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Story of the Eye Amy Kazzymerchyk

Kaja Silverman

'Unstoppable Development'

Joan Carlisle-Irving Lecture Series

UBC Department of Art History, Visual Art & Theory

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In the introduction to her lecture *Unstoppable Development*, Kaja Silverman declared, "I am arguing that photography is as old as we are; that it is the world's primary way of disclosing itself to us. Photography has been developing unstoppably from the first pinhole camera...to digital photography, and there is nothing static or fixed about it." To substantiate her argument, she read the second chapter from her forthcoming book, *The Miracle of Analogy*.

Silverman focused on the experimental photography of Joseph Nicéphore Niépce (1765-1833), Louis Daguerre (1787-1951) and Henry Fox Talbot (1800-1977). She traced the lineage of their mutual concern for *taking a view of the world*, rather than *receiving an image*. Each photographer used a derivative of Robert Hooke's 1694 camera obscura, which allowed the "artist's view" to direct the aperture, and they each used the window to "obtain a printable view of nature" by "gathering viewpoints".

In 1826 Niépce pointed a camera out of his window and framed the rooftops of the neighbouring buildings. Over an eight-hour exposure he produced *View from the Window at Le Gras*. In 1835, Talbot took *The Oriel Window*. Rather than offering a view through his window, however, he exposed a view of his window (though he would go on to take numerous images “drawn with the pencil of nature”). In 1838 Daguerre further developed Niépce’s vision with the series *View from the Boulevard du Temple*, with an exposure time dramatically shortened from eight hours to thirty seconds.

The analogy of Silverman’s thesis is photography itself.

Photography is an optical analogy for the development of human vision and cognition.

“Early photographs that disappeared quickly were called retinas because they resembled after-images and the opacity of human retinal vision, as described by [Johannes] Kepler.”

It is a technical analogy for developing the capacity to arrest fugitive life.

“Daguerre was driven to rationalize time and solidify form in his images—” to “command more imperiously” over the sun and achieve the Cartesian dream of fixity and stability.

It is a chemical analogy for the development of apprehension.

“The image evolved in tandem with the world.”

It is an ontological analogy for the development of being.

“Talbot observed early chemical images to be self-developing. Some imprints captured in an exposure would appear much later as other imprints were undeveloping from view.”

The miracle of this analogy is that it is interminable. Photography did not emerge with the invention of the camera, but has been developing in our consciousness since we began. As our imperious command of perception unfolds, the analogy develops—unstoppably.

Walking away from the lecture, I gazed up at the full moon. Along with the sun, it is perhaps the oldest ocular aperture we’ve been exposed to. I thought about early human experiences of image doubling. I thought about the advent of the mirror (and Silverman’s own contemplation of it in her early writing). I thought about reflections in water and Narcissus. I thought about shadows on rock walls and Plato’s Cave. I thought about the first time a human gazed into the eyes of another in their likeness. I thought about our inclination to figure star alignments, anthropomorphize weather patterns, and even model the progenitor of being, in our own image. And in the moments before the clouds shrouded the moon from view, I recalled Silverman echoing Heidegger—“nothing ever stands fully exposed before us”.

Amy Kazymierchuk