Black on White: Decolonising the Gaze

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Black on White: Decolonising the Gaze

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- 1 Despite knowing the expression “an innocent gaze” is meaningless, we still catch ourselves in the act of being idealistic. Marc Jimenez remarked that, while we have become relativists in terms of taste, and are therefore conscious of the plurality of cultural systems conditioned by specific historical contexts, we are still prone by distraction, to formulating aesthetic appreciations that call upon “immutable, ahistorical or transhistorical” Platonic beauty.¹ Will we ever be rid of our idealistic gaze?
- 2 Nothing can be a better influence on our retinas than a great exhibition that reveals what we had been approximatively rationalising through knowledge acquired from books. The epigraph of one of Jean Laude’s articles, collected in the roughly 900 pages of his *Ecrits sur l’art*, opportunely quotes Jean-Jacques Rousseau: “What the ancients said most vividly, they did not express by words, but by signs; they did not say it, they showed it.”² According to Jean Laude, a student of Pierre Francastel, this assertion from the author of the *Essay on the Origin of Language* heralds what he terms “non-discursive thought”.³ Updating this type of thought, including its presuppositions that weave through arrangements of patterns and forms, was one of the aims of the exhibition *Le Modèle noir : de Géricault à Matisse*, held at the musée d’Orsay (26 March-21 July 2019).⁴ How can one describe the effect of this exhibition on an absorbed visitor? In the catalogue’s introduction, the words of Anne Lafont and David Bindman referring to a previous museum display sum it up perfectly: the succession of pieces from Théodore Géricault to Henri Matisse proves to be “revelatory of the Eurocentrism and comfortable approximations in the perception of Others, seen as eternally and stiffly exotic or as innocently propitious elements in the regeneration of Western artistic sophistication, which in turn is essentialised in its very grandeur.”⁵ A picture of Martin Luther King visiting an exhibition at the Bowdoin College (Brunswick, Maine) on May 6th, 1964, the very year of the Civil Rights Act, is included in the catalogue and sets the tone: the exhibition’s discourse is political in the purest sense, and aimed at an audience in step with the realities of French society and the fact it is comprised of

overseas territories, where Toussaint Louverture and Madeleine, the young Black servant painted by Marie-Guillemine Benoist, once roamed.⁶

- 3 On a broader scale, how should one understand this shift towards a political understanding of Western art – art from Western Europe, North America, Latin America and the Caribs; in other words, the European imperialist world from the 15th century onwards? Exactly this: that “the purest teleological modernist history cannot do without social and political history, and perhaps even more so Black history.”⁷
- 4 Effectively taking into account this history implies overcoming a difficulty, indeed a terminological taboo, in France at the very least, surrounding the word “race”⁸. It has been considered salutary to expurgate it from one’s vocabulary out of principle, at the same time as “primitive” and “negro”, because of their racist connotations. However, without losing sight of the biological inconstancy of the term of race and the essentialist logic it entails, it should not be forgotten that as a social construct demonstrating a logic of either stigmatisation or reappropriation, it does signify something.⁹ In her study of Abomey court art, Gaëlle Beaujean points out another ideological misunderstanding which for a long time was dominant in museographic representations: ethnical classification. Paul Rivet and Georges Henri Rivière’s *musée de l’Homme* (1937) did not harbour any racist prejudice, and it had ostensibly broken off with the military display of ethnographic loot, but it was however unsuccessful in avoiding ethnic assumptions. The deeply heterogeneous aesthetic reality of the cosmopolitan kingdom of Dahomey’s artefacts, which, following wars and exchanges, had integrated widely varied cultural influences including from the West¹⁰, was therefore invisible to visitors. This state of affairs changed in France from the 1980s onwards, particularly with the opening of the Dapper foundation and its assertive aesthetic stance¹¹ which was confirmed on a wider scale by the Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac Museum (2006).
- 5 African art requires many methodological preliminaries¹², more so than other areas of art history, because the subject is so remarkably full of pitfalls – or rather because our Western knowledge categories have predisposed us to misjudge it. Therefore, the fundamental ambiguity of discourses on Others should not be overlooked; Gaëlle Beaujean reminds us that although it was not answerable to the Ministry of Colonies, ethnology “was very useful for administrators and other civil servants who were in office in Africa.”¹³ The so-called Negro clocks by Jean-Simon Deverberie (1764-1824) are good indicators for appraising the presuppositions inherited from our imperialist history. These decorative clocks were very popular from 1800 to 1830, designed to be advantageously displayed on the mantelpieces of a rich international clientele. The gold-plated, burnished and engraved bronze “*africaneries*” (Anne Lafont) were produced in a spirit that was probably similar to that of post-Davidian painters, such as Anne-Louis Girodet, the author of the famous *Portrait of Jean-Baptiste Belley* (1797) held at the Palace of Versailles. In the context of the first, temporary, abolition of slavery between 1794 and 1802, which was contemporary of the demise of the bronze- and clockmaking corporation, the Deverberie company offered picturesque objects in its catalogue, an unusual way of connecting representations of the foreign “Other” (Black or Native American persons inspired by Chateaubriand’s *Atala*) to time-related data. Anne Lafont highlights the fact that on every clock, the Black subject is either at work or in a work-related occupation. In short, the highly sophisticated ornamental objects represented a condensed version of the particularly predatory new depictions of the world,

characteristic of the Western 19th century. The European world's programme was comprised of two aims: commercially, "capitalist ambition and faith in technological progress", and "as to the desire for territorial expansion, the legal exploitation of labour force, with or without slavery."¹⁴ Regarding for example the case of Dahomey, starting in 1892 France undertook what was modestly termed a "pacification" process led by the general Dodds, who was at the head of 3,000 men, mostly battalions of Senegalese Tirailleurs. But the war proper was preceded by a commercial, political and religious "control strategy"¹⁵, which notably condemned, in the name of humanist values, the unsettling *hwetanu*, annual festivals accompanied by human sacrifices.¹⁶

- 6 As Jean-Jacques Rousseau had anticipated in his first major publication, *Discourse on the Arts and the Sciences* (1750), the legacy of the Enlightenment was ambivalent: the progress of knowledge does not imply the progress of customs. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944) Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer broadened this observation, which Susan Buck-Morss's book, *Hegel and Haiti* (2006) pertinently renewed.¹⁷ The American philosopher thoroughly reinterpretes the *Aesthetics* of the creator of the master-slave dialectic, formulating the hypothesis that the birth of aesthetics as a discipline was connected to the shock created by a world that had become heterogeneous, thus requiring new norms and new taste criteria. The death of classical art that Hegel had predicted is the "paradise lost"¹⁸ of the Euro-centred and nostalgic Westerner, confirming the unsurpassable contradiction of the Enlightenment, indissolubly emancipatory and colonialist all at once.¹⁹
- 7 Although it is possible to identify a process "minimalizing [colonial] brutality"²⁰ that was only revealed in denunciatory art – as was masterfully exemplified by William Blake²¹ – it is also important to underscore the significance of the more recent appropriation processes of art from the African colonies by European avant-gardes. Jean Laude (1922-1983), an ethnologist hired at the musée de l'Homme by Michel Leiris in 1946, a poet, a researcher at the CNRS and later at the University, devoted a great part of his life to studying the meaning of the Western interpretation of Sub-Saharan African art.²² During the post-war period, it was too early to try and assess the situation of Black bodies in the arts. The objects produced by African societies, which were studied and collected by ethnologists such as Marcel Griaule, focused much attention. Based on his own decompartmentalised training, Jean Laude's essays underscored and clarified the convergence of heuristic intuitions and hypotheses between the input of field ethnology on the one hand and the forms of Cubist painters, more particularly those of Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque and Juan Gris, on the other.²³ Jean Laude quotes the latter's memorable words in several places: "Negro sculpture offers obvious proof of the possibility of anti-idealist art"²⁴, in other words, non-symbolic art, to be understood as a "combinatory"²⁵ system of formal stereotypes and signs. Jean Laude's texts are nourished by the decisive contributions of social science (particularly Roman Jakobson and Claude Lévi-Strauss's Structuralism), which no doubt distinguishes him from the more academic art historians of his time.²⁶ His attention and classificatory preoccupation for so-called "Negro" art led him to pay attention to the then little-known work of Carl Einstein (1885-1940), who contributed to George Bataille's magazine *Documents* and wrote the ground-breaking book *Negerplastik* in 1915. Carl Einstein was open about the fact that the gateway leading him to African art had been his interest in Cubism, of which he was a contemporary. Should this indirect access be seen as a methodological pitfall? On the contrary, it would be illusory to believe that as a Westerner, he could have accessed this fundamentally foreign art with no mediation

whatsoever. Jean Laude faithfully defended the trailblazing contribution of the German theoretician, for instance in the profile of Carl Einstein he published in the first issue of the *Cahiers du musée national d'art moderne* in 1979. Defending this approach while facing some of its shortcomings essentially meant supporting a type of art which attempted to recreate reality rather than describing it. Cubism renewed this movement in its own way and in this sense, it constitutes a literal “rupture”, a concept Jean Laude developed in connection to Michel Foucault’s work (*The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 1969)²⁷. But this rupture is not only related to the hazy awareness of what the pioneering exhibition at the New York Museum of Modern Art presented, in 1984-85, under the equally problematic name of “Primitivism” in *20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* (curated by William Rubin).²⁸ Through his exploration of the complex processes of appropriation, Jean Laude forcefully demonstrated how a key painting by Picasso, *The Young Ladies of Avignon* (1906-1907) was the visible proof of a highly elaborate “figurative thought” (Pierre Francastel) and a “decisive disruption in Western visual language”²⁹. To be more precise, that thought-painting exposed a crisis by displaying exactly what it shook up in the knowledge system (*episteme*) and sensitivity (*aesthesis*) of the period. What exactly are we dealing with in this lupanar scene? The historian-cum-ethnologist answers: “Facing Cézanne, all at once the sum, completion and crowning achievement of the Western tradition, he [Picasso] erects compositions derived from a despised art form, the art of the colonies.”³⁰ If we choose to understand Pablo Picasso’s African appropriation through the prism of this interpretation, the process is conscious of the political issue suffusing the formalist dimension, set on the metaphysical battlefield between a dualist Western conception (which separates the body from the mind, making it possible to overlook the former) and a completely different, condensed conception, of which African art, in all its diversity, offers some examples.

- 8 Decolonising the gaze in France still requires combined efforts, in the same spirit as the exhibition at the musée d’Orsay or as the movement initiated by Picasso, in order to gradually correct our impenitent idealism. In the conclusion of one of his articles, Jean Laude made a facetious and acerbic remark: “What would we say if our African friends published at a furious rate books entitled “White art” with a hundred or so illustrations reproducing paintings and sculptures from every European country and every period?”³¹

NOTES

1. Jimenez, Marc. *Qu’est-ce que l’esthétique ?*, Paris: Gallimard, 1997, p. 24, (Folio essais)
2. Laude, Jean. “Lecture ethnologique de l’art”, *Ecrits sur l’art*, Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2019, p. 119, (Œuvres en sociétés).
3. *Ibid.*
4. The exhibition was the result of a collaboration between the Orsay and Orangerie Museums, the Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery (Columbia University, New York), the ACTe memorial in Pointe-à-Pitre and the Bibliothèque nationale de France.

5. *Le Modèle noir : de Géricault à Matisse*, Paris : Musée d'Orsay : Flammarion, 2019, p. 22
6. In her essay, Gaëlle Beaujean also remarks on the function of exhibitions as creating social cohesion from the 1970s onwards. See: Beaujean, Gaëlle. *L'Art de cour d'Abomey : le sens des objets*, Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2019, (Œuvres en sociétés), p. 315
7. *Ibid.*, p. 24
8. On this subject, see the clarifications of Anne Lafont in *L'Art et la race : l'Africain (tout) contre l'œil des Lumières*, Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2019, (Œuvres en sociétés), p. 33-39.
9. *Le Modèle noir. Op. cit.*, p. 35
10. Beaujean, Gaëlle. "Le Rayonnement et la différenciation de 1892 à 1960", *op. cit.*, p. 301
11. Beaujean, Gaëlle. "L'Art de cour d'Abomey depuis 1960 et 2000", *ibid.*, p. 319
12. Lafont, Anne. "Introduction" in *L'Art et la race*, *op. cit.*, p. 5-42. Also see Jean Laude's development on the ethnological approach in art in *Ecrits sur l'art*, *op. cit.*, p. 119-145 and p. 773-809.
13. Beaujean, Gaëlle. *Ibid.*, p. 311
14. Lafont, Anne. *Op. cit.*, p. 312
15. Beaujean, Gaëlle. "La Guerre coloniale et le butin de guerre : 1889-1894", *op. cit.*, p. 223
16. Beaujean, Gaëlle. *Ibid.*, p. 230
17. Lafont, Anne. *Op. cit.*, p. 399-409
18. *Ibid.*
19. On Nietzschean grounds, Jean Laude discusses the collapse of the "coherence of the Western world" for post-Cézanne painters. See: *Ecrits sur l'art*, *op. cit.*, p. 348.
20. Lafont, Anne. *Op. cit.*, p. 297
21. Engravings for John Stedman's book, *Narrative of a Five Years' Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam in Guiana*, London, 1796.
22. His post-graduate thesis was supervised by Pierre Francastel and was devoted to *Dogon Statuary* (1964), and his PhD, supervised by Etienne Souriau dealt with *French Painting (1905-1914) and "Negro Art"* (1968).
23. In contradiction with a functionalist analysis, the categorisation of African artefacts as Art affected museums, including the Musée de l'Homme, from the 1960s onwards. (Beaujean, Gaëlle. *Op.cit.*, p.314).
24. Laude, Jean. *Op.cit.*, p. 145
25. Laude, Jean. *Ibid.*, p. 147
26. Controversial maxim: "Erudition is not History: it most usually leads to acephalous eclecticism", *ibid.*, p. 154.
27. Laude, Jean. *Ibid.*, p. 232
28. Although he was seriously ill, Jean Laude contributed to the exhibition catalogue with an essay on Paul Klee, written with the help of his friend Pierre Daix.
29. Laude, Jean. *Ibid.*, p. 339
30. Laude, Jean. *Ibid.*, p. 340
31. Laude, Jean. *Ibid.*, p. 809

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