

The Real and the Sublime

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The art object is the *objet a*, the unattainable object of desire sought in the Other, the gap in the Symbolic, the leftover when the Symbolic enters the Real. Beauty is an idea in the mind projected onto a physical object, a product of the Other, the unconscious. The Stendhal Syndrome is a product of the subject coming face to face with the Real, with its own non-existence, the impossibility of its desire and representation. The Real is sublime, beyond what can be put into words, beyond what can be measured or calculated, evoking sensations such as delight, awe and longing, or fear, terror and horror. According to Giambattista Vico, writing in Naples in 1725, the sublime marks a break between the known and unknown; it is “knowledge broken.” The expanse of the fountains at the Reggia di Caserta outside Naples, laid out by Luigi Vanvitelli in the 1770s, evokes the sublime. One semester while I was teaching in Rome we took a field trip to Caserta and a student disappeared at the end of the fountains there, at the vanishing point from the palace, the limen between human and nature. We saw him again two days later in Rome.

In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, “In our relation to things, in so far as this relation is constituted by the way of vision, and ordered in the figures of representation, something slips, passes, is transmitted, from stage to stage, and is always to some degree eluded in it—that is what we call the gaze” (73). “From the moment that this gaze appears, the subject tries to adapt himself to it, he becomes that punctiform object, that point of vanishing being with which the subject confuses his own failure” (83). The gaze is unapprehensible. The geometral construction of space shows us that the subject is “caught, manipulated, captured, in the field of vision” (92). The depth of field, elided in the geometral relation, grasps and solicits the subject. The gaze acts as a screen, outside the geometral and optical space, a fourth wall, the point of view of the perceiving subject. The gaze is the *objet a* in the field of vision, the substitute for the unattainable object of desire. The screen, the fourth wall, as in the palace at Caserta, is an absence in the picture, the place of the elision of the subject of the geometral plane. The geometral plane disappears at the vanishing point, as does the constructed perception of the elided subject. As the subject enters the geometral plane, he or she comes face to face with the Real, the *objet a*, the gaze, what is absent from conscious experience, the unconscious. The conscious perceiving subject disappears into the sublime.

