

*I am looked at, that is to say, I am a picture.*¹

Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*

Introduction

What does it mean for an image to 'speak to the eye'? What is the communication between the viewer and the image? When this phrase was first used in the *Illustrated London News* in 1851 it was in relation to the demand for images depicting popular culture.² The Victorian obsession with spectacle was driving the machine of image production to satisfy a desire for visual documentation of events happening in the cultural realm. It was no longer enough to be there, the memory of the event had to be backed up by 'evidence'.³ To keep on top of demand, new formats had to be created and employed to record and document that which the memory could only hold in an unreliable format.

In her essay *Performing Vision In The Theatre Of The Gaze*, Joanna Lowry responds to Lacan in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* by saying:

Lacan's description of the subject trapped in the field of the gaze constructs the 'visible' as a kind of theatrical space, a space in which the subject, rather like an actor on the stage, enters the light of the gaze and performs his or her desire within that light.⁴

This idea that we are all participants, or complicit, in the 'staging' of our visual surroundings

¹ Jacques Lacan, in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), p.106.

² The phrase 'speak to the eye' and its meaning is discussed in depth in Lynda Nead's *Victorian Babylon: People, Streets and Images in Nineteenth-Century London*, (New Haven & New York: Yale University Press, 2005), where she states that it comes from an article in the *Economist* that was reprinted in the *Illustrated London News*, 24 May 1851: "The article describes the crowds who gather around the offices of the *Illustrated London News* in order to get hold of their weekly copies. The reasons for this new mass popularity are the technical improvements in engraving and printing and the consequent cheapness of the illustrations." (p.57). In *The Circus and Victorian Society* (Charlottesville & London: University of Virginia Press, 2005), Brenda Assael also uses it saying: "Victorians flocked to the ring to see acts that spoke to the eye." (p.1).

³ Susan Sontag says, "A photograph passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened." Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, (London: Penguin, 1979), p.5.

⁴ Joanna Lowry, "Performing Vision In The Theatre Of The Gaze," in *Performing the Body, Performing the Text*, ed. Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson (London & New York: Routledge, 1999), p.273.

feeds into the phenomenon I wish to explore of a cycle that we cannot break – and a need, both ours and that of the image. My proposition that *the inevitable breakdown/impermanence of image is in conflict with the performer's desire to create a lasting image* is at the same time acknowledging a communal desire – in as much as we require the performer to position themselves within the 'theatre of the gaze' so that we may capture their image for our exploitation. Also relevant to my investigation is the literal theatre, as an intangible archival space – a space in which images are manufactured, recorded and retained in a format that is at once inaccessible and yet detectable.

When, in chapter 2, I ask the question: '*Is there a parasite in the image, or is the parasite in the brain, being constantly fed by the next image?*' I will avoid using the term parasite as simply a metaphor, and aim to present my argument as if it were a phenomenon or even an entity. Through examining it in this way, if we permit ourselves to depart from our understanding of the inanimate as that which has no intent or sentience, I aim to demonstrate that the image has relevance beyond its obvious function. Seen through the lens of artistic exploration, the idea of the parasite – which could be dismissed as fanciful – opens up alternative ways of thinking about the visual world.