Hanne Loreck, "Blood on the Mirror: Some Reflections on David Reed's Painting and How They Fail to Come About," *New Paintings for the Mirror Room and Archive in a Studio Off the Courtyard* (Graz: Neue Galerie Am Landesmuseum Joanneum, 1996), 56-62.

Blood on the Mirror

Some Reflections on David Reed's Painting and How They Fail to Come About

We may conceive of paintings as particular types of images. They thrust themselves between the gaze and the subject of perception. This subject, from which the gaze might emerge, stands in the way of the self, for under the gaze the self is itself an image. If, as Lacan says, light becomes embodied by means of the gaze – and the painting represents just such a materialization – a painted object is capable of revealing the subject as IMAGination. That subject, at least, who, from his/her own viewpoint, commands space as if it were something spread out opposite him/her: while the subject appears to be forming an image, it is however imagined. We may speak, along with the filmmaker Heinz Emigholz, of the "gaze as a composing force" which "turns the inside out and presents it as reflected in reality". A painting, that body of light and shadow, proves itself on the one hand a projection, in that it transforms the gaze – becoming permeable therein – and on the other also a screen that absorbs or, to use a corporeal metaphor, that sucks up light.

That the painter gives us something to see satisfies the voracious eye – from a distance and at the price of illusion. David Reed presents the relationship between distance and illusion as mediated when he says that both abstract and figurative art act as mirrors for the body. It is the body, he says, that looks at a painting. Reed thus employs another notion of seeing from that which restricts itself to the eye as an organ and describes an intermediate space, which stretches out before the subject neither homogenously nor transparently, but rather pulsates between bodies: his traces and marks in color show this turbulent space in analogy to the "billowing cloaks that cover the figures in Baroque painting" and that appear either to have just flown off the viewer's body into the picture or off the picture onto the body. [11] One could also say that painter, picture and viewer have their eyes on each other, and this has everything to do with covetousness. Veils, however, always stand for the movement between illusion/deception and "naked truth". Both playfully glide along the bodies and back and forth between the picture as a body of color and the viewer, and are particularly fickle when it is a matter of desire, i.e., of disappointment that the subject is not what it pretends to be, and that what one sees is not what one wants to see. Between the bodies, and displacing them, drift the desires.

When David Reed shows his paintings in the Baroque Neue Galerie together with mirrors, windows, crystal chandeliers and vampire films, it is in several respects about light, gazes and images, in short, about the lascivious eye. In the figure of the vampire this voracious eye is to be taken literally and thus carnally: a vampire, crossing the borderline between life and death, is not satisfied with the mere gaze, but must, when in the waking state, take in the blood and flesh of others. The vampire is thus the nameless counterpart of Narcissus, who falls in love with his own reflection and desires, at the cost of his own life, to become one with it. For the vampire produces no reflections in a looking-glass and neither casts shadows nor inscribes himself onto a photograph. Shadows, mirror images and photographs, however, depend upon light.

Vampires are such performances projected into reality. They owe their lives to fiction: once written down, popular traditions about the "undead" and the historical legend of the bloodthirsty and violent fifteenth-century Wallachian Count Dracula became a vision of horror to which film later lent visual form in countless versions by doubling the vampire's conditions of existence. Only in the dark of night did s/he come alive, leaving behind contagious traces of distanceless desire: from the bite, the two tiny holes in the victim's body, blood flows, making its way along the body writhing with pleasurable terror – a body Baroque in its convulsions.
In 1995, in a video installation using Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, David Reed realized the ambition he once expressed as "I want to be

a bedroom painter". What is it that leads from the insert of two of his paintings over the beds of the lovers, who are troubled by a *doppelgänger*, a phantom, an illusion, to the subject of vampires? Vampires are avid lovers whose actions are guided by a compulsive restlessness. In order to get what constantly drives them, for whom ingestion is paired with sexual desire, they can change their identity, or what one prefers to see as such, at the drop of a hat. Effortlessly they transform themselves into animals: a bat, a dog, a wolf, or into particles of dust. And vampirism is contagious, like a disease spread by bodily fluids. What is monstrous about vampires is that they are so difficult to pin down. The only way to render them harmless is to drive a stake through their hearts or completely sever their heads from their bodies – that is, to split the body at the neck, the erogenous zone, in the final phallic act.

For *Vertigo*, David Reed asks what a "painting [might] have witnessed" in "one of the most perverse love scenes in any movie" **(12)**. When applied to vampire films his pictures thus acquire very different functions. When an image "sees" what cannot be shown directly in the film because it would be considered too provocative, but which at the same time appears to be recognized as extremely perverse since it is referred to as such, does the image mirror the perversion? Or does the picture inserted into the film actually produce the perversion, does it become an image of perversion – in the literal meaning of the word – in that it twists something, reverses it as the media of photography and film do?

In David Reed's recent paintings the altered relationship between the ground and paint strokes is remarkable. Amorphous patches, both shimmering and opaque, rampantly split the middle of the carefully primed white canvas horizontally or vertically, or pour themselves into the picture from one of its edges. Other parts reveal painting's self-reflection, which implicates a kind of "perversion": within one canvas, or also on various canvases, one can see repeated apparently identical elegant painterly ornamental flourishes (#343). It is only at second glance that one is able, from the fine grain, to distinguish the one, as a technical re/production, from the other. If one assigns the identifying double to the mirror image, then the relationship of image and mirror image becomes one of difference. The self-identical subject of imagination proves to be a fiction. The marks the vampire leaves behind are bloody signs of his/her presence, indices which, in pairs and sufficient unto themselves, reveal the mirror image as that which it is for the subject: a product of the geometrized, linear perspectival, transparent space. The subject is absorbed into those marks on the body, as in the picture, sites of iridescently organized formlessness, while the luminous surroundings of the marks, the neck of the beloved or the spotlessly white canvas, radiate – like the prismatic *lusters* of the chandelier.

According to Lacan, light is the chief prerequisite of the visual. We encounter the essence of seeing "not in the straight line, but in the point of light – in the point of irradiation, the play of light, fire, the source from which reflections pour forth" **(13)**. Unlike the subject, the vampire does not thrust him/herself into the *picture* as a *stain,* for the matter of which s/he is made is not physical, but phantasmagoric. The pseudo-density of his/her body does not absorb light. The body is irradiated (let us recall that the vampire can also disintegrate into dust, dust that we in turn only perceive as shimmering particles dancing in the light), particularly where it is placed in relation to the purity and virginity of the "victim". And this is perhaps also the case because it is conceivable that in those places in which *nothing* is visible the points of light reflect so intensely that they dissolve everything else. In the attempt to fix the vampire in photography or film with an excess of light, that is practically to capture him/her in the *stain*, the overexposure produced nothing less than a blinding white, i.e., an "empty" screen.

"Desire is thus not mapped... as the desire for form", Rosalind Krauss informs us, "and thus for sublimation (the vertical, the ***gestalt****, the law); desire is modeled in terms of transgression against form. It is the force invested in desublimation."* **(14)** This echo of the subject, the "that is I" as formlessness and submission to a picture of space defined as a part of that space which is not coherent, whose points of light cannot all be occupied simultaneously, this echo appears to resonate between the figure of the vampire and David Reed's extremely oblong paintings. The painter emphasizes the horizontal line, which lies perpendicular to the axis of sublimation. He also does not hang the paintings on the wall itself, but rather at a certain distance before the rich decor: the painting is transformed into an "image in space". When in addition the ground is also a surface and the loops of color appear to be scattered over it, they become signs in a semiotic literality that shows the body as a double projection from outside, which is fragile at every point. Such doublings are what characterize the vampire. His/her sexual voracity and thirst are one, his/her appearance veers between human being, animal and

matter, his/her nature between death and life. In order to satisfy his/her cravings s/he creates an erotically charged zone which "deviates from the normal" – the definition of the perverse – and lives out "unnatural" prolix desires.

Since antiquity, (alleged) sexual pleasure and terrible beauty have captured another monster in the field of vision: Medusa was "terrible to see and to behold" and could only be killed if reflected in a man's shining shield. Among her countless mirror images Peter Paul Rubens' *Head of the Medusa* (1617/18) shines out: the serpent locks writhe dramatically around the head severed from the body of the mortal Gorgon sister, the eyeballs bulge impressively from the pale face. Her petrifying looks had to be eliminated because she embodied seeing as expression. The myth has it that Perseus beheaded the Medusa while she was reflected in his iron shield, without looking at her, and while he himself remained invisible, or better: out of her range of vision. The difference in the deadly sword thrust between the direction of the gaze and the movement of the body, however, denotes a phantasmagoric space. After all, the Medusa stands for castration anxiety. Her, at first, virginal beauty remains the unfulfilled promise of sexual pleasure, which in its fullness belongs only to men; her phallic hair and boar's teeth mark her place outside the gender order, as a mixed being whose female sex, projected onto her face, is both fascinating and repellant, attractive amd fearsome. In the two-dimensionality of the projection, this being, which captivates the viewer with its ambiguity, its formlessness – and here petrification, stiffening, is nothing other than the form of the phallic in the captivating – becomes harmless. The punished Medusa occupies a diffuse space, for that the serpents, in their constantly changing movements, can, by stretching out, define space in all directions and, at the same time – viewed in linear perspective – negate spatial depth in artful knots and twistings. There is only one thing that the serpents cannot do: stand upright, form a straight line – that vertical which is a synonym for the entire *gestalt*. Wherever the drops of the Gorgon's blood fell, Ovid reported further, the earth came to life as "iridescent" vipers. As small highlights, which they thus became, they formed an "eternally mobile mirror" as Percy Bysshe Shelley noted when confronted with the *Medusa* attributed to Leonardo. Thus, the Medusa's head belongs to the realm of the uncanny, because it becomes the embodiment of an invisible, unfixable gaze – and that in a phantasmagoric space below the level of sublimation.
David Reed's paintings also occupy a comparable space when a part of the broad format slips away from the viewer while s/he tries to fix upon another. And this is all the clearer when David Reed plays on the polished white picture ground his sophisticated game with patches or bows, stripes and loops, which thus cut the picture in two. There is always a good deal of empty space there, however, or, put another way: much empty surface that makes it particularly plain that what one perceives is never what one wants to see. It leaves the viewer unsatisfied because what s/he desired does not return. In this sense the subject is a vampire, who wants to suck, who seeks oral gratification, while his/her mirror image – in its control function – prescribes that form which tells him/her: I am (not) a vampire.

When David Reed shows his installation of doubling as difference in the Baroque hall of mirrors, he is playing with at least two models of the picture and the gaze. Site is significant for both. The hall of mirrors stands for the display of worldly power and the production of signs through gliding majestic dances: *The Fearless Vampire Killers* or *Dance of the Vampires* (Roman Polanski, 1967) is the name of one of the best-known films in the genre. It is easy to imagine the "real" mirror images of the viewers in the Neue Galerie standing still for a moment and forming a completely diffuse pictorial space, similar to the bewildering effect of the mirrors in a fairground fun house. The paintings arrest these imaginings. If they at once reflect and remain blind, if they glow and absorb the gaze, then a "countersigning" takes place, when we are able to perceive ourselves, out of the corner of our eyes, as picture-viewers in the mirrors to the right and left. In any case, however, what is important is to understand the picture as a depository of gazes and weapons, as a looking-glass war made visible.

Translated by Pamela Selwyn

FOOTNOTES
FUSSNOTEN

(11) "Talking Pictures", David Reed interviewed by Stephen Ellis. In *David Reed*. Los Angeles: A.R.T. Press, (1990), p. 4.

(12) David Reed, "Two Bedrooms in San Francisco". In *David Reed*, exhibition catalog Kölnischer Kunstverein Köln etc. Ostfildern bei Stuttgart: Edition Cantz, (1995), p. 68.
David Reed, Zwei Schlafzimmer in San Francisco, in: *David Reed*, Ausstellungskatalog Kölnischer Kunstverein Köln u.a., Ostfildern bei Stuttgart: Edition Cantz, (1995), S. 9.

(13) Jacques Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Norton, (1978), p. 94.
Jacques Lacan, *Die vier Grundbegriffe der Psychoanalyse*, übersetzt und herausgegeben von Norbert Haas und Hans-Joachim Metzger, Weinheim, Berlin: Quadriga, (1987), S. 100.

(14) Rosalind Krauss, "Cindy Sherman, Untitled". In *Cindy Sherman 1975-1993*. New York: Rizzoli, (1993), p. 109.
Rosalind Krauss, Cindy Sherman: Untitled, in: *Cindy Sherman 1975-1993*, München, Paris, London: Schirmer/Mosel, (1993), S. 109.