

Thinking Through the Eyes.

On writing and staging the visual

In the third episode of James Joyce's *Ulysses* Stephen Dedalus, one of the novel's two central protagonists, walks along the shore at Sandymount Strand. It is eleven o'clock in the morning on the 16th June 1904 and the book is showing its first serious threats of the linguistic experimentation that is to follow. Having left the boys' school where he is an occasional master, with instruction to deliver a letter for his employer, the headmaster Mr Deasy, and an appointment of his own in The Ship at half past twelve, he wiles some time away with his private ruminations up and down the sands. He has ambitions as a writer - for which he has already been mocked by his housemate that morning - and though it becomes clear that he still smarts from this his mind is awash with playful verbiage and literary philosophising. All he does over the course of twenty pages is walk, pause to note down some verse and urinate, but in so doing equally invokes stillborn babies, the twelfth century theologian Joachim of Fiore, Elsinore Castle, the civilised Houyhnhnms of Jonathan Swift, a telephonic network of umbilical chords down which he can speak to a navel-less Eve, nightmares, sexual fantasies, school days and lost piety amidst incidental daily activities, trivial anxieties and idle half-memories almost without number.

I began to consider this section of *Ulysses* impulsively when reflecting upon contemporary performance making and the manner in which it examines the relationship between what is seen and she or he who sees it. The reason for this was a recollection of Stephen's famous, precocious opening where he states, "Ineluctable modality of the visible : at least that if no more, thought through my eyes." (Joyce, 2000 p.45) Beginning in this somewhat

enigmatic fashion - by drawing the reader's attention immediately to the operation of vision via such a grandiloquent pronouncement - Stephen (and Joyce) prompted a momentary pause to think his statement through. In this pause a number of questions presented themselves concerning the unstable and complex conditions of visual experience.

Despite remaining marginal within the broader field of the visual arts there has been a renewed enthusiasm for performance since the mid 2000s. In particular a move has been seen towards a format where the artist performs themselves, often alone and often delivering a text. This is exemplified in the work of the artists participating the project with which this book is concerned and we could look to the practices of Tris Vonna Michell, Jeremy Shaw, Sue Tompkins and Yael David as cases which reflect a similar approach. Though it is possible to speculate about the prevalence of didactic or academic modes in art education or responses to the rapid, heavily mediated and proliferating nature of contemporary electronic information it is hard to say exactly why this particular scenario of the solo artist working with the performance of text feels so pertinent at present. Whatever the reason it seems that through various strategies artists are making attempts to verbalise their subjective encounters with particular situations that invite audiences to work through a rich palimpsest of personal association and significance in a manner that felt analogous to the activity of Stephen Dedalus between pages 45 and 64 of *Ulysses*. With ineluctable modalities of the visual resonating and the astonishing, particular, partial, fractured, analytical, provocative, compelling vision of the world that follows I was struck that Stephen could easily number among these artists despite being a quasi-autobiographical literary invention from a hundred years prior. This short section of the novel seemed to propose itself as a tool to investigate what this performative scenario could mean for the contingencies at play between the seer and what is seen.

The episode (commonly referred to as *Proteus* after the Homeric episode with which it corresponds in the *Odyssey*) is almost exclusively an articulation of internal mental processing where it appears the only thing that dictates its content is the meeting of the particular context with the vagaries of his subjectivity. What Stephen encounters and what he perceives prompt interpretive activity that manifests as a cognitive loquacity conveyed by Joyce as a voice on the page. This kind of Inner talk or interior monologue is a well established and familiar literary device that gained prominence at the beginning of the 20th Century. Often formally and structurally unconventional or impressionistic this narrative mode attempted to evoke the thought processes of protagonists and in so doing suggest a particular proximity to the personal. Though Joyce is often sited as a writer for whom this technique was particularly significant in the case of *Ulysses* it is just one literary device deployed among many others. The novel's metatextuality and broad irreverent appropriations of style and structure draw attention as much to the respect in which its characters and readers are culturally constituted as they are reflective, interior beings. The private, internal worlds of Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom (*Ulysses*' other central character and analogue of Homer's hero) are elaborated throughout though the forms they take are often shaped out of cultural models borrowed from elsewhere. The examples of the newspaper headlines that order the *Aeolus* episode, the evolution of English from an ancient latinized incantation to a contemporary babble of slang via chronologically unfolding pastiches of literary styles in *Oxen of the Sun*, or the penultimate episode *Ithaca*, structured in the question and answer form of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, indicate an entwining of culture in experience. As such it is clear that this impacts as much upon the readers experiencing the novel as the characters experiencing the events it describes. However in the *Proteus* episode the text renders Stephen's action of walking in terms of the apparently unbridled operation of the mind and, structured as such, allows space for loose association, imaginative fancy, recollections and deliberation. While doing

this it equally pulls significant and intellectually robust ideas into play, vacillating across a threshold between the trivial and the profound with such rapidity that the two are hard to distinguish. In so doing effects are felt by the reader as Joyce achieves what Derek Attridge describes as “the peculiar capacity of literature to engage with crucial intellectual, ethical, and political issues without attempting to resolve them” (Attridge, 2000 p.14). Held together by the singular perception and social/cultural makeup of one individual these elements intertwine, are subject to each other and illustrate the unique particularity of a point of view. Not only this but through their staging as literature they call for a reader to engage with them and respond in turn to the identification and dissonances of Stephen’s interior talk. Given this there seems no reason to assume that this reader’s internal interpretations should be any less privileged than those of the protagonist and so Joyce invites another meeting of a particular context with the vagaries of her or his subjectivity.

Thinking about performance makes this term *staging* become particularly interesting. I use it here with reference to Derek Attridge’s preface to his book *Joyce Effects* (2000) in which he positions himself in relation to the novelist’s writing before going into more detailed analysis in a series of essays. He is at pains to qualify Joyce’s works as, though specific to the historical context in which they were written, still conceived and operating in such a way that they hold wholly new potential for meaning when opened and read at any other time or place. For Attridge this writing is affective and productive calling for a response from the individual that engages with it. He characterises this relationship to the text in theatrical terms describing how issues are “dramatized” rather than raised within it. He goes on to write, “Literary works have effects precisely because they do not float free from the material and intellectual conditions of their time – and ‘their time’ should be understood both as the time of writing and the time of reading – but perform a kind of staging of those

conditions, whether in a spirit of interrogation or celebration or (as often with Joyce) both.” (Attridge, 2000 p. 14).

The decision to situate the encounter with the text in this manner draws attention to particular moment in which it happens, imbuing the act of reading with a liveness that can be vital and empowering for the agent doing so; liberated to negotiate the material before them on their own terms. Thinking of reading as an act upon or with a text, rather than a direct, uncomplicated reception of its content, highlights this activity’s performativity. We can understand the interpretive process of reading as the event of an interface between the written words and the singular individual reading it that produces unique results over which the writer has only a certain degree of control. Understood like this the reader acts, making meaning with the text rather than being a receiver to whom it is transmitted directly.

Interestingly performance theorist Maaïke Bleeker articulates an inversion of this parallel in her discussion of Heiner Müller’s theatre work *Bildbeschreibung* (1984) writing, “looking is indeed presented as a creative act, as a ‘reading’, in the sense of producing meaning.” Though she complicates this relationship with the qualifier, “However, to what extent the one seeing can be understood as the master of possible semiosis seems to be precisely the question at hand.” (Bleeker, 2008 p.66) Considering this uncertainty as to where meaning is made, by whom and to what degree indicates the potential for the subject looked at and the subject looking to participate in a productive interaction that is also complex and reciprocal. Because of this the traditional distinctions between the audience as spectators and performance as barer of meaning become complicated much like the distinctions discussed above between reader and text. The specificity of this meeting means that we must think in terms of the generation of an interpretive product from the

particular vantage point (both physical and cultural) of the subject looking as much as the generation of a creative product of the performing subject looked at. Mutual responses are called for from both positions with each supporting and demanding the presence of the other. In the light of the status of Joyce's text articulated by Derek Attridge and the dynamism implicit here it is clear a similar relationship exists between subject read and subject reading. A result of this is that audiences and readers are invited to consider to the questions raised by these encounters via subtle provocations from a text or specifics of a performance.

Returning to Stephen's progress down Sandymount Strand we can look in more detail at the concerns dramatised in this particular staging of the visual. Again here are his opening words, "Ineluctable modality of the visible : at least that if no more, thought through my eyes." His musings on the operation of sight become a prelude to his monologue; a stream of consciousness that could be regarded as the illustration of the manner in which what is perceived through the eyes is just as subject to the plural interpretive mechanics of language - and thus the historical, social, cultural and political - as the reception of the written word. Beginning in this way he asserts that as "ineluctable" and a "modality" what is seen is mediated information from which we have no escape. Its quality as a modality would indicate that the subject seen is something external to the seer to which access is only available after being processed by a system. Its ineluctability would indicate that there is no alternative to receiving this information by these means. In a single heady sentence Stephen pulls a host of complex questions about the nature of vision into play but with responsibility to no one but his loose and wayward mental activity, steered and buffeted by the world he perceives as he walks, he does not struggle to reach a conclusion.

Signatures of all things I am here to read, seaspawn and seawrack, the nearing tide,
that rusty boot. Snotgreen, bluesilver, rust: coloured signs. Limits of the diaphane.

But he adds: in bodies.

(Joyce, 2000 p.45)

Instead he drifts and, with bodies in mind, playfully experiments with the visual limitations of his own. "Shut your eyes and see" he instructs himself and does so. This self-imposed blindness affects him very little from the reader's point of view with his perception of the world about him still made intelligible as much by the affect and organisation of associations and references as the sensory. He gives shape space to his surroundings in his mind via snatches of theory from Gotthold Lessing, "If I fell over a cliff that beetles o'er his base, fell through the nebeneinander ineluctably" (p.45) and rhythms of his walking stir memories of studied mechanics of poetry to life, "A catalectic tetrameter of iambs marching. No, agallop: deline the mare." (p.46) As he comments, He is "getting on nicely in the dark." (p.45) Though he doesn't exactly pin down answers to the questions born of his idle speculation, with his eyes open again he returns circuitously to hone and reconfigure his opening phrase to "the ineluctable modality of the ineluctable visuality." (p.61) In this refined form of visuality, what Hal Foster designates as "sight as social fact," is a more satisfactory term to make sense of what Stephen illustrates and is engaged in as he strolls up the beach. Rather than being the physical fact of sight, visuality implies the processes and systems that make the products of this sense intelligible. Because of this we need to think in terms of the means by which things become visible rather than a unitary or universal visual experience.

Considering this we can look back once more to his opening words and particularly the significance of his phrase "Thought through the eyes." Here the eyes are characterised as

the conduit through which thought must pass. By equating and entangling thought and vision like this the operation of the mind at all its registers; ruminatory, logical, systematic, flitting, ponderous etc. etc. and in all its interpretive activities are constituted by the subject's position as a seer. This will always be situated and contextually specific with vision an event unfolding and taking place over time. Visual experience understood like this corresponds neatly with the rendering of Stephen's walk in down the beach the Proteus episode and because of this the world he sees is able to veer between fantasised encounters with his extended family, recollections of his youthful sexual awakening, the weighty, symbolic vision of "two crucified shirts", ambivalence to his national and political heritage and more and more and more sprawling outward in a vivid, disparate polysemy that is legitimated and laced together by his singular point of view. Despite being very much preoccupied by his own visual experience he indicates an understanding of a reciprocity between the subject looked at and subject beheld.

"Touch me. Soft eyes. Soft soft soft hand. I am lonely here. O, touch me soon, now. What is that word known to all men? I am quiet here alone. Sad too. Touch, touch me."

(Joyce, p.61)

His words are heavy with adolescent impotence and it seems that for him though vision is a medium of desire it is also the means by which the transformative recognition, validation and affection are transmitted from a lover. He draws attention to the agency of vision and the respect that as a phenomenon it is not only affected by its social and cultural context but capable of impacting the subject at which it is directed. Though he might not appreciate or recognise the privilege and power accorded to the male look, being, as he is,

a subject predating the the critical elaborations of the troubling hierarchies at play in gendered representation, he points towards an erotic tactile capacity of the seer to act upon the seen.

The vast, intermeshing complexities of looking illustrated here put forward a challenge to the fixity in idealised historical and cultural conventions of seeing. The intimation received via Stephen of the situated nature of the visual subject problematises a Cartesian division of body and mind that would be suggested by the optical mathematics of fixed point perspective. The tendency to think of the visual world as framed by the parameters of a picture and shaped by a single viewpoint or, as Martin Jay describes it, “the monocular eye at the apex of beholder's pyramid [that] could be construed as transcendental and universal” (Jay, 1988 p.11) implies an abstracted, illusory absence of the historically located and singular viewer that Stephen could represent. In his case, when thinking of vision in these optical and physiological terms, I feel a greater proximity to an account of sight that includes all of the peripheral distortions and saccadic jumps of a pair of eyes for which focus is just one tiny point moving across a great field. I am reminded that the rapid, involuntary movements of the eye are exactly the means by which the brain assembles a three dimensional representation of the world about us - never lingering too long on one detail and constantly appraising the relationships between them that make them distinct. In order that the rigidity of fixed point perspective can endure the body must be effaced and emotional and associative responses to what is perceived visually limited. In a world so governed there is no space for the doubt, incompleteness, undecidability and discord that must be negotiated by a reader of *Ulysses* either in their own interpretations or on the page. The implicit authority in the apparently objective, scientific eyes and reasoned observation of the perspectival image is only maintained while the illusion that it is not itself a construction is upheld.

The leaps and disjoin of the prose in the Proteus episode could allow a rereading of the phrase “Thought through my eyes” so that rather than just suggesting that the eyes are the channels of thought we are also invited to *think them through*. The implication of “thinking though the eyes” - as in the sense of carefully and systematically considering what they are and do - is to radically consider the material specificity of the body. Following an invitation to examine their operation as a pair of gelatinous spheres in the front of the skull with lenses through which light can pass to an optic nerve leaves them very tangibly present. To then speculate about how the information they received is made into a product comprehensible as sight leaves a reader alert and critical to what and how they are. This foregrounding of the necessity of a self-conscious position that recognises the manner in which culture impinges upon and shapes a subject position or point of view recalls the earlier consideration of Derek Attridge and Maaike Bleeker pointing to the conclusion that Stephen’s monologue is not only a staging of the visual but of the subject of the visual - a staging of the “the distinct historical manifestations of visual experience” (Bleeker, 2008, p. 1) or, indeed, ineluctable visuality.

It is perhaps folly to call forth Stephen Dedalus to participate in this project. As an alter ego for the youthful Joyce encrypted in the pages of a novel published in 1922 it would seem that his world would correspond very little with the one in which this text is written. This is possibly so and his ideas are occasionally half-baked and juvenile, vague or incomplete. However rereading his fallible voice and errant contemplation of the visual world he encounters on Sandymount Strand feels timely and illuminating when considering the texts and performances of a number of artists working today. He is a staging of literary ambition and a questing intellect illustrating that, now one with thought, vision must be subject to the practices of looking to which he is accustomed and constituted by as a visual subject.

His monologue prompts speculation as to what determines how, when, where or for how long it is good or felicitous to look. Questions are raised concerning where power and intimacy are located for the subject seeing and the subject seen. He shows that visual practices are pliant, protean and not as rigidly defined as they might appear for, as the individual who looks, he is automatically thrust into a process in which the social, cultural and political are notions that shape what he sees. Though they shift, reconfigure and often disappoint it is clear they remain essential parameters in order to allow what is perceived to become intelligible.

Before he returns to streets of Dublin with his tasks and appointments Stephen's attentions have returned to the body - first a fantasy of a corpse washed ashore and then his own decaying teeth. He seems concerned with the problems its fallibility and mortality poses, interrogating himself with the hope of finding answers. None are forthcoming it seems and with resignation, acknowledging visuality's ineluctability, the final act of his performance is a profane one inviting spectatorship but not demanding it.

“He laid the dry snot picked from his nostril on a ledge of rock, carefully. For the rest let look who will.”

(Joyce, p.64)

References:

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