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Introduction: Right in Front of our Eyes

One of the most popular, because easy to understand, products of contemporary cognitive psychology is the so-called 'McGurk effect'. The effect was first outlined in *Nature* in 1976 by Harry McGurk and John MacDonald, who discovered by chance the potential for visual cues to interfere with auditory information in the perceptual field. Experiments have shown that if a sound recording of the same repeated phoneme (for example, 'ba ba ba') is paired with recordings of a set of lips pronouncing first the same phoneme (ba ba ba) and then a different one (for example, 'fa fa fa'), the visual information will tend to override the auditory. More often than not, the perceiver of the audio-visual recording will first hear 'ba ba ba', and then hear 'fa fa fa', even though the sound has not in fact changed. The lessons derived from the McGurk effect are predictable: that speech perception depends on sensory integration, that vision is the dominant sense, and that our eyes can be tricked, or rather, that our eyes can trick our other senses.

It is tempting to detect in the McGurk effect an unlikely alliance, or at least homologous relations, between cognitivist theory and ideology critique. The latter also teaches us to distrust appearances and to search for a set of real relations underlying the deceptive surface of things. As Bertolt Brecht said about a photograph of a factory, 'less than ever does the mere reflection of reality reveal anything about reality. A photograph of the Krupp works or the A.E.G. tells us next to nothing about these institutions. The reification of human relations – the factory, say – means that they are no longer explicit. Something must in fact be *built up*, something artificially posed'.[1] Brecht raises the stakes rather higher than McGurk and McDonald, but does at least coincide with them in his wariness about the visual field more generally, in its capacity to deceive.

This special issue of *Parallax* does not take the McGurk effect as its theoretical starting point, but rather as a form of common sense to be contested. Leaving aside the techno-historical

contingency of the effect, which is made possible only through modern sound and video recording and editing equipment, we are tempted to say that our contemporary situation is quite the opposite of what McGurk and McDonald discovered: the visual field (and, why not, the auditory as well) is not potentially duplicitous, as they comfortingly make out, but rather, it is right there, in front of our eyes (or ears). This, of course, is no guarantee that we will see or hear what is directly in front of us, for sometimes the best place to hide is right out in the open, as Edgar Allan Poe demonstrated with his purloined letter.

Jacques Lacan, one of the best readers of 'The Purloined Letter', is a central reference point in this issue, even if his famous essay is not. Our initial points of orientation are in fact earlier, coming from seemingly disparate parts of the theoretical tradition, as we attempt to forge affinities between Freud and Wittgenstein. In section 129 of *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein writes: 'The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something because it is always before one's eyes.)' The problem, as Wittgenstein goes on to remark, 'is that we *fail to be struck* by what, once seen, is most striking and most valuable'.[2] This concern with the importance, not to mention the difficulty, of seeing what is always in front of one's eyes is shared by classical psychoanalysis. In his essay 'The Moses of Michelangelo', Freud describes psychoanalysis as attempting to reveal 'secret and concealed things', but suggests that these things are themselves already on the surface – 'the scum' (*der Abhub*), as he puts it, of our observations.[3] If we wanted to construct an ongoing genealogy of this mode of thought beyond psychoanalysis and ordinary-language philosophy, we could point, over fifty years later, to an interview Bernard Bonnefoy conducted with Michel Foucault, in which Foucault points out that his philosophy is 'not trying to reveal things that have been deeply buried, hidden, forgotten for centuries or millennia, nor of discovering, behind what's been said by others, the secret they wished to hide [...] [It is] simply trying to make apparent what is very immediately present and at the same time invisible [...] To grasp that invisibility, that invisible of the too visible, that distancing of what is too close, that unknown familiarity'[4]

The political implications of Foucault's attempt can be mapped out very clearly in a text that sets itself up against Poe's 'spooks' – Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*.

> I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids – and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me.[5]

Ellison's 'Prologue' puns on being a 'man of substance' and belonging to the 'great American tradition of tinkers' in order to reflect on the political potential of refusing a simple logic of demystification. Wittgenstein's assertion that 'we find certain things about seeing puzzling, because we do not find the whole business of seeing puzzling enough',[6] is given here a full relational quality. The invisibility of which the Prologue speaks is not 'exactly a matter of a bio-chemical accident to my epidermis' but occurs instead 'because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their *inner* eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality.'[7] Far from providing any kind of easy resolution, the protagonist's invisibility leads to the violence in which a 'tall white man' is 'almost killed by a phantom', 'mugged by an invisible man!' and to his battle against 'Monopolated Light & Power', carried out by the protagonist through an act of sabotage which fills his 'hole' with a series of impossibly harsh lights: 'Perhaps you'll think it strange that an invisible man should need light, desire light, love light. But maybe it is exactly because I am invisible. Light confirms my reality, gives birth to my form.'[8] By inhabiting desired selves both longed for and despised, the self in *Invisible Man* does not emerge from dialogic interaction or lead to resolutions, but constantly flips one position into its opposite, darkness into light, meekness into a dangerous activity, and vice versa.

This brief example from a novel that thinks of blackness not as a given, as something to recognise, but as the result of an interaction between what can and cannot be seen when 'right in front of your eyes' encapsulates some of the theoretical, philosophical, aesthetic and political issues that this special issue of *Parallax*, 'Right in Front of our Eyes', sets out to analyse. The essays that follow ask, in different ways, why we routinely fail to notice the 'aspects' of things 'that are most important for us' and speculate on the potential consequences of this 'aspect-blindness'. They ask at what point, and under what conditions, the immediately present becomes invisible, and what might it mean to allow ourselves to be struck by that which is already in plain sight. How might such instances be made possible? In

this respect, the issue's interest is in a variety of double-takes, gestalt switches, un/disguised psychic treasures, blind spots and duck-rabbits. At stake therefore in many of the issue's essays is the practice of 'surface reading' of a literary or non-literary text, as well as potential critical responses to such a practice. Does an emphasis on seeing what is right in front of our eyes reveal an anti-philosophical aversion to depth? Or, indeed, an attempt to sidestep the complexities of ideology? What of Heidegger' view that 'concealing' and 'disclosing', hiding and letting-be, are always inextricably connected.[9] Do certain forms of philosophical and political 'blindness' have their uses in the context of a culture fascinated by 'seeing all'?

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[1] Cited in Benjamin, *One-Way Street*, 255.
[2] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §129.
[3] Freud, 'Moses of Michelangelo,' 265.
[4] Foucault, *Speech Begins After Death*, 70-71.
[5] Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 7.
[6] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, pt. II, section xi, 181.
[7] Ellison, 7.
[8] Ellison, 10.
[9] Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, 148.