The Locus of Looking - Dissecting Visuality in the Theatre
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Dr Nicolaas Tulp, surgeon and representative of the civil authority, anatomist and frequent office holder in the bourgeois government of Amsterdam. But also a general practitioner who, like Freud, left his case-histories, the Observationes, where the body is made text, and in which one of the patients is constrained to spend a winter in bed suffering from the insight that his bones were made of wax and would buckle if he stood up. The sick man was a painter to whom Tulp refers in a way that suggests it was Rembrandt, the most prolific producer of self-portraits ever, who was obsessed by the story of Samson and Deliah – that narrative of symbolic castration and the treachery of women – and whose first important canvas depicted Tulp’s magisterial dissection of the executed criminal Aris Kindt. At which Descartes was probably present; anatomist himself, philosopher and legislator for modern subjectivity, who, meditating by the stove, considering strangely whether his body exists, uses the wax that is to hand to prove that corporeal objects have no consistency or essentiality but extension in space. And Caspar Barlaeus was almost certainly there at the dissection too, a leading intellectual and noted neurotic, who wrote poetry in praise of Dr Tulp’s dissection of Kindt and dared not sit down for fear that his buttocks, which were made of glass, would shatter.
While in England, their brothers. Hamlet calling on his flesh to melt. Marvell, Member of Parliament, who let aggressivity write in his poem. And Milton and Pepys: each committed in their different ways to inexorable textuality; driven by equivocal desire. A revolutionary poet and censor, who also wrote a Samson, and a secret diarist narrating himself and his world in private. Both eventually blind.... But these are anecdotes and in some respects improbable, or at least susceptible of proof. Surely not worth of serious historical attention. And yet is there not something at once risible and haunting about a poet of the bourgeois class who thought that his body was made of glass (for Descartes, of course, strictly a madness); or salutary an image of the public dissection of a man who had no respect for the law? Or revealing in men driven blind by writing? When we consider these conditions in the representatives of a historical order, is there not some reflection to be made on the rationality and freedom of the elaboration of which the period is said to have made important advances?

Then do these fragments not begin to figure the outline of a historical fable, even a structure: at the foundation of our own epoch a conjunction of themes and powers which it is still ours to live, and if enough time remains, undo, today? (Francis Baker: *The Tremulous Private Body: Essays on Subjection*, London and New York: Methuen, 1984: 115–116)