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abstract:

The text is an analysis of Agnieszka Brzeżańska's photographs from the How To Shine In Public series, created in Tokyo in 1997–2001 in the context of the gaze theory as an objet petit presented by Jacques Lacan in Seminar XI of 1964 and the feminist deconstruction of psychoanalysis. I refer to the practice of écriture féminine as conceived by Hélène Cixous and its reformulation within the parler femme concept by Luce Irigaray. Both Lacan's theory and its feminist reformulation serve to rewrite the visual field of photo-graphics and the photographic series by Brzeżańska. I see in it the potential for the gaze to manifest itself as objet petit a, however, intercepted by the female subject, who is both the sender and the addressee of the visual expression.

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The Gaze Through Which I Am Photo-Graphed: On Writing with Light in Agnieszka Brzeżańska's Photography

In his *The End of the Theory of the Gaze*, James Elkins describes Lacan's gaze theory as one of the most influential and evocative in the field of visual culture studies, but almost impossible to read.[1] This framework, which Lacan called "the gaze as *objet petit a*," was outlined in a series of lectures published in the 1964 collected volume *Le Séminaire: Livre XI. Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*, released in English as *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis (Book XI)*. The famous eleventh installment in the series discusses the reversal of the subject-object relationship of the gaze. In simple terms, this entails the subject losing control of the gaze and its being captured by the object, elevating the latter to the dominant position in the relationship. Elkins is correct that the theory of the gaze as *objet petit a* is extremely persuasive and has remained fascinating for the past 60 years. But is it nearly unreadable? And does that mean it cannot be interpreted or used to analyze phenomena in the fields of visual culture and the arts? Perhaps the argument does not revolve around its reading so much as its experience and its repurposing in the form of interpretive performance or analytic experiment. One such repurposing involved the feminist deconstruction of psychoanalysis in the 1970s and the practice of *écriture féminine*, including its reformulation under the concept of *parler femme*, which introduced the category of sexual distinction into psychoanalytic discourse. The two practices have been used, respectively, in the process of writing from a female perspective, and in the act of female expression, meaning that the subject using them was, in traditional phallocentric psychoanalysis, marked by a dual lack. On the one hand, this duality stemmed from the constitutive and

irreducible deficiency of the subject in comparison to the great Other; on the other, within this system, the woman functioned as a castrated subject.[2]

Undaunted by Elkins' proclamation of unreadability, I will attempt to reformulate the theory of the gaze as *objet petit a* in the content of Agnieszka Brzeżańska's photographs from the series *How To Shine in Public* (1997–1998), as I believe they hold the potential to manifest the anamorphic gaze described by Lacan in *Book XI* of his seminar. Applied to a series of pictures, reformulating the gaze as *objet petit a* will carry all the more weight as it is *photo-graphy* – writing with light. Secondly, I will transpose the persistently avant-garde and subversive potential of the feminist deconstruction of psychoanalysis – following Slavoj Žižek's interpretative strategies – from the praxis of writing and expression into the visual realm. Finally, I will attempt to demonstrate that adopting the perspective of the gaze as *objet petit a* – or, to borrow from Žižek, of "looking awry" – then filtering it through a feminist lens, enables the transition from the ideological to the political subject (which I will explain later on).

A gap in the space of the visible

The term *objet petit a* itself is never translated, as it holds the status of an algebraic sign in psychoanalysis, and as such is considered Lacan's greatest contribution to psychoanalytic theory.[3] The concept of *objet petit a* clearly underwent an evolution in the French psychoanalyst's theoretical work, but in the context of this essay, the most important aspect entails the desire generated by the absence of the object. It must be strongly emphasized, however, that *objet petit a* itself becomes the cause of the desire. This brings about a clash of two separate orders: presence related to excess fantasy, and absence produced by the lack of the object of desire. If the object-cause of desire denies us access, then the gaze, in the form of absence,

shapes the structures of our fantasies.

To further elucidate the specific character of the gaze, we must first retrace what Lacan was thinking when using the categories of fantasy and desire. The everyday experience of social reality involves defined, ostensibly meaningful and ordered structures contained within what Lacan called the "Symbolic order."



Agnieszka Brzeżańska, *How To Shine In Public*, 1997–1998, courtesy of the artist.

Despite a sense of harmony between signified and signifier, cracks appear in the structure of reality, incongruous objects that cannot be reduced to the level of ordinary elements. In *The Real Gaze*, Todd McGowan writes that these protrude as excessive from the area of everyday experience, designated by the defined boundaries of the Symbolic.[4] That which constitutes this excess, however, remains invisible to us, because it transcends the structure of objective vision (or "looking straight," as Žižek puts it). The gaze as *objet petit a*, therefore, is characterized by the inability to directly see and take possession – through the controlling gaze, commanding the field of view. It is precisely here that desire and its influence are formed: we desire what refuses us access to itself. Desire is related to the social order's inability to offer fulfillment to the subject, and emerges when subjectivity is shaped in relation to social expectation. Like a suture, fantasy closes the breach caused by the structure of desire. The logic of fantasy, according to Lacan, enables the subject to seemingly transcend the impasse of unfulfillment, driven by the irreducible lack of the object of desire. Fantasy, both private and public, is a form of script, a performance, often played out unconsciously, to create

the sense of completeness.[5]

It ought to be noted that unfulfillment within the Symbolic stems not only from the norms imposed by this order, which the subject must abide by, but also the structure of language that underpins social communication. This means that, in the course of language acquisition in childhood, the subject is confronted with a demand or law they will henceforth be subject to. This demand or law is expressed by way of language, which itself is subject to interpretation. And here lies the problem of hidden meanings concealed within the language aimed at the subject by the Other. From the structure of language itself, meanwhile, emerges the desire to decipher its meaning. If actually uncovered, however, it would immediately be replaced by another desire. Thus, the Other generates an incessantly desiring subject, an unfulfilled subject which seeks to find in it something more than just otherness. Desire, although driven by the Other, representing the social order, is at the same time a threat to the functioning of this order. If desire stems from a demand expressed by language, while remaining inexpressible through language itself, then it reaffirms the fault inherent in the structure of the system. Consequently, the ideology of the Symbolic is unable to fill the constitutive lack in the desiring subject. The destiny of desire would then be to circle the essential impossibility. In such an interpretation, desire and the desiring subject have a political character. This particular feature derives from surrendering to the desire to transcend, or at least to perceive the possibility of transcending, the Symbolic order. Radicalized by the politics of desire, the subject is of course also pacified by the ideology of the social order, exploiting fantasy so as to neutralize desire. The purpose of fantasy is to offer the sensation of fulfillment without the discomfort engendered by the fundamental impossibility of fulfilling the desire.[6]

Tackling such a framing of the clash of the political and the

ideological, Lacan, in *Book VII* of his seminar, devoted to the ethics of psychoanalysis, formulated one of his fundamental propositions, which deals with the necessity of perseverance in desire.[7] At its core, the idea implies accepting the impossibility of fulfilling the desire, which in a psychoanalytic interpretation entails the awareness of a constitutive lack and the refusal to engage in a fantasy that merely simulates fulfillment. A subject embracing the structure of desire acknowledges the lack not only within themselves, but within the Other, possessing nothing that could help fulfill the desire.

As such, the gaze as *objet petit a* is oriented toward desire. This means that the object-cause of desire emerges from a situation that objectively does not exist in the Symbolic order, yet still skews perception. This gaze brings to mind the optics of anamorphosis, unreadable when viewed head on, but which takes on a specific shape when viewed obliquely. At its core, this is a reversal of the order of seeing, because looking head on is typically synonymous with objective viewing, whereas looking askew is associated with disturbances resulting from fear or desire. The anamorphic gaze, paradoxically, permits an undistorted view of things. It is only looking awry, conditioned and distorted by desire, that enables us to see what Lacan calls *objet petit a*.[8] As an example of the mechanism behind this sort of gaze, Lacan mentions Hans Holbein's 1533 painting *The Ambassadors.* At the bottom of the picture is a strange shape that is impossible to identify at first glance. Here, I will refer to a recommendation that Lacan includes in *Book XI* of his seminar: he advises everyone to take their first look at the painting as they step outside the space they find themselves in. It is only then that the painting, or *that thing* in the painting, will turn toward us, allowing us to see and decipher the emerging form. The object is pure anamorphosis – viewed head on, it is merely an abstract splotch, but viewed askew, we begin to see

a human skull.[9] From Holbein's perspective, it indicates death inevitably lurking beneath everyday experience. For Lacan, meanwhile, the anamorphic skull is, first and foremost, a locus in which the gaze as *objet petit a* manifests itself.[10]

Light from another shore

The scholar who perfectly interpreted Lacan's theory of the gaze as applied to the medium of photography was Jean Baudrillard. In his *Photography, or the Writing of Light*, he writes: "In photography, we see nothing. Only the lens 'sees' things."[11] For Baudrillard, photography is a place of absence, but also a place of the writing of light. One key aspect here is the work of the camera itself, which *photo-graphs* – it captures a light-based record of what appears and disappears in front of its lens.[12] The camera thus becomes a Lacanian gaze-instrument which enables the imaginal identification of the ego and the construction of an identity based around a gaze directed from without: "Hence it comes about that the gaze is the instrument through which light is embodied and through which... I am *photo-graphed*."[13]



Agnieszka Brzeżańska, *How To Shine In Public*, 1997-1998, courtesy of the artist.

Developing the theme of photographic light, Baudrillard compares its particular nature with the paintings of Edward Hopper, in which we find a distinctive, raw white light, reminiscent of the light at the seashore. Baudrillard believes it to be unrealistic, emptied out, devoid of atmosphere, as if coming "from another shore." Hopper's intuition about light resembles Vermeer, except that in the works of the Dutch artist the light

reveals intimacy, while in the American's it reveals the absolute externality, the materiality of objects, their immediate fulfillment and manifestation through emptiness. Baudrillard calls this manifestation, also present in photography, the "phenomenology of reality's absence," and argues that it is linked with a certain subversiveness of the image, based on the fact that photography, on the one hand, is an expression of the literality of the pictured object, while on the other it becomes the operator of reality's disappearance, i.e. a pictorial simulation related to – as Paul Virilio calls it – "the aesthetics of disappearance."[14]

Baudrillard's light and Lacan's gaze driven by absence and inversion of the subject-object relationship became points of departure for my analysis of Agnieszka Brzeżańska's photographs from the 1997–1998 series *How to Shine in Public*. Comprising 25 color pictures measuring 10×15 cm, taken with a compact camera, the series comes in a soft-cover album slightly larger than their format. The series can be split into two sets, drawing on vernacular, homespun photography aesthetics, and thus related to amateur photographic activity. The first set includes pictures showing a variety of events, featuring the artist in group or individual situations. Importantly, Brzeżańska herself was not the one releasing the shutter, and it is these photographs that will be the subject of my analysis. The second set was snapped by the artist herself, and is mostly a record of the reality she experienced, such as in the pictures of landscapes.

How to Shine in Public depicts everyday situations from the artist's time in Tokyo, where she studied at the National University of Fine Arts and Music from 1997–2001. What takes the series beyond the conventions of domestic photography is Brzeżańska's use of a sharp instrument to scratch irregular shapes into the surface of both photo sets. The scratches vary across individual photographs in their intensity, shape, and size.

In pictures from the first set, Brzeżańska scratched away the photographic emulsion from her face, head, or whole figure. This treatment created radiant forms, resembling light sources emanating with differing intensity. One picture shows a dozen or so standing and crouching figures, arranged facing the camera in two rows, surrounded by buildings and trees. In the second row, Brzeżańska is pictured with a luminous spot in place of her head, and rays emanating sideways, gently covering the heads of figures next to her. In another photograph, we see young women sitting in a garden gazebo, looking into the lens. Among them, the artist is visible again, with a radiant spot again replacing her head, this time slightly obscuring the faces of the others. And in the photo showing tea being prepared inside a room, the woman pictured next to the artist has practically all her face covered by the light emanating not only from Brzeżańska's head, but almost her entire figure – we see only her legs and parts of her arms reaching out for a nearby bowl. The set has only two photographs that show Brzeżańska alone – one pictures her with Tokyo Bay behind her, while the other shows her between two stone buildings.

From *bokashi* to iconoclash

Alongside treating photographs as paintings, another key aspect of *How to Shine in Public* entails treating them as material objects subjected to physical interventions. This kind of approach could be linked to François Soulages' appeal for shifting the humanities' approach to photography toward a materialist view.[15]

The materialist interpretation – according to the authors of a radical program for visual sociology – ties into a social practice that enables the formation of a physical relationship with the medium.[16] In this case, the relationship, involving scratching the picture's surface, would commonly be associated with vandalizing photography, aggressively erasing parts of an

image or concealing undesirable elements. The latter aspect seems most aligned with Brzeżańska's practice. Her radiant scratches carry a reference to Japanese anti-obscenity laws, particularly Article 175 of the Japanese Criminal Code, which deals with broadly defined matters of public health (*Kōshū eisei-ho*). Living in Tokyo, Brzeżańska was confronted with Japan's deeply conservative attitude toward depictions of bodies and nakedness – especially of the female variety. According to the restrictive Article 175, pubic hair is considered obscene (*waisetsu*). In effect, any (mainly Western) publication or magazine on the Japanese market that featured such depictions would be censored, either by scratching them out or covering them up.

> Censorship worked and purged everything potentially obscene. There are anecdotes about Japanese grandmothers scratching out suggestive or explicit parts of foldouts in erotic magazines imported from the West. *Waisetsu* (obscenity) had to be covered up with *bokashi* (blurring).[17]

Similar restrictions also applied to Japanese film productions, which for decades were subject to strict rules defined by the Film Classification and Rating Organization, also known as Eirin. For a long time, films were banned from showing even a strand of pubic hair – which was covered by applying blurring, the aforementioned *bokashi*, which limited the field of view. For that purpose, pornographic productions used a triangular piece of flesh-toned adhesive tape called *maebari*, which literally means "hanging in front." The strict Eirin code, which also covered depictions of violence, drugs, and imagery that could be considered offensive to the nation, was tempered in the mid-1990s, but the pornography industry had struggled against the tough guidelines since the 1960s, developing the *pinku eiga* or "pink film" genre, a strain of low-budget soft porn that did not feature explicit depictions of genitalia or sexual acts.[18]

In Brzeżańska's work, the iconoclastic approach of Japanese

censors to eroticism and pornography, which became the starting point for the scratching gesture in *How to Shine in Public* , coalesces into a form close to Latourian "iconoclash." The French philosopher argued that, unlike iconoclasm, which is a project aimed at destruction, iconoclash is more ambiguous, straddling the intersection of destructive and constructive, and impossible to pin down without further enquiry. Iconoclasm, meanwhile, is always a monodimensional distortion, based on both the sheer force of the gesture and the impact of what is being destroyed.[19] While iconoclash is defined by visual and semantic richness, and a "productive cascade of re-representation,"[20] in the case of Brzeżańska's gesture, the dissolution of the existing regime of representation is the desirable outcome, opening up new possibilities in both visualization and the reading of photographs, as well as the formation of subjectivity, a notion to which I will return later.[21] The scratched-out, abstract form violates the order of representation and constitutes an aggressive gesture of destruction,[22] while at the same time being an element manifesting invisibility within a photographic image, which escapes mimeticism and therefore light – a constitutive factor for the creation of photography. Thus, Brzeżańska lays bare the mechanism of creating an image, which is possible

> [t]hanks to the medium of photography, which, still alive, shimmers before our very eyes, increasingly concealing the object of its depiction. [...] It is also the very shift into visibility, whether of the visible order of representation or the invisible order of phenomenality. Through its gradual dissolution, the viewer can glimpse the interplay between these two aspects of the artwork.[23]

Consequently, in *How to Shine in Public*, light becomes an element associated with decay, dissolution, and erasure, but also revelation, indication, and manifestation. Brzeżańska situates her photographs at the intersection of the material object and the

image as medium. On the one hand, the artist uses mechanical erasure to efface her figure from the picture, yet never removing it completely; on the other, making herself radiant becomes a paradoxical rematerialization, by way of light, of what has been effaced. The mystery of the image, in the words of Hans Belting, is that it inextricably links presence and absence. Paradoxically, the image is present in its medium, but holds within itself a kind of illusion, as it is present in a different manner than its medium.[24] In Brzeżańska's photographs, this apparent separation is granted a certain fluidity, as the gesture manifesting the materiality of the photographic image simultaneously becomes part of the visual field. This brings to mind Baudrillard's reflections on Polaroid photos, which allow for the near-simultaneous experience of image and object.[25]

Illuminating excess, or the phantasmatic aspect of the gaze

I will return to the Lacanian *photo-graphic* gaze-instrument, directed from without – embodied by the camera, allowing the imaginal identification of the ego and the development of identity. In *How to Shine in Public*, created in Japan, an external gaze identifies the artist in several registers. Ewa Toniak writes that Brzeżańska is a double object of observation – as a woman and a foreigner.[26] Here, I would label her not only an Other, hailing from a foreign land, but also a person with a different cultural background and certain economic status. Brzeżańska is *photo-graphed*





Agnieszka Brzeżańska, *How To Shine In Public*, 1997–1998, courtesy of the artist.

as a privileged white woman from East-Central Europe who has the opportunity to study abroad. It ought to be noted that the female image in Japan is marked, to a large extent, by twofold, ultra-patriarchal stereotyping. On the one hand, womanhood is tied to the figure of the immutable Lolita, associated with *kawaii* culture; on the other, it is linked with the *ryosaikenbo* ideal of a "good wife and wise mother." The latter, in which a woman devotes herself to homemaking and caring for the family, is rooted in the Confucian tradition, and deviations from this model are seen as undermining social norms. Moreover, Japanese women, although among the best-educated women in the world, are openly discriminated against in the job market, and experience similar biases in other areas of life, including extreme sexism, something unthinkable in other developed countries.[27]

In *How to Shine in Public*, the artist points out the presence of the *photo-graphing* gaze from without, through which identity is conceived. Her luminous scratches illustrate Lacan's aforementioned notion that the gaze is an instrument through which light is embodied. By tying the gesture into Japanese censorship measures, the artist exposes a certain excess, but one with a wholly different profile than that dictating the blurring of depictions of genitals. Pornography, by portraying excess in relation to the everyday experience of social reality (all the while stemming from it), ultimately proves insufficiently redundant. It means that pornography presumes the possibility of showing everything, including the gaze as *objet petit a*. This explicitness of pornography, however, ultimately precludes the manifestation of a gaze that is impossible to capture. It is not a material object, but a form of distorting social reality, visible only as distortion. According to McGowan, pornography "never shows enough precisely because it attempts to show everything."[28]

Žižek, meanwhile, in an attempt to explain the mechanics of the Lacanian gaze as it applies to pornography, but at the same time relating it to the function of *objet petit a*, quotes a passage from *Book XI*

of the seminar.

> In the scopic field, everything is articulated between two terms that act in an antinomic way – on the side of things, there is the gaze, that is to say, things look at me, and yet I see them. This is how one should understand those words, so strongly stressed, in the Gospel: "They have eyes that they might not see." That they might not see what? Precisely, that things are looking at them.[29]

According to Žižek, pornography is inherently perverse. This perverse character, however, lies not in the explicit portrayal of the sexual act, but rather in the purely formal aspect, as the spectators by definition assume the position of passive subject, or are even degraded to the position of objectification. In pornography, the gaze remains not on the side of the viewed object, as Lacan would have it, but with the audience. That is why it is not apparent on the screen, and why the pornographic image is "flat," incapable of reflecting the gaze, devoid of "stains" or distortions that would require one to look awry. Consequently, pornography lacks viewing objects, because it imposes a one-way gaze – the spectator staring at the image. Contrary to widespread opinion that actors are reduced to mere objects of pleasure, it is the spectators that ultimately become objectified. Žižek also emphasizes that the actual subjects in this relationship are the actors on the screen, eliciting sexual arousal, while the spectators are reduced to a paralyzed object-gaze.[30]

In such a perspective, the gesture of censoring pornographic pictures could, paradoxically, enable the saturation of those images with an absent gaze. Avoiding pornographic excess generates a completely different type of surplus, related to the production of fantasy. And it is precisely within this register that Brzeżańska operates, visualizing excess as a distortion of the scopic field. Following the metaphor of the anamorphic gaze, the luminous scratches on the surface of the artist's photographs could be interpreted as a site that requires us to look awry. To

recapitulate Žižek, only a gaze directed at an angle, conditioned and distorted by desire, enables us to perceive the *objet petit a*.

In Todd McGowan's psychoanalytical theory of film, one of the key categories is the cinema of fantasy, which, by means of exposing a certain excess, enables the staging of the gaze as *objet petit a*. It is conceived as an object incongruous with everyday social reality, which protrudes as an excessive, real element exploding the structure of the existing order. The *objet petit a* indicates that this order is not neutral space, but rather a social, political, and cultural construct woven from fantasy. The emergence within this structure of the *objet petit a* is akin to the appearance of a blind spot – a distortion reminiscent of the one in the Holbein picture. It is a point at which viewers lose their distance and engage with what they are seeing, as the form of the depicted object shifts along with their position. It is impossible to immediately recognize the depicted shape – one must first shift their position relative to the image, set the body in motion, engage in action. The effort of the subject generates that which it will be able to see, and the very act of looking is not neutral.[31]

As mentioned, during her stay in Japan, Brzeżańska was seen as an Other, and this is precisely how she manifests herself in the photographs from *How to Shine in Public*. While embodied by the superficial markings of being a white woman, otherness here results first and foremost from the position occupied within the Symbolic order. And it is precisely this stain, imperceptible in our everyday experience of reality, that becomes visible through distortion in the form of scratching / radiance in the field of vision. By engaging physically with the surface of the picture and setting her own body in motion, the artist visualizes excess as a disturbance in the field of vision. McGowan argues that film stages fantasy and makes visible the stain that eludes us in our everyday functioning. Brzeżańska's photographs play a similar role: by exposing an excessive image which has too strong an

impact, they show seeing itself. The scratches etched into the artist's image thus become a peculiar visualization of the object-gaze, excessively protruding from the portrayed reality. By refusing to engage in fantasy, the artist points out the lack of neutrality of the depicted situations and, consequently, their political character.

In *How to Shine in Public*, the excess of gaze is made visible through fantasy, which cannot be explicitly perceived in the everyday experience of reality, but is present within the framework of every relationship and social interaction. Fantasies such as those of power, sexism, racism, or nationalism, as well as conspiracy fantasies, permeate the social structure and affect how subjects function in relation to each another – although these representations are typically suppressed. This suppression, which tends to be broken down by phantasmatic outbursts such as riots, attacks, or violent crime, leaves us unaware of fantasy's presence. And it is this social unawareness that enables the facade of the order and neutrality of the Symbolic regime.[32] This neutrality is, naturally, wholly fictional, and the excess of gaze is constantly present beneath the veneer of the seemingly ordered structure. In Brzeżańska's series, the artist herself protrudes as excess from social reality – as an Other, as a privileged foreigner, and, first and foremost, as a woman. The artist literally illuminates the excess related to the fantasy of her position in intensely phallocentric and sexist Japan. Using so-called "domestic photography" for this purpose, widely and easily available, but disrupted by patches of light, could be read as the artist saying that visualized excess is not an exceptional situation. Rather, it is a phenomenon as ubiquitous as the photographic aesthetic used to visualize it.

Ready to burst with a luminous torrent

Exposing or irradiating oneself as a woman – othered and redundant within the Symbolic order – could also be treated in terms of transcending the logic of psychoanalytic discourse. This means that the Other is not another of the same, as stipulated by Luce Irigaray, but a wholly separate subject, breaking with the "identity" regime of what the scholar calls "the phallocentric system."[33] In such an interpretation, the luminous scratches of *How to Shine in Public* would not only mark sites of fracture that the gaze emerges from, but also serve as the site where the castrated person, represented in the Symbolic order by the lack of a female subject, could come into existence on a different basis.



Agnieszka Brzeżańska, *How To Shine In Public*, 1997–1998, courtesy of the artist.

In this context, the words of Hélène Cixous, postulating the practice of *écriture feminine*, seem particularly symptomatic. In her iconic essay "The Laugh of the Medusa," she emphasizes the body and bodily experience in female writing:

> I wished that that woman would write and proclaim this unique empire so that other women, other unacknowledged sovereigns, might exclaim: I, too, overflow; my desires have invented new desires, my body knows unheard-of songs. Time and again I, too, have felt so full of luminous torrents that I could burst – burst with forms much more beautiful than those which are put up in frames and sold

for a stinking fortune.[34]

The passage describes the liberation of female desire, so revolutionary in nature that it would allow transcendence of the normative framework of the phallocentric order.[35] Cixous writes about the readiness to burst with a luminous torrent, exploding into forms other than those known from previous patterns. Brzeżańska's photographs and her iconoclash gesture, collapsing the order of representation, may be treated as a visual realization of the explosion Cixous describes. *How to Shine in Public* becomes an analog, a visual transposition of the postulates of *écriture féminine*, at the same time going beyond them. It translates the textual-discursive figure of the female subject – also associated with criticism of *écriture féminine* – into the language of the body and empirical female experience. In this case, the experience of the artist, along with her entanglement in the categories of time and place, as well as gender, age, background, and privilege, would constitute an associative link with Donna Haraway's category of "situated knowledge."[36] The practice of situated knowledge, meanwhile, ties into the concept of Luce Irigaray's "*parler femme* concept. "Speaking as woman" presumes a different sort of connection between female and male desire and language, all the while seeking to bridge the gap between the somatic experience of the female subject and its articulation. In other words, it would entail the ability of the woman to exist as a political subject, capable of articulation dictated by the specificity of gendered experience.[37]

To that end, Irigaray renounced *écriture féminine* and instead turned her attention toward the act of utterance (*langage*) rather than the structure of language (*langue*), drawing in her reflections on the figure of "two lips." The notion pertains not to human anatomy but morphology, conceived in physical, discursive, and performative categories. In this view, morphology has a distinctly dual nature. On the one hand, it ties in with the material aspect of corporeality, namely the physical lips; on the

other, it has a discursive character, meaning that it concerns ways of articulation in language. The "two lips" figure subverts the logic of a singular, implicitly neutral male subject. Thus it becomes a synecdoche for *parler femme*, or articulation related to distinction and its material and semiotic dimension. The act of expression is no longer an abstract figure detached from social relations and a depoliticized discursive order, but is associated with corporeality and gendering.[38] Such an approach would enable transcendence of the textual determinants of *écriture féminine* and the broadening of the postulates Cixous outlined in the 1970s, including "Your body must be heard"[39] or "Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time."[40] That transcendence was to materialize in *parler femme*, and subsequent reformulations, such as the affective turn, all the way up to corporeal feminism and queer theory.

Therefore, the embodied light that manifests itself in *How to Shine in Public*, the light that constitutes one of the fundamental categories of metaphysics situated at the heart of Western phallocentrism, here becomes the source of another light, "from another shore." One located on the edge of the "two lips," meaning the capacity to articulate, not necessarily linguistically, because here this articulation is visual, and to create space from which the female subject can speak within the Symbolic order. *Photo-graphing* – or writing with light – is here purely material in character, because the artist's body becomes the site of this writing, this illumination, this burst of the luminous stream, and, at the same time, the site of physical intervention, the mechanical erasure of one's own image. Through this gesture, the artist disrupts the Symbolic order and permits the emergence of the gaze from this luminous stain. Consequently, this enables subjective manifestation through the actual physical activity of scratching off photographic emulsion. In this context,

this passage from the artist seems particularly significant:

> I would like to be transmuted into pure energy, into light. For years I have been collecting books, information, and experiences on that subject; investigating this area takes up most of my time. [...] But filtering [information] does not exactly lead anywhere. You have to do something with it. If I didn't try to embed it in my work, it would have all been pointless.[41]

The title of the series *How to Shine in Public* is not a question about "How to shine in public space?" or "How to shine in company?" but rather an answer to how a female subject can harness the excess aspect of the gaze as *objet petit a* to intervene in the structure of the Symbolic as a political subject, and in that intervention harness the instruments of phallocentric discourse to transcend or even abolish it. Here, light loses its metaphysical aspect in favor of pure physicality and, consequently, corporeality – both of the figure and the photograph. Finally: *photo-graphing* in the sense of the Lacanian gaze-instrument, identified – like all traditional Freudian psychoanalysis in the interpretations of Cixous, Irigaray, and subsequent representatives of the feminist deconstruction of psychoanalysis – with the male gaze and male construction of the subject, may be abolished in favor of a new construct of subjectivity. This reconfigures not only the position and status of the woman as speaking her own language, but also the addressee of her utterance.

1 James Elkins, *The End of the Theory of the Gaze*, unpublished, 24, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/236313800_The_End_of_the_Theory_of_the_Gaze (accessed November 13, 2018).

2 It should be emphasized, as Paweł Dybel does following Lacan, that the "conception of castration should not be conceived ontically, as an act that did or can take place, but rather ontologically: as lack inherent in the very structure of existence, rooted in the disharmonious form of the Symbolic order as such." See: Paweł Dybel, *Zagadka "drugiej płci." Spory wokół różnicy seksualnej w psychoanalizie i feminizmie* (Kraków: Universitas, 2006), 224.

3 Drawing on algebra, a branch of mathematics, was aimed at structuring and formalizing the concepts and phenomena of psychoanalysis. Using the structure and operations of algebraic equations, their systems, or the rules of manipulating the symbols of the variables, enabled abstract concepts to be distilled down to mathematical signs. One of the first signs of psychoanalytic algebra to appear in Lacan's theory was the *a*, the first letter of the word *autre* (other). It made its debut in 1955, when Lacan introduced it in relation to *schéma L*, which formalized theoretical aspects of psychoanalysis using diagrams consisting of points linked with a number of vectors. Each point in the diagram is marked with a specific symbol of Lacanian algebra, while the vectors reflect the structural relationships between them. The *a* denotes the little Other, whereas the great Other is marked with *A*. Here, the little Other is what is coupled with the ego, in a relationship which is always reflexive, interchangeable. See: "Objet (petit) a," in: *An Encyclopedia of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, http://nosubject.com/Objet_(petit)_a (accessed May 15, 2018).

4 Todd McGowan, *The Real Gaze: Film Theory after Lacan* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007), 25–29.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., 110–111.

7 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960*, trans. Dennis Porter, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York City, NY–London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), 321.

8 Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA–London: MIT Press, 1992), 8–12.

9 An example of the use of Holbein's painting in the context of Lacan's theory of the gaze

can be found in the 2015 Lionel Baier movie, *Vanity.*

10 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts in Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York City, NY–London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1981), 88.

11 Jean Baudrillard, *Photography, or the Writing of Light*, trans. Francois Debrix, University of Victoria Theory Archive, https://journals.uvic.ca/index.php/ctheory/article/view/14605/5462 (accessed January 22, 2019).

12 Ibid.

13 Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XI*, 106.

14 Baudrillard, *Photography, or the Writing of Light*.

15 François Soulages, *Estetyka fotografii. Strata i zysk*, trans. Beata Mytych-Forajter and Wacław Forajter (Kraków: Universitas, 2007), 147.

16 Rafał Drozdowski and Marek Krajewski, *Za fotografię! W stronę radykalnego rogram socjologii wizualnej* (Warsaw: Fundacja Nowej Kultury Bęc Zmiana, 2010), 158.

17 Rafał Tomański, "Różowe kino," *Dwutygodnik* no. 73 (2012), www.dwutygodnik.com/artykul/3029-rozowe-kino.html (accessed April 30, 2019).

18 Jasper Sharp, *Behind the Pink Curtain: The Complete History of Japanese Sex Cinema* (Godalming: FAB, 2008), 9–18.

19 Bruno Latour, "What Is Iconoclash? Or Is The World Beyond The Image Wars?" in: *Iconoclash, Beyond The Image-Wars in Science, Religion, and Art*, eds. Peter Weibel and Bruno Latour (Karlsruhe: ZKM – MIT Press, 2002), 16.

20 Ibid., 36.

21 The gesture of scratching returns in Brzeżańska's works, including the 1999 series *I ty możesz zostać świętą* [*You Can Be a Saint, Too*], which features commercial and fashion photographs from a variety of magazines, for example of a model from the campaign for Calvin Klein's *Eternity* perfume. Here, the scratches take the form of halos or luminous third eyes emerging on foreheads, marrying spirituality and capitalist aesthetics. Developed further, the light motif also appears in the 2005 project *Free Doom*, which explored anticipation of the apocalypse. On the intersection of her artistic efforts and everyday reality, Brzeżańska often draws on light language, a form of non-linear communication related to sonic vibrations and symbol systems.

22 When it comes to the photographic medium, Brzeżańska's strategy is not a new phenomenon. The source of the scratching gesture can be traced back to an affective approach to the image, as Robert Frank did with his famous 1958 photo essay *The Americans*. Over a decade and a half later, in 1974, Frank drove a nail through a stack of valuable prints from *The Americans* and wrote "The end of photography" on them. To quote W. J. T. Mitchell: "If *The Americans* is the great tragic poem of American photography, Frank seems to play the role of its tragic hero, a kind of Oedipus who 'had eyes' that saw something so terrible and shocking that he felt compelled to put them out, to put his camera in a closet." In a footnote to the passage, Mitchell alludes to the words of Jack Kerouac at the end of his introduction to *The Americans*: "To Robert Frank I now give this message: You got eyes." See: W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago, IL–London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 278.

23 Martyna Mieszkowska, "Deformacja obrazu artystycznego jako próba przekroczenia granic obrazowania. Na przykładzie książek fotograficznych Kostasa Kiritsisa," in: *Zakłócone spojrzenie. Fotografia i strategie widzenia*, eds. Łukasz Białkowski and Katarzyna Oczkowska (Kraków: Muzeum Fotografii w Krakowie, 2017), 32.

24 Hans Belting, *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body*, trans. Thomas Dunlap (Princeton, NJ–Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011), 19–20.

25 Jean Baudrillard, *America*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1989), 37.

26 Ewa Toniak, "Ja, które jest Innym," *Galeriaart.pl*, http://galeriaart.pl/pl/brzezanska/essays/2/ja-ktore-jest-innym (accessed April 30, 2019).

27 See: "The Global Gender Gap Report 2018," *World Economic Forum*, December 17, 2018, www.weforum.org/reports/the-global-gender-gap-report-2018 (accessed May 26, 2019); Olga Barbasiewicz, "Modernizacja tradycyjnych ról społecznych kobiet

w Japonii," *Uniwersyteckie Czasopismo Socjologiczne* vol. 11, no. 2 (2015), http://cejsh.icm.edu.pl/cejsh/element/bwmeta1.element.desklight-5f47929e-85aa-4cf0-89ce-6f2a5f864845/c/UCS_2015_nr_11_art._2.pdf (accessed May 26, 2019).

28 McGowan, *The Real Gaze*, 28.

29 Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XI*, 109, as quoted in Žižek, *Looking Awry*, 109.

30 Žižek, *Looking Awry*, 110.

31 McGowan, *The Real Gaze*, 25.

32 Ibid., 50.

33 Luce Irigaray, "Why Cultivate Difference? Toward a Culture of Two Subjects," *Paragraph: A Journal of Modern Critical Theory* vol. 15, no 3 (2002), 79, www.jstor.org/stable/43263698?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents (accessed May 29, 2019).

34 Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* vol. 1, no. 4 (Summer 1976), 876.

35 Katarzyna Szopa, "Awangardowe wyzwania teorii feministycznych," *Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich* vol. 61, no. 2 (2018), 31.

36 See: Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* vol. 14, no. 3 (Autumn 1988), 575–599.

37 Szopa, "Awangardowe wyzwania teorii feministycznych," 32–33.

38 Katarzyna Szopa, "'Nieziszczone narodziny'. Cixous i Irigaray, czyli kobiety z Czarnego Kontynentu," *Postscriptum Polonistyczne* vol. 20, no. 2 (2017), 18.

39 Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," 880.

40 Ibid.

41 *Nowe zjawiska w sztuce polskiej po 2000*, eds. Grzegorz Borkowski, Adam Mazur, and Monika Branicka (Warsaw: CSW Zamek Ujazdowski, 2007), 164.

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