

'The Gaze of Discourse: Figures on the Surface, Figures of the Surface', Conference paper and publication at *Changing Identities and Contexts in the Arts (CICA)*, University of Gothenburg, Sweden, February 2012

This paper is an encounter between Blanchot's essay 'The Gaze of Orpheus' and the work of the New York based Spanish painter Juan Usle. The encounter happens through a piece of writing that I have written in the context of my own art practice. It is true to say, there is no direct relationship, no causal link, between this writing, my reading of Blanchot's essay, my looking at the work of Juan Usle and my own practice as a painter. I have looked at, thought about and admired Usle's paintings for a long time and yet they remain enigmatic to me; they may even have become *more* enigmatic.

Writing places certain demands on reading; it creates a deliberate process that asks questions, makes connections and creates a new space in the imagination. It is artificial to exclude looking from this process when the object of writing is the artwork. Perhaps, what is at stake in art-related writing is to create a space that pre-cedes the separation of looking, writing and reading – a theoretical place we can only meet as an event? This suggests that there is no explanatory purpose behind such writing for where it begins and where it ends up are, in reality, never fully apparent, never actually fixed and stable points; only ever fictive representations.

Whatever the reason for engaging with the task of such writing, it must be *approached* in some way. However futile, the gaze of discourse is towards the imperceptible heart of the work; it does want to possess the work in some way and to capture its essence even though it knows it can't. Does art try to do the same? Does art try to capture its own heart, its own essence in the process of its own facture? I think this may be the case. Of course, it's paradoxical because it is not logically possible to capture something that does not yet exist; that which the apparatus of capture is itself in the process of creating.

How does an analysis such as this approach that paradox. This is not simply an intellectual pursuit (for I know it is a futile mission), but something draws me in which is an irrational desire that is more instinctive, more direct, more corporeal, perhaps, than the decision to fulfil a pre-ordained objective.

Of course, desire finds its way in the practical world. I came across Blanchot's essay through a chance encounter – the happenstance of hearing of an idea that piqued my interest. The context was a question that continues to be irresolvable; a question about the role of a painting's image in that paradoxical event of the encounter. It's like this; when I look at a painting I sense that the image is only one aspect of what is important; it is an image that never seems to fix itself long enough to

become a stable and identifiable object. It is as if when I look directly at the painting and search for what fascinates me it disappears, or rather it only ever appeared as a veiled presence, momentarily as it were, and when I try to look at it face to face it is gone forever, but repeated endlessly. And yet, without my being aware of it, everything changes in that moment.

For me, the immediate appeal of the myth of Orpheus, or rather Blanchot's version of it, is that this moment seems to repeat a key moment in the story; a story which begins with Eurydice, Orpheus' wife, bitten by a serpent at their wedding party, and sent to the underworld. Orpheus, in his grief sets out to retrieve her. Through the power of his music he is able to charm the guardians of the underworld, gain entry and persuade Hades to allow him to lead Eurydice back into the light of the day – an agreement made on condition that, as Eurydice follows him, Orpheus must not turn around to look at her until she has stepped out into the full light of day; if Orpheus fails to abide by the rule Eurydice will disappear for a second time, this time for good. Inevitably, perhaps, Orpheus transgresses this divine law; as they near the threshold of the day (she following close by) he turns around and, in the moment he sets eyes upon her veiled presence, she disappears, out of reach forever.

For Blanchot the significance of this narrative is not that it is a story of loss and failure caused by impatience and weakness, but rather that it presents a figure of the artist's plight; for Blanchot *Orpheus' mission is fundamentally artistic and not romantic.*

From a *representational* point of view, the story is metaphorical and its temporality chronological. The role of music, of art, is romantic to begin with (as it is used to charm his way in to the underworld so that he can be re-united with his love and who is also the very origin of that music), and secondly lamenting (when the mission fails). In other words from a representational point of view music or art has an object, and a purpose. To the contrary, Blanchot's interpretation, is *figural* in so far as art/music has no other purpose than to seek its own origins. The story begins with Orpheus who, in the rational world of the daylight (where all is clear and distinct), sets out on a reasonable pursuit – to bring Eurydice back into its light. However, in the irrational night of the underworld (a world of insubstantial shadows and phantoms) different rules apply and Orpheus, through his act of transgression, fulfils his destiny as an artist. From the moment Orpheus began to play his lyre and entered the underworld the purpose was never anything other than to turn and face Eurydice as the both the origin of that powerful music (which was necessary to begin the narrative), and to look at her as 'the limit of what art can attain'. As he turns around he encounters, not Eurydice as substantial and corporeal but only her presence *as a disappearance, an absence.* For

Blanchot this second loss is the essential feature of artistic activity: that is, its impossibility, in the sense that art's origin is the very thing it is unable to possess for itself whilst at the same time being its sole motivation. *Time becomes paradoxical* here because the myth cannot begin without the power of art and so this is a story of an event that always already has had to have taken place in order to occur; the pursuit is only possible when a space has already been opened up, as the opening line has it: '... art is the power that causes the night to open.' For Blanchot Orpheus' failure is only a failure from the point of view of the day - the figure of the rational and logical world of cause and effect. *However, from the point of view of the work, from the place of paradox, failure is the destiny of art itself because it is the destruction of identity and the inauguration of difference in itself; a creation of the 'radically new'.*

So often in Usle's work there is a recognisable motif or an implied space or visual phenomena. These are never 'disguised' or narrative, however, as in the work of Pheobe Unwin, for example, in which the impetus of the painting is essentially representational – to embody a certain memory or state of mind (although sometimes they succeed in going beyond that...). On the contrary, it is as if Usle creates a vocabulary in each painting, translating remembrances into properly pictorial elements. If Unwin typically superimposes a suggested or implied space with a decorative motif (albeit with inventiveness and flair) the motif in Usle's painting has a more structural role to play, establishing an abstract space that looks out towards the referent through a recognisable graphic, but does not really invite the viewer in to imagine a possible scene. Despite appearances, the image is involved behind the scenes creating a different world altogether; not metaphoric but rhythmic. This distinction can be explained by comparing two ways of approaching appearance: in everyday language we regard the image as fixed and stable because we can recognise it and measure its likeness in relation to a pre-existing model (for example, we discriminate this image of a twig in relation to a general essence of twigness). A different way of approaching appearance is to regard it as a sign - a non-linguistic sign -that is not fixed and stable but is an affect emerging out of flux. In this sense appearance is an affect generated by the work as a machine whose mechanisms are unconscious, imperceptible and beyond representation. Appearance is thus the product of representation (established visual codes and conventions) and of an unreadable corporeal trace of looking; a heterogeneous space created by the embodied act of viewing which is purely plastic and has no concept; what Lyotard calls a figural space and which the machine evokes as it undoes the certainty of the image.

We might think of this evocation as a relation between the representable and corporeal as a repetition of the moment when Orpheus' plans, conceived of in the day (the realm of

representation), embarked upon in the name of Eurydice (who was ‘concealed behind a name...’) fail in that momentary, embodied act of turning around on the threshold between night and day, when her phantom disappears.

I read somewhere that this painting (*Mal de Sol [Evil Sun]* (1994)) was begun as a reminiscence of having had sunstroke as a child. We might think of the colour as summoning up of the darkened room he spent time in recovering; the painted cracks of the surface a reference to broken skin. If these remembrances were in Usle’s mind or were traces in his body which started the painting process we can never know, even if we wanted to – they are after all only fanciful speculations. The image of the twig is less easy to identify as belonging to this narrative and naming other parts of the painting in such metaphorical terms is less easy still. Language is discontinuous when it comes to description – we soon meet the problem of what is significant? – a motif, a colour, a contour, an edge, the edge, a brushstroke, the texture, light, transparency – the list is endless. In truth I can remember looking at a specific painting and finding that although I could describe the painting in general terms my visual experience was more accurately one in which there were only moments that became distinguished and never lasted – all I remember now are moments of sustained fascination in front of the painting. As I’ve said before, it is the sensation that the work is indescribable because when I look straight at the work what is of most importance has already disappeared. Perhaps, we can say that that very indescribability becomes figured in Usle’s work.

This would not be the case if the surface did not have an insistent presence in the work. Compare, for example, the work of Cecily Brown where we are invited to play a game of recognising hidden forms that come in and out of focus. Clues are planted, forms suggested, and then superseded by the elegant brushwork that animates the surface – however, the surface itself remains a passive support and fascination does not interfere with our enjoyment of the game or admiration for the skill of execution. To the contrary, the surface of Usle’s paintings becomes the figure; the site of collapse between intention and inspiration or rather through which, in the material process of painting, intention becomes inspiration. But, it’s not as though the surface precedes the work. It does as a physical plane- a flat, white gesso surface -but as an operation it is a creation of the work. Certain things can be seen and said: for example, we can imagine a gap that paradoxically opens up between the twig and the crack; the twig as a painted ‘presence’ on the surface and the crack a painted absence of the surface that implies a space beneath, but there is no illusion of this, just the implication that the surface is itself an interface of its underneath and its appearance. As an interface (which is the living heart of the work) it is no longer possible to think of the surface in

dialectical terms; as either the 'blank canvas' – the bounded physical support which is an object situated within an architectural, interior space at the beginning; nor as a surface of inscription that supports the illusion of figures in a figurative painting; nor as the absent 'other' to the flatness of abstract painting - the decorative plane that threatens the affect of a purely optical spatiality.

To make materiality and corporeality overwhelm the image is consistent with Blanchot's economy in his version of the Orphic myth. In his book *Maurice Blanchot and the literature of transgression* John Gregg highlights the importance that Blanchot gives to Orpheus' motivation in turning to look at Eurydice and which leads to ultimate failure; it is not his desire for Eurydice herself as image that leads him to turn back and but his desire to collapse the physical, corporeal interval that lies between them; to collapse otherness, her difference. But it is this gap which is the perpetual horizon that Orpheus must maintain if he is to bring Eurydice into the light, the collapse of which brings his mission to an end. For Blanchot this is a moment of transgression and impatience but it is more importantly a moment of inspiration and it is the very destiny, the exigency of the work itself. In the night transgression and impatience are not regrettable signs of weakness as they would be from the vantage point of the day. In the night impatience becomes a powerful act that ends art's separation from its origin. Similarly, transgression is a powerful act, not only in the sense that Orpheus disobeys the divine law but in his initial entry to the underworld which transgresses the rule that a living mortal is not ordinarily entitled to have access to the realm of the dead. But it is his music that enables him to reach the point at which he has the opportunity to try to retrieve Eurydice.

Creative activity, therefore, seems to begin at a stage in which artists feel confident in their ability to have control over the raw materials of their craft. This initial confidence tends to waver, however, as they make further advances, and it is eventually replaced by impersonality, passivity and fascination. In order to write – to have the ultimate Orphic encounter of experience the presence of absence – it is necessary to write already as a prelude to this moment, *as if* writing were the exercise of a power. (John Gregg, *Maurice Blanchot and the literature of transgression*, p49)

Although the surface is an insistent presence in this later painting (*Mecanismo Gramatical* [*Grammatical mechanism*]) from 1996 that is not to say that it is 'totalised'. As I have already suggested the assertiveness of the surface is paradoxically the moment when it loses its identity as a physical plane in dialectical opposition to, either the architectural space outside the canvas, the figures that would define it as a ground in a figurative painting or its 'other' – the merely decorative flat surface that would threaten the optical space of an abstract painting. The surface resists totalisation by escaping a dialectical framework to become paradoxical.

Of course, we can't look directly at this paradoxical surface, because it is not a fixed and stable object, but we can approach it by beginning with what we can point to – its image. Firstly, it has a more evidently graphic structure than *Mal de Sol*; as the title suggests it is a 'grammatical mechanism'. An enunciation machine that produces linguistic functions; nouns, pronouns, propositions, verbs, adjectives and so on. Rather than alluding to visual memory or phenomena through similitude the painting points to a language of visual coding and its syntax; most notably the suggestion of a speech bubble and a 'key' of squares at the bottom that provide the semblance of a means to de-code the image, like a key for signs on a map, for example. However, this is not an ironic gesture to undermine the notion of 'fine art' in opposition to the applied arts of the comic book or ordinance survey map. Instead, there is an interweaving of heterogeneous visual forms of communication but which, in that interweaving can't communicate anything. There is an oscillating movement between presence and absence through the figure of the surface.

First the presence of the *idea* of visual coding and syntax stands in for the absent actual, specific instances of such coding. Moreover, this idea is also made present in the *act of reading* – for example the illegible, and enigmatic 'writing' – a presence which demands the disappearance of the *surface of inscription*; which becomes forgotten.

This is followed by the absence of this presence as the idea and the performance of reading becomes obscured by the *materiality of the painted surface* which, to some extent re-asserts the material planarity of those graphic forms obliterated in the first place; but it also asserts itself as the condition of possibility for inscription. An obvious example would be the speech bubble, which is a white space created by default, for it has not been painted itself but is a left-over ground; both a positive and a negative shape; a clearing of the surface and the creation of a boundary by the surface. It is both a ground for the scribble and yet it is a figure too.

Through this oscillating movement between presence and absence, which is of the surface, and happens through the surface, the surface itself appears but, just as Eurydice in the moment of Orpheus' transgression, only in its disappearance.

This painting (*La Garganta de Albers, Las Muelas de Gaudi [Albers' Throat, the Teeth of Gaudi]* (2003)) could also be understood as an engagement with other forms of visual representation – specifically the paintings of Albers and the architecture of Gaudi - but also a play, perhaps with ideas that belong properly to discourse – in this case a play with the idea of flatness so emblematic of the Modernist project. Albers and Gaudi bring different notions of flatness into the painting – optical spatiality in the case of Albers and the flatness of Gaudi's facades punctured by the tactile space of the windows. These references have a complex relation to one another and to the idea of a

paradoxical surface. To borrow from linguistics; the ‘throat of Albers’, operates *metonymically* in the sense that, like a keynote, generates the tempo and tone, the rhythm, the interval– the wind or voice of the work – an emanating rhythm that animates the ‘teeth of Gaudi’ so that the gaps, the weight of the positive and negative shapes move across the surface – play a tune on the ivories(!)The Albers square is a kind of pseudo centre (making oblique reference to figurative composition and the hierarchy of figures) whose role is not as image but to move the work of the painting along (akin to the role played by the goal of the game which is to set the game in motion and sustain play). Reference to Gaudi’s facades, on the other hand, organises the surface, provides a *metaphor* for the surface; a surface or pure facade, rather than a ground, upon which actions and operations can be inscribed.

*The work creates **the facade as a visual trope***; by which I mean that the painting presents the viewer with an essence of a view; the view of a surface that is not synonymous with the picture plane but is a flat surface nevertheless. The painting is saying “this is how it is to view a surface which is no more than a facade”. However, this is not purely theoretical – that is to say, the painting does not give us a universal model for that idea nor does it give us a representative example. Neither is this idea actually articulated by the painting verbally, as it were; as a polemic that would comment on superficiality, for example. To the contrary the trope is a specific construction of this painting – whose structure is not to be recognisable by comparing two moments in time (externally, as it were) but which creates sensation through the resonance of two moments in time, internally, as it were, because these moments do not have a chronological relation to one another. The oscillating movement between presence and absence prevents a fixed and stable image from obliterating the material presence of the surface, the sense of the wall/facade is not fixed and stable but continuously disappears from view. Rather than standing outside the work, comparing it to previous examples and matching it against what we might recognise, this flux suggests that we are somehow inside the work and that the act of naming such a trope is no more than an attempt to create a relationship to the outside; to fix what we also know is contested by the work.

Blanchot describes it thus: “As we look at the most certain masterpiece, whose beginning dazzles us with its brilliance and decisiveness, we find that we are also faced with something which is fading away, a work that has suddenly become invisible again, is no longer there, and has never been there. This sudden eclipse is the distant memory of Orpheus’ gaze, it is a nostalgic return to the uncertainty of the origin.’

Furthermore, as the painting brings the Albers/Gaudi axes together, it is not the case that the work combines pre-existing elements but, it can be said, that this painting creates those very elements. I

could say, for example, that the idea of Albers' breath – his sonorous rhythm that moves outwards across the surface, does not strictly belong to Albers work – it is a new invention created by Usle's painting. On the other hand, I could say that Usle's painting has created a new perspective on Albers' work. Likewise, his painting has created a new sense of Gaudi's rhythmic facades, with their black holes and white walls. It is in this sense that Usle painting precedes that of Albers and Gaudi; a repetition, perhaps of the paradoxical temporality of Blanchot's narrative. This is also an idea that in the impossible task of seeking its own origins the creation of the artwork undoes all origin, all past as a fixed chronology, so that and as it creates itself it also creates history.

Conclusion

The paintings I've shown you are paintings that I've admired for many years; that I've seen at first hand and looked at in reproduction many times in the studio, have made paintings that try to move to a similar rhythm. Still I know that I will never be able to use them up. In moving on I always return to them and they remain a very personal (almost) obsession as exemplars of what art can do. I am aware that my analysis is partial, but having said that I've tried to examine the paintings in such a way that it is not their image or meaning or what they are that has been the focus; rather that I have tried to investigate what they do. I know that this is not fixed. I wrote about the work differently when I researched my PhD. My terms of reference were different then, my interests and sensibilities were different then. The point is that this research is not simply about Usle's work but about a relation created in my reading of Blanchot's text. It may seem obvious to say it but the implication is that there are as many different ways to unfold the work as there are texts that would enable a new ways of thinking; new ways of thinking not because the text told me something new but because the encounter between the two is never more than the moment allows.

Catherine Ferguson, February 2012