



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Literature

DECENTERING THE STRUCTURED UNCONSCIOUS: JACKSON POLLOCK'S FRAMES

KEY WORDS:

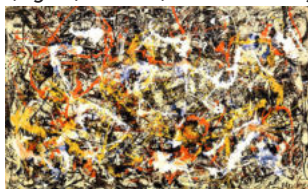
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“My paintings do not have a centre, but depend on the same amount of interest throughout” (Pollock “My Paintings” 18). This ostensibly simple assertion which emanated from Jackson Pollock, the abstract expressionist is tremendously terse and compact in its core levels, since it incorporates into it the very quintessential rudiments that constitute Deconstruction and the Derridean notion concerning centre and the structurality of structure. Logocentrism, the idea that meaning is present or intrinsic in a word, image or text is a cultural desire. It ties with the age-old delusion dating from Plato of the metaphysics of presence; the longing for truth, essence and meaning to be present and contained within the object. Until recently the term 'structure' was used to describe the composition of some material or something else other than the structure itself. The entire concept of centre limited the free play and gave a meticulous orientation to the structure which could never be replaced. It was for the first time that the structurality of the structure was being observed. Any structure without a centre is indescribable even today.

Derrida asserts:

Nevertheless, the centre also closes off the free play it opens up and makes possible. Qua centre, it is the point at which the substitution of contents, elements, or terms is no longer possible, which in turn is realized as the classical thought concerning structure that the centre is, paradoxically, within the structure and outside it...The centre is at the centre of the totality, and yet, since the centre does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality), the totality has its centre elsewhere. The centre is not the centre. (Derrida 295)

This dual capacity of centre enables its infinite potential of slippage to attain stability at infinity. While examining two pictures of the London Bridge shot in the daylight and the dark, it suggests that the impression of reality itself is unsteady. Pollock's painting is a critique of the perception of the notion of centre. The spectator is keen to determine this centre, or the vanishing point in a painting since structure would desire for a centre and this desire in turn is constituted by a lack in the middle of the structure. One cannot conceive of the very notion of absence of centre, for, human beings always insist on a strong presence rather than an absence. Unlike in a painting like *Las Meninas* in which “the entire picture is looking out at a scene for which it is itself a scene” (Foucault 15) and the reflection in the mirror in it which “provides the centre around which the entire representation is ordered” (15), Pollock's paintings cast off this notion of presence and focuses on rather the absence i.e., the fallacious point of convergence itself. Perhaps one of his most famed works is the painting entitled *Convergence* which is a collage of colours splattered on the canvas. It creates masterful shapes and lines that evoke emotions and attack the eye. The painting created in 1952 is oil on canvas; 93.5 inches by 155 inches. With his brushstrokes he was able to make handy use of lines, colours, lights, textures, and contrasting shapes.



Convergence 1952

The four corners of the canvas are streaked with black and dull yellow which absorb most of the space in the painting. This dominance suggests a pessimistic and mysterious nature, a kind of barrier that it holds against the outer world. The painter is careful enough to see to it that not a single drop of any colour is strewn on to the other. Each colour establishes its own identity. The underlying black linear structure of *Convergence* is thickened out so that the blotted colour areas on top of it are congruent in scale and avoids the blurriness of *Lavender Mist*. Indeed, those blotted areas seem to float free across the surface of the canvas in openness. The most exquisite aspect is formed by the circles, swirls, lines and spots splattered with bright colours: orange, yellow and white onto the black colour which might be suggesting the brighter side of life indicating hope thereby radiating warmth and happiness to bounce back from disappointments and despair, uplifting and rejuvenating our spirit. White, the colour of little stimulation for the senses, is the embodiment of perfection, completeness, new beginnings, neutrality, and impartiality. The whole painting therefore appears to be a system of binaries. This is where Lacan steps into the frame. For Freud, the unconscious is that part of our existence that escapes us and over which we have no control, but at the same time which governs our thoughts and wishes. For Lacan, on the other hand, the unconscious consists of signifying material. The unconscious is a process of signification it is the language that speaks through us rather than the language we speak. In this sense Lacan speaks of the unconscious as quite simply the 'discourse of the Other'. The 'Other', unlike the 'other' of the mirror stage, is the symbolic order; it is that foreign language that we are born into and must learn to speak if we are to articulate our own desire. Psychoanalysis teaches us that our desires are always inextricably bound up with the desires of others. In the first instance these are the desires of our parents, as they place upon the new born infant all their hopes and wishes for a prosperous and fulfilled life, but also in the sense that they invest in their children all their own unfilled dreams and aspirations. These unconscious desires and wishes of others flow into us through language – through discourse – and therefore desire is always shaped and moulded by language. We can only express our desire through the language we have and we must learn that language through others. According to Lacan, just as there is no such thing as the unconscious without language, it is through language that desire comes into being. We are locked within what Lacan calls a circuit of discourse:

It is the discourse of the circuit in which I am integrated. I am one of its links. It is the discourse of my father, for instance, in so far as my father made mistakes which I am condemned to reproduce.... I am condemned to reproduce them because I am obliged to pick up again the discourse, he bequeathed to me, not simply because I am his son, but because one can't stop the chain of discourse, and it is precisely my duty to transmit it in its aberrant form to someone else...To be fully human we are subjected to this symbolic order – the order of language, of discourse. Unconscious desire therefore emerges in relation to the Other – the symbolic order. (Homer 44)

As Bruce Fink writes in *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Joissance*, “we can say that the unconscious is full of such foreign desires” (Qtd. in Homer 70). The psychoanalytic subject – the subject of the unconscious – can

only come into being through others and in relation to the Other. As Lacan puts it, the subject unfolds in the place (locus) of the Other. Photographs from Pollock's childhood and family home document an early exposure to motifs of his cultural past. His mother, Stella Mae McClure Pollock was a source of this symbolic order. An accomplished seamstress who made clothing for herself and her children, as well as quilted and crocheted, she encouraged her five sons' aesthetic interests. Inspiration from his early childhood environment, which an artist of Pollock's intensity and innovation could later have unconsciously drawn upon, include curvilinear forms in lace, textured surfaces, line and dot motif, and working on a horizontal format. This is quite evident especially in the interior of Pollock's home featuring the lace curtains that his mother made. There is another photograph showing Mrs. Pollock's two young sons dressed in the lace clothing she made for them. In another one with parents and two young sons, the artist's mother is dressed in an elaborate interlacing blouse of her own design. Set like a frieze above the lace covered window is a long horizontal framed lithograph of flowers, a format later favoured by Pollock for a number of his horizontal paintings, one of which he posed with for the Life Magazine article of 1949 and another of which he hung on his living room wall in Springs, New York, for a photo of a family gathering with his mother present. Even there is a photo of his mother wearing a costume of her own design, and surprisingly is composed of the same elements that appear in Pollock paintings which include the lines, dots, swirls and splashing suggesting Pollock's breakthrough, which was profoundly informed by his personal and cultural past. In *Convergence*, in the backdrop of the dull colours, the brighter colours are portrayed in such a way that both sets appear to be equally appealing and stimulating. One of the tremendous aspects is that each brush stroke is different from the other. The use of multiple lines on the canvas provides for the complement and cancellation of one line by another, continuously negating logos. This is what ultimately deconstruction did, freeing binaries of one another and allowing each to play independently and arbitrarily. Every signifier leads to a signified which becomes a signifier again leading to another and the process continues till infinity. In a way it is the embodiment of free speech and freedom of expression. It is large and contains multitudes. Pollock threw mud in the face of conventions and rebelled against the constraints of society's oppressions. It is everything that the world stood for, all wrapped up in a messy but deep package, because it steered clear of social realism and overt political gestures. The whole painting appears to be a never-ending puzzle. A close examination of the painting would reveal the presence of an eye and has in it the letters of the painter's name inscribed and functions like a kaleidoscope which alters each time it is viewed. The artist in Pollock sparkles through his brilliant work wherein he doesn't give space for any kind of analysis, and thereby increases the anxiety of the spectator. It resonates with the Keatsian notion of the unheard melody which never brings to light the essence and leaves it incomprehensible thereby preserving its ambiguity, eternal charm and immortality, for as Keats writes in "Ode on a Grecian Urn," "Beauty is truth, truth beauty."

In each brushstroke there is a strong sense of homogeneity in the apparent heterogeneity which is explained in the Chaos Theory, the science of finding an underlying order in things that appear to be totally random and unpredictable. A profound inquisition of abstract art brings to light that there's enough productive data in a painting that the spectator can identify the artist once he or she becomes familiar with their work. In a sense, the spectator's eyes and brain are doing the fractal theory analysis to determine if what he is looking at is a DeKooning, Pollock, or Motherwell. In 1984, a study of a dripping tap showed that small adjustments could change the falling fluid from a chaotic to non-chaotic flow and Pollock dripped paint from a canon to vast canvases rolled out across the floor of his barn. He could have likewise mastered a non-

chaotic flow. In contrast to the broken lines painted by conventional brush contact with the canvas surface, he used a constant stream of paint to produce a uniquely continuous trajectory as it splattered on to the canvas below. The non-chaotic flow concealed in the apparent chaotic flow representing the Pollockian unconscious in a way suggests what Lacan proclaimed as the unconscious which was structured like a language. Freud described the unconscious as a realm without syntax or grammar; a realm without temporality or contradiction. The unconscious according to Lacan, is governed by the rules of the signifier as it is language that translates sensory images into structure. The unconscious can be realized only through speech and language; therefore, similar kinds of relationships exist between unconscious elements, signifiers and other forms of language. The Lacanian unconscious is neither an individual unconscious nor the collective unconscious, the repository or reservoir of mythical images (archetypes) and racial inheritance but is rather the effect of a trans-individual symbolic order upon the subject. The unconscious is structured like a language in the sense that it is a signifying process that involves coding and decoding, or ciphering and deciphering and it comes into being in the symbolic order in the gap between signifier and signified, through the sliding of the signified beneath the signifier and the failure of meaning to be fixed. In short, the unconscious is something that signifies and must be deciphered. This is obvious in Pollock: "It is only when I lose contact with the painting that the result is a mess. Otherwise, there is pure harmony, an easy give and take, and the painting comes out well" (Qtd in Kaprow 40). Unlike the earlier Renaissance paintings, this continuous trajectory symbolized a distinct phenomenon which focused on the transformation of art from being a product to process which Harold Rosenberg described as follows.

At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act—rather than as a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyze or express an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event. (22)

The image is not something the artist brings to the canvas from a prior act of artistic creation, but something that happens as a result of the encounter between the artist and the material. Having subordinated the aesthetic to the moment of the act, the art coincides with the artist's biography. The painting itself is a "moment" in the adulterated mixture of his life.... The act-painting is of the same metaphysical substance as the artist's existence. The new painting has broken down every distinction between art and life. (23)

The lone artist did not want the world to be different, but on the contrary, wanted his canvas to be a world and accepted as real only that which he was in the process of creating. Such an artist described his painting as not an Art but an Is, which was not a picture of a thing but the thing itself and not the representation of Nature but the Nature itself.

This structured language is not the mere linguistics but on the contrary, is the *la linguisterie* which is the side of language that linguistics ignores. It refers to those points in language when meaning fails and breaks down; it is the science of the word that fails. Fink has translated *la linguisterie* as 'linguistricks', which serves to emphasize the playfulness of the unconscious and the way it is always trying to trip the subject up, playing tricks on conscious thought. It is in this sense and not in the sense of formal linguistics that the unconscious is structured like a language. What is seen in Pollock is not the manifested realism of the reality but on the other hand the reality itself. A painter like Rene Magritte, who drew a pipe and wrote beneath it "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" (this is not a pipe), was actually trying to expound this pseudo realistic affinity to represent reality. Pollock attempted a deliberate revolution

by painting on huge canvases unlike the hitherto used ones. As a matter of fact, he was making a triumphant proclamation of the present as the ultimate reality by being a constituent of the painting, working from all four sides and offering his hand to pantomime, gestures and dance, with each brushstroke along with his body movement conveying an aesthetic statement. Pollock remarks: "On the floor I am more at ease. I feel nearer, more part of the painting, since this way I can walk around it, work from the four sides and literally be in the painting" ("My Painting" 65). The action on the canvas became its own depiction as it was an amalgamation of the psychic and the material which itself by nature was a sign. The concept of binary system of the signifier and signified is redefined in the painting wherein the signifier did not deliver a mental image but on the other hand, the signified itself assumed the role of the signifier, thus merging to form

a single system. In *Las Meninas*, there runs a compelling line from the eyes of the painter to what he is observing, i.e., King Philip IV and his wife who are in turn replaced by the onlookers, thereby identifying with the royal figures signifying that the onlookers are the real kings and queens. On the contrary, in Pollock the concept of the Renaissance Selfhood has been marginalized, or in a way transformed into a more subtle and enormously complex form.

The Impressionists were less concerned with describing the contours of objects and the fullness of space than with the effect of light as perceived by the retina. The Symbolists passed through the eye to portray images of the imagination; an approach extended later by the Surrealists. Subjectivity was further explored through colour by the Post-impressionists and Expressionists, and the Cubists devised a multi-perspectival means of presenting objects as seen by the mind over time. Modernism's journey into the mind culminated with various forms of non-objective abstraction that either reduced the outer world to perceived patterns and essences or abandoned it entirely by turning the gaze directly inward and producing images of visionary experience. In Pollock, signification is always a process – a chain. None of its elements actually 'consist' of the meaning, as it presses forward to the next signifier. Meaning is not fixed, or as Lacan puts it, there is "an incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier" (Homer 42). In this sense Pollock's oeuvre is one of modernism's purest forms. His painting, to a large extent is a more sophisticated and evolved form and incorporates into it infinite signifieds when compared to a painting like *The Persistence of Memory* by Salvador Dali or *Oedipus Rex* by Max Ernst. In the traditional outlook, the role of the centre was not only to orient but also to balance and organize the structure which extended as well as curtailed the freedom of free play simultaneously. But imagine in a painting of Pollock wherein the centre or the vanishing point itself is concealed with at most precision and surveillance that none ever is adept to discover except the artist himself, i.e., "the concept of a free play based on a fundamental ground, a free play which is constituted upon a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude" itself has been traumatized. Thus "centre, which can either be inside or outside" has been "as readily called the origin as the end, as readily *arche* as *telos*" (Derrida 296). Rosenberg alludes to Apollinaire: "*J'ai fait des gestes blancs parmi les solitudes*" (Rosenberg) loosely translated as "I made white gestures amid the emptiness." In that sense Pollock is akin to an engineer who constructs "the totality of his language, syntax and lexicon" as opposed to a bricoleur who uses "the means at hand" (Derrida 296). What ultimately Pollock tried to symbolize through his work was the "absence of the transcendental signified", as Derrida would call which extends the domain and the interplay of signification ad infinitum, which would in turn create the rupture through continuous differing and deferring. Pollock re-defined the whole tradition of art which became an act rather than an object and a process rather than a product. It is this refined form of the tradition which laid the foundation for a number of

major art movements, from Happenings and Fluxus to Conceptual, Performance art, Installation art and Earth art. Even a sketch which is the preliminary form of an image the mind is trying to grasp is unknown to Pollock. To work from sketches arouses the suspicion that the artist still regards the canvas as a place where the mind records its contents-rather than itself as the "mind" through which the painter thinks by changing a surface with paint. The critic who goes on judging in terms of schools, styles, and form-as if the painter were still concerned with producing certain kind of object (the work of art) instead of living on the canvas-is bound to seem a stranger to the Pollockian Universe. Rosenberg recollects Stevens' views on poetry that it is a process of the personality of the poet.

But the psychology is the psychology of creation. Not that of the so-called psychological criticism that wants to "read" a painting for clues to the artist's sexual preferences or debilities. The work, the act, translates the psychologically given into the intentional, into a "world"-and thus transcends it". With traditional esthetic references discarded as irrelevant, what gives the canvas its meaning is not psychological data but, the way the artist organizes his emotional and intellectual energy as if he were in a living situation. The interest lies in the kind of act taking place in the four-sided arena, a dramatic interest. (23)

Ultimately, Pollock shared the triumphant proclamation that Wallace Stevens uttered, "The American will is easily satisfied in its efforts to realize itself in knowing itself" (Qtd in Rosenberg 22).



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