

...In My Image (Some Lessons)

In *Communication: visage paranoïaque* (1931), Salvador Dali teaches us a lesson.

Starting from a photograph of a hut with some people lying about it the pedagogical destination is a face. A paranoid one.

Stage 1. The original photograph lies across a horizontal axis -- a landscape. Stage 2. Moving this in a ninety-degree rotation a semblance of a human visage becomes discernible in the portrait format. Stage 3. Blocking out certain visual information the third phase of this object-image-lesson is dedicated to making the face yet more apparent – whites are made whiter, darkneses are enhanced -- mid-tones drop out.

Dali proceeds from the lessons of Leonardo da Vinci. Look at cracks in the wall long enough and clouds appear. Perhaps the lesson is that we will see images of ourselves, of the worlds we want to imagine, anywhere. We infest the world with images of ourselves imagining. We spread out.

Dali proceeds through observation as assimilation. The ego is a swelling incorporation of things 'out there' into things 'in here' like an amoeba swallowing its way through a world of objects (images?). Anything 'out there' can become an image for me, of me, in me.

The starting point. It is a photograph of a hut with some people lying about it. It looks as if it has been taken in Africa, part of a vast colonial imaginary reservoir. A fantasy parading as a document of the ways people live. The hut looks as if it is made of straw. It is spherical with a point atop it, like an upturned breast. Behind it runs a fence. The people are dressed 'primitively'. Some people are lying about. Some recline, like odalisques. Others kneel or sit, resting their heads towards their knees. There are perhaps eleven people in all.

Dali teaches us a lesson in paranoiac knowledge, perhaps of an anthropological anthropomorphic dimension. He shows us, through the experience of prolonged assisted looking, a knowledge that didn't know itself. The face is paranoid. It didn't realise it was a photograph of a hut with some people lying about it.

In 1931 Dali-as-viewer of an image brought back from a far off colony sees himself but as a distortion, embedded deep in the image-object. These people, turned into objects by being frozen in the image, become the groundswell for a precarious identification. Subjects, turned into objects of fascination, are animated again. Fused together as a face.

Another lesson perhaps, apropos of Jacques Lacan. The signifier represents the subject for another signifier. The sign, as Charles Sander Peirce put it, shows something to some-one. Lacan's gloss is that language 'does' the subject not vice versa. The subjects transformed into signifiers (the image of a gathering of some people) become material for another signifier (white face sculpted from these signifiers). The foundations of certain identification and communication are transformed into uncertain knowledges. The face is paranoid. It didn't realise it was a photograph of a hut with some people lying about it.

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