

The Gaze of Coronavirus

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The first thing my partner and I did upon landing in Wuhan on January 22nd, 2020, was to put on baby blue face masks and take a selfie. Robert Kilroy (2014) argues that the selfie embodies the “inside-out structure of the gaze” laid out in Lacan’s *Seminar XI*: the press of a button places us “under the gaze...not a seen gaze but a gaze imagined by me in the field of the Other” (*XI* 82). In taking a selfie, the smartphone generates a screen-image, both an image of ourselves in relation to the Other (the *jouissance* of being content), and a screen, domesticating the threat of truly being seen through a filtered (literally in the case of Instagram) and misleading presentation of ourselves in the guise of the signifier. Being within China’s Great Firewall, my attempts to post the selfie to Instagram reiterated the psychoanalytic truth that the big Other does not exist.

Twelve hours later, my phone’s screen was cracked, hemorrhaging functionality. It had happened at some point in sorting myself, my partner, her parents, and our luggage into a tiny taxi at 3am as part of a mad escape out of Wuhan to an airport in another province, 8 hours away. Previously, my phone kept my symbolic coordinates about me, involving 1) consuming developing news about the virus (while disregarding that my body might become physically trapped in the developing news); 2) being the geometral point toward which my flows of Internet information directed themselves; 3) being a user with all my tastes and preferences reliably inscribed in the big Other (♪ *I wanna be surveilled* ♪). That security blanket was suddenly gone. After an escape through innumerable medical checkpoints and a flight back to Vancouver, we incredulously watched the coronavirus be treated with that same security blanket upon return until it became impossible. For too long—and perhaps still—the virus existed merely as a consumable digital object, one possible to safely mediate through the Internet’s manipulable gaze. Inevitably, the Real restrained by the Internet’s visual field spilled across borders, including, singularly, the borders of the digital screen.

I want to argue that my cracked screen is an anamorphic image like those discussed in Lacan’s *Seminar XI*: “any kind of construction that is made in such a way that by means of an optical transposition a certain form that wasn’t visible at first sight transforms itself into a readable image” (135). Kilroy describes Lacan’s anamorphic image as one that compels us to subtract the content of the image, and directly experience its form instead. Similarly, my cracked phone screen was emptied of its reassuring content, replaced by random silvery fractures, whose luminescence hinted at the incomprehensible innards of digital technology.

Like all anamorphic images, the cracked screen momentarily displaces us from our home at the geometral point. As Lacan relates in *XI*, the technology of perspective in painting

orientated their visual fields toward a geometral point of view: an empty space inhabitable by the viewing subject. This empty space is further institutionalized and refined by the Internet's record of our unique "viewing preferences." In both visual fields, we are able to position ourselves as both viewer and viewable object—though with the ubiquity of Internet usage, this once momentarily habitable position (standing in front of a painting) now imprisons our entire visual reality. But what we really are, Lacan argues, is the irresolvable antagonism between these two positions, evoked by the opacity of the screen (that which shields us from being totally seen, and allows us to safely see, but not too much).

With the cracking of the screen, the twin objects of: 1) the digital screen's export of our subjectivity as sanitized and objectified profiles; and 2) the conjuring of the big Other as manipulable object (through following, blocking and the general curation of our social feeds), momentarily collapse into a far more resistant object, the monolith-like unworkable phone screen, no longer responsive to our swipes and touches. Rather than existing as selves positioned securely in the big Other of the Internet, our true subjectivity is revealed as the screen itself: "if I am anything in the picture, it is always in the form of the screen" (XI 97).

A couple cultural examples help flesh out this point. In *Nocturnal Animals* (Ford 2016), Susan's (Amy Adams) colleague Sage (Jena Malone) shows her a new app on her phone, one that allows her to "be more involved" with her infant daughter by watching her sleep in her crib. But Susan accidentally drops the phone, its screen cracks and the true opacity of this involved relationship reveals itself. Symptomatically, this truth is waved away by Sage, who states she was meaning to get the new model anyway. In *The Green Inferno* (Roth 2013), protagonist Justine (Lorenza Izzo) livestreams a protest against Amazon deforestation—performing an ethical self to the Western big Other—and the loggers respond by cracking her phone's screen with a bullet. After Justine endures a series of brutalities by the Indigenous tribe she was "protecting", she emerges from the forest, desperately waving her long dead phone at the loggers—now her saviours. She screams "cellphone...Internet...camera!" in order to identify herself as non-Indigenous and not be shot. Her phone isn't a tool; she is her phone, a truth she must acknowledge to save her life. Finally, in the second season of *You* (Netflix 2019), the blood of the murdered Delilah (Carmela Zumbado) is shown mingling with her cracked phone screen. Only in death, screen and subject are ultimately reconciled as one.

When my partner and I returned to Vancouver, my cracked and dead phone somehow automatically—to my embarrassment—posted the lighthearted selfie we had taken upon arrival in Wuhan, before the situation had become a pandemic. As Kilroy writes, "the anamorphic experience itself becomes, retroactively, meaningful" (57) by laying bare the mechanisms that enshrine our sense of reality in the visual field. The cracked screen reveals that the beyond which we ritually manage through our phones—through actions like selfies—is in fact as

incomprehensible as the glittering circuits beneath the surface of our devices, a truth kept at bay by our continual replacement of cracked devices. As the contemporary insistence of the Real, the coronavirus is looking back at us through our phones, but only when we crack them.