

Pointing the View

for Jodi



The view has a point on it, it has shape, it has a direction and stability. These are the things we say we know about looking at the world, all of them concocted. Are any of them true?

Why isn't the view pointed, and pointed in a specific direction? That's the way we draw

it, but then again, we didn't always draw like that and not everyone draws like that and in fact it's not now the kind of drawing we do or how we think about drawing. Yet, pointing a view from a point, with the picture plane that corresponds to the drafting surface and the vanishing point that moves along with our chosen point of view and the construction that allows us to control the depth of field and pretend that the retina is flat and so on ... these are such convenient expandable notions that it seems foolish to give them up, or maybe it's even impossible to give them up, given that language and thought have formed around them, a kind of Whorfian scar material that allows the broken bone to function but now the limp seems the normal way to walk.

Imagine, speaking of Whorf and the Whorf-Sapir hypothesis that language creates its own reality, that thanks to global warming the eskimos who were the famous tribe used to illustrate the thesis suddenly had winters without snow but their "snow world" with all of its different words for different kinds of snow continued. Would they notice global warming at all? How would their mentality change once the occasion for naming "snow just fallen on a grass surface that had been warmed by the sun" never comes up?

Point of view, is one of those expressions that, so useful, it probably has built-in survival capability that allows it to serve as a metaphor long after we leave the world imagined by Dürer in his famous engraving of an artist using a lucinda to plot the end-wise view of the model using a monocular grid, while orthogonal (in every way) to this drafting lesson we have a binocular room looking out on a varied landscape, and one of the windows winks at us with references to the Annunciation. Dürer was no fool. He was showing us a fad that was really a symptom; a mechanization of the point of view that, though we really didn't believe in it, was nonetheless something we continued to use *compulsively*, as indicated by the punitive immobilization of the eye by the obelisk.

Critiques of this and other of Dürer's illustrations of automated drafting seem to think that Dürer is advocating this technique without any tongue-and-cheek dimension. Irony is always debatable, but the position of the model and the iconic value of the objects on the window sill seem to make a strong case that Dürer is laughing. Of course we don't *see* like we draw; that's not the point. We make drawings for a lot of reasons but drawings are not representations of how or what we see, yet we allow them to be, in the same way we allow a piece of printed paper to pay the waiter for a nice dinner, or the way we say "Fine, thank you," to the question "How are you?" The drawing is a symptom; and the conventional ways of describing how drawings are constructed are symptoms — and strong ones, given our insistence that they *belong* to the natural way of doing things. No matter how much we ridicule them (and Dürer surely is doing this) or how much we point out the differences between the monocular view and binocular optics —

which we still can't explain — or the kinds of problems brought in by the frame, we still like to say the *point* of view is a *point* and that we *point* our view in various directions; and that we are free to change our point of view and our directions in the same way a bird is free to fly from branch to branch or off beyond the horizon.

In fact we are not free. In the stupid sense of “not free,” we pay a price. First, we identify a point of view with our subjectivity. We are our point of view, where the point of view serves as a metaphor for all of our attitudes, predispositions, tics, habits, and misconceptions. This is the other side of the anecdote repeated by Ernst Gombrich in his *Art and Illusion*, the original author being the German artist Ludwig Richter on a holiday with other artist-friends, all four of whom decided to conduct an experiment about objective representation by sitting as close as possible and choosing the same scene.¹ Despite their common training, identical mastery of identical techniques, the artists produced as many different drawings as there were artists. Despite their common point of view in a literal geographic sense of the term, they could not escape their “point of view” in its personality function. Their point of view was a portable prison, a way of looking that they could change only with great difficulty, if at all.

This is the “point of view” applied to subjectivity, and thus subjectivity comes to have its own picture plane, vanishing point, cone of vision, and immobilization of the monocular eye — all of the apparatus associated with the Euclidean metaphor. To have a point of view is to maintain a *symptom* about subjectivity that we return to in an automated, mechanical way. We compulsively attach ourselves to our Cartesian self-image, *pictorialized* as a geometry that isolates the viewer from the viewed and mechanizes the question of accessibility in terms of a plot of near and far, large and small. Space is reduced to a billiard-ball causality of contingencies that regulate the effects of everything before us, while it provides the subject side of the picture plane with its own rules of movement. And, because communication takes place in this geometricized field, this *symptom* also regulates our relations to others who, though subjects like ourselves, are objectified within layers that conceal an “inner truth” with “outer appearance.” We begin, thanks to the point of view model, to conceive subjectivity as a series of layers, each with its own admissions and confessions, sins and punishments. Our psyches become models of Dante's *Inferno*, a depth associated with the discovery of an “impossible” truth.

So, while we can move about our geometricized world and set up our representational frames anywhere we like, the cost of this is that, thanks to the compulsion to geometricize the world in this way, we construct a point of view prison that, as subjects within the (Lacanian) Symbolic, we cannot escape. It's like the joke about Lady Astor, who scolded Winston Churchill for his drunkenness: “Winston, you are drunk, very very drunk.” “My dear Lady,” the inebriated Prime Minister replied, “You are ugly, very ugly.

¹ Gombrich gets the story from Heinrich Wölfflin's *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (Principles of Art History), 1915. Wölfflin tells the story as he has it from Ludwig Richter, one of the four painters traveling in Tivoli who undertook the experiment in representational authenticity. This seems to be a perfect transcription of the perception/reality binary problem, yielding a skeptical “there can be no accurate picture of reality” conclusion. Wölfflin used it to develop his theory of the “double root of style,” drawing possibly on the “Morelli theory” of authenticity in art, that style is based on one hand on a conscious sensibility but, on the other, something deeper and more psychological.

Tomorrow I shall be sober.” So, how is our imprisonment in our metaphorized point of view also our symptomatic (self-)entrapment by the Symbolic, and is there any escape?²

Once we see the spectacle of our portrayal of subjective identity in terms of a method of graphical representation, we could either laugh or cry. One seems to be free, the other is definitely not, at least we so commonly regard it to be a trap, prison, or limit that getting out of our personal point of view would be like shedding our skin, and in fact all traditions in philosophy and religion point to the difficulty of doing this and portray transformation in terms of magic, rebirth, metempsychosis, apocalypse, transfiguration, etc. In other words, changing our point of view involves nothing less than catastrophe for the subject who has accepted a position within the cultural/social edifice of the Symbolic at the cost of being assigned a wholly “external” identity. We live within the Symbolic as spies, sometimes as double agents, always feeling the risk of being discovered and punished. This fear in fact is the motive for psychoanalysis and the psychoanalytic aim of “know thyself.”

Escaping our point of view, our graphical metaphor of subjectivity, is therefore difficult if not impossible. It would involve giving up everything we regard as “ourselves,” the things that cushion reality with an array of fantasy constructs and self-images. Who we feel ourselves to be is geometrically founded at the point of the Mirror Stage, where anxiety based on identity is realized as a central factor to be used to reward and punish; it becomes the economic system that tells us where to go and what to do. The Mirror Stage is nothing more or less than imprinting the point of view metaphor as the basis of our (non-)identity within the Symbolic. The benefit of this optical transfiguration is that we construct freedom in terms of the mirror plane’s 1:1 lie, its conversion of left to right and right to left.

the inverter gate

This makes the mirror what is called in physics an “inverter gate,” a kind of switch that works like this. A light switch is actually two inverter gates paired so that a circuit may be perfectly divided into two opposite states, an “on” and “off,” or “positive” and “negative.” When one switch changes positive to negative, the other simultaneously changes from negative to positive. There is never any “doubt” in the circuit about whether the lights are on or off. They cannot be a bit on or a bit off. They are binary, a matter of either/or.

If one of the switches is removed, an inverter gate is produced. This is what happens, mathematically, when an imaginary number, such as $\sqrt{-1}$, is encountered, or when a recursive calculation creates a repeating decimal value, such as $1/9$, $2/9$, etc. (.1111..., .2222..., etc.). The short-circuit is literally “short one switch,” with the result that what should be an effect of a procedure becomes a cause. In the calculation of the Golden Mean, \emptyset , the ratio that should be the answer becomes the question, so to speak, of a new rectangle — and thus a “growth dynamic” is discovered. Equations of the form $x^2-x-1=0$ produce self-referential sequences that amount to the same thing: infinities. Cantor showed that infinities heading

² You see, dear Jodi, I turned the tables on you a bit unfairly, since you already know what I’m saying, and you would have said it yourself, but the trick here is to see the freedom that seems evident in the ability to choose different points of view as a part of the problem of not being able to change the point of view, using the point as a metaphor for subjective identity, or “identity within the Symbolic” as Lacan would put it. The experiment here is to say that, because the perspectival system of the point of view as a function of pictorial representation has more than a little something to do with the way we are defined as subjects, and that definition as subjects is not something that happens all on its own but is a project of culture and language. This is an *ersatz* thought experiment, to go back and forth between the picture-making procedure and the self-identity project, to see how one influences the other, and if the results are “all there is,” i. e. if we *cannot change our point of view* (meaning our subjective identities).

towards increasingly large numbers and those going to increasingly small numbers had an *eigenvalue* that could be discovered using a “diagonal method,” and his revolutionary theorem created the idea of “transfinite numbers.” Cantor was so disturbed by this discovery that he wrote the Pope asking if his soul was in danger, since he had clearly stolen a secret from God. So, the inverter gate is not a trivial matter!

Whether we call it recursive, transfinite, or just self-referential, the subject’s entrapment within subjectivity is the same as the number’s perceived limitation to the non-recursive, non-transfinite, and non-self-referential. We know that this is not so. The “natural numbers” of arithmetic have built-in properties that lead to the discovery of irrational and imaginary numbers. The $\sqrt{-1}$ is implicit in the counting system, just as the weirdness of the number 9 has been known since ancient times.³ The weirdness of numbers is not a marginal issue; it has been regarded as a species of magic. So: does the “inverter-gate function” which produces such wildness in mathematics on account of its self-referential function have a similar importance for the “circuits” we might use to model subjectivity within the Symbolic? Are we justified by the symbolic nature of “the Symbolic” to make such a comparison?

This experiment (developing the inverter-gate metaphor in order to critique the point-of-view metaphor) is based on the *ersatz* principle that (1) nothing is lost in an experiment, even wrong answers produce interesting and usually useful results; and (2) if the experiment “works out,” whole new lines of thinking are opened up. The requirements for conducting an experiment are simple. It can’t be “too wild,” that is the ideas have to have some basis, and rather than use an idea entirely the way it has been designed to be used, it is better to see an idea from as many different angles as possible, to “triangulate” a median version. This is the reason why the inverter-gate, originally a mathematical idea, should be taken to a psychoanalytic framework, and then to an ethnographic framework, and then to an architectural framework, and then to a framework expanding the architectural esthetic into a broader field — all kinds of art made by all kind of cultures for all kinds of reasons. The “triangulation” should work like compound interest. Every “gain” in one field of study should be re-calculated according to another field, to see if its values are spurious and local or more universal.

The basis of the experiment begins with the exchange between the *freedom* experienced with the geometricized point of view — “you can set up your imagination anywhere to ‘take a picture’ of what’s happening” — and the *constraint* that subjects as subjects experience within the Symbolic. This is also, I would argue, the more general dialectic between Choice and Trait (Darwin), Contingency and the Absolute (Hegel), Freedom and Necessity (political theory), and the other binaries that see that the terms, though opposite, are “entangled.” We can take each of these versions of the dialectic back to the circuit with the inverter-gate to analyze how, in each field of study, the problem of the binary has been addressed. Certainly, the Hegelian context is profitable if only because Hegel “sticks it out” to the end, putting the problem in its most extreme and hard-to-solve format. There is good evidence that the inverter-gate metaphor is appropriate to the Hegelian dialectic, when we hear from Slavoj Žižek that the key to understanding how the “synthesis” of the dialectic’s thesis and antithesis doesn’t really exist as such because it has already been given in the thesis, in the same way that the *Witz* joke type has the punch line built into the opening. This is a bit like saying that the vanishing point is built into the POV, but that the “disguise” of this fact is the visibility of “half” of everything in between — that we have a visibility/

³ See for example, Cecil Balmond, *Number 9: The Search for the Sigma Code ; Nine Fixed Points in the Wind* (Munich: Prestel, 2008).

invisibility sandwich thanks to our alienation of finitude (our fixed point of view) from infinitude (the “eternal” horizon’s vanishing point).

autoeroticism

The term “autoeroticism” is linked to the project of breaking out of subjectivity by identifying with a state *prior* to the subject’s full membership within the Symbolic. Only Freud and Lacan have developed terminology to the point where it is possible to talk about two stages of becoming subjects, a “human” stage during which “the Symbolic” as the regime of subjectivity proper gradually “over-writes” behaviors and mental states used to define the human as such. Freud uses the same connection Vico uses to discover what makes humans humans and subjects subjects: the evidence linking childhood with primitive cultures. Freud, excited by an essay by Carl Abel on the “contronym” (a word meaning two opposite things), sees how this pre-subjective state is related to the unconscious, which he knows is unable to recognize negational binaries (life/death, right/wrong, truth/fiction, etc.). Linguists denounce Abel, but these same linguists denounce the entire idea that anything such as a “primitive” language could exist. For Émile Benveniste, one of the chief critics, all languages are “historically” the same. There is no movement from primitive to modern. (Mladen Dolar, it should be noted, points out that this a-historical view is based on linguistics’ limitation to *phonetic* models of language.) Vico’s non-phonetic idea of language is based on the influence of “root metaphors” that frame and continually re-package language’s communicative contents. For Vico, language has a built-in inverter gate, and that’s metonymy, the form of metaphor that requires structuring an “absence” from inside the chain of signifiers. Metonym and metalepsis are thus other ways of saying “inverter-gate.”

Freud notes that the young human is not yet a subject, and Lacan famously points to a single dramatic optical event where the human becomes a subject — or, to be more accurate about this, an optical event that allows the young human to realize that s/he has “already become a subject without knowing it.” Subjectivity emerges in the same astounding way that, in a sorites “pops out” — the pile of sand *suddenly* becomes a pile, yet subtracting grains of sand from that discovery point cannot determine the point where the collection of grains became a pile. In evolution, the sorites phenomenon is called “exaptation” — the presence of traits not significant for survival that, once the environmental “tables are turned,” become critical.

Freud’s pre-subject is autoerotic. This is not just the famous “polymorphous perversity” that has not yet organized sex around phallic enjoyment. It is a general fluidity in separating the world into distinct subjects and objects, here’s and there’s, causes and effects. The alliance between primitive cultures and children in this practice invites the addition of an important third participant: poetry/art. When Picasso incorporates ancient art motifs in his work, he is only an explicit exponent of a long-existing presence of the ancient within every contemporary age’s art practices. Art is modern and ancient at the same time, it varies only in the degree to which it explicitly acknowledges this “debt to the past,” and the degree to which it re-symbolizes the relationship. With a triad of childhood, primitive culture, and art, the question of the point of view and the inverter gate (add mathematics to the triad) becomes a charged field for experimentation. The rule of the experiment is that any “instance” (theoretical question) can and should be taken to all three (or four) fields and interrogated. Terms should not limit the question of the point of view binary (public freedom *versus* private constraint) to any one terminology or method of investigation.

One should feel free to rotate Dürer's classic "lesson" to reveal its similarity to Duchamp's *Large Glass*, bride above bachelor below — an "autoerotic" experiment if ever there was one!

Should one be optimistic about the experiment posing the existence of the reciprocity between the point of view's two versions, public freedom (the illusion that we can set up visibility anywhere) and private restriction (that subjectivity is identified as a point of view)? The main source of optimism is the ever-informative idea of the autoerotic, which exists in so many forms and from so many sources that it is not simply an abstract idea that can be "refuted" by cognitive behaviorism, phenomenology, or any other critical school. Denying autoeroticism amounts to saying that children speak like adults; that the "drives" have no effect or even do not exist; or that transfinite numbers, non-local entanglement (quantum physics), or recursion are not important. Autoeroticism may not be the only key to the point of view's two faces and their relationship, but it is certainly a big part of the full answer. Understanding autoeroticism in some way is possibly critical for any project relating to the point of view and its "history of deception" in subjectivity's self-presentation.

The bigger question perhaps is how, in answering a seemingly "small" question, such a large and complex array of issues is engaged. And, is there any *advantage*, critically and theoretically, in having what amounts to an encyclopedia written with only one entry. This points to the centrality, the strategic placement of the question of the point of view; how like the spider in the middle of its web, the point of view is able to sense the internal movements of issues that, though theoretically or historically distant, nonetheless effect it. The phenomenon of "spooky action at a distance" (the "non-local" of quantum physics) seems to be in play at the critical theory level. A new relationship connecting topics from different fields of study promises to move theory beyond appearance/reality binaries into a "thirdness" situation. In fact, "thirdness" is a term used by theorists in other fields who, standing in precisely the same spot because of their own articulation of the point-of-view problem, use to assert the need for a new kind of phenomenology, one that *equates* Form and Content.



With such a compact question and such broad implications, an experiment is not simply justified, it is necessary. We have to break out of any single disciplinary framework to carry it out. And, to do this, we have to use the question itself as a basis for a set of terms that, to be useful, must be re-calibrated by their relationship to this issue. The challenge is to find a way to pay for every excursion into new territory, to pair every trip out with a trip back home to unpack, sort the photos, write up the journals. The experiment has to alternate between centrifugal wildness into bizarre connections and centripetal, sober assessment of what has been found, an evaluation. But, since the critical context is being redefined by the experiment, any evaluation has to be written in terms of the new futures that have opened up on account of the new-found connections. The danger here is one of creating a world of leverage and unreality, where thought intoxicates. In that case, we must say to all the Mrs. Astors, "tomorrow I shall be sober."