
**ART HISTORY AND THEORY 2
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ASSESSMENT 2

DARIAN LEADER
STEALING THE MONA LISA
What art stops us from seeing
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‘On the morning of 21 August 1911, a slight, white-smocked man slipped out of one of the side entrances of the Louvre, and soon vanished into the crowd on the rue de Rivoli. His step was not easy, as beneath his smock he held a wooden panel which he had both to conceal and protect.’¹

The theft of Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa* brought thousands of people to view the place where the painting once hung, many of whom had never been to the Louvre before. This moment in twentieth-century art history, and the ensuing spectacle, is used by Darian Leader as the accompanying story-line for an investigation into the why an empty gallery space was attractive and why we look at visual art.

Sigmund Freud (1856 – 1939) and Jacques Lacan² (1901 – 1981) are employed as psychoanalytic guides; many other writers and theorists are drawn on in confirmation or counterpoint; and the author makes extensive use of contemporary artworks to further underline the thought process.

The *Mona Lisa*, as a result of its theft and subsequent proliferation of all forms of media, was elevated from being simply a painting to ‘the symbol of painting itself’³. This simple observation explains why almost everyone who sees the painting in person is surprised by its diminutive size: as any ‘encounter with an empirical object that has taken on such symbolic power can result only... in disappointment’⁴. For in our minds the object casts a shadow much bigger than its actual physical displacement.

Such international media saturation could not have occurred any earlier in history, with this being an era of newspapers with significant circulation and film newsreels. Equally though, such a hysteria may not have had the room to flourish in later decades, due to the sheer volume of media traffic itself. Such an elevation of painting to symbol would not occur, or at least so effectively endure, if such a theft were to happen in today’s society, inundated as it is with so many images vying for attention.

The disparity between the anticipation of a personal encounter with an object or place that has become significant, and the actual experience itself, often exhibits as a reluctance to realise a fantasy. Some do not actually want that special long-wished-for event to occur simply because it may not match their hopes, and the possibility of destroying the sanctity of the symbol is too much of a risk.⁵

For an object or image to become a symbol for us, Leader asserts that they must take on a 'signifying value', but not just for ourself but 'they need to mean something for *someone else*'⁶. This is derived from Lacan's structuring of the look – being a dynamic not just between the viewer and the object, but including a third party viewing the viewer. This obviously need not involve the physical presence of another person, as this look is often internalised and forms part of our self-image⁷. In an example of particular resonance, Leader illustrates by noting that 'people wandering around art galleries often start thinking about how someone else would see the work they are looking at – usually, someone they love'⁸. Or perhaps someone they detest: for the meaning for the other need not be positive, it matters only that it has currency; rebellion could be defined as esteeming an object or opinion that is strongly disapproved of by a significant other.

We can never know exactly how the other sees us, but Lacan holds that all we can be sure of is that we are looked at⁹. Further, 'what we see and where we look will depend, in part, on what someone else sees and where someone else looks'¹⁰. The images we direct our gaze to capture us, they 'mould us, transfix us, captivate us and alienate us'¹¹. Lacan posits that an object or image becomes a symbol when we put in the place of the Thing. The Thing is his term for a place, a zone, created by a 'traumatic aspect to early experience that we cannot grasp directly in terms of representations or meanings' [referring to the relationship with the mother, this can be a 'suffocating proximity' or an 'unbearable absence']; it is 'an empty space created by this failure at the level of representations and meanings'¹². This failure of language and imagination 'becomes the space for our desires'¹³; so implying that our desires are unobtainable, for if they could be grasped then they have form.

Lacan defines sublimation as the 'the elevation of an object to the dignity of the Thing, or, in another formula, as the colonization of the space of the Thing'¹⁴. The object's displacement, 'rather than obscuring or hiding the zone of emptiness... points to it, evokes it'¹⁵. If an artwork is assigned symbolic importance, then, in Lacanian terms, for the viewer it evokes this place of emptiness. This is then why we look at visual art: we are searching for a glimmer of this inaccessible zone, and perhaps a path the healing the pain and loss that created it. But at no time can the artwork or object actually take the place of the Thing, and so there is an important 'difference between the object and the space the object find itself in'¹⁶.

Leader proposes that: ‘most things become more interesting once we’ve lost them. We can start looking for them, and then, perhaps, realise their true value¹⁷’. This is connected to this zone beyond visualisation; for its formation is dependent on a loss, albeit one so immense that it cannot be defined.

Discussion of sublimation is central to Leader’s exposition¹⁸: the classic definition, paraphrased as ‘instead of fucking, you go and paint a picture instead’¹⁹, implies the existence of a ‘primary sexual instinct’. Freud disagreed with the existence of instinct, preferring *drives* – oral, anal, scopophilic and invocatory²⁰ – with the aim of a drive being its satisfaction. Sublimation, in this schema, involves the satisfaction of a drive. Leader reviews Freud’s many aspects on sublimating²¹: that its purest form is scientific activity [mathematical formulation means that the body has been completely removed], and as artists do not achieve this, then they do not ‘complete the arc of sublimation’²² and their work is necessarily incomplete.

For Freud, not only are all artworks essentially incomplete in terms of sublimating, the visual field is always incomplete – our ‘visual curiosity is organised around something hidden... and the visual world becomes more interesting for us as we seek to complete it by searching for the concealed element’²³. Further though, ‘all art is unfinished since it can never satisfy the appetite of the eye: it can never show what the eye searches for’²⁴.

The difficulties of the sublimation discussions aside, Leader draws Lacan and Freud together with:

‘We are born into a universe of signs and, from a psychoanalytic perspective, one of its main effects is the experience of loss: ... the loss of the body’s enjoyment through the constraints of education, and the different forms of loss involved in the assumption of speech and language. And loss creates desire, the yearning to re-find something we believe we once possessed. Art provides a special place within civilization to symbolise and elaborate this search’²⁵.

Further, if ‘visual art has a special relation to this dimension of loss, there will always be something ‘beyond’ a painting, however graphic or detailed it might be’²⁶.

Leader also uses these theories to shed light on why art is made. In terms of the look, Lacan believed the evil dimension of the look is ‘present for all of us at a latent level’²⁷ and that, unconsciously, an artist may produce as a means of diverting the gaze of this ‘evil eye’. The author uses the ingenious parallel of animals’ terror moult and suggests that artists ‘divest’ themselves of artwork, dropping

images in order to survive²⁸ and so observing that ‘art in this sense is desperate... less the relaxed pastime of the aesthete than a furious defensive manoeuvre to ward off a malevolent Other’²⁹. Further, that art never stopped being religious in the precise sense of being designed partly as an offering³⁰.

For the artist there exists a problem of attempting to represent something that does not allow visible elocution, something that ‘resists being turned into an image’. This struggle often results in apparent changes in subject, and changes in styles or even medium:

‘when an artist is confronted with this problem of giving a form to something that by definition does not have a form, it frequently results in a change in the register of what the artist is working with rather than simply a change in what the artist is supposedly depicting ... the shift occurs once one approach to the problem of giving a form to something that has no form has exhausted itself’³¹

As such, our ‘visual reality is based on an exclusion that is less the result of a prohibition than an impossibility’³². This perhaps explains why artists are never entirely content with their own work, as the ultimate goal has not been reached – in terms of image making and in terms of sublimation – and so the work does not feel complete.

‘The story of the vanishing of the Mona Lisa has shown us what happens when the split between the artwork and the empty space it occupies is made manifest. But there is still enough of this empty space present when art fails to disappear; it is the special, sacred space that the artwork inhabits, the space that makes us ask the question, ‘is this art?’’. The problem, and the power, of this space is that we can’t see it. Art can evoke it for us, but it remains invisible. It is both what art invites us to see and what art stops us from seeing.’³³

Leader’s text, though at times difficult terrain for a novice, is rich in interesting observations and seeds for further contemplation, more than can be adequately discussed in such a short essay³⁴. The most salient perhaps is his advice: ‘when we read about ‘art’, this can never mean ‘all art’... that is one reason why theories of art never work’³⁵.

¹ Darian Leader, *Stealing the Mona Lisa*, 2002: p1.

² Refer to Anne D'Alleva, *Methods & Theories of Art History*, 2005: p96. Lacan and Freud are closely related, as Lacan is referred to as a theorist 'who revolutionized his field by reinterpreting Freud's work through semiotics, linguistics, and structuralism'.

³ Darian Leader, op. cit. under 1 above: p4. Leader's clarity of language is such that it directly quoting his text is a superior option to paraphrasing or reordering words.

⁴ Darian Leader, op. cit. under 1 above: p5.

⁵ Refer to Alain de Botton, *The Art of Travel*, 2002, p9: In Huysman's novel, *A Rebours*, the 'effete and misanthropic hero, the aristocratic Duc des Esseintes' decides that one's own reverie of an imagined experience is better than the inevitable disappointment of an actual journey, and so decides to never leave his home again.

⁶ Darian Leader, op. cit. under 1 above: p26.

⁷ Refer to Darian Leader, op. cit. under 1 above: p27-8: 'our own visual perception of ourselves depends in part of how we think we are seen by someone else. When there is a change in this look, our own image is put in question. We could evoke here the well-known experience of disappointment in love: when a lover is confronted with the loss of their beloved's affections, isn't one of the first things to happen a change in their relation to their own image? This might take the form of a hatred of this image, or the desire for change, seen, for example, in the adoption of a new fashion style or haircut.' And who amongst us has been immune to this feeling.

⁸ Darian Leader, op. cit. under 1 above: p15.

⁹ Leader, using Lacan, sites this as the basis of the childhood fantasies of being invisible, and of playing peek-a-boo.

¹⁰ Darian Leader, op. cit. under 1 above: p13. This calls to mind a game my brother and I used to play as children, where we would stare at the sky in an effort to get others in the street around us to start doing the same – we wanted to manipulate their gaze.

¹¹ Darian Leader, op. cit. under 1 above: p25.

¹² Darian Leader, op. cit. under 1 above: p59.

¹³ Darian Leader, op. cit. under 1 above: p61.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Darian Leader, op. cit. under 1 above: p7.

¹⁸ The threads of differing approaches to sublimating are intertwined in the text and difficult to untangle for a reader new to Lacan and Freud. Leader himself admits the 'concept of sublimation seems to have become hopelessly complex' [p105].

¹⁹ Darian Leader, op. cit. under 1 above: p53.

²⁰ Refer Darian Leader, op. cit. under 1 above: p.56: these drives are in fact partial, 'we are interested less in people than in the edges of people, the erogenous zones and bodily margins'.

²¹ Refer to Darian Leader, op. cit. under 1 above: p113: Leader makes a very interesting parallel with parental lineage by observing that Freud links sublimation with the 'recognition of the abstract dimension of paternity over the physicality of the relation to the mother. Form triumphs over content, the signifier over the signified'.

²² Darian Leader, op. cit. under 1 above: p106.

²³ Darian Leader, op. cit. under 1 above: p11. The missing element for Freud is of course the genitals, namely the penis [females are 'missing' the penis]. With respect to children's art, Leader asks 'does anyone bat an eyelid if they stick on a chimney when the house, in fact, has none?' and concludes that 'an extra chimney is fine, but the sex isn't'.

²⁴ Darian Leader, op. cit. under 1 above: p129.

²⁵ Darian Leader, op. cit. under 1 above: p75.

²⁶ Darian Leader, op. cit. under 1 above: p81.

²⁷ Darian Leader, op. cit. under 1 above: p31.

²⁸ Darian Leader, op. cit. under 1 above: p39.

²⁹ Darian Leader, op. cit. under 1 above: p43.

³⁰ Darian Leader, op. cit. under 1 above: p51.

³¹ Darian Leader, op. cit. under 1 above: p153.

³² Darian Leader, op. cit. under 1 above: p154.

³³ Darian Leader, op. cit. under 1 above: p176-7.

³⁴ Other points that I found interesting, but that simply didn't fit into the essay context as it evolved, include:

- (i) the 'natural world is already caught up in language, it is already pulverised by signs'; 'even our ideas of 'nature'... are the result of complex historical and cultural process... the way we look at some idyllic or shabby country spectacle will be informed by how we have seen it represented in art, the media' [p64];
- (ii) '...that is why art is so expensive. It evokes our castration, the fact that everything has to be given up for nothing' [p84] – this simply didn't make sense to me;
- (iii) in art 'it is less sight than ideas that matter' [p109];
- (iv) 'Art, after all, is about making, not communicating' [p111];
- (v) even though the skill involved in creating a 'good' fake may be significant, it is never appreciated as a work of art due to our belief that it's where it came from that counts – that a forger doesn't have the passion the artist had when the work was created – and so the desire isn't genuine [p 115];
- (vi) labeling a creative outcome an 'artwork' invites its use as a signifier for the artist [p119-121];
- (vii) for some works, 'partialness is subordinated to their function as symbols' [p128] – examples include the Venus di Milo [arguably the symbol for sculpture] and Michelangelo's Florence Pieta: 'if there is always something missing from an image, the only way to evoke completeness would be via an image that appears unfinished. What attracts our look is what we cannot see, and we search the field of vision for what could never find a place there, the part lacking from visual reality' [p128-9];
- (viii) 'perspective means that the artist has, in a certain way, been included in the picture... the point of perspective is always there. This is the point from which the artist looks back at us' [p134]; equally though, 'what you see depends on where you see it from... the viewer's look... actually constituted visual reality rather than simply recording it' [p137];
- (ix) if one symbol drops out, the entire inter-related network of symbols must come into play to make sense of the absence and fill the gap – this called a conspiracy theory [p165];

³⁵ Darian Leader, op. cit. under 1 above: p9.

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