gives density to Gogol's memory of his father's injunction to remember:

What constitutes the crystal-image is the most fundamental operation of time: since the past is constituted not after the present that it was but at the same time, time has split itself in two at each moment as present and past, which differ from each other in nature, or... it has to split the present in two heterogeneous directions, one of which is launched towards the future while the other falls into the past. Time has to split at the same time as it sets

[3] I use the phrase "act of memory" to foreground the active naturen present tense of memory. See Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spitzer, eds. 1999.

[4] On multidperectional memory, see Rothberg (2009).

itself out or unrolls itself: it splits in two dissymmetrical jets, one of which makes all the present pass on, while the other preserves all the past. Time consists of this split, and it is this, it is time that we *see in the crystal* (Deleuze 1989: 82; emphasis in text).

The "emanation of past reality" that Barthes marveled at in photography (1981, 88) is compounded by an emanation of another's (past or present) reality. In Lahiri's novel, the father and the son are as "other" to each other as possible. Memory mediates to turn this very readable, popular novel into a document of "migratory aesthetics", an encounter not based on alterity –a vexed concept that implies an unmentioned superior "self" – but on groping towards affective understanding, against all odds of circumstance and history. The miracle of such an encounter will only happen if you allow the other to be, whether you see what she sees or not.

My brief reading of Lahiri's novel brings me to a further consideration of the complexities of focalisation. Keep in mind this concept of a permeable, de-individualized but strongly sensorial subject in time as a (multidirectional) crystallized constellation. Here lies the relevance of focalisation for postcolonial narratology. But to fully make that case, I need to call on some complicating ideas. For, such relevance depends not only on narrative structure but also and in fact, primarily, on ethical and political effects. And it is there that the vexed preposition "post-" as used in the term "postcolonial" must be challenged. And who better to call on, then, but Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak – as a scholar and a writer?

Focalisation as Absence

In a brief but illuminating analysis in her recent book, *An Aesthetic Education*, of some passages from Coetzee's much-discussed 1999 novel *Disgrace* Spivak demonstrates her bold way of making literary analysis, *as such,* relevant for ethics and politics (2012: 322-327). Her method: to imagine "absent things." She notices that in Coetzee's novel, the narration keeps the focalisation systematically away from the main character's daughter, the rape survivor Lucy. This is a significant absence because focalisation gives access to characters' perceptions and feelings. This is why it is a key term in any narrative analysis.

When present, a character's focalisation facilitates empathy; when absent, it precludes such emotional involvement. Hence, the distribution of affect across the novel depends on it. "What if," asks Spivak, we imagine the absent focalisation of Lucy? This "what if?" question enables her to come up with an interpretation that does justice to the feminist necessity to bring the woman character to convincing life, as well as "explains" how she can take the position she does in relation to the post-apartheid situation – with a certain hesitation to use the prefix coming from an awareness of the problematic meaning of the prefix "post-" in which her rape happened.[5]

The logic of this move is entirely convincing in that absent focalisation, as I have argued many times (most explicitly 1988), is just as much a feature of a narrative text as its presence; "who cannot focalise?" as important a question as "who focalises?" Deciding to invent Lucy's focalisation turns a reader into an interactive one. What she calls "the nestling of logic and rhetoric" (317) brings the ethical, the epistemological and the political together, in a tense but firm entanglement. The knot works

[5] To keep this discussion succinct I refer to the more extensive discussion of "what if?" questions in my recent book (2013). This paragraph and a few following ones are spin-offs of my article on Spivak's book in PMLA. (2014)

through a readerly act of tracing intertextuality, "working both ways" (319). The reader is in charge both of restoring reference "in order that intertextuality may function; and to *create* intertextuality as well." (318; emphasis added) This quotation comes from a discussion of Tagore and Mozart, but prepares us for the Coetzee analysis to come.

Is the creation of Lucy's focalisation not a breach of the textual grounding of interpretation, so indispensable to keep personal projection at bay, and to guarantee teachability? No, Spivak claims, since the literary text "gives rhetorical signals to the reader, which lead to activating the readerly imagination" (323) so that no reader has to be submissive and be "content with acting out the failure of reading." (323) In fact, the text provokes such disobedience by means of its rhetoric that restricts focalisation too emphatically to the character of Professor Lurie, who is under ethical scrutiny. Spivak calls this readerly response to the text's provocation, *counterfocalisation*. And as all opposition, such acts are bound to the text they counter. She claims the text provokes it: "This provocation into counterfocalisation is the 'political' in political fiction – the transformation of a tendency into a crisis." (324) The *literary* act of interactive reading is the site where the political can happen.

Spivak makes this specific when she writes:

It is precisely this limited validity of the liberal white ex-colonizer's understanding that *Disgrace* questions through the invitation to focalise the enigma of Lucy. (326)

What is the textual basis for this invitation? It can only be the incongruent absence of Lucy's focalisation which is so striking that it alone works as an invite. The discrepancy between Lucy's presence as a character, her importance in the sad adventure of her father, and the absence of her focalisation make for what, in theories of reception, used to be called a "gap": something the absence of which is so noticeable that readers tend to feel challenged to fill it in.

The importance of this invitation goes far beyond the feminist aspect (to make the focalisation of the woman character and her typical woman's plight visible). Spivak brings the different political elements together: "If we, like Lurie, [the male main protagonist and Lucy's father] ignore the enigma of Lucy, the novel, being fully focalised precisely by Lurie, can be made to say every racist thing." (326) This suggests that focalisation, including and perhaps, especially in its negativity, is key to a postcolonial narratology (with the same qualms about "post-"). And indeed, as we know, many are the colonial novels where "natives" are merely elements of the décor, of the bottom of the power structure, and of the narrative need to fill the diegetic universe.[6]

Although this example works towards an understanding of the special relevance of focalisation for the postcolonial narratology, a detour is necessary to frame such an assertion. Spivak's work is so apt to discuss the issue to which this volume is devoted because, while she is doubtlessly one of the most reputed postcolonial critics, she is not specifically a narratologist; rather, she is intimately knowledgeable about philosophy. Her deep knowledge of Kant, Marx and Gramsci is a red thread through her books. And, given her interest in what we call less and less happily "postcolonial" theory it comes as no surprise that the discussions of such canonical and inexhaustible philosophical texts never lose sight of the social-political implications of the ideas gleaned from the encounter. Thus, a philosophical tradition is brought to bear on contemporary social issues of a keen actuality. Meandering through her work runs the philosophical underpinning of her analyses of (narrative) literature. This distinguishes

[6] Spivak refers here to two essays on Coetzee's novel of the many that wonder about this aspect, precisely, because they do not dare make that bold Spivakian move. (McDonald 2002 and Attwell 2002)

her work from formalist deployments of structuralist ideas.

This solid philosophical background does not make her texts always easy to read for literary and other cultural scholars eager to get ideas –preferably quickly– about "how-to-do" postcolonial literary studies. That may be all for the good; quick fixes can only lead to clichés, condescending nods of the kind that used to be called, disparagingly, "politically correct", and projection of Western preoccupations on what we think we have understood but still keep "othering". Hence, Spivak's immersive work with philosophy, precluding such fast understandings, is also what makes her work useful for our current exploration of a postcolonial narratology.

The key Spivakian concept, and the one that builds the bridge between classical analysis of (present) focalisation and the absent one coming to visibility through the "what if?" question, is "critical intimacy". This concept evokes the migratory nature of knowledge, but in it inheres the need for criticality; yet with intimacy, condescension is avoided and empathy facilitated. The concept stipulates that a particular kind of focalisation –with intimacy and critique bound together– is the best way to get access to interculturality. It is worth the effort of meeting the challenge of Spivak's writing because the meandering tour through Western philosophy and (not only) western literature with what she has termed "critical intimacy" is enriching, on all levels, and more so because it is so unorthodox in style and consistently feminist in argument. She broaches many important subjects pertaining to the cultural issues raised by the social world today; not only its literature, but taking literature as a serious participant. Spivak's work moves so naturally between the political, ethical, and aesthetic domains that her ultimate promotion of the *epistemological* as the key to an aesthetic education almost passes unnoticed. And yet, how do we know, and how do we know we know: this is why "education" matters, is difficult, and is possible. Education, I think, is the central kind of narrative, or staging, where critical intimacy is necessary as a mode of focalising.[7]

In an earlier response to Spivak's book *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Towards a History of the Vanishing Present* (1999) I proposed that Spivak's prose is best read as oral discourse, specifically the talk of a teacher who, committed to her students' education, is attentive to seeing eyes waver, hands moving to write down a note, ears pricked up, and other signs of difficulty that requires some side-stepping. In narratological terms, we can say that her writing stages the "second person" to whom the teaching is addressed; in terms of this essay, the "focalisee". In other words, my interpretation of Spivak's writing style narrativises it.

Once seen as the mode of a teacher, every deviation from the straight-and-narrow of exposing a logical argument can be considered generous, interactive, and indispensable. The possibility to immediately attend to individual students' needs is the primary reason why live teaching is still needed. I was inspired by Spivak's writing, and felt justified in this figurative, personifying mode of reading her by her own use of figures, such as the "native informant," to make intellectual points. She deploys that figure, for example, as a figure of methodology to articulate and qualify her "critically intimate" encounter with Kant. This is why "critical intimacy" is another of her figurations of her intellectual position.

To understand what probing the absent focaliser –Spivak's proposal– entails, I propose that the 2012 book, equally voluminous, challenging, and demanding is rather not, in my view, best read through the figure of the teacher. The primarily and paradoxical reason

[7] "Critical Intimacy" has become the title of the final chapter of my book Travelling Concepts in the Humanities (2002), a chapter in which Spivak's 1999 book was my case.

I find this no longer the most productive approach is that here the author stages herself with insistence and frequency explicitly as a teacher. She initially defines her work in a phrase, "of the classroom situation," and throughout the book that situation is extensively described. Her adventures in different teaching situations may have an interest of their own, but the figure has lost its figurativity; it no longer triggers the reader's imagination: the "what if?" question. This leads to my assertion that explicit focalisation may be less illuminating than its absence as a trigger of the imagination.

An additional paradox ensues, which has its bearing on the field of postcolonial studies: staging herself as a teacher across national and linguistic borders –identifying with the image of her that circulates so widely– with many anecdotes about teaching in India and Bangladesh, she deploys a memorial mode that has become increasingly popular in the United States. In the wake of feminism, postcolonialism and other new movements that have had such a decisive and defining impact on the academic modes of thinking –and don't take me wrong, that impact was and is fabulous– this *personalizing* account now passes as almost standard. In my view, however, this probing of personal memories in academic work has one drawback: when not carefully measured and monitored but sliding towards particularity, it tends to cultivate an individualism poorly suitable for the teaching situation, which may get in the way of the arguments, and which is especially unsuitable for the intercultural situation. Only when this personal mode really contributes theoretically and analytically to the academic content, it works. Otherwise, individualism takes over. To put the paradox strongly to create a frame for my discussion: the more "Indian" the figure of the teacher on the level of anecdote, the more "American" her intellectual style becomes, to the detriment of the "postcolonial" aspect of the writing. It takes an analysis through the concept of focalisation –inflected as "critical intimacy"– to see this.

From this difference between these two books and my intuitive bracketing of the "teacherly" mode of reading for the most recent one, I learned that explicitness does not stimulate the imagination, while, as Spivak rightly insists, the latter is key to the aesthetic. In other words, even a scholarly book has an aesthetic, and even a specifically narrative side to it, which is instrumental in the pleasure of reading it. And that pleasure is the royal road to readability. It so happens that the imagination is Spivak's major weapon against the hopelessness she keeps mentioning in her book. She provisionally defines it as "'thinking absent things, hardly distinguishable from thinking." (16) Note the importance of the share the imagination has in thinking as such.

In view of this, I contend that the focalisation and subsequent self-figuration of the teacher in *An Aesthetic Education* is not "absent*" enough*. In this book, then, I have been looking for another mode to what she calls "instrumentalize" her text, a mode in accordance with her arguments, and making true on the author's request to get "interactive readers." (3) This mode is based on what I would like to propose as maxim-spotting. For this, a mode of focalisation that is indeed interactive –it compels the reader to "spot" the maxims– is more suitable than critical intimacy here. A maxim is a short utterance given as a statement, a thesis; something like an internal, partial summary, or an aphorism. I like to think of Adorno's *Minima Moralia* from 1951 (2006) as a prime example of the genre. Maxims are so relevant for my argument because they are subjective but not psychological. The subjective nature of the maxim allows adherence, empathy, agreement, rejection; but some response is almost inevitable. They solicit activity on the part of the reader; an activity that does not separate intellectual and sense-based responses. Subjective but not psychological: here we have a definition of focalisation.

An example of a maxim. In the discussion of the translation of Kant's definition of maxims, we read: "…a general assumption of continuous translatability is waylaid by the diachronic heterogeneity of our globe…" (14). Food for thought: about translation – discussed throughout and the focus of chapter 12– about globalization, discussed in many of the essays, albeit mostly sideways; about heterogeneity and the vexed parasynonym "alterity", discussed with a lot of scepticism, and about time, the diachronic in the contemporary, and all the issues surrounding that term. And about the subjectivity of the one whose vision is expressed here. That is a lot of thinking that this utterance solicits. These subjects brought together in one short sentence join forces in making up the non-linear coherence of a book that is itself heterogeneous. Only when we treat this as a maxim can this complex of multiple meanings come to visibility. This is the beauty of the concept of focalisation: through the interactivity solicited in this writing, and the maxim-spotting that the reader performs, it allows us to *see*, and even sensually experience, such insights as no convoluted argumentation can convey so clearly.[8]

Seeing It

So far I have treated focalisation in fiction, an absent focaliser, in academic writing that invites critical intimacy; and in a writing, also academic yet almost opposite, that invites maxim-spotting, that foregrounds itself as a maxim. These examples all raised issues of focalisation; of further differentiating it so as to adapt itself to intercultural situations. And I could add more examples, from film, painting, and as I have done before, anthropology. Neither narrative, nor its backbone focalisation is bound to literature, or textuality for that matter. Moreover, the absence or negative of narrative functions is as telling as their presence or explicit invocation. There is an elective affinity, although not an identification, between focalisation and seeing. Reading focalisation and practicing counterfocalisation where needed is an activity with political relevance.

To avoid an impression of over-generalisation (diluting the concept) this calls for some unpacking. I will do that through a close look at a cluster of neighbouring concepts that all touch visuality, both as sense perception and as insight. These concepts are the "gaze", "focalisation", and "iconicity". They are different but affiliated. They are often conflated, with disastrous results, or, alternatively, kept separate, with impoverishing results. They are all three "travelling concepts" - concepts taken from one domain to another, with changes in use, meaning and analytic value along the way. The following consideration describes the travels through which they have gone. I will give my view of what happened with these concepts in the cultural field, and move back and forth between that general development and my own intellectual itinerary.[9]

In order to see the relevance of such concept-probing for a postcolonial narratology, I briefly invoke work by Indian artist Nalini Malani, whose shadow plays stage acts of memory that I would qualify, with Max Silverman, as palimpsestic. Malani has been working with the diffuse, repressed or otherwise distorted memories of religious-political violence in the wake partition (1947), superimposed by the violence of Hindus committed against Muslims (1992-3) and the violence in Gujarat in 2002. Note that these three waves of violence seem

[8] For more extensive discussion of Spivak's 2012 book, see the April 2014 issue of PMLA.

[9] The following paragraphs are a revision of some segments from my book (2002).

acts of repeating, and thus constitute together also palimpsest of a different kind.[10]

The "gaze" is a key concept in visual studies, one I find important enough to fuss about if fuzziness is to be avoided. It is widely used in fields whose members participate in cultural studies, both as a common word and as a concept. Norman Bryson's analysis of the life of this concept, first in art history, then in feminist and gender studies, amply demonstrates why it is worth reflecting on. He rightly insists that feminism has had a decisive impact on visual studies; film studies would be nowhere near where it is today without it. In turn, film studies, especially in its extended form, which includes television and the new media, are a key area in cultural studies. The itinerary Bryson sketches is largely informed by the centrality of the concept of the gaze in all the participating disciplines. One of these is literature. If we realise that film studies, at least in the United States, grew out of English departments, the time- and space-map becomes decidedly interesting.[11]

The concept of the gaze has a variety of backgrounds. It is sometimes used as an equivalent of the look, indicating the position of the subject doing the looking. As such, it points to a subject position, real or represented. It is also used in distinction from the look, as a fixed and fixating, colonising, mode of looking –a look that objectifies, appropriates, disempowers, and even, possibly, violates. This makes it an important concept for a critique of colonialism– and of the remnants of it, or renewed forms, in so-called postcolonial literature and art. It increases the difficulty of looking at Malani's 2012 installation *In Search of Vanished Blood.* As its title indicates, this work, like Spivak's maxims, solicits an interactive viewer willing to *search* for what is *vanished*; the trauma of violence.[12]

In its Lacanian sense, the gaze is very different from –if not opposed to– its more common usage as the equivalent of the look or a specific version of it (Silverman 1996). The Lacanian gaze is, most succinctly, the visual order (equivalent to the symbolic order, or the visual part of that order) in which the subject is caught. In this sense it is an indispensable concept through which to understand all cultural domains, including text-based ones. The gaze is the world looking (back) at the subject. Nothing makes this clearer than a shadow play based on slowly turning cylindrical shapes that cast on the surrounding walls evocations of figures from Indian epic and mythology, popular painting, Greek mythology and recent literary texts – artefacts that all have in common that they represent, evoke or resist violence in and for the present. This is how, in this work, the world and its history look back at us. Significantly, the viewer is trapped between the cylinders and the shadows on the walls, and cannot help being "in" the shadows.[13]

In its more common use –perhaps between ordinary word and analytical concept– the gaze is the look that the subject casts on other people, and other things. Feminism initiated the scrutiny of the gaze's objectifying thrust, especially in film studies, where the specific Lacanian sense remains important (Silverman 1996). Cultural critics, including

[10] The factual violence on three historical moments is not the issue here; the memory of it, or its forgetting, is the impulse Malani brings to making her shadow plays.

[11] See Bryson's introduction to Looking In: The Art of Viewing. This text, in fact, was one of the reasons that I became more acutely aware of the importance of concepts. Silverman (1996) offers an excellent, indeed, indispensable, discussion of the gaze in Lacanian theory.

[12] See Bryson (1983) for a distinction between the "gaze" and the "glance" as two versions of the look. On Malani's shadow plays, see Huyssen (2013). The title of her 2012 work, shown at Documenta that year, resonates with the subtitle of Spivak's 1999 book.

[13] See Ernst van Alphen's analysis of Charlotte Delbo's writings is suggestively titled "Caught by Images" (in 2005).

anthropologists, have been interested in the use of photography in historical and ethnographic research. More broadly, the meaning-producing effects of images, including textual-rhetorical ones, have been recognised. In this type of analysis, the gaze is also obviously central. Using the shadows of cultural memories as her medium, Malani makes an appropriating gaze impossible. The figures are fugitive, moving, ungraspable; whereas the vizier is caught between subject and object position.[14]

The objectification and the disempowering exoticisation of others further flesh out the issues of power inequity that the concept helps to lay bare. This is its relevance for postcolonial theory. Indeed, the affiliated concepts of the other and alterity have been scrutinised for their own collusion with the imperialist forces that hold the gaze in this photographic and cinematic material. Merging in her work the mythologies of India as well as Greece, Malani makes any distinction between self and other, already precluded by the form and medium of the work, also impossible on the level of content.

Enabling the analysis of non-canonical objects, such as snapshots, the concept is also helpful in allowing the boundaries between elite and larger culture to be overcome. Between all these usages, an examination of the concept itself is appropriate. Not to police it, or to prescribe a purified use for it, but to gauge its possibilities, and to either delimit or link the objects on which it has been brought to bear. Only with such examination can it prove its usefulness for postcolonial narratology.

So far, in its development in the cultural community, the concept of the gaze has demonstrated its flexibility and inclination to social critique. But, for the issue of postcolonial methodology, it also has a more hands-on kind of relevance. For it has an affiliation with –although is not identical to– the concept of focalisation in narrative theory. This is where my own involvement came in. In my early work, I struggled to adjust that concept. In fact, in narrative theory, the concept of focalisation, although clearly visual in background, has been deployed to overcome visual strictures and the subsequent metaphorical floundering of concepts such as perspective and point of view.

It is precisely because the concept of focalisation is *not* identical to that of the gaze or the look (although it has some unclear yet persistent affiliation with both of these concepts of visuality) that it can help to clarify a vexed issue in the relationship between looking and language, between art history and literary studies, but also, between mainstream and postcolonial narratology.The common question for all three of these concepts is what the look of a represented (narrated or depicted) figure does to the imagination of the reader or the look of the viewer. This is why Spivak's imaginative leap to her "what if?" question that enabled her to sketch in the absent focalisor Lucy, is decisively important to develop a specifically postcolonial use of the concept of focalisation.

Focalisation was the object of my first academic passion when, in the seventies, I became a narratologist. Retrospectively, my interest in developing a more workable concept to replace what literary scholars call perspective or point of view was rooted in a sense of the cultural importance of vision, even in the most language-based of the arts. My long-term argument with the master of narrative theory, Gérard Genette, for example, turned out entirely based on cultural-political disagreement. Hence, vision must not be understood exclusively in the technical-visual sense. In the slightly metaphorical but indispensable sense of imaginary –akin but not identical to imagination– vision tends to involve both actual looking and interpreting, including in literary reading. And, while this is a reason to recommend the verb "reading"

[14] See, for example, Hirsch (1997, 1999).

for the analysis of visual images, it is also a reason *not* to cast the visual out of the concept of focalisation. The danger of dilution here must be carefully balanced against the impoverishment caused by the excess of conceptual essentialism that goes by the proud name of "rigour".[15]

The term focalisation also helped overcome the limitations of the linguistically inspired tools inherited from structuralism. These were based on the structure of the sentence and failed to help account for what happens between characters in narrative, figures in image, and the readers of both. The great emphasis on conveyable and generalisable content in structuralist semantics hampered attempts to understand *how* such contents were conveyed –to what effects and ends– through what can be termed "subjectivity networks."[16]

The hypothesis that readers *envision*, that is, create, images from textual stimuli, cuts right through semantic theory, grammar, and rhetoric, to foreground the presence and crucial importance of *images* in reading. The fact that Malani makes her viewers come to terms with being caught in images that evoke past violence – especially against women – in the present, demonstrates that the importance of images lies in their rigorous present tense. At one point, when I managed to solve a long-standing problem of biblical philology "simply" by envisioning, instead of deciphering, the text, seeing, in the present, the violence done to young girls millennia ago, I savoured the great pleasure and excitement that come with discovery. Let me call the provisional result of this first phase of the dynamic of the concept-in-use, the gaze-as-focalisor.[17]

The second phase goes in the opposite direction. Take "Rembrandt", for example. The name stands for a *text* –"Rembrandt" as the cultural ensemble of images, dis- and re-attributed according to an expansive or purifying cultural mood– and for the discourses about the real and imaginary figure indicated by the name. The images called "Rembrandt" are notoriously disinterested in linear perspective and also highly narrative. Moreover, many of these images are replete with issues relevant for a gender perspective – such as the nude, scenes related to rape, and myth-based history paintings in which women are being framed. For these reasons combined, focalisation imposes itself as an operative concept. In contrast, "perspective" can only spell disaster. But, while narrativity may be medium-independent, the transfer of a specific concept from narrative theory –in this case, focalisation, which is mostly deployed in the analysis of verbal narratives– to visual texts, requires the probing of its realm, its productivity, and its potential for propagation versus the risk of dilution.[18]

This probing is all the more important because of the double ambiguity that threatens here. Firstly, focalisation is a narrative inflection of imagining, interpreting, and perception that *can,* but need not, be visual imaging. This would allow disparaging presentations of "others" through actions, for example, to pass unnoticed. To conflate focalisation with the gaze would be to return to square one, thus undoing the work of differentiation between two different modes of semiotic expression, whilst erasing the critical potential

15 I have been greatly –indeed, decisively– inspired by Genette's three volumes of Figures, especially the third volume translated into English as Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method. (1983). When his response to criticism appeared (1988) I understood how deep the cleft was between our conceptions of literature.

16 For an elaboration of subjectivity networks, I must refer to my book Death and Dissymmetry (1988).

17 This happened several times in my work on the Book of Judges (Bal, 1988). A key text remains W.J.T. Mitchell's opening chapter "What is an Image?" in Iconology (1995). The word "envision" yields a tentative concept in Schwenger (1999).

18 In Chapter 1 of Travelling Concepts I have discussed these two possible results of interdisciplinarity, following Stengers (1987).

of a more subtle narrative analysis. Secondly, and conversely, the projection of narrativity on visual images is an analytic move that has great potential but is also highly specific. To put it simply: not all images are narrative, any more than all narrative acts of focalisation are visual. Yet narratives and images have *envisioning* as their common form of reception. This is why Spivak's bold envisioning of the absent focalising acts of Lucy is so crucial to a postcolonial, that is, critical narratology. The differences and the common elements between the two concepts are equally important. This is also why Malani's shadowy images move, turn, appear and disappear. This is how they hold us: as Huyssen has it, by their "visual lure and aesthetic fascination" that keep the present tense active beyond a mere, because powerless, lament about gendered violence. (52)

In my own work, the examination of the concept of focalisation for use in the analysis of visual images was all the more urgent because the new area of visual imagery appears to carry traces of the same word by which the concept is known. This was a moment of truth: is focalisation in narratology "only a metaphor" borrowed from the visual domain? If so, does its deployment in visual analysis fall back on its literal meaning?

Instead, and supported by Malani's images, I claim the concept of focalisation helps to articulate the look precisely through its movement. After travelling, first from the visual domain to narratology, then to the more specific analysis of visual images, focalisation has received a meaning in visual analysis that overlaps neither with the old visual one –focusing with a lens– nor simply with the new narratological one – the cluster of perception and interpretation that guides the attention through the narrative. Or, as in Malani's work, the multiple narratives brought in to facilitates "acts of memory". It now indicates neither a *location* of the gaze on the picture plane, nor a *subject* of it, such as either the figure or the viewer. What becomes visible is the *movement* of the look – a movement Malani makes so inevitable on all levels that nothing can offer a more convincing, because experiential argument than this artwork.[19]

In that movement, the look encounters the limitations imposed by the gaze, the visual order. For the gaze dictates the limits of the figures' respective positions as holder of the objectifying and colonising look, and the disempowered object of that look. The tension between the focalisor's movement and these limitations is the true object of analysis. For it is here that structural, formal aspects of the object become meaningful, dynamic, and culturally operative: through the time-bound, changing effect of the culture that frames them. Thanks to its narratological background, the concept of focalisation imported mobility into the visual domain that usefully and productively complemented the potential to structure envisioning that had been carried over from visual to narrative in the first phase. We do not even have to fall back on such notoriously fuzzy and deceptive concepts as *implied viewer*, by analogy to an implied author that is tenaciously problematic.

For all these reasons combined, I privilege focalisation as the most important concept in postcolonial narratology. Its potential to not only facilitate precise and hence teachable interpretations but also to entice interactive reading with empathy, to facilitate experiential participation in the movement inherent in representation, especially in the memories of colonial but also postcolonial violence, and exposed to the hilt in Malani's shadow play that makes all of us participants in that violence in the present tense, is key for a deployment of narratology in contexts where readers lack specific knowledge and might

[19] Inspired by the philosophy of images as embodied and moving by Henri Bergson, I have developed the idea that images move by definition. An extensive argument in 2013; a very short version in 2013a.

therefore be tempted to judge prematurely, to cast aside a book, or to look down on an action. A consistent attention to focalisation, both present and absent, instead, promotes an exciting discovery of new visions, imaginative and enriching. If we want our students to be politically aware and ethically sensitive, this is the best breeding ground for such attitudes.

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