

Georges Perec and Roman Opalka: From the Final Gaze to the Defeat of Death

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Abstract: When depicting the Final Gaze, Georges Perec and Roman Opalka emphasize equally the *ergon* and *parergon* in both literature and painting. My argument is that the Final Gaze is a metaphor for continuity and a source of inspiration in art, it progresses into a new form of contemplation and delineates into a specific line of reasoning among artists and writers. In addition, exploratory theories, such as the “death of the aura” and “disinterest in art,” defined by Walter Benjamin and Jacques Derrida, help us expend this metaphor. My work promotes the idea that the Final Gaze is not about death or destruction, it is about the end of a cycle and the beginning of a new one.

Keywords: final gaze – *parergon* and *ergon* – destruction of artwork – circularity in art and literature – self-portrait

The epigraph “Regarde de tous tes yeux, regarde!” (“Look with all your eyes, look!”) to *La Vie mode d'emploi* (*Life a User's Manual*) by Georges Perec¹ announces the anxious state of viewing or being viewed. These are two different concepts, where the one viewed is unrelated to looking on something one has loved and being conscious of that fact. Furthermore, being the one viewed provokes not thoughts of a final encounter but thoughts about the significance of being stared at or observed intentionally. The opening quotation is an engaging phrase brought into popular usage by Jules Verne² in his novel *Michel Strogoff* (*Michael Strogoff: The Courier of the Czar*) in 1876. In addition, Chapter V, Part 2 of the novel has as a title the same long statement: “Look with all your eyes, look!” For the reader of the late nineteenth century, Jules Verne’s term serves as a message right before the discovery of audiovisual technology.

¹ Georges Perec (1936-1982) was a French writer of Polish-Jewish origin and member of the group OULIPO.

² Jules Verne (1828-1905) was a French writer, best known for his science fiction and adventure genre.

For Georges Perec and Roman Opalka,³ the concept means craftiness, finesse, artifice. Opalka began painting his “details” in 1965 and Perec published *Life a User’s Manual* in 1978. The unexpected connection between both works is important, because Perec was not a big fan of contemporary art, yet he is indirectly influenced by it.

I. Introduction

This article explores a particular aspect of vision, the final gaze. This metaphor of viewing for the last time is important because it gives a better understanding of self-worth and gives one an opportunity to use resources, talents, and skills to go far and help the others live by choice or belief. It is also of great significance to have a clearer structure in life which will help people to go on loving their work, being nurtured by it, and thriving through it. The project of the final gaze is complex, controversial, and ultimately incomplete. But, as this study hopes to indicate, its place in literature and art is even more resonant in the twentieth century, thus making it more stable than previous studies on the final gaze. The final gaze is watching something disappear forever. Perec and Opalka do not emphasize nostalgia and loss but a new beginning. The psychological effect in literary works or real life, I argue, is that a person gains a degree of self-reliance or self-sufficiency during the very last moments before going blind. Seeing, blindness or death are on display in Perec’s works and illustrate a particular dynamic of endings and new beginnings. Knowing that you are seeing someone or place for the last time in your life with your whole love or existence being left behind, the one who looks focuses on thoughts and emotions. In the case of Orpheus, for example, he has been told that looking back will result in Eurydice’s permanent death in Hades. So, his final gaze is a fatal one for her – he could not resist seeing if she were actually following him and looked too soon. It was an act of impiety in not believing the gods. The Strogoff gaze is an ironic turning, because what was thought to be the end of his sight turns out to be his continued sight.

The main focus of this study, devoted to the effects of the final and ultimate gaze, explore the fictional and artistic discourses in both Perec and Opalka. The final gaze is similar to the ultimate gaze, because it is likely to have a profound success on well-being or survival. It questions one’s ability to make sound decisions earlier in one’s life. Special attention is given to theoretical concepts such as the mourning of the “aura,” the autobiographical *parergon* and the permanent genesis not only in real life, but also in literature and art. “Aura” is a general concept associated with any object of perception and technology. It means waning, but also a quality of being unique. *Parergon* is a Greek noun meaning something that is an accessory to a main work or subject.

³ Roman Opalka (1931-2011) was a French artist of Polish origin, who worked his entire life on a single project, painting numbers on “details” entitled “1965 / 1 – ∞.” He also used audiovisual devices and self-representation in his “details.”

G rard Genette calls all those things that accompany a published text “paratext.” My analysis, informed by the reading of Walter Benjamin⁴ and Jacques Derrida,⁵ aims to highlight the connections between the aesthetic thought about the final gaze and the contemporary debate on the ontological and ethical status of art.

Jacques Lacan influenced many critics especially those who worked on the notion of desire and gaze. Lacan’s concept of gaze is related to the scopic drive, a partial manifestation of desire. Desire is one, undivided, but drives can be numerous. Many philosophers elaborated on gaze to illustrate relations of power and surveillance, such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Michel Foucault. For them, gaze implies a loss of autonomy when people realize that they are being viewed. Laura Mulvey introduced the notion of “male gaze” in her film studies, where women are objectified. The “postcolonial gaze” interprets the colonizer/colonized relationship. The role of power and its appropriation after viewing or being viewed is central to all these studies. My interpretation is different, as it focuses on a specific type of gaze, the final gaze, the one that illustrates a dynamic of continuity. Many critics address the final gaze of a particular character, but none of them challenge or conceptualize it. This is the intention of this article.

The connection between Perec and Opalka has been observed by the critic Jean-Luc Joly in *Perec et l’art contemporain (Perec and Contemporary Art)*, where he describes the reception of Perec’s works by contemporary artists among whom are Roman Opalka, Christian Boltanski, Sophie Calle, Claude Closky, On Kawara, Edouard Lev . Joly argues that the impact is significant but at the same time unforeseen. It is posthumous and spontaneous, but for Joly it helps the audience understand what contemporary art is:

en effet, si Perec est actuellement une r f rence importante pour l’art contemporain, n’est-ce pas pr cis ment parce que son  uvre, ses projets, ses personnages ou sa personne r pondent   leur mani re   la question difficile de savoir ce qu’est ou plut t ce que peut  tre cet art contemporain ? (*Perec et l’art contemporain. Pr sentation par Jean-Luc Joly*)

indeed, if Perec is currently an important reference for contemporary art, it is precisely because his work, his projects, his character and his personality respond in their own way to the difficult question of what contemporary art may be. (*Perec and Contemporary Art. Presentation by Jean-Luc Joly*)⁶

⁴ Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) was a German philosopher and literary critic. He was associated with the Frankfurt School.

⁵ Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) was a French philosopher who developed a semiotic analysis known as deconstruction. He is the father of postmodern philosophy.

⁶ All translations are the author’s except where otherwise noted.

My study differs from Joly's observations, because it focuses not only on the final gaze, but also on its effect on text and paratext. When Joly's article appeared in print in 2010, Opalka was still alive and he could not have interpreted the artist's final gaze. Christelle Reggiani notices in 2003 that Perec uses photography in his novels to describe memories from the past. All photographs become white in time erasing images and also our memory of them. Perec was more than a passive spectator of modern art. There is nothing left to chance in his literary works related to art. Chance is what makes one afraid of the final gaze. Gazers may or may not realize that this is their final gaze. In her book *Constraining Chance: Georges Perec and the OULIPO*, Alison James reveals the ways in which Perec's texts engage with chance and, more importantly, how the author tries to control its operation. Visual arts, television, cinema screens and public advertisements have enabled a panoply of images to enter Perec's works and invade his consciousness. The world of visual over-stimulation provides the milieu in which Perec finds the means to influence contemporary artists.

II. Multiplication and Deconstruction of the Art Work

Jules Verne's novel *Michael Strogoff: The Courier of the Czar* appeared in 1876 shortly before the first experimental work that led to the invention of cinema, television, and the mechanical reproduction of the artwork. The process of mass production reaches the art object in its very center, as shown in the 1936 essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* by the German cultural critic Walter Benjamin. According to Benjamin, the very authenticity of a piece of art and its power of effect are being compromised by the era of reproduction. The "aura" of the work disappears with its loss of uniqueness. Instead of a unique existence of the work of art, there is now a series that develops toward infinity. One can see the result of mechanical reproduction, both destructive and cathartic at the same time, in the obsessive habits of Opalka. Perec seems to have drawn on excessive ideas from the Benjamin's essay to describe Bartlebooth, a central character in his book *Life a User's Manual*. Perec's point, which he expressed far more clearly than did Benjamin, is that modern artists and technology destroyed the right to accept or respect the work of art. Because of this destruction, images of art, produced by Opalka or the fictional character Bartlebooth, have become ephemeral, worthless, and free.

1. Opalka's Final number

Opalka invents a series of paintings, which he called "details," covered entirely by natural numbers (1, 2, 3 – ∞). His "details" are like pages of a book, but instead of letters the viewer sees a sequence of numbers, deprived of the element zero (\mathbb{N}^*). Mathematicians do not agree whether to include zero in the set of natural numbers. Zero is between negative and positive integers. In my 2008 e-mail correspondence with Opalka, he explained why he began with the natural number 1. It is related to

divisibility. Zero cannot be divided, whereas other natural numbers can. He started his painting with 1 and not 0, because he did not want to begin with nothing (0), but with something substantial (1). The opposite of infinity (all) is 0 (nothing), not 1 (one). In Greek thought, God or the Universe of the intellect is 1 (one) and the elements of the universe are multipliers of 1 (one). In the *Symposium*, Plato distinguishes that reality which is visible, but not intelligible, and that which is intelligible, but invisible. Opalka paints both the perceptible and the imperceptible. Zero is the lack of anything. Opalka wanted to have a painting that counts, a painting with a voice. He begins with 1 and finishes with 5607249 at the end of his life. Opalka's final gaze, which he did not know would be the last one, is on the last number he painted: 5607249. Opalka's "details" have a beginning and an end. The details follow one another like the chapters in a novel. The number that opens each "detail" in the top left-hand corner of the canvas follows the last number of the previous "detail" in the bottom right-hand corner.

All his life, Opalka sought to organize the content of his paintings beginning with natural and positive integers all the way toward infinity. It is a rigid and stubborn program that takes into account the quantity and not the quality of seeing. Quantity itself becomes quality. This equation is sufficient to define the aesthetic value of the "details." For him painting is essentially a process of combining; its goal is to contain all possibilities within itself, to grasp infinity through the totality of the visual and the senses. One can see this esthetic of totality in new forms of art realized on the computer.

Like most controversial paintings, the profusion of numbers masks the designs or patterns of the artist. Certainly, the excessive counting hides Opalka's automatic routine. In the book *Rencontre par la séparation (Meeting by Separation)*, Opalka states that without a measuring tool, he drew all these figures, always being careful not to exceed the average graphical dimension of numbers and the distance between numbers. He was really concerned about the readability of his writing, whose scale depends on the size of the "details:" 196 x 135 cm. By writing, he also means painting numbers. These dimensions have been conceived for his entire life program and the optimal possibility of an average man to carry a "detail," with arms outstretched. The same proportions can be found in the size of his studio door in Warsaw, Poland.

For Opalka, painting is used to represent not a moment in life but the impeding of life through a pattern of numbers and the routine (life) of building the painting (the puzzle of evolving numbers). Correlated is the fact that Opalka photographs himself as he is creating his painting (life) and records his own voice so that we see the life and movement toward death in the oral and written record of his aging against numbers that could and do go on within infinity. That the "detail" he is creating is not just the impersonal movement of the universe, is seen in the fact that toward his own end (he is neither eternal nor infinite) he begins to add another kind of number, 1% white that erases the other numbers that represent his own existence. In the end the canvas is void of numbers and ready for a new beginning, a picking up of the routine and numbering,

different numbers, of course, but numbers of this “detail” that represents one existence in the eternity and infinity that is the universe.

2. Bartlebooth’s Final Puzzle

One can also see the desire for rapid listing in Perec’s “novels” *Life a User’s Manual*: the list of characters and their activities in Chapter LI, the collection of paintings and prints in the Parisian building, Bartlebooth’s myriad of efforts to visit 500 harbors, etc. *Life a User’s Manual* is described as “novels” in plural, because of the tapestry of interwoven stories. Bartlebooth’s desire in these “novels” is not to capture on canvas and describe the entire world, but a specific portion of it. Given the intricate arrangement of the world, it is done through a complex, artistic and entertaining program, where no element can be omitted. As Alison James points in her book, part of the trouble lies in Bartlebooth’s wish to control the order of events in detail and leave nothing to chance. His final actions remain fixed on one of his paintings cut into puzzles, more precisely painting number 439. He dies holding in his hands the last puzzle in the shape of a W, but the painting showed clearly the letter X. The fate and the “aura” of the 500 paintings is part of a ludic program. In Perec’s “novels,” the principal character, Bartlebooth, is preoccupied by the painting of a harbor. This painting contains live memories of his former life. One can see here an image of Perec’s own Jewishness both in the sense of contemporary events that made him an orphan and in the sense that the image of the “wandering Jew” fits his situation. The painting of the harbor five hundred times represents the growth of past life in memory through looking at the painting and its successive metamorphosis into a motion picture of his past life.

Benjamin says in his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* that the unique quality of the authentic work of art is found in its ritual. To his playful background, Bartlebooth does not want to add any other substance, whether political or critical. The importance of his paintings lies within the fact that it exists and serves as a game. It is a solitary game, not an exhibit for masses. The essential point here is that the ritualistic nature of his work of art requires almost no viewing at all. It remains as hidden as the accessibility of certain deities or parts of a temple were to most people in Greek and Roman cultures.

Bartlebooth’s defense of “aura” is more than a statement of belief; he is clearly against any reproduction of his artwork and its exhibition character. The motto of this character is to engage the artist wherever possible. This is a heroic act, a type of human sacrifice, in his opinion. The goal of the reverse motto would be to engage the artist as little as possible, leaving the machines to reproduce the artwork toward infinity. Since such ideas are concerned largely with interpretation, it is often felt that the reader faces an ambivalent device, which is sometimes serious other times playful. The irony here is that Bartlebooth chooses to play. He destroys the “aura” of his paintings. In this stylistic context he represents the rigorous and the casual at the same time. His game is literally the “decay of the aura,” but this type of game does not serve as a basis for reproduction

and does not occur before a fortuitous public. One can explain this destruction by Bartlebooth's rejection of any eternal value for his works. As an amateur painter, Bartlebooth claims neither artistic nor interpretive value for his canvases representing seaports. There is no cult concerning what his art expresses; it is only a question of the game it produces. Yet the question arises as to whether Bartlebooth's paintings were designed to embellish walls. The answer is negative; their prime function was to serve as an object of entertainment and reconstruction of his memory. However, this is contradictory to all the paintings hanging on the walls of the Parisian building in *Life a User's Manual*, whose primary function is purely decorative. In his book *La Mémoire et l'oblique: Georges Perec autobiographe (Memory and Oblique: Georges Perec Autobiographer)*, Philippe Lejeune argues that Perec has a special way of talking about his life. He never addresses the question of memory directly; he finds an oblique way to do so. A good many of his memories, as they are known, are widely understood through his literary characters such as Bartlebooth.

3. Art is Not Static

Although one can talk about Bartlebooth and Opalka being similar in their sensibilities, it can be seen that their doctrines about art differ. For Opalka, art has a special significance. In both cases, however, there is a determination to avoid the problems of the day. Opalka began painting his "details" in 1965 and he sees them as materialization of artistic time and progress in art. Since 1972, when Opalka decided to add an additional 1% white color, the gray background becomes increasingly whiter. More important still is the artist's gaze toward the numbers painted in white on a completely white background. He envisions this progress toward infinity, not as a declarative aesthetics of an institutional system, but as a diachronic aesthetic, where numbers replace one another over time. Indeed, numbers, not shapes, become evidence of the presence of a plastic work. The concept of these "details" undermines what is seen, even though numbers can serve as shapes. The eye no longer sees the numbers or the gray area. It all disappears under the white color.

Equally telling are Opalka and Bartlebooth's reactions to finding a safe place to count or play. Above all, they are determined to find a retreat or an expression of pure interiority to list numbers or solve puzzles. The artist does not paint only what he sees, but also what he sees within the soul. Painting itself and the idea of seeing are called into question. Furthermore, art disappears from the canvas when Bartlebooth plunges the painting into a detergent solution and gets a blank canvas. In this sense, a so-called blank canvas can be a painting. For Opalka, the "detail" evolves into whiteness after 1972. The content of what is being seen depends on the artist's arbitrary decision, his actions and the array of choices for the completion of work.

On the whole, both artists contest the rationalist notion: that art is a repetitive and ordinary activity that does not need to end in order to be fixed in time and space. A new definition of art imposes itself here, where art has an end, but can be integrated in

time and space by numbers. It is an endless process of work for both the artist and the viewer. Yet, Bartlebooth adopts visibility to give it a ludic feature, while Opalka abandons visibility in favor of an encrypted script. Both go beyond art without necessarily leaving the aesthetic territory. These examples show that artwork is an irreversible process and it cannot find its culmination in a static iconic object. It evolves to white purity, to the inevitable new beginning after its symbolic destruction. Thus the ultimate gaze is the final moment when the painting is pure before the 1% change in Opalka's case.

4. Barthebooth and His Disinterested Pleasure in Art

Jacques Derrida in *The Truth in Painting* claims that every work of art carries a capacity of general deconstruction. It exists both in the discourse that interprets it and also beyond this discourse. Either it calls for an act of trust from the world, or for the acceptance of this world, prior to any possible interpretation. Ultimately this exploration may be an arena for dispute by the public. On the one hand Bartlebooth refuses to submit his works for public display and interpretation. On the other he destroys them and keeps them under complete silence. The work of art becomes voiceless and useless. Certainly it reveals an attitude to the twentieth century that cannot be imagined in any other age. Bartlebooth undermines the viewer's interpretation and the artist's sacrifice. In doing so, he limits "the right to see" of the spectator. Just as his paintings become unseen, autonomous and silent, so Bartlebooth completes his ritual. He changes his behavior and loses interest after the cycle has ended. He establishes and sets up limits for his painting and ritual playing by assigning a fixed date. In 25 years he will paint 500 harbors. Why 25 years? Why 500 paintings? These series stop at nothing except his own schedule. This halt is a form of death. Despite concern with the voyage, no political or historical conflict could interrupt his new daily routine, not even a World War.

Perhaps Bartlebooth's paintings are mechanical productivity, but they offer him a free game of imitation and reminiscence, and moreover, he receives no compensation other than his own "pure and disinterested pleasure" (*La Vérité en peinture* 52). According to Derrida, interest in art always refers to the existence of an object of art with a certain value. The question of beauty has intrinsically nothing to do with the interest that one has or lacks about an art object. The idea of beauty comes from the observation of things one considers beautiful. Appropriately enough, says Derrida in his book *The Truth in Painting*, the pleasure experienced at the beautiful requires absolute lack of interest for the object to exist: "Ce qu'on traduit en général par satisfaction subjective, le *Wohlgefallen*, le *plaire* qui détermine le jugement esthétique, doit être, on le sait, désintéressé" (*La Vérité en peinture* 52) ("What is generally called a subjective satisfaction, *Wohlgefallen*, the appeal, which determines the aesthetic judgment, must be, as we all know it, selfless" (*The Truth in Painting* 52).

Apparently, Derrida does not discuss the formal aspect of art. An aesthetic is built on intellect not necessarily on emotions, contrary to the claims by Jean-Jacques

Rousseau, the spokesman for these doubts in the eighteenth century. More important still is Derrida's appeal to the viewer's pleasure or displeasure in art. The aesthetic appreciation does not enrich our knowledge about the object of art. It provides a close relationship with the object and an affect: pleasure or displeasure. Taste in art is not a cognitive judgment, it is not logical, but subjective and therefore aesthetic (*aisthesis*). Above all, pleasure and displeasure can never be objective. This may be true, but it does not remove the intellectual pleasure in art analysis. This "pure and disinterested pleasure" of the object's existence "détermine le jugement de goût et l'énigme du rapport *endeuillé* – travail du deuil d'avance entamé – à la beauté. Comme une sorte de réduction transcendantale, l'épochè d'une thèse d'existence dont le suspens libère, dans certaines conditions formelles, l'affection pure du plaisir" (*La Vérité en peinture* 52-53) ("determines the judgment of taste and the enigma of the grieving rapport – a grieving process started in advance - towards beauty. It is similar to a transcendental reduction, where suspense releases an *epochè* of an existence thesis, in certain formal conditions, a pure love for pleasure") (*The Truth in Painting* 52-53).

The pleasure that Bartlebooth feels for pure play pushes him toward the non-existence of things and determines him to deconstruct his project. This is an anticipatory mourning for a life project. The mourning for the disappearance of things, the suspense, liberates him from the paths of knowledge, enabling him to enjoy in silence the fun part of the project. Bartlebooth finds during these moments of "impasse," during "these hours of sluggish inertia," during "these privileged instants" the essence of pleasure:

Plus souvent heureusement, au terme de ces heures d'attente, après être passé par tous les degrés de l'anxiété et de l'exaspération contrôlées, Bartlebooth atteignait une sorte d'état second, une stase, une espèce d'hébétude tout asiatique, peut-être analogue à celle que recherche le tireur à l'arc : un oubli profond du corps et du but à atteindre, un esprit vide, parfaitement vide, ouvert, disponible, une attention intacte mais flottant librement au-dessus des vicissitudes de l'existence, des contingences du puzzle et des embûches de l'artisan. (*La Vie mode d'emploi* 404)

More often fortunately, after these hours of waiting, after going through all the degrees of anxiety and controlled exasperation, Bartlebooth reached a kind of daze, stasis, a kind of Asian stupor, perhaps similar to that sought by the archer: an oblivion of the body and goal in life, an empty mind, perfectly empty, open, available, an intact attention, but floating freely above the vicissitudes of existence, the contingencies of the puzzle and the craftsman's pitfalls (*Life a User's Manual* 404).

5. Opalka and the Parergon in Art

In material terms Opalka, unlike Bartlebooth, finds pleasure in the display of his paintings to the public eye; he does not deprive them of critical commentary. The artist even painted in public, he followed his relentless program toward infinity. He is even reputed to have recorded his voice while painting numbers. The audience does not only see; it listens to the artist's voice counting in Polish. He counts quickly and articulates his numbers well. It sounds like a theatrical performance or a continuous reading of the holy book or a solo show. Similar in his tasks to Bartlebooth, Opalka is an intriguing madman when it comes to dealing with the *parergon*, what surrounds a work of art, and of course the *ergon*, the work of art itself. Here, Derrida's pictorial commentary responds to Kant's theory about these two notions, *ergon* and *parergon*. The twentieth century is a consummate age for lists of things used in art. Besides the voice recorder which uses a magnetic tape, there are many other accessories used by Opalka: microphones, headphones, mirrors, lamps, extension cords, a white screen, a screen placed on top of the art scene to reflect the light, a camera with a long handle, so that the artist can take pictures of himself with the same angle in the same position. All these supplements do not seem separate; they are part of the artistic process and create meaning in a cooperative manner. What is outside the "detail" becomes part of the "detail." It is neither outside nor inside. This surprising constancy of the *parergon* increases the pleasure of aesthetic taste in content and form. Like Opalka, Perec is often thought of as a genius in highlighting the external additives such as picture frames, clothing for statues, textual or artistic devices presented before or after a novel, tables, graphs; in other words, the "paratext", to borrow Gérard Genette's notion.

The *parergon* of Bartlebooth's paintings outweighs his artistic goal. This quasi-philosophical concept means, for Bartlebooth, an intact and regularly distorted formal structure, also placed in another aesthetic field. It is the game and the autobiographical field, which gives a new meaning and form to the *ergon*. Bartlebooth assembles puzzles from his paintings, and in doing so he reconstructs the fragments of his memory. His endurance is central to his achievement. It is in such a mood that Opalka takes pictures of himself, giving his "details" an autobiographical dimension.

The secondary task of these two artists is to push, to press against the work, seeking a point of contact with its essential meaning. The transcendent externality puts pressure on the border between the inside and the outside of the work of art. The external becomes internal only if the internal is missing. This delineation of inside and outside for both artists may seem unusual. Where does the *parergon* begin and end? How does one translate the main idea of a painting? The artist's voice that counts is it *parergon* or his personal photos? In my opinion, the voice and the photos are not part of the pictorial "details," but bring forth the same concept of enumeration toward infinity at an oral and photographic level. The move is a bold one, for the artist brings symmetry and parallelism among sound and visual arts. The result is an oral and photographic transposition synchronized with painting. However arbitrary this game might seem, the

“details,” the voice and the pictures are parallel tasks that take place at the same time. They overlap, but they are independent activities too. And Opalka’s assertion in defense of such activities may be intended as a self-portrait. In these activities, Opalka prefigures the story of his painting, the role of the human body and its privilege in art. The *parergon* intervenes only because of an inner lack and it bears traces of the artist’s sacrifice: his age captured in the photos. The *parergon* is changing to whiteness similar to Opalka’s “details.” But this framework is problematic, for as stated earlier, it is difficult to decide whether the photos and the voice are *parergon*, essential accessories, or *ergon*. The *parergon*, which reinforces the idea of self-representation and self-sacrifice, constitutes the very unity of the *ergon*. It does not appear only in the inner boundary, but also in the outer limit. The *parergon* has a surface that separates the work from the outside, from all the historical, political, economic background in which the artist creates. No theory can change the content of a work of art if it does not weigh first on the limiting framework.

6. A White Death in the Act of Seeing

Opalka’s understanding of the artist’s sacrifice is unique. The sacrificial rite is in the “detail,” in its repetition. The painter paints with no specific goal in mind and does not expect any compensation. He “opens a game” of reminiscence and leaves the mind free to produce the artwork. He implements another imitation between his own actions and those of the human imagination. The movement of the artist’s hand, that draws the integers from his mind, on a canvas already loaded with numbers, is part of an “economimesis” which produces an excessive abundance. By “economimesis” Derrida means a concept of economy that governs the view of the beautiful. In Derrida’s essay “Economimesis” there is a link between mimesis and *oikonomia*, the political economy. A politics or a political economy, to be more precise, is part of every discourse on art and on the beautiful. Nevertheless, the concepts of economy and beauty, in their most general instance, entail a kind of specification for Opalka. The hand receives more from the imagination than it promises to its viewers. The hand acts naturally, without any outside intervention. It is pure productivity that creates nothing but what belongs to the human being: the free play of enumeration.

The extreme accumulation of numbers means dispersion in everything: in world events, in different states of mind. For both Bartlebooth and Opalka, the whole is cut into small “details” to be returned to nothingness, to the blank space, to the beginning of innocence. Opalka and Bartlebooth further restrict the spectator’s right to see. The white numbers on a white background cannot be read or seen. The viewer can guess whether he or she counts to himself or herself. This represents a white death in the act of seeing, but not to the concept of art. The form and content of the work of art merge. The artist and the viewer become one being counting toward infinity. The reason behind this lies not as much in any fascination for mathematics as in the attitudes towards order and disorder. Opalka gives a direction to the spectator, who deconstructs the path of the artist’s hand with his or her eye movement up and down the canvas.

This raises the question of order and disorder in art, contrary to what Derrida said in *The Truth in Painting*. He said that an object of art does not necessarily require a direction in reading. In Opalka's "details," one must start counting at the top left corner of the canvas, similar to reading and writing. After so much excess and constant confinement, the artist is no longer interested in the visual aspect and paints his numbers in white. He thus becomes a deconstructive counter creating a program of "mourning" and emptiness. This reductionist trend or degree zero of painting, frees the artist from the old tradition problem, allowing him to enter a new life, a perfectibility stage in art.

III. The Final Gaze and the Circularity of Art

The thought of the final gaze for Perce and Opalka is death before everything blurs and merges into chaos. From this point on everything seems possible again. The final gaze is the observation that one world ends and another begins. Last part of a cycle, the ultimate gaze embodies the end of a period represented by its political or artistic context. Perce introduces a number of compelling images in *Life a User's Manual* about the final gaze. First, he mentions the controversy about Amerigo Vespucci, who never knew or learned on his deathbed that the new continent was named after him. Then, it is said that Vespucci was still alive, when the use of the new land, called America, was established. The narrator of *Life a User's Manual* describes a romantic engraving about this case. It is Antoine Johannot's engraving that shows the Italian explorer on his deathbed surrounded by his family in 1512.⁷ A man, kneeling in tears at his bedside, gives him an atlas to see with his own eyes one last time, the word America deployed through the new continent (*La Vie mode d'emploi* 455). The description of this engraving, included in Chapter LXXX entitled "Bartlebooth" in *Life a User's Manual*, echoes with the great story of the main character. Bartlebooth dies trying to assemble one of his paintings cut into puzzles. His ultimate action is attached to the aesthetic object of his life. Among other interpretations on this subject, Perce is trying to present Bartlebooth's life project as a pale reflection of important trips in the New World made by Vespucci. Echo in literature is a very powerful technique and can penetrate time and space. The echoes that follow after, are vaguer and less important, but bear the imprint of the original explosion.

1. The Desire for Self-Representation

Convinced that great art is the expression of their inmost spirit, Perce and Opalka believe in self-expression, but they are no revolutionaries. When painting harbors, human activities, maps and atlases of the New World, Bartlebooth, Opalka and

⁷ Antoine Johannot (1803-1852) also called Tony Johannot, is a French artist who illustrated many books for Molière, Cervantes, Rousseau, Walter Scott, Lord Byron, Goethe, Lamartine, Hugo and many others.

Vespucci make their self-portrait. Their ultimate gaze at the world perpetuates the desire for self-representation. In art, the macrocosm often symbolizes the artist himself, the intellectual and spiritual microcosm. The original discovery of the universe leads to aesthetic self-realization, to its singular place in the world, to the designs of the world:

Un homme fait le projet de dessiner le Monde. Les années passent : il peuple une surface d'images de provinces, de royaumes, de montagnes, de golfes, de navires, d'îles, de poissons, de maisons, d'instruments, d'astres, de chevaux, de gens. Peu avant sa mort, il s'aperçoit que ce patient labyrinthe de formes n'est rien d'autre que son portrait. (*Atlas Wim Delvoe* 1)

A man has as a project to draw the world. Years pass: he populates an area with images of provinces, kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships, islands, fish, houses, instruments, stars, horses and people. Shortly before his death, he realizes that the patient labyrinth of forms is nothing other than his self-portrait (*Atlas Wim Delvoe* 1)

Perec and Opalka not only bring a greater dogmatism to the revival, but they also discuss art and its significance for the modern painter in far more specific terms. Their inspiration stems from the fact that the project coincides with the life of the artist. A writer or an artist's life is nothing less than an uninterrupted artistic journey. The painter's work is between the enjoyment of art and the "mania of living." And more personally, it implies that the life of the artist becomes a work of art. For Bartlebooth and Opalka, art and life are identical. This basic concept is at the center of their artistic approach, in the heart of *parergon*. And, indeed, this is not possible without a rigid subordination of life to the creative act.

In this context, where art is always a metaphor for life, Wim Delvoe⁸ designs an atlas, which combines the rigor of science and imagination. In a world oversaturated with real maps, the artist imagines a new Physical and Political World Map with oceans, seas, rivers, relief more or less similar on both hemispheres. In his collection of maps, the eye discovers six parts of the world and seven seas, totally fictitious, whose names are distinctive traces of several languages such as English, French, Chinese, Russian, *etc.*: North Cihatailoi, South Cihatailoi, Opatiwonia, Great Fari, United States of Bei-i-or-ia and Skelian Archipel; Mooxy Ocean, Caric Ocean, Onaby Ocean, Bavlian Ocean, Bombardo Ocean, Ocean Athai and South Otique Ocean.

Delvoe's titanic project shows resemblance to the conviction of Atlas, a Titan in Greek mythology, supporting on his shoulders the sky for eternity. Facing the

⁸ Wim Delvoe (b. 1965 in Wervik, West Flanders) is a Belgian artist who explores the trivial and the revolting in art.

wickedness and violence of the public, the artist often gives the impression of bearing the world and its values on his shoulders. In the corridors of time, the artist accepts Atlas' task and goes in search of a new world, a fictional world at peace with itself. Atlas' final gaze costs him his life. Under Perseus' pressure, he takes a look at the head of the Gorgon Medusa, which petrifies and turns him into a mountain. The giant's transfiguration does not remove his condemnation by the gods of Olympus.

Execution, travel, numbers, and inspiration: these images of Verne, Perec, Opalka and Delvoye thus suggest a new direction. The point at issue is whether the representation of the final gaze can in itself play a transitional role for this new direction. The mentioned artists show a world that comes to life; they reflect the genesis of a finite cycle and commitment to a new space, a new beginning. At its simplest, this genesis begins with the world of disorder, chaos, one, "zero degree" of artistic expression, and always ends there, at the starting point of creation. They must invent the elements of a new language, of a new art space. The resulting fall is inevitable. All seems lost, even the idea of a fall. Finding a way means to restore this fall. The artistic crisis is as much art as metaphysics. Such thinking provides an exciting rationale for the abandoned chaos to be reorganized. And although any project, historical or artistic, seems futile, incapable of producing any meaning, there is always a way to deconstruct and begin a new one. Chance, which has no meaning and is often blind, is the fate of the individual.

2. The Defeat of Death

With its numerous characters, *Life a User's Manual* becomes in this sense a rapid succession of final contemplations followed by inevitable deaths. Art, for Perec and Opalka, is one of the last attempts to revive the dream and create a new life plan. This constant creation reminds them sometimes that the project size is only a parenthesis of the world. For these artists, the final gaze and the last act is a clear reference to culture and nature. Blind and without energy, Bartlebooth continues nevertheless to assemble puzzles using his touch. The mind and the hands are his last hope to solve the puzzle. He concentrates his final act on the human artifact, the canvas he had painted and Winckler who had cut it into puzzles:

C'est le vingt-trois juin mille neuf cent soixante-quinze et il va être huit heures du soir. Assis devant son puzzle, Bartlebooth vient de mourir. Sur le drap de la table, quelque part dans le ciel crépusculaire du quatre cent trente-neuvième puzzle, le trou noir de la seule pièce non encore posée dessine la silhouette presque parfaite d'un X. Mais la pièce que le mort tient entre ses doigts a la forme, depuis longtemps prévisible dans son ironie même, d'un W. (*La Vie mode d'emploi* 578)

It is June twenty-third nineteen seventy-five and it will soon be eight o'clock. Sitting in front of his puzzle, Bartlebooth just died. On the table cloth, somewhere in the twilight sky of four hundred and thirty-ninth puzzle, the black hole of one piece, not yet used, shows the perfect shape of an X. But the piece, that the diseased holds in his hands, as the irony predicted long ago, has the shape of a W. (*Life a User's Manual* 578)

For Michel Strogoff, the final moments are near his mother, who represents life and defeat of death. He directs his supreme gaze towards his mother, towards nature and the continuation of life: "Ma mère! ...Oui! oui! à toi mon suprême regard...! Reste là, devant moi! Que je voie encore ta figure bien-aimée! Que mes yeux se ferment en te regardant!" (*Michel Strogoff* Chapitre V, Partie 2) ("My mother! Yes...! Yes! My supreme gaze is for you...! Stay there before me! So that I could see again your beloved face! I want my eyes to see you before they close!" (*Michael Strogoff: The Courier of the Czar*, Chapter V, Part 2).

The same goes for Opalka, whose ultimate gaze is fixed on the white color. This could mean the absence or the sum of all colors. All or nothing. In this way, the white color is at the beginning and at the end of his artistic project. White for Opalka refers to a transitional phase between the visible and the invisible, between earthly and heavenly life, between death and rebirth. According to this his organization of things, every human project must go through the white source of energy. The white color acts as a silence full of possibilities and hope. The gray world of Opalka is a symbolism of despair and static power. By whitening the "details" he hopes to find new inspiration. It is a leap from static to dynamic forces. The white paint is the absolute silence in writing. This silence is not the same thing as death, it abounds in living possibilities. The same for the white color, it is a blank space before birth, before a new beginning.

As might be expected, art and nature are the counterpoint of death; they are the site of a permanent genesis according to Romanticism. What remains after Bartlebooth and Opalka is the concept, because they destroyed the visual side of their paintings. For the Romantic Movement, content and interiority are important; they go beyond the form to develop the idea further. This is known as the mourning of the form, the destruction of art and the predominance of the idea.

There are two interrelated projects for Percec announced in the epigraph of *Life a User's Manual*, "Look with all your eyes, look!" This motto helps the reader understand and trace the fall of a myth, the myth of the final gaze. It also means to revive permanent dreams and thirst for life. And, just as Percec announces Bartlebooth's death and the end of his life project, thus he depicts the silence:

Véronique Altamont regarde une ancienne photographie de sa mère
 Dans sa cuisine Cinoc ouvre une boîte de pilchards aux aromates en
 consultant les fiches de ses mots périmés ;

Hutting travaille au portrait d'un homme d'affaires japonais ; un chat tout blanc aux yeux vairons dort dans la chambre de Smautf...
 Le petit-fils de l'accordeur aveugle attend son grand-père sur les marches en lisant les aventures de Carel Van Loorens...
 "Hortense" écoute de la musique au casque en attendant les Marquiseaux. (*La Vie mode d'emploi* 576-578)

Véronique Altamont gazes at an old photograph of her mother.
 In his kitchen, Cinoc opens a can of pilchards with herbs and looks at his notes.
 Hutting works on a portrait of a Japanese businessman; a very odd-eyed white cat sleeps in Smautf's room...
 The grandson of a blind tuner reads the adventures of Carel Van Loorens, while waiting for his grandfather on the door steps...
 "Hortense" listens to music on her earphones, while waiting for the Marquiseaux (*Life a User's Manual* 576-578).

These infra-ordinary activities banish speech and actually show how to magnify an event and intensify literary effects. Bartlebooth, with the last puzzle in his hands, is a continuation of this list of quiet activities. Perce shows evidence that a project is doomed to perdition, because it is part of a time frame and an ephemeral human activity. The death of the project is not complete, since Bartlebooth leaves behind paintings cut into puzzles he has not managed to assemble. The project did not disappear; it keeps the memory cut into fragments, the memory of an artist and of a puzzle maker. The tragic final phase is inside the project that he leaves behind and the possibility of continuing the game or reinventing another project.

The final gaze is more than a continuation of a project. The exploration can be extensive as well as intensive: the sheer detail of the world can become overwhelming. It is the extensiveness of these projects that obsessed Perce and Opalka. Their most powerful remark on art that they make is the poetry of silence and calmness. Their ideas led them to deny the inevitability of the ultimate gaze and profit from its silence or turbulence. Carried away by their art projects, they look back, but their art does not disappear. They can still find traces of their projects, even though they tried to deconstruct them, on the ruins of history. This worldview is much more than a dream or mourning.

These artists' projects, conceived against time, seem close to Hegel's idea in his lectures on *Aesthetics*. The most ephemeral things are signs of eternity. Hegel notes that when describing a thing, by a natural or an artistic process, it is changing, becoming something else. The Hegelian dialectic teaches us that the science of nature and art destroys but it also retains what it generates. The two artists, Perce and Opalka work against any rules of preservation, but they ensure the birth of new games, of new

beginnings. The emergence of the new in nature or art has the dissolution of the old as an absolute condition. This negative connotation does not represent Evil, but a necessary transformation of nature or art. It is a transition from one stage to another, a world buried in the past making room for a new one. Perec and Opalka affirm the hope that each project, no matter how insignificant it is, is as influential and vital as reality itself. They describe the ultimate gaze as reflecting, at a deeper level, on the origin and aspect of each fragment of reality. To the global vision of mourning and death accompanying the final gaze, they oppose the winding evidence of renewal in life.

Their effort is akin to the poetic attempt of Stéphane Mallarmé, who wrote with the support of all the arts to produce an emotional surprise. Similar to Mallarmé's verses, these artists' projects induce a strong impact: the reader has never before heard or seen such artistic games immersed in a new atmosphere. Each image of the ultimate gaze portrays the inevitable beginning. The void becomes the starting point of the Beautiful and the Ideal. Bartlebooth loses his sight, but he continues his project with his hands and mind. He failed to send all his paintings to nothingness, because there are sixty-one left to assemble. Amerigo Vespucci died in the Old World looking at the map of the New World. Strogoff sees his mother in tears and begins to cry. His tears water his eyes and save his sight from the hot sword. This miracle will allow him to continue his fight against the Tartars. Atlas, turned into a mountain, does not stop supporting the vaults of heaven. Opalka does not stop counting even if the numbers are no longer visible.

IV. Conclusion

Following on the work of several artists, fictional or real, recent or past thinkers, this study suggests that the final gaze is the ultimate gaze, very edifying and sharply defined in literature and art, but not convincingly enough in criticism. Paintings represent a moment of stasis where a moment in life is inscribed and which provokes meditation and reflection on life and the meaning of the story, or portrait painted. Perec writes "novels" and Opalka paints numbers to invoke the relationship between painting, life, death, and rebirth. These artists' originality consists of building their continuity myth from the idea of the final gaze. As such, Bartlebooth and Opalka deconstruct their canvases looking forward to a new beginning, thus rebuilding their work toward infinity. For just as Bartlebooth's blindness and Opalka's persistence are sacrifices in the name art, so their paintings multiply from the invisible.

The aesthetic judgment for these artists permanently assumes a mixture of intrinsic and extrinsic values, *ergon* and *parergon*, the new and the old. Such notions certainly add considerable authority to their art projects. This is important, because usually, the aesthetic judgment focuses on the intrinsic beauty, not the surrounding material, but Perec and Opalka favor the *parergon* bringing it closer to the *ergon*, the main body of an artwork. It is interesting, too, to see Bartlebooth's game and Opalka's voice

contribute to the aesthetic representation of the *ergon*, of the beautiful in painting. The most important outcome of their tasks is that the creation act continues after the final gaze. That an observer's knowledge about the final gaze is never complete is another of the many ways in which the significances of literature and art seem to be inexhaustible. The artists' position about the motto "Look with all your eyes, look!" is certainly a tempting ambiguous notion. The theme of death and final gaze allow them to unleash a jubilant imagination of life and potential creation. Through a procession of funeral images, of multiplicity and deconstruction of art, they emphasize the ultimate gaze in the circularity of real life and art.

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