Welcome to the Cultural Revolution

ROSALIND KRAUSS

Linguistics, semiotics, rhetoric, and various models of “textuality” have become the lingua franca for critical reflections on the arts, the media, and cultural forms. Society is a text. Nature and its scientific representations are “discourses.” Even the unconscious is structured like a language.

—W. J. T. Mitchell, Picture Theory¹

The messenger who came rushing into the art world, as into the discipline of art history, some thirty years ago, bringing news of the recent invasion of the “textual” into the domain of the visual, could have saved his [sic] breath. The visual arts have always battled the onslaught of a verbal production—from ekphrasis to allegory; from ut pictura poesis to iconography²—that modernist art managed, briefly, to stun but never totally to silence.

If, during that time, semiotics became a tool of choice for certain theorists and historians of art, it was more in the hopes of taking a naive conception of the verbal and, by critiquing and exposing its unexamined assumptions about representation, of making it thereby a sophisticated means of analysis, than it was a switch in practice from a basis in image to a basis in text. And even as this semiotically minded project was unfolding, the modernist bulwarks were themselves giving way to a flood of the retextualization of abstract art, so that the most austerely antinarrative, nonobjective paintings were being rethematized and recentered around an ever more imperious Logos.

2. That hostility to the textual is not the province of modernist art alone but was shared by other regimes of Western art in their disdain for the narrative or the allegorical has been the argument of Swetlana Alpers. See The Art of Describing (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983). It is also deeply ingrained in the work of Leo Steinberg, whose current Norton Lectures at Harvard University (taking up subjects from Michelangelo and Mantegna to Velasquez and Picasso) bear the collective title “The Mute Image and the Meddling Text.”

Which means that in seeing a “pictorial turn” as merely supplanting a somewhat earlier, postwar “linguistic turn” in the human sciences, W. J. T. Mitchell is setting his sights far too modestly. For if there is indeed a pictorial turn, at least within the aesthetic realm, it is disrupting centuries, not decades, of practice.

That there should be such a break seems by now undeniable. Just as it would seem most fruitful to think about it via the notion Fredric Jameson began to develop some twenty years ago with the term “cultural revolution.” For the latter concept is a way of understanding how upheavals in modes of production will demand the opening up of freshly wrought, imaginary spaces into which prospective subjects of the new cultural and social order might narratively (phantasmatically) project themselves. Accordingly, in *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson had asked us to grasp the Enlightenment: “as part of a properly bourgeois cultural revolution, in which the values and the discourses, the habits and the daily space, of the ancien régime were systematically dismantled so that in their place could be set the new conceptualities, habits and life forms, and value systems of a capitalist market society.” Under such a description, advanced culture—far from being contestatory or resistant—is continually preparing its subjects to inhabit indeed, the next, more demanding stage in the development of capital.

If electronic media are now reorganizing vast segments of the global economy at the level of production, we cannot but expect a related revolution within the domain of the cultural, which is to say, at the level of projection: of the stories we tell about ourselves; the theories we use to understand the physical world and our place within it; the conceptual matrices we build; and most important, perhaps, the very type of sign we employ in the service of such representations.

That the sign-of-preference of the media should be “mythological” and “interpellant,” was something Roland Barthes had already begun to speak about in the mid-1950s. And indeed, as the media have switched from a photographic to an electronic base, the “myth”-driven disappearance of the signifier that Barthes had so patiently analyzed—which is to say the elision of the material support for the sign, whether written or pictured—has only intensified, increasingly giving cultural objects the effect of a kind of mirage-like precipitate of “nature,” presented to their receivers (this is the interpellant part) as merely one or another example of the natural state of things. Perhaps it is more than anything else this

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4. See Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (1957), trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972). Barthes explains myth, as he is using it, as a second-order semiological system, in which “a sign (namely the associative total of a concept and an image) in the first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second.” The activity of myth is to take hold of this new composite signifier and “turn it suddenly into an empty, parasitical form . . . When it becomes form, the meaning leaves its contingency behind; it empties itself, it becomes impoverished, history evaporates, only the letter remains. There is here a paradoxical permutation in the reading operations, an abnormal regression from meaning to form, from the linguistic sign to the mythical signifier” (p. 117).
5. For an application of Barthes’s structure of myth to the photographic practice of Cindy Sherman, and the difficulty most writers on her work seem to have had in seeing past the (mythic)
drive to banish the signifier that makes the pictorial the more desirable modality of sign for the purposes of myth. For the visual image, in its character as gestalt, its hanging-together-ness ("You can't," as Robert Morris said, "seek the gestalt of a gestalt"), seems far less easy to dismantle into its separate components than does the written expression.

That Barthes's analysis should have turned not only on the disappearance of the signifier but as well on the function of interpellation is extremely interesting for what would be called the Academy's role in the ensuing, and ongoing, "cultural revolution." For interpellation—or in its more psychological guise, "identification"—is the very subject-field of a whole new discipline that began to develop within the university over these same years. This discipline, Cultural Studies, has set itself to systematize our understanding of the constitution of human subjects as so many identities that are not so much produced by their accession to a set of social conditions as they are reproduced through a process of (unconscious) identification with preexisting sources of authority and legitimation, whether these sources be people, institutions, or texts. Whether or not the reigning example of interpellation, within Cultural Studies, is verbal and auditory—the "Hey you!" of either policeman [sic] or friend—the master trope of identification is visual and spatial: the recognition-in-imitation to which Lacan refers throughout his essay on the mirror stage, whether he is describing the assumption of an image in the human infant, or the development of gonads in the female pigeon, or the forming of swarms in the migratory locust; in all instances the mimetic function is primary and it is grounded on seeing.6

Which brings us to the quotation from Picture Theory with which I began, and its repetition of what it takes to be an unexceptionable commonplace of Lacanian theory: the unconscious is structured like a language. Rather, one could argue, if Lacan has become so overwhelmingly important within Cultural Studies, which is to say, if Althusserian interpellation and Lacanian identification map so efficiently onto one another, this is because within this very psychoanalytic theory the unconscious is not structured like a language, but like an image, and that image—like the myth (but also like the mirror)—stripped of all apparent material support.

And yet, it will be retorted, isn't Lacan insistent on the foundational character of the signifier, in all its material and localizable nature, for the operations of the unconscious? Doesn't this foundation—in the letter itself—guarantee the linguistic nature of the unconscious, securing it as symbolic, against the forces of the image,

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6. For example, "it is a necessary condition for the maturation of the gonad of the female pigeon that it should see another member of its species, of either sex; so sufficient in itself is this condition that the desired effect may be obtained merely by placing the individual within reach of the field of reflection of a mirror" (Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I" [1949], Ecrits, trans. Alan Sheridan [New York: Norton, 1977], p. 3).
the visual, the projective? Isn’t the stress on the Imaginary function a misreading of Lacan; perhaps the same misreading in which a Foucauldian or Althusserian view of psychoanalysis continues to indulge? Isn’t the linguistic dimension of Lacan’s theory put indelibly in place by a text like “The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason since Freud”?8

It is precisely “The Agency of the Letter” that Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe submitted to close scrutiny so many years ago, by stressing Lacan’s own sleight-of-hand transformation of the Saussurean sign into an algorithm, something that Saussure’s own formulation for the relation between signified and signifier manifestly is not. As the authors remark: “It is essentially a question of subjecting the Saussurean sign to a certain treatment. To algorithmize the sign, if we can risk this expression, will practically mean to prevent it from functioning as a sign. We could even say that as it is posited, it is destroyed.”9

The stages of this destruction are triple: first, the registers are reversed so that Saussure’s \( \frac{S_d}{S_r} \) becomes Lacan’s \( \frac{S_r}{S_d} \)—henceforth declared an algorithm: \( \frac{S}{S} \); second, as an algorithm, the relation between the halves of the sign are voided of internal relationship (the two faces of a single signifying unit) as signaled by the removal of Saussure’s unifying ellipse,10 to become instead the stages of an operation: “One thing is certain,” writes Lacan, “if the algorithm \( \frac{S}{S} \) with its bar is appropriate, access from one to the other cannot in any case have a signification.”11 Having thus destroyed the sign (Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe remark that Lacan’s is a linguistics without a concept of the sign) to replace it by the idea of a formal operation that will allow the computation of a value for a given function, Lacan replaces the derived algorithm by—here is the third move—its schema, or picture. And it is this picture that now both illustrates the operation of the algorithm and institutes a permanent slippage between the symbolic

10. Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe characterize Lacan’s resistance to the theory of the sign as a rejection of that kind of “thinking which ‘unmotivates’ the sign in order to better ‘motivate’ the signifier in its relation to the signified” (ibid., p. 39), a position which in “The Agency of the Letter” Lacan calls an illusion (“the illusion that the signifier answers to the function of representing the signified, or better, that the signifier has to answer for its existence in the name of any signification whatever” (Écrits, p. 150).
dimension of language and the pictured reality (the location of two lavatories) to which this schematic rendering is so curiously transparent.

For in looking at the representation of something like a corridor with two public bathrooms, their identical doors merely surmounted by opposing “signifiers” (as though posted on the wall above the doors), one is struck by the distance between the Saussurean account of signification, which in this instance would have had no choice but to link the image of a male to the corresponding signifier MEN, or one of a female to the signifier WOMEN. One is also struck by a signifier that is both double and internally oppositional so that the signifier itself would have to be interpreted MEN ≠ WOMEN, which is to say that the signifier is itself algorithmic, reduced to an expression of the abstractly formalizable bar of pure opposition. The operation that this algorithm of nonidentity then produces is what Lacan calls a “precipitation” out of the dimension of the signifier into the domain of what is at one and the same time an articulation of the field of the symbolic and that of reality. Which is to say that the action of the signifier is to cut out two things with one stroke: a universal law of sexual segregation; and a means of inscribing it on a formerly undifferentiated reality as the institution of two distinct spaces—the solitary confinement for urination—by the imposition of the signifier’s “law.”

The presence of this picture at the very heart of the Lacanian explanation for the operations of the signifier is not only extremely arresting, but the capacity of the image to shed its manifestly schematic, or Symbolic, character and fuse with the naturalistic condition of the setting seems to underscore that in the grip of this picture it is very hard to hang on to the signifier itself as present within the effects it produces.

12. The relevant passage from Lacan reads: “We see that, without greatly extending the scope of the signifier concerned in the experiment, that is, by doubling a noun through the mere juxtaposition of two terms whose complementary meanings ought apparently to reinforce each other, a surprise is produced by the unexpected precipitation of an unexpected meaning; the image of twin doors symbolizing, with the solitary confinement offered Western man for the satisfaction of his natural needs away from home, the imperative that he seems to share with the great majority of primitive communities by which his public life is subjected to the laws of urinary segregation” (ibid., p. 151).
Indeed, the visual condition of this founding algorithm is to be felt in the succeeding algorithms presented in “The Agency of the Letter,” particularly the one for the topological condition of metaphor in the structure of the unconscious: $f(S')S \equiv S(+)s$. For here the plus sign has no significance whatever as either logical or mathematical notation, but in representing instead, as Lacan puts it, “the crossing of the bar—and the constitutive value of this crossing for the emergence of signification”\textsuperscript{13}—it is, as Jane Gallop muses, “an ideogram . . . a Witz, a joke, a visual pun.”\textsuperscript{14}

In a sense this algorithm is to represent the binding of the subject into the “linguistic” condition of the earlier algorithm, so that a signifier in the field of the Other ($S'$) will come to stand for the subject ($S$) by utterly eclipsing that subject\textsuperscript{15} as the condition for the emergence of signification in the subject, a subject who is for this reason lost at the very moment of constituting itself. The sign for this apparent onset of meaning, in which the bar (“the mark of non-sense”) is crossed and the signified is adduced by “taking up its position at the precise point at which sense is produced in nonsense,” is a plus sign—+—that is not a notation, but a picture, the picture of a barrier that, “resisting signification,”\textsuperscript{16} is shown as both pierced and not pierced. And in its character of being a surface that is traversed while remaining entirely intact, the + could be said to resemble a line-of-sight projecting itself within the reflections of a mirror.

It is certainly the case that the Lacanian algorithm for metaphor was devised to plot symptom-formation rather than identification, and thus it could be argued that—in its truly “linguistic” dimension in terms of a logic of substitution—it should be held rigorously distinct from the operations of the mirror and the screen. But my reply to that argument would focus on two things here. The first is the utterly visual, pictorial, character of a crucial part of the equation that links

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., p. 164.
\textsuperscript{14} Gallop, Reading Lacan, p. 119.
\textsuperscript{15} Lacan uses as his example of metaphor the line from Hugo, “His sheaf was neither miserly or spiteful,” which is mystifying as long as one thinks of it, itself, as a metaphor, but becomes clearer as an instance of Lacan’s idea of a figure of eclipse: “But once his sheaf has thus usurped his place, Booz can no longer return there” (\textit{Ecrits}, p. 157). For a discussion of the problematic nature of Lacan’s idea of metaphor, see Jean-François Lyotard, “The Dream-Work Does Not Think,” in \textit{The Lyotard Reader}, ed. Andrew Benjamin (Oxford: Basil Blackwood, 1989), pp. 33–40.
it back to the master algorithm on the one hand and to the naturalistic setting of the mirror relation on the other. The second is the triadic, substitutional nature of Lacan's very conception of the mirror relation, the precondition for the possibility that later (Symbolic) states of development can be mapped on this foundation in the Imaginary. For if, in Lacan's argument, the subject's primary identification is with a projected image of itself grasped in its mirror reflection ("We have only to understand the mirror stage as an identification, in the full sense that analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image"), thus necessitating the introjection of an imago which is external, it is equally part of his argument that any jubilant accession to this beautifully formed Gestalt must at the same stroke trigger an aggressive rage against the Gestalt, since the subject is now in a rivalrous relationship with that external being which is more perfect than itself, even though that being is itself. Which is to say that the very thing with which the subject identifies and on which its ego depends is set up as a substitute for the subject. This structure of self-alienation, in being triadic, describes a primary condition of self-supplanting, which the mirror's double condition of being perfectly transparent and perfectly opaque captures in what could be seen as the ur-form of the + of language ("For the Other, the place of discourse, always latent to the triangulation that consecrates that distance, is not yet so as long as it has not spread right into the specular relation in its purest moment: in the gesture with which the child in front of the mirror, turning to the one who is holding it, appeals with its look to the witness who decants, verifying it, the recognition of the image, of the jubilant assumption, where indeed it already was").

18. This is described in the paper "Aggressivity in Psychoanalysis," written in 1948, one year before the publication of the "Mirror Stage" essay. Lacan here relates the imago of the human form, "in which the human individual fixes upon himself an image that alienates him from himself," to aggressivity: "This form will crystallize in the subject's internal conflicting tension, which determines the awakening of his desire for the object of the other's desire: here the primordial coming together (concours) is precipitated into aggressive competitiveness (concurrence), from which develops the triad of others, the ego and the object" (Écrits, p. 19).
The objection might still be made that even if there is a way in which the conditions of specularity within Lacan’s theory invade the upper regions of the structure, so to speak, by permeating the Symbolic, and thus making it possible for the whole discourse of interpellation to be mapped onto that theory, this represents a shift away from what is “proper” to Lacanian analysis itself, in which the letter continues to be privileged over the mirror. And yet we know that the very shift within this “proper” Lacanianism, away from an examination of the Symbolic and desire and toward an analysis of the Real and enjoyment, involves a wholesale attack on the letter.\(^{20}\) Insofar as the Real is what escapes signification, we could say that its present-day ascension within Lacanian studies performs, in that corner of the Academy, the same displacement of the signifier in its (structural, material) presence within the production of meaning as Cultural Studies carries out in its own.

*At this point, interpretation has turned around in production, and reception has begun to be recycled as use.*

—Fredric Jameson, “Reading and the Division of Labor”\(^ {21}\)

With the mention of “production,” I have nudged my argument in the direction of a different feature common to Cultural Studies which nonetheless meshes with the grounding identificatory/interpellative mechanism. This is the shift that Cultural Studies has operated away from an earlier, and what is now seen as outmoded, focus on the *production* of texts or works of art (as the goal of an equally outmoded literary or art-historical analysis), in favor of a new concentration on *reception*, or in the mass-cultural context addressed by Cultural Studies, that form of reception which is more properly called *consumption*. As Meaghan Morris describes one of the central theses of cultural studies: consumption practices cannot be derived from or reduced to a mirror of production; instead, seen as a mode of pleasure and resistance, indeed, as a “politics,” consumer practice is “far more than just economic activity; it is also about dreams and consolation, communication and confrontation, image and identity.”\(^ {22}\) And this enlarged idea of consumption is logically consistent with the structure of identification in which the embrace of a subject by a powerfully compelling image—illusory,

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\(^{20}\) Within the Anglophone context the way is led by Slavoj Žižek, as in *Enjoy Your Symptom!* (New York: Routledge, 1992).


phantasmatic, oneiric, hallucinatory—finds that subject as a reproduction of the visual constellation he or she has no choice but to receive and internalize.

The parallel Cultural Studies repeatedly draws between the fantasy image and the mass-cultural media image is made, of course, in the name of a “politics” of consumption. The idea of the subversive or contestatory (and thus “creative”) uses that consumers might make of mass-cultural image banks is undoubtedly an attempt to sneak a notion of production back into a discursive field from which it has been banished. The classic case would be Janice Radway’s position that addictive readers of industrially produced romance novels use this reading subversively, since it provides an imaginary, compensatory space into which they may escape from the routines of their oppressive domestic lives, carving out an emotional room of one’s own, so to speak, and thus opening up a more empowered subject position with which to identify, no matter how transitorily or ambivalently (since the romance heroines are coded “strong” only through the weakness on their part that binds a hero to them the more tenaciously to cling to an ideal of the happy domestic couple). But besides whatever we might think of an argument that sees as “oppositional” behavior that challenges none of the conditions of a given community’s life—using escapist activity, in fact, to make it possible for everything to remain in place—the position it articulates has two corollaries. The first is that as a support for fantasy, the mass-cultural image be consumed unanalytically and whole—that is, mythically—the supposedly subversive act being merely (and perversely) one of recoding it, in this case, from woman-as-victim to woman-as-powerful. The second is that this recoding of the mass-cultural object is equivalent to its “production” on the part of the consumer/receiver.

This strange new use for the word production seems indeed symptomatic of the very eclipse of those features of real industrial activity that Cultural Studies celebrates, and in so doing, prepares new subjects-of-culture to accept as given. And production is not a lone word in this recycled vocabulary. Construction and constitution are also secured as markers of a kind of making or building or producing that is purely substitutional for making or building within the political economy. For even as the necessarily passive and unconscious subjects of this effect are repeatedly analyzed as so “constructed,” the academic analysts of this construction must feel themselves increasingly shut out from any real understanding of the actual inner workings of the ever more complex technologies (such as computer processing) that form the material basis of this analysis.

Jameson has written very persuasively about the way the substitution of reception for production within academic analysis reflects a wide-scale de-skilling that leaves most people—workers and academics alike—unprepared to cope with production. At the level of culture, whether high or mass, he writes: “In both cases, for very different reasons, the experience of the production of such art forms

is inaccessible to most people (including critics and intellectuals), who thereby find themselves thrown back on an experience of both kinds of art as sheer reception (whence the attractiveness of those categories for contemporary theory).” Thus whether we are speaking about contemporary postelectronic music or television production, these “are not environments in which most people feel at home, and in any case they inspire very little optimism about that potential control or mastery over processes, oneself, and nature and collective destiny, which nonalienated labor necessarily includes and projects.”

*The image culture of postmodern[ism]*
*is postperceptual, turning on imaginary rather than on material consumption.*

—Jameson, “Reading and the Division of Labor”

I have been arguing that a certain type of visual sign is now ascendant in that part of the Academy that likes to think of itself as avant-garde. Identified as *image*, its material structure has collapsed and, disembodied, it now rises as Imaginary, hallucinatory, seductive: the shared property of Psychoanalytic Studies, Cultural Studies, and the incipient field of Visual Studies. I have also said that for this to have come about within Lacanian analysis itself, there needed to be a shift away from a focus on the processes of the Symbolic and onto the operations of the Real.

This newfound concentration on what is utterly resistant to signification is identified by Slavoj Žižek with the shift that occurs in Lacan’s later work. Žižek explains that in the 1960s, when Lacan was still a structuralist (and therefore a modernist looking for the detail that would dissolve the hold of the social system of the Symbolic), he believed that the goal of psychoanalysis was the interpretative dissolution of the symptom so that the patient could get past this compromise-formation and identify with his fantasy, which is to say his “fundamental existential project.” But in the later Lacan, Žižek writes, “the analysis is over when we take a certain distance from the fantasy and identify with the pathological singularity on which the consistency of our enjoyment depends.” This pathological singularity is now renamed “sinthome” and, understood as what “gives the subject his ontological consistency,” it is this that the subject must now identify with. For if it dissolves, the subject disintegrates. “The dimension of ex-sisting sinthome is more radical than that of symptom or fantasy,” Žižek writes; “sinthome is a psychotic kernel that can neither be interpreted (as symptom) nor ‘traversed’ (as fantasy)—what to do with it, then? Lacan’s answer is to identify with the sinthome.”

Presymbolic, the psychotic kernel of the *sinthome* is also described as

25. Ibid., p. 144.
27. Ibid., p. 137.
“anamorphic,” a stain or blot that drops out of the visible picture of reality, a residue that somehow gestures toward the unseen presence of a formless, and thus unrepresentable, Thing. As such, the *sinthome* would seem to be as far away as possible from the mirror operations of identification. Yet, to repeat Žižek’s formulation: “what to do with it, then? Lacan’s answer is to identify with the sinthome.”

If I am particularly arrested by this admonition to identify not with what is “in” the picture, but with what drops out of it, this is because it seems to me that such an idea is bizarrely (if perversely) congruent with the most extreme variant of a certain orthodox reading of modernist art itself, which occurs, needless to say, not within Cultural Studies or Visual Culture, but within the very precincts of art history. For in the high modernist analysis set out by Michael Fried, Jackson Pollock’s painting is said to reach its most sublime achievement when it is no longer just a matter of the dripped line’s having transcended the “cut”—Clement Greenberg’s expression for traditional drawing’s isolation of figures from their backgrounds. Instead, turning Greenberg’s reasoning on its head, Fried locates Pollock’s accomplishment in the “cutout,” which is to say a figurative shape that has been literally excised from the linear skein, as in the 1949 painting *Out of the Web*, to create a hole or absence in the pictorial surface. Now, Greenberg had argued that if Pollock had forged a signifier whose linear meander

annulled its own figurative conditions and thereby created the simultaneous field of the “all-over,” this achievement is modernist in that it has two faces. On the one hand it can signify the (abstract) conditions of objective reality: both what Greenberg had called the continuity of “space at large,” and at the level of the art object, what is recognized as the continuity of the canvas surface; while on the other, it can make these objective conditions produce an analogue and thus a reflection of the subjective mode of their own understanding, which is to say the autotransparency, immediacy, and homogeneity of consciousness.

Fried was instead to have severed the connection between these two faces, jettisoning the objective, materialist side in order to construct the walled-in subjectivity of what could be called (entirely against his own will, it must be added) a kind of “schizo-modernism.” The significance of Pollock’s cutouts, he argued, is that the absence they register is not experienced as something actually occurring within the space of the painting but, instead, as a wholly subjective condition: as though each were a kind of “blind spot” in the viewer’s own field of vision. “It is like part of our retina that is destroyed,” he writes, a part that “for some reason is not registering the visual field over a certain area.”

And within this logic the significance taken on by the cutout was that it ceased to exist in objective space: “In the end the relation between the field and the figure is simply not spatial at all: it is purely and wholly optical: so that the figure created by removing part of the painted field . . . seems to lie somewhere within our own eyes, as strange as this may sound.”

What Fried’s logic does not contain is the modernist precondition that the figurative impact of the cutout—its shape—be suspended. Rather the figure is now conserved as “image”—as a kind of hallucinatory counterpart to the bodily dimension it has attained within the viewer’s own physical being: the retinal surface against which it registers as “blind spot.” The double gesture at work in this interpretive move is then, first, to suspend the material, objective status of the signifier, so that the “optical” field is now reorganized as floating, indeterminate, and hallucinatory; and second, to reconstruct that signifier as an invisible precipitate of the body and its drives, a vanishing horizon, a psychic mark of where the body disappears into itself, as fold, as lacuna. It is this double gesture that then produces the bizarre parallel between Fried’s “Pollock” and Žižek’s anamorphic stain.

The example of animal mimicry analyzed by Roger Caillois and adopted by Lacan in the formation of his theory of the mirror stage provides us with one model of how this parallel could be possible. For animal mimicry is a kind of strange, shadow case of modernism’s own drive to create an analytical pictorial language by suppressing the distinction between figure and ground, thus making

29. Ibid.
all boundary conditions irremediably ambiguous. When Picasso told Gertrude Stein in the fall of 1914 that it was not the French Army but Cubism that had invented camouflage, he was already drawing this parallel, although clearly oblivious to all its inherent dangers for the transformative thinking of modernist art. For camouflage is not about transcending the bodily, it is about hiding bodies. And indeed the animal who takes on the exact markings of its milieu continues to exist within the mottled and continuous surface that effaces its contours. Thus the parallel with mimicry is the last one the modernist should welcome, since the short circuit its reasoning would perform on modernism would be to reinsert a body hidden beneath all and every move to transcend the bodily, to reconvert every abstract paradigm into crypto-figuration or “image,” and to narrativize every formal move as if to produce for every white monochrome painting, for example, some version or other of the derisive title: Child Buried under Snow.

Caillois’s own move with relation to animal mimicry had been to pathologize it, to make it the function of the dispossession of an animal subject who, no longer in control of the location of the visual data around it, and not knowing whether the images it sees are inside or outside itself, literally does not know on which side of its skin it exists. It was not only the Surrealist avant-garde that welcomed this interpretation as a model of a kind of schizo-modernism (for which Dali’s “paranoiac-critical method” was already one manifestation), but also of course Lacan, for whom mimicry would become an enduring paradigm of the onset of the splitting of the subject within the grip of the visual field.

And indeed, in 1964, one year before Fried was to write his analysis of Pollock’s “cutouts,” Lacan once again places the phenomenon of mimicry in relation to the scopic drive, whose object—like that of any other drive (oral, anal, phallic)—is not presence: a need fulfilled; but an absence: a desire forever thwarted.31 In the brief excursus into the subject of painting that Lacan permits himself within this discussion, he refers to a book called Charpentes in which pictorial composition is “explained” by tracing—Earle Loran-style—linear trajectories and abstract shapes (circles, triangles, etc.) over the surface of the painting as an attempt to excavate and thus to explain its purportedly hidden compositional logic.32 Although Lacan is delighted with the book, he doesn’t like the idea of these figures being internal armatures: charpentes as structure, reinforcing the reality of the object. What he likes, instead, is the idea that they are “cutouts,” lacunae, “holes,” ways of inscribing the viewing subject within the painting as coinciding with his or her own scopic object of desire, which is to say his or her own absence.33

32. Ibid., p. 108.
33. Lacan writes: “In every picture, this central field cannot but be absent, and replaced by a hole.… Consequently, and in as much as the picture enters into a relation to desire, the place of a central screen is always marked, which is precisely that by which, in front of the picture, I am elided as subject of the geometrical plane” (ibid).
They are, that is to say, inscriptions of the desiring subject within the surface of the painting the way the moth is inscribed onto the bark of the tree: in a schizophrenic displacement that has caused the subjective boundaries to collapse between inside and outside, “me” here but the object no longer “there.”

If this peculiar convergence between Lacan and Michael Fried’s “Pollock” is interesting to contemplate, it is because Fried has generalized his analysis beyond Pollock or even modernism, to a condition he advocates as highly desirable for painting (and indeed for art itself), and which he calls “absorption.” That “absorption” should now be welcomed by “picture theory,” which is to say, that a convergence between it and the concerns with image-as-identification that are generalized throughout Cultural Studies should be conceivable, seems unsurprising insofar as “absorption” itself is symptomatic of the way art history is recutting even its most “proper” concerns to meet the requirements of the “cultural revolution.”

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Cultural Studies has always proclaimed itself as revolutionary, the avant-garde operating within the Academy—as an insurgency—in the wake of the events of May 1968. Visual Studies has very little to do to map itself onto the model of its (Cultural Studies) model, since, as I have tried to suggest, that earlier model was already thoroughly dependent upon a certain nonmaterialist conception of the image: the image as fundamentally disembodied and phantasmatic. But whether this revolution is indeed an insurgency, or whether it—as an unexceptional case of “cultural revolution”—serves an ever more technologized structure of knowledge and helps to acclimate subjects of that knowledge to increasingly alienated conditions of experience (both of them requirements of global capital) is a question we must continue to ask. That the new field of Visual Studies may not be as radical as it thinks is the point of the thoroughly orthodox art-historical parable with which my demonstration ended.

34. See Mitchell’s text “What Do Pictures Really Want?” in this issue, where he refers to Fried’s *Absorption and Theatricality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).