The Locus of Looking - Dissecting Visuality in the Theatre
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Chapter 5 > “How Can We Know the Dancer from the Dance?”
Navel Gazing as Critical Practice
— O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?
— Yeats: Among School Children

The last line of Yeats’ famous poem has been interpreted as a rhetorical question, which states the potential unity between sign and referent. It is however, as Paul de Man (1979: 11–12) has pointed out, equally possible to read the last line literally rather than figuratively. Read in this way, Yeats’ final question is not just a confirmation of the fact that sign and referent fit together so exquisitely but that all differences between them are effaced. Instead, “How can we know the dancer from the dance?” becomes a serious question that sets out to deconstruct precisely this intricate intertwining of sign and referent in the ‘presence’ that the poem addresses, and thus to expose the conflation that allows for the rhetorical reading in the first place. In this second reading, the question is not whether or not we can know the dancer from the dance, but how we can know the difference.

De Man demonstrates how the entire scheme set up by the first, rhetorical reading of the question can be undermined, or deconstructed, in terms of the second reading. Here, the final line is read literally as meaning that, since dancer and dance are not the same, it might be useful, perhaps even desperately necessary, to tell them apart. Furthermore, de Man writes, these two readings of the poem do not simply exist side by side. They have to engage each other in direct confrontation, for the one reading is precisely the error denounced by the other and has to be undone by it. Therefore, de Man calls the question “How can we know the dancer from the dance?” a figure that cries out for the differentiation that it itself conceals (de Man 1979:12).

From this perspective, the question “How can we know the dancer from the dance?” touches a point most relevant for the theatre. This is the case because the contemporary stage, where bodies and other signs seem to ‘break free’ from the dramatic frame in order to present ‘themselves’ instead of functioning as sign for something else, often suggests an inseparability of sign and referent similar to that suggested by the rhetorical reading of Yeats’ poem. This results in a paradoxical situation similar to the one encountered in Part I of this study. On the one hand, many accounts of the new developments in the theatre testify to a growing awareness of the inevitable discursivity of our ways of seeing, and understand what we see as being the product of signifying practices rather than simply ‘there to be seen.’ On the other hand, there is a persistent tendency to understand the effects of this deconstruction on stage in terms of increased authenticity, immediateness, the thing brought back to itself, analogous to the inseparability of dancer and dance in the rhetorical reading of Yeats’ poem.

Secondly, the question “How can we know the dancer from the dance?” seems to be a particularly apt question within the context of Western
European theatre of the 80s and 90s, as in this theatre, dance and dancers appear to present a strong appeal to the desire involved in the rhetorical reading of Yeats' question; that is, the desire to come to a point where performers are 'themselves' in events in which sign and meaning are no longer separable. Yeats' question brings to mind many examples of theatre makers who began to collaborate with dancers and choreographers, or to experiment with making dance themselves, as well as a more general blurring of boundaries between theatre and dance. In this artistic climate, choreographers such as Pina Bausch, Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker, William Forsythe, Alain Platel, Sasha Waltz, and Meg Stuart have also become influential among theatre makers.

In the theatre just described, Yeats' question “How can we know the dancer from the dance?” rings out with urgency precisely because of the duplicity observed by de Man. Although ‘we’ today seem to know well enough that there is no sign without referent, it is very often precisely the apparent conflation of sign and referent that makes today's theatre so appealing. Therefore, in order to understand the relation between seer and seen as it takes place in this theatre, it does not suffice to either observe that dancer and dance, actor and act, sign and meaning (seem to) be conflated in an undivided 'presence,' nor does it suffice to deconstruct this ‘presence’ in order to undo the apparent conflation. What is needed instead, is to understand the relationship between seer and seen in terms of the duplicity observed by de Man. At this point, the subject of vision can serve as a critical tool to mediate between a deconstructive approach to what is seen on stage (that is, an approach in which what seems to be just 'there to be seen' is understood in terms of signs), and the appeal presented to the seer as subject, an appeal that works to obscure precisely the status of what is seen as a sign.

In the first part of this study, I demonstrated how the subject of vision, understood as a 'position' mediating between what is seen and the individual seer as subject, helps to clarify how the deconstruction of the dramatic theatre serves to de-theatricalize what is seen on stage, and how this contributes to a position for the seer from where he or she can see it 'as it is.' I have introduced a triangular model to describe the relationship between the seer as subject, the subject seen, and the subject of vision.

In this second part of my study, I will use the triangular model to further explore the involvement of the seer as subject with what is seen. As I will demonstrate, the apparent conflation of sign and referent turns into an important indicator, provided that these moments of apparent conflation of dancer and dance, of actor and act, of sign and referent, are understood in terms of the duplicity as observed by de Man. That is, provided that they are understood as figures that cry out for the differentiation that they themselves conceal. This differentiation can turn moments of apparent conflation into moments of exposure: exposure not of what or who is there to be seen on stage, but of the subject involved in seeing it as such.
In the following chapters, I will explain how my triangular model can help in understanding exactly who this subject ‘just looking’ is. I have chosen three theatre performances that use retheatralization as a strategy to expose the subjectivity involved in ‘just looking.’ In chapter 6, “Peter’s Powder Puff: Retheatralizing Sexuality in the Field of Vision,” Gonne Heggen’s choreography Looking for Peter (1996) will be instrumental in exposing aspects of the gendered-ness involved in ‘just looking.’ In chapter 7, “Disorders that Consciousness can Produce: Bodies Seeing Bodies on Stage,” the performance De Zieleweg van de Danser (The Path of the Dancer’s Soul, 1997) serves as my theoretical object for a discussion of the relationship between ‘just looking,’ the psychoanalytical subject, and the disembodied I/eye. But first, I will engage with a performance that retheatralizes the multiplication of frames typical of the post-dramatic theatre in order to redirect attention from framing as part of the representation on stage, to framing as part and parcel of a subjective point of view. This performance is Bas en Elze Dansen (Bas and Elze Dance, 1996) by Cas Enklaar and Els Ingeborg Smits.1

The Bas Raadsheer versus Elze Struys Case — In Bas en Elze Dansen, actors Cas Enklaar and Els Ingeborg Smits play two fictive fossils of Dutch theatre history. The title of the show refers to an earlier production titled Bas en Elze kijken terug (Bas and Elze Look Back, 1992) in which the characters Bas and Elze looked back upon their careers in Dutch theatre.2 They have worked with all of the famous members of the theatre community and have played most famous plays, and infamous plays alike. And although their bodies threaten to fail, they still know all the lines by heart. Both live in the Louise Houbée Foundation, a (fictitious) home for elderly artists. When we meet them again in Bas en Elze Dansen, they are working on a new production of Sophocles’ Electra. Elze has done Electra before, back in 1936, for which she received a prestigious Dutch theatre award. But now she does not feel satisfied anymore by repeating Sophocles’ words. This time, she wants to dance Electra. She quotes Martha Graham’s famous dictum that “The body does not lie” and dances Electra with a can of coffee beans on her head by way of an urn.

Bas is shocked. Sophocles’ words have proved their value for over 2000 years. What would we know about Electra if the words had not been preserved and handed down to us? Maybe the body does not lie, but very often it is hard to see what it says, and it also has a rather short life. And given Elze’s age, it is not very likely we will be able to enjoy her truthful bodily message much longer. While Elze’s body will die, the words of Sophocles will be handed on to coming generations, to be performed by ever-new bodies.

Perceived as such, the condition of the actor and his or her relation to the dramatic text could be called symptomatic for the general condition of
being born into discourse and living one's life through the act of assuming positions within it. Bas and Elze have literally spent most of their lives expressing themselves on stage through the words of others. And even now, they often use the words of others to express their own fears and feelings. When, for example, they contemplate the time of their own death approaching, they use the text of Chekhov's *Three Sisters*:

The years will pass, and we shall all be gone for good and quite forgotten. ... Our faces and our voices will be forgotten and people won't even know that there were once three of us here. ... But our sufferings may mean happiness for the people who come after us. ... There will be a time when peace and happiness reign in the world, and then we shall be remembered kindly and blessed. [...] Oh, if only we knew, if only we knew (Chekhov 1954: 329–330).

When, a little later, Elze lapses into a momentarily state of absence, Bas contemplates the fragility of life, repeating King Lear's speech when he discovers his daughter Cordelia's dead body. 

*Bas en Elze Dansen* foregrounds the relationship between the physical self and the words of others as an important motive behind the search for new modes of theatrical expression. The performance demonstrates that while theatre may be as old as Methuselah, it is, nevertheless, alive and kicking. The characters Bas and Elze with all their memories of a theatre long gone, represent theatre history, just as the would-be rehearsals for their new show represent the continuous search for new modes of theatrical expression. The questions stated in the program leaflet: “Is dance to be preferred to the spoken word? Does the body speak more truly than language?” recall many avant-garde theatre experiments that contributed to the deconstruction of the dramatic theatre over the course of the 20th century.

In *Bas en Elze Dansen*, this quest takes the shape of a confrontation of theatre tradition, represented by Bas, with the impetus to change, represented by Elze. Bas distracts his attention from the vulnerability of his own aging body by identifying with the undying words of immortal drama-authors, and hides his own corporeality, shielding it behind an obsessive preoccupation with manners and looks. Elze, on the other hand, immediately begins to peel off the layers of gilt to show *sans gêne*, an elderly body dressed in a rehearsal outfit that does not exactly become her. The exercises that she performs, instead of showing off physical prowess, bear witness to failure and aging and to what she can no longer do. It is this body, this carcass as she calls it, that according to her, speaks more truly than Sophocles' words will ever do.

If it were up to Bas, Elze would stop moving about immediately. Movement compromises her delivery. While Elze does some warming up exercises, Bas memorizes a list of forty-three rules for the actor as recorded by Cor van der Lugt Melsert in 1949. These rules are about self-control and control of bodily appearance. One of the rules reads that the actor, unlike the
musician or the sculptor, has only himself at his disposal: his voice, his body, and his presence. On stage, the actor has to do without a musical instrument or a block of marble to hold on to. This being confined to his own body seems to be hard for Bas to accept. For him, what counts in the theatre is not his own physical presence, but the words of the dramatist. His body is to be controlled and to be kept out of sight, metaphorically speaking, to prevent it from distracting the audience's attention. His physical presence has to be made subservient to the architecture of the drama that frames it, and makes it readable in terms of the telos as given within the text.

**Just be Yourself!** — The rules for the actor as memorized by Bas reveal the kind of technical training that these fictive historical actors (supposedly) received once upon a time, early in the 20th century. They say a great deal about the changes in the conception of acting since then.

It is no longer the technical ability to put oneself in someone else's position, but the personality of the actor as human being that is placed in the forefront. This trend towards disappearance of the character is further reinforced by influences from dance and performance art (Van Kerkhoven 1998: 111, my translation).

Dramaturge Marianne van Kerkhoven wrote the passage cited here in 1998. In a 1991 article in *Theaterschrift* 7, she defines the new actor born out of these developments in terms of a 'third' form of acting:

In contrast to 'the Stanislavski actor' whose work is based on immersion in the character and 'the Brecht actor' who displays his character to the audience, the 'third variation actor' primarily wants to show himself to the audience, whether or not by means of a character (Van Kerkhoven 1994: 10, italics in the text).

In this development, the work of the New York based Wooster group is often mentioned as important influence. Van Kerkhoven, also, refers to the Wooster group, quoting actor Ron Vawter's description of acting as "finding out who I am in front of an audience;" the actor no longer steps into the character's shoes, but rather allows this imaginary figure to live within himself; the character almost 'disappears.'

It is worthy of note that Ron Vawter, in search of himself in front of an audience, usually spoke the words of others. He spoke the words of Roy Cohn and Jack Smith, for example, as well as those of many fictional characters. Rather than presenting himself in his own words, his search for who he is problematizes the very notion of self, and shows it to be inseparable from the discourse in which it is expressed. This complication is a recurring theme in *Bas en Elze Dansen*.

Cas Enklaar and Els Ingeborg Smits, the actors who perform Bas and Elze, although not old enough to be called fossils themselves, have been at
the heart of Dutch theatre for almost 30 years now. The actors are the product of theatrical developments, and their performance is about this history and how it has defined their ‘role’ as actor. Their careers started in 1968 and 1969, a time of revolt in Dutch theatre that has gone down in history as the *Aktie Tomaat* (Action Tomato). This revolt inaugurated major changes in Dutch theatre establishment, and ended the careers of many leading actors and actresses who made it in the more conventional theatre that has now fallen into disfavor. The role of Elze is based on the memoirs of several of such actresses. Actors Cas Enklaar and Els Ingeborg Smits themselves belong to the generation that threw tomatoes and became famous for resisting the type of theatre represented by the characters Bas and Elze.

In *Bas en Elze Dansen*, Cas Enklaar and Els Ingeborg Smits perform the actors of the older generation they defined themselves in opposition to. But they do not show them according to the style and rules of some old fashioned theatre. Instead, they show these actors being ‘themselves’ in a de-theatricalized setting typical of much theatre after 1968. What we see on stage is not an illusionist representation of another world, but the empty space of a small black box theatre: Peter Brook’s empty space. Instead of a stage set, a few props are scattered around: a table, some chairs, and a coffee machine. An old painted backdrop showing a winter landscape hangs a somewhat out of place against the back wall. Two actors dressed casually enter the stage and address the audience. They introduce themselves as actors and explain what they are going to do. This is not going to be a polished performance. Instead, they are going to show us a rehearsal where everything happens *à l’improviste*. The actors show fragments of the play they are rehearsing, try out things with the text, discuss their roles and the interpretation of the play, disagree, make coffee and smoke cigarettes. They are constantly there as ‘themselves,’ commenting on the role they play, or using elements of the role to reveal things about themselves.

The performance presents a sampling of strategies of de-theatricalization as they have proved successful in the deconstruction of dramatic theatre. However, instead of using these strategies to de-theatricalize what we see on stage, this performance actually stages such strategies, thereby *retheatricalizing* what we think we see. The actors seen as ‘themselves’ on stage are not Cas Enklaar and Els Ingeborg Smits, but Bas and Elze. The actors ‘themselves’ are characters.

In *Bas en Elze Dansen*, the actors Bas and Elze’s selves are quite literally the product of theatrical discourse. The performance demonstrates how this self is produced on stage by means of signs. We see it *and* read it. With this retheatricalization of strategies of de-theatricalization, Cas Enklaar and Els Ingeborg Smits demonstrate how such strategies work in the construction of the actor’s ‘self’ on stage. The performance demonstrates how the deconstruction of the dramatic theatre serves as framework that *produces* the actor’s presence as her or him ‘self,’ and how seeing this self depends upon a frame of reference.
The performance also shows that deconstructing or ‘breaking through’ such a framework does not open onto some undivided presence ‘behind’ it. On the contrary, the frame is shown to be constitutive of this very distinction. Bas en Elze Dansen demonstrates that the multiplication of the frame, does not result in increased visibility of the thing in itself, but rather in indeterminacy. Furthermore, this indeterminacy undermines the position of the seer as the one who is able to see it ‘as it is,’ and helps to expose framing as involved in what we think we see.

**Punctum** — On stage, we witness a day of the rehearsal process. Bas and Elze rehearse, discuss, have lunch and continually reminisce. They are more than a hundred years old now and still remarkably energetic. Nevertheless, every now and then age begins to show. They are short of breath, they fall asleep spontaneously, Elze sits down next to a chair instead of on it, they make mistakes, and repeat themselves. Such involuntarily behavior on stage attracts attention in a way similar to what Roland Barthes described as the **punctum** in photography.

The **punctum** is a detail that sticks out from the frame of symbolic reality. The **punctum** describes a moment that seems to escape coding and intention, evading representation. Barthes opposes the punctum to **studium**, which he describes as “the extension of a field which I perceive quite familiarly as a consequence of my knowledge, my culture: this field can be more or less stylized, more or less successful, depending on the photographer’s skill or luck, but it always refers to a classical body of information” (Barthes 1993: 25–26). Studium evokes a kind of general interest, but not the emotional stirring caused by the punctum, because in the case of the studium, emotion “requires the rational intermediary of an ethical and political culture,” it results from “an average affect [...] almost from a certain training” (Barthes 1993: 26).

Barthes introduces these ideas about photography in *Camera Lucida* (1993) a book he wrote while preoccupied with “an ‘ontological’ desire” to know what photography is “in itself” (Barthes 1993: 3). He finds this to be an essential feature in what for him is the quintessential photograph: an image of his mother. He describes how, after his mother’s death, he looks through her photographs “looking for the truth of the face [he] had loved” (Barthes 1993: 67). Finally, he finds what he is looking for in a photograph of his mother as she is a child of five together out with her brother in a Winter Garden.

Hence I was leafing through the photographs of my mother according to an initiatic path which led me to that cry, the end of all language: ‘There she is! (Barthes 1993: 109).

It is in this photograph that he finally finds a trace of his mother that exposes her as she really was, and that reveals part of her essence or self.
Barthes does not understand this quality in terms of information about his mother given by the photograph or by the way the photograph represents her. Rather, he understands the impact made by the photograph in terms of its ability to go beyond what he termed the studium and present him with what Lacan calls the Touché, the Occasion, the Encounter, the Real, in its indefatigable expression (Barthes 1993: 4). “In a first impulse, I exclaimed: ‘there she is! She’s really there!’” (Barthes 1993: 99). The photograph then, seems to appeal to a desire for immediateness, directness, a desire to go beyond the 'always already' of the symbolic order.

[F]inally the Winter Garden Photograph, in which I do much more than recognize her (clumsy word): in which I discover her: a sudden awakening, outside of “likeness,” a satori in which words fail, the rare, perhaps unique evidence of the “So, yes, so much and no more” (Barthes 1993: 109, italics in the text).

“Look,” “see,” “here she is,” the photograph seems to say, a gesture Barthes associates with the gesture of the child pointing his finger at something and saying: that, there it is, lo (Barthes 1993: 5).

In Bas en Elze Dansen, the behavior of Bas and Elze on stage contains many symptoms of involuntary behavior that seem to ‘break through’ the symbolic reality represented to show a trace of the real presence of the actor behind it. However, in Bas en Elze Dansen, these moments are staged. They appear as symptoms only within the framework of the story represented on stage. They are not traces of Cas Enklaar and Els Ingeborg Smits’ real selves. Rather, they function as signs of unintended behavior of the fictional characters/actors Bas and Elze and as such they do not rupture in the studium but support it. All of the signs but one.

At one point, Bas and Elze repeat an entire scene we have seen shortly before. It is a scene in which Bas and Elze recollect memories, or stories that have to pass for spontaneous memories. There is something odd about this repetition. In this scene, they remember a hilarious moment that happened in a provincial theatre where all the actors fell about laughing so that the performance had to be cancelled. The scene starts from an embrace. They find comfort in each others arms and then both begin to laugh, saying: “yes, I know what you are thinking.” They start telling the story together, finishing each other’s words, and having a lot of fun in telling it. After this spontaneous memory, others follow and then, unexpectedly, they repeat the entire scene about the performance that was cancelled in exactly the same way as we have just seen it.

Now, if the repetition of this scene is supposed to be a sign of these two old people’s failing memories, if this is supposed to signify that the characters Bas and Elze mistakenly tell the same story twice, then it is strange that their memories fail in exactly the same way at precisely the same moment. Furthermore, it seems strange that their telling of this story, which is supposed to represent a spontaneous interaction between the two, is
repeated in exactly the same way as we saw it shortly before. Performed the way it is, it looks more like the real actors Cas Enklaar and Els Ingeborg Smits have forgotten that they have played this scene already and mistakenly perform it a second time, exactly the way they have rehearsed it. The embrace from which the scene starts is a recurring motive in the play, which would make it understandable that they, by mistake, start the wrong scene.

But then, the iron discipline with which they do the whole scene again exactly the same way, with the same timing, movements, hesitations and slips of the tongue, is somehow at odds with the atmosphere of spontaneity suggested by the performance. And then again, why would two people make the same mistake at exactly the same moment? If one of them indeed inadvertently started to repeat a scene, and the other decided to go along with it in order to keep the show going, it would make more sense to do a variation on the scene in order to give it an improvised character similar to the rest of the performance.

The repetition does not fit within the logic of the story of Bas and Elze. Equally problematic, it appears to understand this repetition as a trace of the real presence of actors Cas Enklaar and Els Ingeborg Smits behind the mask. Precisely this undecidability, this impossibility to fit it into either side of the binary opposition that still defines much understanding of theatrical meaning production, makes it useful for a deconstruction of both.

The strictly studied character of the repetition not only highlights the sign character of the spontaneity and the ‘just being there’ character of the rest of the performance. It also confronts the seer in the audience with the ‘frames’ at work in seeing this: with his or her expectations, knowledge, desires. This undecidability causes a kind of short circuit between actors and characters, thereby multiplying the frame. What do actually we see here: the actor or the character? This critical move undermines the opposition of framed vs. non-framed, of symbolic representation vs. real presence. It undermines the idea that breaking up the frame will result in a non-framed situation, opening onto some real presence behind it. Instead, it leaves the audience in uncertainty about how to look at this, how to understand it. It makes the audience aware of its own visual habits as they are involved in seeing theatre performance. In doing so, the repetition functions as what Mieke Bal has termed the navel.8

The Navel — Like Barthes’ punctum, Bal’s concept of the navel refers to a tiny detail, a pointless point that somehow falls outside the logic of the scene represented. This does not bring, however, Bal to a reading of such details as traces of the real. Instead she takes its appearance as ‘just there to be seen,’ as a meaningful symptom that draws attention to the limits of signification, to its limitations, and to how subjectivity is involved.

Initially, such a detail appears as noise within the represented scene. However, as Bal demonstrates, it can function as a meaningful pointer that
helps to shift attention from the story represented to the story involved in the act of seeing this representation, the story of the interaction between seer and seen, precisely because it is noisy. In this respect, the navel presents a starting point for a re-narrativization of 'just looking,' by showing how 'just looking' involves a story emanating from a subject.

The term ‘subject’ underscores this idea of human reality as a construct, as the product of signifying practices that are culturally specific and not necessarily conscious. To account for the subjectivity involved in the way we see the world demands increased awareness of how the ways we perceive and interpret are socially based, rather than biologically given or the product of individual choice. Subjective perspective is an effect of cultural and historical specific visual practices to which the individual seer is subjected. These practices produce the seer as subject and are part of the way the seer engages with what is seen.

Since each seer brings his or her cultural baggage, there can be no such thing as fixed, predetermined or unified meaning. This does not mean however, that there are no limits. All too easily, increased awareness of subjectivity involved in what we think we get associated with relativity, with anything goes, and with increased freedom to give meaning at will, while in fact the notions of the subject and subjectivity call into question precisely the autonomy, freedom and stability that define the position of the individual.

Effects of this misunderstanding can be seen at work in the use of Derrida’s own concept of dissemination to deconstruct fixed meanings and objectively given truths. Dissemination has proved to be a powerful tool to undermine persistent tendencies to explain what is seen in terms of origins, and for redirecting attention to signs as events that take place in interactive situations with someone for whom they appear as signs. Dissemination, however, does not mean unaccountability or the freedom to give meaning at will. Bal points out that Derrida himself has argued against this misunderstanding. However, as she also points out, this misunderstanding is somehow already implicated within Derrida’s use of metaphor.

Although [Derrida] undermines the phallic view of sign and meaning inscribed in Saussure’s semiotic, Derrida is also implicated in it. This is because his dissemination, intended to dissolve the penetrating power of the dualistic sign, sometimes looks like an overwhelming dispersion of semen: coming all over the text, it spreads out so pervasively, so biblically, that it becomes like the stars in heaven or sand at the seashore: a promise to global fatherhood […] (Bal 2001: 82)

It is this global fatherhood that Bal argues against with her notion of the navel as a center without meaning.

The anatomical navel is a scar, a leftover, meaningless in itself, but meaningful as a pointer that focuses attention on the connection that was cut in order to produce the human being as independent entity. Similarly, the navel as critical concept is an index that can point to a lost relationship, cut
through, or repressed in order to produce the subject as independent entity 'just looking.' Taken as an index, the navel can help to reconnect what is seen with a historically, culturally and socially positioned viewer. As a bodily metaphor, the navel can help to draw attention to body involved in seeing and how being a body plays a part in how we make sense of what we see; how the body and the symbolic have to be understood as intertwined rather than as opposed.

Bal introduces her concept of the navel in her book on Rembrandt paintings which mostly represent biblical stories. Bal demonstrates how these stories function as a frame in a way analogous to the logocentric architecture of dramatic theatre. The story presents a frame that sets out a relationship between seeer and seen, a frame through which all elements seen, get clear meaning and can be understood in a meaningful relationship to one another. The frame is a guide to interpreting what is seen as a function of the story. Bal demonstrates this type of reading with a reading of Rembrandt's Danae (1636, see Bal 1991: 18–24). The painting represents a pre-given story; various elements of the painting offer a visual representation of various elements of the pre-text. This is the story of Danae, barred from love by her frightened father but, in the moment the picture presents, visited by Zeus in the guise of a shower of gold.

Bas goes on to demonstrate that a reading of the same painting as a visual text, as an address orientated to a viewer as subject of vision, tells a different story.

Looking at the picture, we see a female body, nude, displayed for the lust of the viewer who is allowed to peep into the intimacy of the doubly closed bedroom. But this is a visual story, the story of vision in Western culture. It is the story of the male voyeur and the female object, of the eroticisation of vision: it is the story of the central syntagm – subject-function-object – in which the positions are fixed along gender lines – through which, indeed, gender itself is constructed (Bal 1991: 19–20).

The painting as a visual composition presents an address to a viewer, and this address interpellates the viewer into a position as seeer in relation to what is seen. This other story does not deny or replace the story of the pre-text, but it does present a perspective on various elements of the image and the way things are shown. It also helps us to understand why this particular visualization of the story of Danae is convincing, and to whom.

The fact that the painting representing the story of Danae addresses the viewer as voyeur looking at a naked female body displayed for his visual pleasure, does not mean that the story of Danae is about voyeurism, nor that the visual story presented by this painting can be reduced to voyeurism. Rather, becoming aware of how the story represented here (the pre-text about Danae and Zeus), and the address presented to a viewer by means of this particular visualization are related, provides insight into how the meaning of this painting comes into being as an effect of the interaction between seeer and seen as mediated by the perspective presented by the painting.
Bal demonstrates how in this process, a tiny detail that seems to fall outside the logic of the representation or appears as simply noise within it, can shift attention from a reading of visual signs in terms of a relation to a (supposed) origin (the story of Danae in Bal's example, or the drama text, or the self of the actor on stage) towards a reading of visual signs as events taking place in a historically and socially specific situation, and in relation to a seer. Such a detail can alert us to how the painting is organized as a visual text in respect to a seers, as well as to how what appears to be convincing must be understood in relation to the parameters that define seers as subjects seeing.  

The navel as the insignificant detail or noise is meaningful in two interrelated ways. First, visual 'noise' says something about the subject seeing because it is that what has to be repressed in order to achieve the effect of unproblematic 'just looking.' Visual 'noise' has to be repressed in order to confirm the seer as the one who is able to see it 'as it is.' Second, such a detail — provided that it is not understood (and repressed) as noise but taken as a sign that addresses a seer — can be useful in relating what is 'just there to be seen,' to the point of view from where it appears, thus exposing the point of view that gets obscured when these signs are being repressed as noise. Seen this way, the navel functions as shifter that can elucidate the relation between the seer 'just looking' and what is 'there to be seen,' in terms of the duplicity observed by de Man.

The Navel of the Dream — Bal is not the first one to have invoked the navel as interpretative metaphor. Freud uses the term 'the navel of the dream' to designate a moment that seems to resist interpretation and must remain obscure. He introduces the term in an analysis of one of his own dreams, a dream about a female patient named Irma. His psychoanalytical treatment relieved her hysterical anxiety but not all of her somatic symptoms. Unwilling to accept the solution Freud proposed, she breaks off the treatment.

In his dream, Freud takes Irma to the window and looks down her throat. He sees a big white patch and whitish gray scabs covering a wound. In his explanation, Freud interprets the figure of Irma as a condensation of various women he knows. He understands the patch and the scabs as a composite index for his anxiety about his eldest daughter's serious illness and his own ill health due to the use of cocaine. However, in a footnote to his interpretation of his own dream, however, Freud states that:

I had a feeling that the interpretation of this part of the dream was not carried far enough to make it possible to follow the whole of its concealed meaning. If I had pursued my comparison between the three women, it would have taken me far afield — there is at least one spot [Stelle] in every dream at which it is unplumbable [unergründlich] — a navel, as it were, that is its point of contact with the unknown [mit dem Unerkannten zusammenhängt] (Freud, quoted in Bronfen 1994: 82).
Elisabeth Bronfen (1994) makes an analogy between Freud’s concept of the navel of the dream and the vanishing point in perspective. The vanishing point marks a limit we cannot see beyond, the point where receding lines meet. It marks the limit of what can be seen while, at the same time, it signifies an inaccessible beyond. The vanishing point mirrors the vantage point, the point from where the scene is depicted. It has its function within a logic that serves to support a position for the viewer as the one who can see it ‘as it is.’

Bronfen explains how, in Freud’s text, the notion of the navel of the dream as vanishing point serves to assuage the blow to his analytical potency constituted by Irma’s canceling treatment. The double navel (the metaphor ‘the navel of the dream’ and the representation of the white scabs) Bronfen argues, mediates two moments in which Freud’s dream articulates a wounding of his sense of potency, by confronting him with a moment that eludes it. Irma’s resistance ‘castrates’ him in the sense that it points out his impotence as an analyst; it marks the moment of failure in his interpretative system. In his dream, this wound manifests itself in the white scabs as an index for his anxiety about illness. In his analysis of his own dream, the fear for his own impotence manifests itself in his explanation of the white scabs as the ‘navel of the dream,’ a rhetorical gesture that relieves him of the responsibility to understand what he sees as a sign, and to know how to interpret this sign.

In the interpretation of his own dream, Freud constructs a narrative explicitly acknowledging that his interpretation was not carried far enough because he insists that the concealed meaning would take one too far afield. He justifies his interpretative impotence by stating that this “tangle of dream thoughts cannot be unraveled” and that a reading of it “adds nothing to our knowledge of the content of the dream.” He contents himself instead with the figure of “a spot where the dream recedes down into the unknown” (Bronfen 1994: 83).

At stake then when we encounter the navel of a representation – the knotted scar covering and recalling a wound – lies the issue of impotence and the desire to reassert potency; resistance of an enigma and its encroachment upon the subject; failure and exculpation; castration as it structures symbolic relations, and sublimation as it diffuses the threat of the Real (Bronfen 1994: 85).

This sublimation tames the real, turning the lack of signifier (where words fail) into a signifier for lack (‘navel of the dream’). Significantly, this threatening lack of signifier that has to be sublimated and made harmless is marked in Freud’s dream by the whitish gray spots that offer themselves specularly to Freud as he “penetrates Irma’s oral cavity, leading him down into the unknown of the body” (Bronfen 1994: 83). This relationship between the vanishing point, female bodies, and the need to sublimate a lack of signifiers into signifiers of lack will be explored in the next chapter, where the analogy
between the navel as the elusive spot, and the vanishing point as point of origin in perspectival vision, will help to expose the body involved in 'just looking.'

By acknowledging the navel of his dream as the vanishing point, as the place where interpretation would lead to far afield, Freud restores his position as viewer with the potency to distinguish between what is meaningful and what is not. The potency to make this distinction is what is at stake in Bas en Elze Dansen as well. The narrative moment which I have called the navel of the performance, presents the viewer with a confusing knot that undermines the binary opposition of representation and presence and makes this opposition felt as part of the logic that structures what we think we see. This moment resists an automatic reading of what is seen in terms of the story represented. It also resists a reading as a moment of exposure of the real presence of the actors as ‘themselves’ behind the representation. This moment is confusing not because the frame is taken away and the thing appears in all its glorious presence. Rather, confusion results from the way the performance prevents ‘just looking’ from taking place and leaves the viewer in confusion about what he or she is seeing.

Like the navel of Freud’s dream, the navel of this performance is a small detail that can easily be suppressed as meaningless, as a moment that would lead one astray if one were to try to fully understand it. Actually, ignoring this moment smooths the logic of the story represented. The story makes complete sense and is much more coherent without it. Within this coherent story, it is noise, an irritating moment that seems to ask to be covered up like a mistake or a stain. Understood as the navel of the performance, however, it can function as an index by drawing attention to the relationship that has to be suppressed and sublimated, in order to produce the seer as independent subject ‘just looking’ at what is ‘there to be seen.’

**Always Already Dead** — Bronfen reads Barthes’ account of the punctum as a specular counterpart to Freud’s navel of the dream. Like the navel of Freud’s dream, the punctum points to what evades representation. It is disturbing precisely because it cannot be named. It is a “blind field” (Barthes 1993: 57). But unlike Freud, who marks the navel of his dream as that which must be left obscure, Barthes recognizes the punctum as the spot, which precisely does not lead astray. Barthes writes:

> I exhaust myself realizing that ‘this has been.’ [...] I passed beyond the unreality of the thing represented, I entered crazily into the spectacle, into the image, taking into my arms what is dead, what is going to die. (Barthes 1993: 107, 117)

Barthes understands the punctum in terms of a facticity that allows him to go beyond representation, the effect of which he describes as a being absorbed into what he sees (“I entered crazily into the spectacle”) to be united with
that which the spectacle presents to him. Barthes enters crazily into the spectacle to be united with what is both already dead (his mother), and going to die (the five year old child on the photograph). The photograph shows him the dead in a way that can momentarily forestall death, allowing him to embrace these always already dead people as though they were living. In this respect, he creates a relationship between photography and theatre as a means of making present here and now what is always already dead.

We know the original theatre and the cult of the Dead: the first actors separated themselves from the community by playing the role of the Dead: to make oneself up was to designate oneself as a body simultaneously living and dead: the whitened bust of the totemic theatre, the man with the painted face in the Chinese theatre, the rice-paste makeup of the Indian Katha-Kali, the Japanese No mask ... Now it is the same relation which I find in the Photograph; how 'lifelike' we strive to make it (and this frenzy to be lifelike can only be our mythic denial of an apprehension of death). Photography is a kind of primitive theatre, a kind of Tableau Vivant, a figuration of the motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead (Barthes 1993: 31-32, italics in the text).

Photography has its function in warding off death, postponing it. Photography can make present the dead while at the same time photographic representation brings out death in what is living by turning the living into an image that represents the living as always already dead. The photograph is a representation of a moment that per definition is no more, is absent; it shows what is already dead. This character of always already being dead has to be countered by, suppressed by, or obscured through strategies of life-likeness that obscure the difference between sign and referent. If successfully obscured, this results in a moment that stands out and is no longer experienced as representation, but as presence here and now. In these photographs, sign and referent seem to coincide and as a result, the distance between seer and seen is likewise transcended.

What if we take these always already dead people embraced by Barthes as though they were alive – an illusion afforded by the particular characteristic of the photograph that allows him to 'enter like crazy' – as symptomatic of a more general condition summarized in Derrida's dictum 'always already'? Then, the photographic punctum describes the moment at which we see what we know to be always already representation, and therefore absent, as 'just there to be seen,' lo, this here, present. In this moment, the always already dead are experienced as being present, a condition that is evoked by the punctum as a moment where sign and referent seem to become conflated. This moment allows Barthes to 'enter like crazy,' it draws him in, absorbs him into what he sees.

The photograph, or more specifically, photographs characterized by punctum, appear as a fetish: we know very well but... We know very well that what we see is always already dead, that it is a representation of something absent, yet some photographs allow us momentarily to enter this absent world, to be absorbed into it and experience what is seen as present, as here
and now, and as the thing in itself rather than as a representation. Similarly, the theatre can function as a fetish. Even though we are aware of the always already dead character of what we see, of its dependency on what is not there, the theatre nevertheless presents us with momentary experiences of presence, of immediateness, that seem to escape he realm of the always already constructed.

**Re-animation** — In *Bas en Elze Dansen*, theatre likewise appears as a means of warding off death. The theatre appears as a means to make present and keep alive what is dead and/or absent: the words of immortal drama authors. Bas and Elze’s urge to keep on making theatre seems to be a way to distract attention from death’s approach, maybe even a means to keep death at bay. As soon as they stop rehearsing, death urges itself upon them and they begin to contemplate old age, their past and mortality.

Elze proposes dance as an alternative to the always already dead words of dramatists. She wants to make Electra present in a way more directly touching than Sophocles’ words. She forwards dance as a means of presenting a more intense address to a viewer, more intense than a representation of the text. Although at first Bas does not seem taken with the idea of dancing instead of talking, in the end they do dance. On several occasions during the performance, they perform dance movements together, and the show ends with a dance sequence of several minutes.

These dance sequences are not motivated by the story and they seem to just happen spontaneously. During these dance sequences, the actors Cas Enklaar and Els Ingeborg Smits no longer perform the signs of age that characterize their impersonation of Bas and Elze, again resulting in ambiguous effects. What are we seeing here? Are we supposed to see Bas and Elze who have miraculously transcended the ailments of old age? Or do we see Els Ingeborg Smits and Cas Enklaar as ‘themselves’ performing these movements? Do we see actors who have freed themselves from the restrictions imposed upon them by the story or do we see characters who, by means of dance, transcend the limitations imposed upon them by the ‘reality’ of their life, old age and mortality? Again, these moments remain ambiguous. But in any case, dance appears to be a strategy that holds the promise of breaking free from symbolic reality, be it either the reality represented or the reality of representation. The performance is a practical demonstration of how dance actually manages to produce the effect of heightened directness, and is thus able to achieve an effect that theatrical representation cannot produce. Dance appears as a means of leaving behind what Barthes has called the studium and to reach out towards the audience in a way similar to the punctum.

According to Barthes, the punctum is the moment that does not lead astray because it marks the moment that counts, the moment that (seems to be) the fulfillment of a desire that in Barthes’ text is represented by his desire to retrieve a connection with what is lost: his mother. The punctum
marks a moment that contains the promise to overcome the separation of which the navel is the scar: the cutting of the umbilical chord that produces the individual as individual by separating him or her from the mother. The punctum thus appears, to cite de Man, as “a figure that cries out for the differentiation that it itself conceals,” while the navel, on the other hand, helps to understand the punctum in terms of the duality described by de Man, namely as the effect of signs that derive their meaning from something absent, a status however, that remains concealed precisely by the address these signs present to a particular viewer. In terms of the triangular model introduced in part I, the punctum depends on a relationship in which the individual seer automatically identifies with the position of the subject of vision as implied in what is seen.

The relation with this seer is what has to remain concealed in order to produce the effect of the punctum. This relationship is also what remains concealed in Barthes’ text. The punctum is “what I add to the photograph and what is nonetheless already there” (Barthes 1993: 55). The punctum marks the moment that “I animate the photograph and it animates me” (Barthes 1993: 59). This ambiguity is characteristic of Barthes when he deals with the punctum. He frequently speaks of it as something that can be pointed out in the photograph, something objectively given and there to be seen by everyone, and he actually points out what, according to him, is the punctum in many photographs. However, in the end he leaves out precisely the image that for him is the quintessential photograph, namely the photograph of his mother as child in the Winter Garden, saying:

I cannot reproduce the Winter Garden Photograph. It exists only for me. For you, it would be nothing but an indifferent picture, one of the thousands manifestations of the ‘ordinary’; it cannot in any way constitute the visible object of a science; it cannot establish an objectivity, in the positive sense of the term; at most it would interest your studium; period clothes, photogeny; but in it, for you, no wound” (Barthes 1993: 73).

This suggests that punctum is not an objective element in the image after all, but something that exists only in relation to a particular seer, a seer to whom it appears as such. Hence, the Winter Garden Photograph reveals as much about Roland Barthes as it does about his mother. And seen in this way, not showing it, means that he avoids being exposed as a subject. It protects his position as an absent seer who can see it ‘as it is.’
1 — Bas en Elze Dansen was written, directed and performed by Cas Enklaar and Els Ingeborg Smits. Premiere: January 18, 1996 in De Toneelschuur, Haarlem (the Netherlands).

2 — Bas en Elze kijken terug was written, directed and performed by Cas Enklaar and Els Ingeborg Smits. Premiere: March 16, 1992 in De Brakke Grond, Amsterdam (the Netherlands).

3 — Cor van der Lugt Melsert (1882-1969) actor, director and manager of theatre company Het Hofstad Tooneel (The Hague) and of the city theatre of Amsterdam. After WW II he was suspended from his office for a period of two years. He began working as a theatre critic and in 1949 he published his autobiography Wat ik nog zeggen wou,...


5 — On October 9, 1969, two students of the Amsterdam Theatre School threw tomatoes at the stage at the end of a performance of Shakespeare's The Tempest, by the Nederlands Comedie. Their action was the start of a series of protest-manifestations with which young theatre makers revolted against what they saw as uninspired and old fashioned repertoire theatre, as well as against the old fashioned, hierarchically organized companies that dominated the existing order.

6 — Peter Brook. The Empty Space. New York, 1968

7 — "To recognize the studium is inevitably to encounter the photographer's intentions, to enter into harmony with them, to approve or disapprove of them, but always to understand them (Barthes 1993: 27-28). "Certain details may 'prick' me. If they do not, it is doubtless because the photographer has put them there intentionally" (47). Punctum has nothing to say, but is telling [...]. The studium is ultimately always coded, the punctum is not" (51).


9 — Bal:

between the text (the story of the welcomed arrival of Zeus) and the image (the exhibition of a female body for voyeuristic consumption), the painting produces its own narrative, reducible to neither - the work's visual/narrative textuality. The pre-text is literally a pretext: Its anteriority allows the painting's appeal to the general story as a frame for its reversal. The story's centrality, as the theme of the work, allows everything decentered to slip in: it allows, that is, for the dissemination of meaning. [...]

These two stories - the purely textual, verbal pre-text and the story of the purely visual present - collude and collide in the work's textuality. They are in tension, but not in contradiction. They produce a new story, the text of the Danae as an interaction between the canvas and the viewer who processes it. In this text, Zeus, invisible as he is, thus becomes the pre-text the woman uses to get rid of the indiscreet viewer. The woman who at first sight seemed to be on display - as a spectacle, in a static visual reading - takes over and dominates both viewer and lover. Her genitals, prefigured
by the slippers and magnified by the opening of the curtain at the other end of the sight line, are central in the framed text. They are turned toward the viewer, but they can be seen by neither viewer nor lover, because the viewer is sent away while the lover comes to her from the other side/sight. This way, her sexuality, in spite of its centrality, is a trace of the pre-text, for the conflicting lines of sight cut it off; it is also the locus of the metaphor that kept creeping into the vocabulary of my analysis: It is the navel of the text. But between sex and navel lies a difference – the difference between voyeurism and its deconstruction (Bal 1991: 21).