

The Scopic drive and its destinies. The psychic functions of mask

*Gilles Bourlot*¹

Abstract

The notion of scopic drive is essential in psychoanalysis. However, the powers of the gaze are an ancient theme already present in Greek mythology. The article makes connections between ancient mythology, psychoanalytic concepts and clinical issues. What is scopic drive? The article takes up again the question of the scopic drive of its mythological foundations until its representations in the contemporary art to show that « to watch » and « to be watched » are complex activities in psychic life, in which the question of the mask is inscribed. This research presents and questions the psychic functions of the mask, from a metapsychological point of view.

¹ Clinical Psychologist, Ph. D in Clinical Psychology, University of Nice, France

Email corresponding author: gilles.bourlot@yahoo.fr



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1. Introduction

The gaze is an enigmatic experience. "To watch" and "to be watched" are two different positions of the subject and sources of unconscious anguish and enjoyment, as in the case of "voyeurism". Can we think the gaze as a drive, vector of anguish and enjoyment? In which way can the gaze be a limit experience?

The problem of the mask is part of the metapsychology of the gaze: Are masks contingent creations or an anthropological necessity? What are the psychic functions of the mask?

From the Greek myth of Medusa to contemporary art, the question of the gaze is at the center of decisive fictions to think the drive. Myths and art occupy a central place in the psychoanalytic theory of drive. Freud recognizes this aspect, when he talks about his theorization of drives as "our mythology" (Freud, 1933). A theory of drives and gaze necessarily rests on fictions, at the limit of the conceptualizable.

The gaze is part of the "limit concepts", like the concept of drive itself (Freud, 1915). Hence, our initial hypothesis: insofar as the theory of gaze unfolds to the limits of the unrepresentable, we need fictions, myths and art (Bourlot, 2015).

A metapsychology of gaze is aimed at understanding unconscious anguish and scopic enjoyments. But anguish and enjoyment are inaccessible to observation: for example, “*jouissance*” at work in “voyeurism” and “exhibitionism”... Similarly the “source” and “purpose” of the scopic drive are not empirically “observable” (Freud, 1915).

The fundamental notions of a metapsychology of the gaze (“voyeurism”, “scopic drive”, “enjoyment”...) imply the passage through fictions: the myth of Medusa will be our starting point.

2. The gaze as an enigma, from the myth of Medusa to contemporary art

Clinic frequently makes us hear situations in which a subject has felt “reduced” to the state of “object”. Under a gaze, it is not uncommon for a subject to feel “judged”, “objectified” as in shame, or “persecuted”. These psychic nuances are complex and will deserve developments in our future research. By taking up the question of the gaze in psychoanalysis, we come to question what can “*désjectiver*” the subject. “Desubjectivation” means several things: to freeze, not to be able to “speak”, and thus to prevent the possibility of thinking. “Desubjectivation” means, more radically: to be stunned, transformed into an object. There are moments of anguish when a gaze can “objectify” a being, reduce it to a thing, an object, a pure appearance (Didier-Weill, 2003). What theoretical tools do we have to think about these phenomena?

2.1. The syndrome of Medusa

Long before psychoanalysis, the myth of Medusa is found in many stories of transformations, which relate to the powers of gaze (Déloc, 2006). These narratives have been redeveloped in relevant psychoanalytic researches on the relationship between gaze and superego: there may be in the experience of being watched and judged a « *morfifère expérience* », as when a sudden look takes power over a body and prevents the subject from moving, speaking, becoming anything but an object (Didier-Weill, 1995).

We propose to name “*Medusa syndrome*” a clinical entity that could describe this singular position of a subject under the power of gaze, with three main aspects:

a. *The subject feels frozen under the gaze of the Other.* The Medusa gaze produces characteristic effects. In Greek mythology, all the archaic narratives evoke Medusa changing into stone all those who fall *under* the gaze (Déloc, 2006). The gaze of Medusa immobilizes the body. What does this mean clinically? This corresponds to sensations of rigidification of the body, to *the impossibility of moving*. What the patient can sometimes describe *after* this kind of sensations. The body seems

trapped by the gaze of the Other: bodily sensations are frequently found in the clinic of anxiety and anguish. "To be watched" therefore prevents all movement, all becoming.

b. « *Desubjectivation* ». What is the "position", in the metapsychological meaning, of the one who is looked at (Freud, 1915)? Is he still a "subject"? Deprived of the possibility of speaking, is it not "objectified"? The gaze of Medusa corresponds to a situation of *absolute passivity*. Thus, the subject fails to detach from this petrifying gaze. The impossibility of detaching oneself and finding shelter is part of Medusa syndrome. This impossible detachment recalls in a sense the story of Narcissus. In the myth of Narcissus "to watch" and "to watch at oneself" are combined until fascination and death (Déloc, 2006). Is there a gaze that the subject can not leave? Is not "*fascination*" the power to capture the subject in a "scene"? *Where* is he, moreover, the one who feels the power of the Medusa Gaze?

c. *Death drive and scopic drive*. The subject being reduced to the position of the object, he can find himself at the limit of the inanimate, therefore of death. The gaze of Medusa freezes the living. If immobility can have several degrees, it confines indeed to the extinction of all movement. The alliance of the scopic drive and the death drive is one of the riddles of the Medusa syndrome. "Death" means, in this context, "inanimate", "petrified": it is the impossibility of movement and the reign of absolute silence that characterize death drive (Freud, 1923). Alain Didier-Weill interprets this drive as a complex injunction, with several repertoires: "not a word", "do not insist" (Didier-Weill, 1995). The essential thing lies in the refusal of everything become, so to speak the "de-subjectification".

However, in the myth of Medusa arises both the question of gaze and what can neutralize it. Hence our central hypothesis: *the shield* of Perseus is the first of the masks. The mask is comparable to a protective screen, a *separation* between visible and invisible. Is this separation the fundamental function of the mask?

In Greek mythology, Perseus's shield is the antidote to the gaze. The shield sends the gaze back to Medusa. Like the mask of a warrior, Perseus' shield sends back a terrifying image. The shield is the prototype of the mask. Far from being limited to the mythical stories of the ancient world, the question of the frozen gaze also appears in other areas, as in modern philosophy.

2.2. The experience of shame.

Modern philosophy, especially phenomenology, has often describe psychic experiences, even stories of transformation, in which the gaze is referred to a singular experience. Jean-Paul Sartre has described, from a phenomenological point of view, how much the experience of shame is bound at a gaze (Sartre, 1943).

The gaze that surprises me in the experience of shame prevents me from going out of the act, the gesture, the situation where I am seen: I am frozen by the look. How to understand this possible correlation between "being looked at" and the feeling of being inanimate or objectified?

The metapsychological approach gives meaning to the phenomenological description. Alain Didier-Weill questioned the metapsychological springs of the dialectic "subjectivation" / "desubjectivation", "to become" / "immobility", "words" / "gaze" (Didier-Weill, 1995). If the repertoires of the superego are infinitely varied, from insult to the most insidious injunctions and judgments, Alain Didier-Weill unveils the springs: it is always aimed, for the archaic superego, *to silence the subject*. How far can a gaze be all-powerful?

2.3. This Nameless spectacle

Contemporary art has sometimes updated the myth of Medusa with unexpected depth. Thus, in *This Nameless Spectacle*, the contemporary artist Jesper Just proposes a very intense video installation, staging the destinies of the scopic drive (Just, 2011). In this work, there are precisely two simultaneous projections, on two opposite walls, to better show the destinies of the scopic drive, which implies a complex game between "to watch" and "to be watched".

It is thus a double film, which gives to see the same "scene", split, or divided. There is the "scene" as it is experienced by a *woman-object* of gaze on a screen, and the "scene" as it is lived by a voyeur-man on the other screen. On one side therefore; the passive position of a woman who knows herself and feels watched, followed, "persecuted"? On the other side, the active position of the one who looks, the one who pursues and does not let go of his prey. This contemporary transposition of the myth of Medusa ends with the impossibility of bearing the gaze, and thus the *fainting* of the woman, climax of anguish of persecution which borders on enjoyment.

This work perfectly highlights an unequal exchange between the two protagonists; the object-woman, trying to flee in vain, and the man watching, pursuing, who does not let his prey run away. This imbalance is accentuated by many details, such as the displacement of the woman in a wheelchair. She turns several times, he follows her relentlessly. And when she is at home, *inside* her apartment, the gaze still reaches her, the curtain is open... This work as condensed as brilliant, and which will lead to longer developments elsewhere, gives to think four essential things:

a. "The" gaze does not exist. There are always, at least, two distinct positions in the destinies of the scopic drive: "to watch" / "to be watched". This first polarity corresponds to other more complex polarities; "Activity" / "passivity", "subject" / "object", "living" / "death"...

b. *The absence of words* characterizes the primitive experience of gaze. What is a "primitive" experience? It is an experience where no word has its place, as when the baby has a sensory experience without a word being expressed by the adult, or as when a relationship excludes the speech a priori. The "voyeurism" staged in *This nameless spectacle* leaves no room for a verbal exchange, which redoubles the anguish, on the one hand, and the enjoyment of the Other... In other words, enjoyment is off-language (Lacan, 1972).

c. *The rise of anguish in the experience of Medusa gaze reaches an extreme limit, when the object-woman faints.* But this climax seems to mingle anguish and sexual enjoyment. The ambiguity of the gaze, of the experience of being watched is perfectly exposed by Jesper Just: at the end of his video, the doubt remains; Is it an intense sexual « *jouissance* » or / and an unbearable anguish that leads to death?

d. *The subject needs a space that escape the gaze of the Other.* Can subjectivity survive without secret space? Masks create a separation between visible and invisible, outside and inside... The scopic drive must not be limitless.

3. What is the scopic drive ?

In his metapsychology, Freud progressively moves towards the definition of the drive with its four constituent dimensions: the push, the goal, the object and the source (Freud, 1915). This "fundamental concept" is at the center of the writings published in 1915. In this scientific paradigm, a concept is the name of a convention passed in the community of researchers: the definition of "fundamental concepts" ("*Grundbegriffe*") emphasizes a "conventional" aspect.

The historical context played a role in this conception of the "convention": the beginning of the 20th century was marked by a radical change in the modeling and the fictionalization of certain scientific concepts. The theory of Relativity, for example, upset the idea of what could be a "fundamental concept" such as "Time" or "Space" and the boundary between conceptual and fictional became more and more permeable.

This conception can lead us to think of the concept-convention as a temporary fiction. The concept of drive is a fiction, resulting from a complex dialectic between "ideas" and "phenomena", between general definitions and clinical material, in a system of reciprocal relations: there is not, for example, a description that does not imply a few "ideas", on the one hand, and the relevance of an abstract concept seems delimited by the clinical material, on the other hand.

The apparent arbitrariness of conventions is fundamentally limited by clinical practice: a metapsychological concept is only a fiction capable of gathering together, rendering intelligible, "grasping" ("*Begreifen*") what is encountered in clinical experience, like the processes related to the couple voyeurism-exhibitionism for example. Thus, the concepts are more like provisional fictions than detached dogmas of clinical reality: Freud gives himself the right to use "abstract ideas", while maintaining a deep link with the need to account for psychopathological processes such as "voyeurism" (Freud, 1915).

3.1. The drive as a "limit concept"

In 1915, this theorization of the drive emphasizes the problematic dimension of the concept. The drive is defined as a "border concept" or rather a "limit concept" ("*Grenzbegriff*"), which indicates both the specific position of the drive between body and psychic life and the presence of a boundary ("*Grenze*") (Freud, 1915). The field of drive is not reducible to the body or the biological, it refers more fundamentally to a process of "representation" and the "psychic representative" of "something" that remains inaccessible. This term "boundary concept" is not an invention of Freud, it is a semantic heritage that refers to Kant: a "limit concept" refers to both a problematic concept and a task for critical thinking. (Kant, 1781).

3.2. The passage to myths

Between 1915 and 1920, a fundamental transformation will lead Freud from a conceptual search to a position of theoretic-narrator, where the mythological narrative takes a nodal place (Bourlot, 2015). In 1920, the theory of drives is renewed, starting from the question of trauma and repetition (Freud, 1920). The publication of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* thus corresponds to a modification of the theory of drive dualism (reorganized from the Eros / Thanatos pair) and to a correlative re-articulation of the relationship between metapsychology and fictions.

At the threshold of the mythical narrative, Freud describes his epistemological choice of a myth that derives its relevance from the necessity of thinking about Repetition. Hence the reference to the theory that Plato has developed (Freud, 1920).

It is not only a question of going "further" in the representations of the drive, it is a question of changing direction: this reorganization consists in a double shift of the center of gravity of the metapsychology, towards the death drive and to the narration of myths, as if only the myths could help us to think of the place of death drive in psychic life (Bourlot, 2015).

Myths make it possible to think "something" which belongs to the most enigmatic drives, such as the entanglement of Life and Death. They participate in a speculative movement in the metapsychological elaboration. Freud had been careful to emphasize "speculation" as a

qualitative leap in his own thought as if, at the same time as he was reconstructing his metapsychology, he had not ceased to explore the conditions of his theoretical creativity: speculation is an attempt to consistently exploit an idea, with the curiosity to see where it will lead.

So, in 1922, Freud refers to Medusa myth to think what causes fright in the mythical narrative (Freud, 192). Freud evokes and names a double process: being afraid / to scare. Is not the primary function of a mask to produce a similar effect?

4. The invention of the mask

As early as Greek Antiquity, shields and masks represented the horrible face, the gaze of Medusa, in order to horrify the adversaries in battle: the mask is first of all *a representation*, that aims for an effect (Déloc, 2006).

Jacques Lacan questioned this problem of the scopic drive. For Lacan, the gaze met in shame is less a reality than a gaze imagined in the field of the Other. This is the shame experienced by a subject, who unknowingly imagines the "judgment" (Lacan, 1964).

More fundamentally, Lacan emphasizes the relationship between mask, screen and shield: the mask shows something, it is *an image*. The mask is a screen in the double sense of the word; the screen hides and shows, veils something and represents something else. The mask is fundamentally double. It follows from this several psychic functions:

a. *The mask is a "gaze-catcher"*. The mask both hides "something unknown" and catches the gaze, it shows something (the gaze itself in the case of war masks in particular), hiding something else. It is doubly constituted, by an absence and a presence, an invisible (behind the mask) and a visible (the mask). The mask can be a "parade", which has a dual meaning: protect and show (Lacan, 1964). The mask creates an imaginary relationship, which can be intimidation, seduction...

b. *The mask creates a space of imaginary play*. If the mask, as screen, is a fundamental mediation in the relation to the other, the essential of the mask consists in playing. It is an imaginary play between oneself and the other, between visible and invisible, between appearance and identity, image and beyond the image.

c. *"Something unknown"* is always preserved by the mask. The mask is as important by what it shows, as by what it prevents from seeing. It embodies a *separative power*, a limit. It exhibits a gaze, to better escape the primitive gaze that could induce the judgment *par excellence*: "you're just that."

5. Conclusions

Masks are not a contingent creation: they represent an anthropological necessity, to limit the gaze. The masks introduce a space of imaginary play in the destinies of the scopic drive, they transform the risk of absolute passivity in possibility to play actively with the gaze. We will make four remarks to conclude :

- Is not psychoanalysis itself a way of putting the scopic drive in parentheses? Freud, in creating the couch, invented the possibility of a relation « without gaze ». Talking while closing eyes also allows to reconnect with the dream and the « other scene »... The subjectivating axis, that goes from the talking subject to the dream space, implies this setting in parentheses of the gaze.

- In our research, mythical fictions (Medusa, Narcissus) and artistic works (*This nameless spectacle*) have been constituted as so many intermediate spaces between the question of the gaze and what the mask preserves. : "Something unknown". In the world of fiction, myths and works of art seem capable of thinking the most unthinkable, for example a gaze that would transmit death (Vernant, 1988). The activity of thinking the gaze involves rehabilitating both the theoretical imagination and the mythical narrative, that is to say, the fiction in its deepest dimensions, to approach essential psychopathological processes such as the processes of Life and Death.

- The psychic functions of the mask are complex functions (to create a separation between visible and invisible, to capture the gaze by showing an image...). These functions are different from the social functions of the masks in a given society (Lévi-Strauss, 1979). The psychic functions of the mask are close to the psychic functions of skin according Didier Anzieu: the mask marks a limit inside / outside and protects (Anzieu, 1974). Like the skin, the mask is also a means of primary relations with the others. The specificity of the mask is to look for an effect, like to scare. The Latin origin of the word refers to the mask as the false face that aims to scare (Littré, 1869)... The primitive stake of the mask is *to become active*, to exhibit something, what Freud had suggested about Medusa (Freud, 1922).

- We have presented several psychic functions: to *separate* the visible and the invisible, to *protect*, to *show* "something" (notably another gaze), to *capture* the imaginary of the other, to *create* a space of imaginary play between oneself and the other... The mask is constituted fundamentally in these double games: to hide / to show, to veil / to reveal... The essential thing is its function precisely to create distance, to produce a playing relation, where it was once, without distance, without play. More radically, does not one of the most fundamental games consist of appearing / disappearing, like the « fort » / « da » in the example of Freud (Freud, 1920)? Hence this open formulation: "Where it was frozen under a gaze, a play of hide and seek must become"...

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