

Discuss ways in which deconstruction can alter our point of view. Make specific reference to J. Derrida's *The Truth in Painting and Memoirs of the Blind*.

This simple, in this absolute negating, is the active, the infinite opposed to itself as an equal to itself; as negating it is as absolutely related to its opposite, and its activity, its simple negating, is a relation to its opposite, and the now is the immediately opposite of itself, its self-negating, While this limit sublates itself in its excluding or in its activity, what acts against and negates itself is rather the non-being of this limit. ~ Alexandre Koyré¹

Deconstruction is an intellectual movement started in the 1960s, in response to the long-existed Western philosophical tradition and our everyday experience, it simultaneously inherits, rejects and critiques traditional metaphysics notably aspects of aesthetic tradition. The fundamental objective of deconstruction is to open up new senses in oneself and human communication, and new possibilities in critical discourse.

'...by means of a deconstruction of this (philosophy's) hegemonic gesture we can begin to see in each field, whether it be what we call psychology, logic, politics, or the arts, the possibility of emancipation from the hegemony and authority of philosophical discourse.'²

Philosophy is a structurally totalising discourse, it defines binary around a subject matter and considers all discursive regions to be dependent upon it. Meanwhile, deconstruction works on the level of synthesis, thesis as well as antithesis of this 'hegemonic gesture' to seek an alternative non-totalising insight into the subject matter, it deconstructs the binary oppositions, subverts the singularity of meaning, adds new consideration, and re-defines the object from a new perspective.

'How to "know thy self"?' is a major concern in deconstruction. Self-reflection is important – one should observe oneself doing something in the process of doing that something, like how we signify art, and how we are signified in art. The becoming of, and the making of an object, although performative, is to be focused on as much as the object itself. It can therefore be said that deconstruction provides an alternative methodology to psychoanalysis in the study of human mind, it is perhaps less systematic than the latter, nonetheless, it carries out its study in an equally intellectual and creative manner.

Methodology?

To acquire a deconstructive point of view of a seemingly legitimate discourse or object, we need to start by working along the fissure. Such fissure is exemplified by 'passe-partout' – 'a structure with a movable base' that stands accurately in-between the frame and the framed work, ambivalent and mobile like its literal translation – 'passing everywhere'³. The truth – the meaning – is like 'passe-partout', always escaping definition and in fact, impossible to be properly defined. When examining the methodology of deconstruction, I realized there is no way to theorize because everything counts and at the same time nothing does. There is no rules or step-by-step manual to guide a deconstructive reading, indeed, it is a sheer act of reading in which one has to look everywhere, into every notion, every metaphor and graphic detail. I see myself sucked into an abyss of human mind (Derrida's mind!), it is dark but not quite dark, jam-packed with displaced images, broken sentences, and voices that keep repeating themselves. I start picking up bits and pieces, looking for the key... but is there *one*?

Textuality, Spacing and Form

We live in a web of language – where there is humanity, linguistic is at work. Everything we perceive is with language, and through its infrastructure, which is determined by set of rules that enables language to operate. This concept of language apparatus is first contributed by Structuralist Saussure in early 19th Century. Saussure defines language a system of signs, homogenous, the only essential thing is the union of meanings and sound-image.⁴ Derrida subverts the idea of language as a self-contained sign system, and suggests it is a free-flow communication of sense where there is no single meaning, no direct relationship from the signifier to the signified or between the two. Language is always associated with textuality which requires close-reading of the *signifier* (*signifier* here can refer to one of Derrida's meanings of *trait*). Textuality is the bridge that allows us to relate one form of text to another in our reading. We can read a painting like a piece of writing and vice versa in the logical exchange between different cultural practice, and from there, we can study the underlying social, cultural and ideological implications of language that function in our collective unconscious.

'I am interested in the idiom in painting'⁵ Derrida comes straight with the notion of exchange between language ('idiom'), and art ('painting') in the opening of *The Truth in Painting*. The economy of idiom, in which the expression renders its multiple meaning in merely a few words, is untranslatable, unique to different language and culture. Derrida acknowledges the necessary difference we need in the linguistic domain, and admits that we cannot approach an idiom in other terms other than those specific to it. Precisely, the specificity of idiom presents the essence of a text in non-discursive representation like pictorial art '...there is a text as soon as deconstruction is engaged in fields said to be artistic, visual or spatial. There is a text because there is always a little discourse somewhere in the visual arts, and also because even if there is no discourse, the effect of spacing already implies a textualization.'⁶ Deconstruction reads a text in its specificity (unique context and historical circumstances), whereas, a text has multiple voices to offer and is open to limitless reading. Through deconstruction, and with the aid of the nature of exchange in the linguistic economy, textualization is made possible, a text is therefore able to impose itself on the reader and speak for its Other(s).

'Language always entails a "spacing" (*espacement*) that works, by definition, at a remove from its producer. For communication to occur, words must travel'⁷

The Hegelian aesthetic model 'begins by implying... art – the word, the concept, the thing – has a unity and, what is more, an originary meaning, an *etymon*, a truth that is *one* and *naked* [*une vérité une et nue*], and that it would be sufficient to unveil it through history...'⁸ Derrida questions the credibility in this single representation of aesthetics as it pre-supposes art has one single meaning and overlooks the multiplicity in its concept. Deconstruction introduces the concept of spacing into Hegel's philosophical thinking in order to remove the classical role of the author as the only source of meaning. '...once spacing is introduced, as a *sina qua non* of linguistic expression and of sense-making processes in general, then the philosopher of language necessarily becomes a philosopher of spatial articulation(s). The task becomes, in effect, an architectural one, mapping out the limits and testing the boundaries of communicational space, or that of a plastic artist, exploring the relations among line, form, and shades of meaning.'⁹ The space we are talking about here is of course not in the visual but mental sphere. Deconstruction works against phallogocentric tradition, against singularity in the philosophical interpretation of (the father's) meaning. Similar to my earlier discussion on textuality, spacing allows interaction to happen between a piece of art *proper* and its viewer-reader and brings out multiple meaning of a piece of art other than an absolute, transcendental point of view imposed by the author (or, curator, art historian, critic and philosopher...)

Textuality is important in deconstructive reading and it is about features (*traits*) of and around a text, including the frame. The graphic depiction of frame that Derrida uses in *The Truth of Painting* is a demonstration of the crossover between two media, through textuality, where writing takes on the characteristics of painting. The frame here is a *trait* that illustrates the qualities 'external' to a work of art. The frame of a painting is a figurative means to divide the content and the context, an attribute that draws a dividing line between the signified and the signifier. As a construct, the frame's identity is blurred, it is neither the work itself nor entirely not the work, yet it gives shape to a work and allows it to be what it is. Derrida describes the nature of a frame as accessory, foreign, secondary, and supplementary: 'the *parergon*: neither work (*ergon*) nor outside the work [hors d'oeuvre], neither inside nor outside, neither above nor below, it disconcerts any

opposition but does not remain indeterminate and it gives rise to the work.¹⁰ However, is the function of a frame only to supplement the work? Derrida argues that the integrity of the *ergon* indeed relies on the supplementary nature of the *parergon* as the frame is in fact as indispensable as the work as it defines the very *presence* of the work; in such a way, Derrida figures how the frame imposes legitimacy and value on a painting, and he questions if the 'external' qualities around a work of art, namely frame, title, signature, museum, archive, reproduction, discourse, market etc. are or are not limitations to the work of art.

Blindness, Representation and Sexual Difference

Who or what is speaking?
 The answer is neither 'one' [or 'das Man']
 nor 'it' [or 'id'], nor quite 'the I' or 'the we'.
 ~ Jean Hyppolite¹¹

For Derrida there is no pure visual experience in contemplating a drawing as its production is always obscured by certain *blindness*, so is the final product. 'The drawing is blind... the operation of drawing would have something to do with blindness, would in some way regard blindness'¹² Drawings, especially self-portraits, reflect the artist's memory and unconscious anticipation through mediated artistic articulation in 'traits' (brushstrokes, lines, marks etc.). As discussed, deconstruction always plays with crossover between the domains of drawing and writing; in that respect, writings, also reflect the author's memory and unconscious anticipation, which can be revealed while unveiling the traits. Nevertheless, viewers are blind to the essential traits, or rather the essential traits are invisible to viewers because they are masked by various themes, inside as well as outside of the text. In *Memoirs of the Blind*, Derrida directs us to the themes of 'point of view' itself, and of sexual difference.

He talks about the point of view of the blind, of draftsman/ woman, of artist, author, and philosopher. Derrida questions if one can keep oneself outside a point of view and objectively describe it. The answer comes in 'No' in *The Truth of Painting* where Derrida

discusses the Kantian sublime. He critiques the transcendental point of view 1) in traditional metaphysics, which always aims at representing 'the Other' from its own point of view; 2) in Kantian sublime, which merely represents the point of view of Kant, the inner-self *in* Kant. Derrida argues that 'magnitude' and 'absolutely large' is a function of Kant's personal preference which takes the male body as standard in measurement. Kant's intention of valorizing the large is to establish a (male) hierarchy of sublime that naturalizes his own bias in sexual difference. Derrida has come to this argument through reading the literal and graphic *traits* in Kant's description of the sublime, for instance, 'pleasure only "gushes indirectly"', 'brusque outpouring, an effusion (Ergiessung)', and a more lengthy quote: 'the maximum pleasure last only an instant (augenblicklich), the time it takes to blink an eye, during which the passage is strictly closed and the stricture absolute. Then the dam bursts and there's flood.'¹³ Derrida gathers that there is never a transcendental point of view of all point of views, and that a point of view is always embodied with implicit sexual reference, always gendered, therefore by necessity, deconstruction reads a text within sexual difference.

Derrida writes *Memoirs of the Blind* as regard Sexual difference. The issue of blindness and sexual difference are both double genitives and interchangeable: seeing and non-seeing – insights situate in a paradoxical position – in blindness; revealing and veiling – Derrida looks for (in)sight by drawing the curtain and walk in the dark. He sets out the text by using Diderot's words in his *Letter to Sophie Volland*:

'I write without seeing. I came. I wanted to kiss your hand... This is the first time I have ever written in the dark... not knowing whether I am indeed forming letters. Wherever there will be nothing, read that I love you'¹⁴

It is not only a romantic quote, it lays down Derrida's hypothesis of sight and faith. Sight and faith, in the abstract Derridean term, are un-provable, and reject verification, unlike the hypothesis in scientific experiments. Following the preface, Derrida asks 'Vous croyez?' Readers are put in blindness right from the start without even knowing what is being asked. This opening subverts transcendental point of view by disorienting the readers. Derrida diffuses elements of blindness in his text just like the way he 'plays' with the notion of frame in *The Truth in Painting* by inserting geometrical marks. Derrida

exposes the frame in which we see things, exposes us to a singular take for granted point of view that is displaced in the unknown.

Afterword

'Now, in terms of my competence in philosophy, I have been able to devise a certain program, a certain matrix of inquiry that permits me to begin by asking the question of competence in general terms – that is to say, to inquire into how competence is formed, the processes of legitimization, of institutionalization, and so on, in all domains, then to advance in different domains not only by admitting my incompetence very sincerely but also by asking the question of competence, that is to say, what defines the limits of my domain, the limits of a corpus, the legitimacy of the questions, and so on.'¹⁵

Deconstruction situates itself in the grey area. It is the grey area. It embraces absolute impossibility and 'accidents' during the course of philosophical analysis. Deconstructive questions may appear to be chasing tails, but every circle is different, and every new confrontation between the asker and whatever it is, leads to a different point of view. It defies definition. Rather than being a dogmatic school of thoughts, it is a set of attitude and approach for critical learning and analysis. Derrida's sense of 'incompetence' is a reminder for any curious inquirer to maintain a distance from our material environment and objects of study, to reflect on existing norms, theories and philosophies. There is no beginning and there is no end; reducing the deconstructive methodology to its most minute form, we would see trains of thought flying in all direction in the air. Marginal. There and not quite there.

Notes

- 1 Alexandre Koyré, *Études d'Histoire de la Pensée Philosophique* (Paris: A. Colin, 1961), p.168
- 2 'The Spatial Arts: An Interview with Jacques Derrida', *Deconstruction and The Visual Arts: Art, Media, Architecture*, ed. Peter Brunette, David Wills (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994) p.10
- 3 Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington, Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p.12
- 4 Ferdinand de Saussure, 'Course in General Linguistics' (1910-1911), *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Julie Rivkin, Michael Ryan (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1998), p.76-90
- 5 Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, p.1
- 6 'The Spatial Arts: An Interview with Jacques Derrida', P.15
- 7 'Introduction', *Deconstruction and The Visual Arts: Art, Media, Architecture*, p.3
- 8 Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, p.20-21
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, p.9
- 11 Jean Hyppolite 'Structure du Language Philosophique d'après la Préface de la Phénoménologie de l'Esprit de Hegel', *The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man: The Structuralist Controversy*, ed. Richard Macksey, Eugenio Donato (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1970), p.343
- 12 Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: the self-portrait and other ruins*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault, and Michael Naas (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p.2
- 13 Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, p.128
- 14 Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: the self-portrait and other ruins*, p.1
- 15 'The Spatial Arts: An Interview with Jacques Derrida', p.9

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Alexandre Koyré, *Études d'Histoire de la Pensée Philosophique* (Paris: A. Colin, 1961)