

Dear,

I haven't seen much of you lately. We might have spoken to *catch up* – even more frequently than we used to before Zoom came to signify static frames rather than the movement of increasing proximity. In fact, we've seen so much of each other that we stopped paying attention to how little we actually see: talking heads, or even more precisely, talking faces, accompanied by letters which spell out our names. I don't mean to say that things used to be better, more authentic, more real before we started hanging out with our frontal views. But somehow I started missing the parts of you I can't see, your back, your other side. What happens to all those ideas of yours, all the things you keep in the back of your mind, either because you carefully hide them or because they haven't articulated themselves as thoughts yet? Where are they, in a world without other sides, if it is true, that "*Hintergedanken erscheinen in Hinterköpfen?*"¹

According to Hans Blumenberg the simple fact that things have more than one side is the condition for intersubjectivity, hence for conjectural knowledge. In order to know anything that exceeds our own immediate experience we depend on the gaze of *the other*. Even before we assure ourselves of the world in language, intersubjectivity allows us to trust that the hidden sides of things exist. Paradoxically then, it is the emergence of the subjective position through the discovery of modern perspective that allows for objectivity. Before that, God held the monopoly on universal sight. In the Middle Ages there was still an edge of the world, a limit to objective knowledge, things that lay outside or beyond our field of vision. It was common knowledge, for example, that demons only had fronts, and walking backwards was an indication of a demon dressed as human, trying to hide its missing parts. If conjecture is grounded in subjectivity, then the modern subject is confronted with what looks like a paradox: objectivity depends on the subjective standpoint of *the other* – which poses a challenge for the doubting ego. The old joke that the sceptic passing a cow on a hike in the mountains – where he can only say for certain that one side of the animal is speckled – shows the limits of a scepticism that doesn't trust *the other*. This sceptic lives in a world where you know it only when you see it for yourself, a world populated by frontal views. Odo Marquard would consider this a flat conception of a sceptic; in his understanding scepticism is the philosophy of finitude.² Since the sceptic admits that knowledge is partial, and since human beings are mortal, the calculation is fairly simple: we just don't have the time to doubt everything, otherwise we wouldn't get very far. If we don't acknowledge our very limited view on the world, we waste our efforts on the Absolute.

Remember that dream you told me the other day? There was a raven that you felt was disproportionately heavy, as heavy as a little dog. I was intrigued that an allegorical vision occurred with such physicality, and you explained that its weight was displayed as a number hovering above its head.

¹ Hans Blumenberg, *Die nackte Wahrheit*, Berlin 2019, p.71.

² Odo Marquard, *Skepsis in der Moderne. Philosophische Studien*, Stuttgart 2007.

In dreams signification does not rely on sensation. Information is neither based on perception nor intellectual deduction; it is just there, at your fingertips, in your face. Is this why all the names put below the talking heads on the screen sometimes seem oneiric, somehow inappropriate to me? Because they give themselves away that readily? “Too much information!”, I want to tell them. Or too little – which, the more I think about it, might turn out to be the same thing.

“Is the camera on? Can you see me?” I can. I see your face. I see your eyes. But since we’ve become images on each other’s screen I can’t tell if they are still looking at me. Seeing your face like this makes me understand why Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, in *A Thousand Plateaus*, stress that the face is not the head, not even part of the body. The face, they write, is a system of signs projected onto our head, which makes us legible to others. So, this is not new. There is no loss of the back of *the other* to mourn if we look at things through Deleuze and Guattari’s eyes, because in their understanding the face had no other side to begin with. If the face is a system of signs to be represented in the social order, the backs of our heads were always lost already, or rather never existed.³ New in the current situation is that our faces show up subtitled – or sometimes even replaced – by our names. In a very literal sense we have become not harder but easier to read.

According to Jacques Derrida, to name an individual marks them as a mortal, because “from the moment that it has a name, its name survives it. It signs its potential disappearance.”⁴ He describes a memorable encounter that makes him wonder what it is that we see when the other one is looking at us. One morning, in the assumed privacy of his bathroom, Derrida notices that his cat is watching him. It looks straight at him, in the direction of his genitals. And for the first time he truly understands that it is looking to *see*, an insight that makes him blush. The cat, Derrida stresses, is a real cat, not *the* cat as an allegorical figure or an exemplar of its species. (Do you also wonder what it weighs?) He realizes that to reduce it to a given name – or to that of its species – will make it disappear. The actual encounter with others, when we see that they *see* us, happens before language, before they become available by means of their names. He is convinced that “what we have here is an existence that refuses to be conceptualized.”⁵ But where does this leave us? Is there a way to think of the absence of a name as something other than privation? And what kind of thinking would that be? Maybe one that doesn’t break others down into kinds, species, and attributes – one, “however fabulous and chimerical”⁶ that occurs before the word and the name.

Do you remember what it feels like when a signifier slips your mind? These awkward moments when someone’s name escapes your consciousness? There is a particular helplessness, a vulnerabili-

³ Deleuze/Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Minneapolis 1987.

⁴ Jacques Derrida, *The Animal that Therefore I Am (More to Follow)*, Critical Inquiry, Volume 28/Issue 2, Chicago 2002, p. 379.

⁵ Ibid, p. 416.

⁶ Ibid.

ty even, in recognizing a face but failing to put a name to it. It's almost spatial, this sensation, like reaching into the dark of your mind, to feel for something you know must be there somewhere. In these moments we can *feel* how thinking works, that it is physical: your whole body trying to remember, your lips moving to echo a sound they have shaped before, your tongue poking around in the dark of your mouth. Being thrown back into your physicality like that, is where you meet *the other*, as two bodies before language.

There has been much talk about what gets lost in digital rooms, all the physical cues, micro-gestures and sounds that usually help to read *the other*, to read the situation. It only shows that, when we use phrases like “I read you” or “I read the room”, we refer to an excess of meaning that cannot be broken down into the contents of what is being said. The meaning of *readability*, in Blumenberg's analysis, is not simply to make sense of the written word, the concept serves as a metaphor to account for the determinable non-determinability of experience as such. Its meaning is to make sense of the world. That is why the definition of scepticism as the philosophy of finitude ends up being the same as hermeneutics. Despite our inability to know the entirety of the world, we still make sense of it. If knowledge is always partial, there is not one but many readings of what is given to us in experience. The “inevitability of unavailability”, as Marquard calls it, asks for interpretation.

How did you know the animal in your dream was a raven as heavy as a dog and not a dog looking like a raven? It seems that even in our dreams – where sensory coherence is often messed up by meaning – sight rules over touch in the hierarchy of senses. You knew it was a raven because it looked like one, even if its weight was suspicious. Scepticism has not always been associated with sight, as Rachel Aumiller points out. It is only since Descartes that we understand scepticism as a critical distance to things, a doubtful stepping away from the familiar. Sight allows us to take whole things in, without getting our hands dirty. But there is another kind of scepticism, that is not so much rooted in distance and doubt but in a desire to move closer to things. Sight is always partial, “a greedy touch, however, allows us to grasp a body from all sides at once.”⁷ In this sense touch is more thorough than sight, and greedier. This does not only apply to touching the other one. Touching yourself can be as exhilarating as alienating an experience, because you perceive yourself as both, subject and object of touch. It is exactly here that Audre Lorde locates the revolutionary potential of autoeroticism, that you might discover sides of yourself that you weren't aware of before.⁸

In digital meeting rooms the subjective and the objective position are merged as well. Since we are not used to seeing ourselves the way others see us, observing our own image on the screen can be very disorientating. Looking at ourselves as the object of someone else's gaze, we become alien to ourselves. Developers of this technology early picked up early on this effect and found a solution: a double-sided image. My own image, as it is displayed to me, differs from the one you see. My own

⁷ *A Touch of Doubt: On Haptic Scepticism*, Rachel Aumiller, ed., in *Scepticism* 9, Berlin 2021, p. 8.

⁸ Audre Lorde and Mahogany L. Browne, *Sister Outsider*, New York 2019.

image on my screen is mirrored, so is yours on your screen. We are not looking at the same image. This change in perspective, I believe, is new. And I wonder about what it does to the hidden. In the Middle Ages – before the introduction of perspective split the world into subjectivity and objectivity – demons still existed, that is, according to a *Weltanschauung* that allowed for a perception that could be fooled. Modernity then tamed those demons through the gaze of *the other*. Even if the hidden sides of things are invisible to me, they are objectively accessible. The modern world has no edge, because in principle everything is available therefore nothing remains in the dark. In the present, I believe, we are dealing with an entirely new perspective. Objective and subjective position are technologically sublated. Those looking at us onscreen are janus-faced. My own image is actually two, looking in two directions. What happens to the edge of the world if the loss of the other side means gaining another *face*?

Why do I miss the other side of you? If anything, the reassuring gaze of *the other* has multiplied, technologically mediated through the many eyes of cameras. I don't need to check whether you have a side hidden from my view, anymore than I need to check all the cows in the world. What I miss then, is not to actually seeing you from behind, but all that exceeds your image and your name. I miss registering your balding head in the row in front of me, the whiff of your nervous sweat coming my way when you gesticulate too much, the sound of your stomach – growling as you have skipped breakfast. What I miss most of all is something I can't name here, because it was never up for grabs by any interrogation, of that conceptualizing mind of mine. What I mourn is not the loss of the hidden side of you but the absence of it. I miss the gaze, be it yours or mine, that can still be fooled. I miss the edge of the world, this place where cats have no names, one-sided cows may still graze in peace and demons will never be found out – as fabulous and chimerical this might be. What I get instead is little frames on my screen and my own image as if seen in a mirror.

Don't worry, dear. I am fine. We are fine. Don't forget that with every loss comes hope, or at least some consolation. Currently, I like to console myself with the notion that in a rear-view mirror, as all the little sticker in your car never fails to remind me, things are always closer than they appear.