

# The Madness Of Vision



On Baroque Aesthetics

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OHIO UNIVERSITY PRESS / ATHENS

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## TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

One of the challenges of the translator's work is to attempt to inhabit the mind of another. This is simultaneously one of the richest aspects of translation. In the case of Christine Buci-Glucksmann, approaching her work means reckoning with extraordinary erudition and keeping pace with a rapid and far-reaching intellectual exploration. In *La folie du voir*, the reader and the translator encounter countless brilliant artists, theoreticians, and critics from a full range of disciplines—literature, music, painting, sculpture, architecture, philosophy, mathematics, psychoanalysis, science, religion, and anthropology. The author crosses and connects traditional disciplines with an ease that embodies the baroque itself. Likewise, the argument of *La folie du voir* is historically unbounded. Buci-Glucksmann begins with the visual sensation of forming Arabic letters, reprises and reanimates the debates on Cartesian perspectivism that anticipated the baroque, then speaks to the baroque impulse in the arts from the Renaissance through the modernist and then the postmodernist periods to exhibit the enduring importance of the baroque in contemporary art and aesthetics.

This translation of *La folie du voir* is intended to introduce this work to the English-language reader, to guide the reader through the expansive contexts of its argument, and also to serve as a resource for further scholarship in phenomenology, baroque aesthetics, and baroque art. Because the author brings the reader to a dizzying range of studies, texts, and works of art, I annotate terms and document citations in the endnotes. When I refer the reader to a concept or a phrasing by another thinker and do so in an endnote, this does not suggest that Buci-Glucksmann has directed the reader to that work. This implies only that I, as translator, find this reference to be helpful for my understanding and interpretation of her work and believe that the reader might find the reference equally useful. Buci-Glucksmann's notes in the original work also appear as endnotes, but are shown in brackets and are flagged with "—B-G." They are translated as in the original, and where the author identifies source material, additional documentation is silently added.

Where the author inserts a quotation into her work, I use the received English translation of the work when one exists and insert it silently into the endnote. In the absence of an authoritative English translation, all translations are mine. I am grateful for conversations with David Mikics on translation from the Latin, Marco Rasi for assistance with a translation from Italian, and Lois Parkinson Zamora for consultation on translating Gracián. However, any error or infelicity is mine alone.

Another fascinating aspect of *La folie du voir*, which once again presents a challenge to the translator, is the author's lyrical and sometimes enraptured prose. Christine Buci-Glucksmann's mode of expression is not conventionally academic, although her argument and the rigor of her thought are decidedly scholarly. The author's wonderfully extravagant prose embodies her claims about the excesses and voids, the shadows and blinding holes of baroque vision. At times her prose is the twisting column and *trompe-l'oeil* of baroque architecture. It shimmers and fascinates as the vision of Narcissus. At times it is as sharp-edged as Judith's knife in her moment with Holofernes. *The Madness of Vision* begins and concludes with the author's personal account of her experience of baroque vision, and one understands that the entire study is both personal and academic. To retain this important aspect of the book, I have not attempted to alter the quality of the author's prose. Incomplete sentences remain incomplete. Paratactic and hypotactic sentences and paragraphs remain as they are in the original. Where the author uses a neologism, I offer an English neologism.

I am happy to acknowledge the University of Houston's College of Liberal Arts and Social Science for a faculty development leave to support the translation of *La folie du voir*, and would like to recognize the generosity of the Martha Gano Houston Foundation for a Research Grant in Literary Criticism for this project. My translation of chapter 2 of *La folie du voir* appeared in *Baroque New Worlds: Representation, Transculturation, Counterconquest*, edited by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Monika Kaup, which was published by Duke University Press. I thank Duke University Press for permission to republish a version of the chapter in this book. The editors and readers of the Ohio University Press offered invaluable support and thoughtful comments on this book, and I appreciate both. Finally, I am so very grateful to Christine Buci-Glucksmann for introducing me to her exquisite vision of madness in baroque vision.

## AUTHOR'S PREFACE

*The Madness of Vision* was first published in 1986 and reissued in June 2002 in an expanded context based on new research on virtual reality (*La folie du voir: Une esthétique du virtuel*). An entire aesthetic and philosophical voyage connects the baroque to the virtual via three historical moments: the seventeenth-century baroque aesthetic; Baudelaire's modern baroque, reinterpreted through Walter Benjamin's work; the contemporary, technological neo-baroque of a global madness of vision.

Seen from this perspective, *The Madness of Vision*, which followed the 1984 publication of *Baroque Reason*, marks a shift in the research of more than twenty years. The historical baroque centered on the themes of Narcissus and Proteus; employing new categories borrowed from the rhetoric of the sublime, and from Lacan and Benjamin; and constituting an aesthetic of thought characteristic of the arts: allegory, form-formlessness, nothingness, the marvelous, and furor. The virtual pushes the baroque to its extreme, based this time on the myth of Icarus, and develops a culture of flux, of artifacts and a new kind of image, the flux-image.

In this sense, the baroque of artifice, metamorphosis, and anamorphosis continues its lineage into the present day. Because from the *Vanities* to the paintings of Caravaggio or the architectural structures of Bernini and Borromini, a culture of time—of ephemeral time, which is often melancholic—creates being, affects and effects.

The baroque dreamed of an eye that would view itself to infinity; the virtual accomplished just that.

Christine Buci-Glucksmann

2012

PRELUDE :

A “JE NE SAIS QUOI . . .”

Who heard,  
Who heard,  
Who saw what I saw?  
—Góngora

This book, *Madness of Vision*,<sup>1</sup> is the story of a gaze that followed me, carried me away, and transported me to the depths of myself, in the labyrinth of a memory devoid of all others, in quest of the extremes of the impossible where presence and absence, fullness and emptiness, annihilation and ecstasy would coincide in Love’s “eternal abyss of harmonious discord.”

A little girl’s fascinated gaze, her captivated gaze. The very first site of the eyes’ rapture. The bedroom was empty, desolate, abandoned; the only sensation an insistent, monotone, repeated moan. I lay there, on fire. The scream came forth like a welt, the aftermath of a lightning bolt, the thundering of a call with no response. And then nothing, nothingness, this nothingness.

Appearing suddenly, in the extreme violence of childish dispossession, this nothingness inhabited me. Named me. The nothingness of bewitched metamorphoses, of forsaken chasms, the nothingness of the very first “dying of love,” like a Voice from before speech in its archaic radiance. I was stricken. Immured in this first silence, this stasis of anguish and death that the mystics call the *noche oscura*, *fâna*, annihilation.

This nothingness created me. Without my knowing it. For a long, infamous time. Because for a very long time, the initial, childish distress, the desperate search for “everything” was buried deep within my alien self, in its naked, restless wandering. In its search for you. As if it required every impulse, in foreign languages, every path to knowledge and its limits, every accumulated death and starlit burning, in order to return to the very site of the first blind and blinding gaze: a baroque rapture, a private myth.

This captive gaze. Utterly enchanted, I brought this gaze to the sign-images, sign-miracles, sign-dreams that a father, specialist in “Eastern” languages, traced in the evening’s muffled silence. Traces awaiting my delighted eye, in suspense, clusters of writing-drawing, black-white shapes, empty-full shapes. My first encounter with languages set the stage for “the uncanny” at the heart of vision in its game of concealment and unveiled secrets.<sup>2</sup> Without a doubt, this initial euphoria, which I buried, evaded, martyred for so long, came back to me suddenly in the astonishing, pleasuring polysemy that I later brought to certain Arabic words: the *addâd*.<sup>3</sup> *Lamaqa* means both “to write” and “to erase.” *Assara*, “to divulge” and “to conceal” a secret. *Tala’a*, “to appear” and “to disappear.” *Fitna*, “seduction” and “betrayal.” My father’s writing lay there—overlooked, a lure for the gaze and for love, an enormous accumulation of traces where life’s intimacy and eternity are intertwined. A palimpsest to decipher.

In the aura of memory, in this type of enrapturing image where my gaze was consumed, the love *per figura*—and for figures—superimposed itself gradually on the Scream, the memory of the scream that haunts *Tosca*, *Turandot*, and the “furious” dissonance of Vivaldi’s *Orlando furioso*.<sup>4</sup> I would slip into this second room—the room of writing and the visible—where I was always silent, always satisfied. Silence is the crystalline point of language where form severs Being and fixes its secret securely within. This silence surrendered me to the *madness of vision*. To the frantic quest for an “all-seeing world” that permits the shift from the visible to Seeingness.<sup>5</sup> Not to see everything, but rather to see vision as in Gracián’s infinite torsion: “One requires eyes on the very eyes, eyes to see how they see.”<sup>6</sup>

I had resembled a prisoner of a “Voice of gazes,”<sup>7</sup> where, by a strange, spiritual alchemy, deprivation and absence became rediscovered pleasure. It was a long enchantment, a lifting of the veils of sadness, a room filled with light, scattering the dust of time: a figure of Apparition. Such as the grand Angels in a painting by Caravaggio, dazzling with a radiant and pleasuring Beauty, appearing in the light from the black background. At that moment, “there, before us, a great being of light and love, the flickering universe, the hesitation of things,” as Cézanne said, expressing the same madness of vision that takes hold of a painting: let light shine on you, let a painting look at you until “all that remains is color, and in color, brightness, clarity.”<sup>8</sup>

Scream/gaze/writing: this chant ran through me and opened me to the power of doubles, of ambidextrous knowledge. Through the most intense of childhood’s mute passions, through the most intimate of the eye’s obsessions,



anguish could become delight, absence could become a profusion of bodies and dazzling materiality. From this point forward, nothingness would be a “tricked-out nothing,” an erotic in suspense, breathing that oscillates between stasis and ecstasy: an amorous subject of opposites.<sup>9</sup> The very subject I dreamed of in Vienna in Musil’s *The Man Without Qualities*: “My heart is at once full of love and emptied of love.”<sup>10</sup>

This gaze. I spent a long time trying to tolerate this gaze, to tame it, to name it. And even to transform it into an enchanted epistemology where love would appear and rhetoric would speak. This gaze. Maintaining what it evades, altering itself in a game of appearances, this oblique gaze, shot through with fissures of death and forgetting, this gaze was baroque. Even anamorphic. Seen from the front, the visible remains confused, disorganized, or prosaically innocent. But seen from an angle—from a correct perspective—a book, an extinguished candle, a cuttlefish bone are suddenly revealed to be a skull, allegories of death, as in the Great Vanities of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Is not “correct perspective” a double gaze, blurred by tears, and blinded, such as the Shakespearean gaze that relies on anamorphosis as metaphor:

For sorrow’s eye, glazed with blinding tears,  
Divides one thing entire to many objects;  
Like perspectives, which rightly gaz’d upon,  
Show nothing but confusion, ey’d awry,  
Distinguish form.<sup>11</sup>

The site of this perspective, where form shifts toward formlessness, toward a luminous chaos of material excess, where form undoes itself to become another, where the real merges with its phantasm, isn’t this a “site of love,” a pulsating baroque site where bodies and their rhetorics are born? First, the initial body is paradoxical, allogical, the body of oxymoronic love: its wound is as sweet (“exquisite”) as a burn is icy. Chasm-body, cannibal-body, amazed-body, such as Catharina Regina Von Greiffenberg evokes in her mystical language: “I kiss you, and I eat you whole, for love, in the depths of my body . . . I am enlightened, amazed. You see me with so much clarity.”<sup>12</sup>

Between abyss and clarity, between blinding tears and blinding love, in the grammar of baroque impulses in which form aims for its dissolution and the dead object aims for its continuance within *jouissance*, I was reborn. And, if the library and ruins are truly the great metaphors of the baroque, I was born

baroque between two books in my father's library, Baudelaire's *The Flowers of Evil* and Hafez's *Divan*. From the West to the East, I found the same floral understanding of the feminine—the rose as a poetics and metaphor of the sex—the same suffering in love, the same *it is thus*, inscribed with the outlay of desire.

As if echoing Shakespeare, another “blinding”: “Tears of blood have drowned my eyes, blinding them, and so it goes. To pursue you is my destiny and I must pursue my destiny, but it is thus.”

“It is thus” is the object—The Thing—of this book. I want this book to construct an oscillating architecture, to spell it out in foreign words: *amok*, *fitna*, *niente*, *mirabile*. . . . I wanted to retranslate the original language of exile and nothingness in its defiance. But, this nothingness became *il niente*, which was so prized by seventeenth-century baroque Italian rhetoricians: *Le glorie del niente*.<sup>13</sup> Beyond its epistemological characteristics, is *il niente* not subject to the “marvelous” (*soggetto della meraviglia*), rebelling against every authoritative principle that touts Being, foundation, causation?<sup>14</sup> Is *il niente* not a loss of identity, an *annihilatio* that brings forth abundance? Such was the aura of silence.

An aesthetic took form at the site of catastrophe and the constituent desiccation. A “post-Aristotelian” rhetoric of the unbelievable, of real wonders, an actual epistemology of paradox caught in a dramaturgy of the Visible and Suffering, something that might arise from Insufficient Reason related to Tesauro's great rhetorical figure: *il mirabile*.<sup>15</sup> Let astonishment trouble and seduce. Let it inform Being by nothingness, such as the Greeks—Socrates—understood it. Yet, let *Being be Vision*, let the effect of beauty produce something like “the effect of truth,” such as the baroque reinvents it in a space forevermore occupied by a “science of seeing.”

*Il mirabile*: the long-suffering of the eye, the duplicity of the Voice (scream) and of Vision in writing, the eternally unstable reciprocity between a solar, seeing gaze and another gaze that is “blinded by blood” and exhausted by tears. The entire anamnesis of a forgotten childhood came over me. It forced me to speak this multiplying language just as I had fantasized in my paternal palimpsest. Forced me to discover that the eye is the mirror of phantasms described by the entire Arab philosophical tradition, resting within the vibrant ambiguity of vision. Does not *Ain* signify the eye, the source, the essence?<sup>16</sup>

How does a gaze proclaim its origin? How might an uncertain form proclaim Being? How might an erotic of pretense, of game and display—even

pornographic—proclaim the effect of truth? And a paradoxon its scientific nature? Such is the site of the baroque, its space to explore.

The madness of vision is staged within this knot of “harmonious discord,” an entirely Borromean knot.<sup>17</sup> With its permanent oscillation: a staggering gaze convulsing in the fright, catastrophe, and horror of the funereal baroque, and a luminous gaze expressing the ecstasy of the loving baroque, an almost palpable carnal gaze like the infinite, sensual shimmer of colors in Venetian painting. At the moment when these gazes collide, a moment of suspense, what the Greeks termed *αρπαζειν*, to captivate, to capture, to take by force, to seize in the sense that one can be seized and seize, let oneself be taken and freed. An almost invisible moment that is always prized. The moment of the finest difference, a difference in which the “other” appears. Resonating in me now and in the future is the force of Pessoa’s poetic statement:

To travel! Leave countries behind!  
Be someone else indefinitely,  
Having a soul without roots  
Means living only to see!<sup>18</sup>

Seeing and living only to see, this scene of the scream, of ashes and light, where I dreamed my birth.

Seeing and living only to see, this site where bodies are shaped, bodies that flaunt and sacrifice their own *jouissance*, like a “basket filled with the bodies of little girls.”<sup>19</sup>

Seeing and living only to see and seize by the chimerical moment of Seeingness, which brings forth the Ungazeable.

Something like the primitive stage of the baroque: opera. The site where Vision and Voice meet, “musicalize,” echo each other to form a speaking nothingness, a dramaturgy of passion. And thus a rhetoric in which law and its transgression, order and its variations, code and its extreme dissonances are united in *lalangue*, itself a rediscovery of *jouissance*, a pleasing drive that always leads to its own destruction, to the luxuriating *mise en abyme* of its elements.<sup>20</sup>

This great dislocated baroque Voice, this voice inhabited by other voices, this voice in self-anamnesis springs from the depths of the “bedroom” of writing. The inaugural Scream begets a dead body, a rent body, a body torn between Vision and Speech, and therein invents a baroque aesthetic. A

narrativity of its characteristic gestures: thought/love, vision/hearing. An archaeology of its gaze.

They say that madness of vision is exactly that: a law, a surreptitiously deviant law in which Vision was embodied in an utterance: *I must become, there where it loved*. “It loved”: the loss of the love’s body, the first dislocation of the body itself, where one arrays oneself to a-wrest the self, where one “disloves.”<sup>21</sup>

They say that the dialectic of vision and the gaze, of the visible and Seeingness originated in the first ontological babblings of self. An overwhelming astonishment, a sight that destroys all gaze.

They say there is a pure dust of love, a wind of ephemera, a soul of the soul.

They say . . .

This work does not aspire to become either a history of art or a new “treatise” on the European baroque, which is already the subject of many excellent works to which I refer. Rather, it depicts a voyage, an orderly and sometimes arcane detour into the baroque madness of vision, into the archaeology that is embodied in the voyage that is objects, texts, and languages, in a drive of desire and knowledge that brought me to the eyes’ thought, figural writing.

Thank you for your interest in this Ohio University Press title.

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