



Ambiguity and Visual Representation in *Pierre and Pola X*

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My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.).

□□□Ludwig Wittgenstein

The problem Wittgenstein confronts in this passage [6.54] from his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*—that of trying to say something articulate about that which defies linguistic expression—is one that similarly haunts a number of other thinkers who want to insist that language cannot fully depict the complexities of human experience. There is something that, because of its importance, would seem to demand expression; however, any attempt to depict it remains unable to do it justice. Thus, it should come as no surprise that in attempting to grapple with the question of “the Nothing” Martin Heidegger draws upon poetic language to capture this “unique struggle between seeming (concealment and distortion) and unconcealment (Being)” [112]. While Heidegger wants to insist that since the “Nothing remains in principle inaccessible to all science,” we are obliged to investigate other means of expression, it is not clear how one might locate a grammar capable of expressing this elusive aspect of human existence [26]. A fundamental difficulty of representation is at stake: how can one make observable that which defies representation? If that which one is attempting to represent is truly nothing, then how can such an object possess recognizable form? If it has form, then it is indeed something and not nothing. Of course, such difficult problems surrounding the concept of nothingness can be found at the origin of Western metaphysical inquiry in the debates of the pre-Socratics, in Parmenides most profoundly. How can we express the ineffable, give form to the formless? This is what concerns us here.

In what follows I want to engage this problem surrounding the complexities involved in representation by way of a reading of Herman Melville's 1852 novel *Pierre or the Ambiguities* combined with an analysis of Leos Carax's 1999 film adaptation, *Pola X*, in reference to how the latter frames these anxieties of the visual. In the end I want to suggest that Melville is attempting to articulate emergent forms of identity that cannot yet be contained within current boundaries of language and existing modes of sociality. Before exploring these issues, however, for clarity's sake and with the awareness that the novel is not widely read compared with his more popular novels, I will briefly summarize the basic plot outline of *Pierre*: a young writer, Pierre Glendinning, after discovering the existence of his half-sister, Isabel, initiates an incestuous relationship with her and renounces his fiancée, Lucy. These events lead Pierre's mother to renounce her son and disinherit him. Freed from his mother's influence, Pierre and Isabel relocate from the Glendinning rural estate to New York City, where they live in poverty while Pierre attempts to make a living as a writer. In time, Lucy joins Pierre and Isabel in their communal living arrangements. Pierre's manuscript is rejected by his publishers as plagiarized and incoherent. After Pierre's cousin (who once had a sexual relationship with Pierre) and Lucy's brother confront Pierre to demand Lucy's return, Pierre shoots his cousin and then kills himself.

I.

A novel about writing, Melville's *Pierre* stands as an early proto-modernist work, with its self-conscious reflection on the process of artistic creation. In his depiction of Pierre's failed attempt to "gospelize the world anew," to pen a mature work, Melville seems to be raising objections to the Emersonian sort of essentialist individualism that dictates that each person possesses a unique identity that ought to be celebrated, regardless of the reaction of the conservative middle-class establishment. By suggesting that this search for an original self—an essential combination of qualities by which each individual is differentiated from others—can often, as in Pierre's case, run aground, Melville appears to be advocating an alternative orientation toward identity, based on contingent, rather than essential, properties of individuality. Employing two apt metaphors for this conception of the self, Melville suggests that the Emersonian foundationalist model of identity fails to account for the ambiguities of human experience. Both metaphors are explicitly spatial and, more importantly, vertical in image. The first compares the self to an empty sarcophagus whose pyramid only obscures this emptiness:

Far as any geologist has yet gone down into the world, it is found to consist of nothing but surface stratified on surface. To its axis, the world being nothing but superinduced superficies. By vast pains we mine into the pyramid; by horrible gropings we come to the central room; with joy we espy the sarcophagus; but we lift the lid—and no body is there!—appallingly vacant as vast is the soul of a man! [285]

Melville goes on to compare the soul to another instructive image, a bottomless staircase:

Deep, deep and still deep and deeper must we go if we would find out the heart of a man; descending into which is as descending a spiral stair in a shaft, without any end, and where that endlessness is only concealed by the spiralness of the stair, and the black of the shaft. [289]

Instead of a linear progression, the spiral design serves to illustrate what accurately characterizes the individual as such is precisely this absence of a strictly delineated beginning and ending—the essence lies in its denial of essence. The circular structure of this paradigm echoes Melville's sense that there is no foundational "self" upon which additional, contingent properties might rest.

In both aforementioned passages, Melville positions his understanding of identity against the hierarchical view, which traditionally separates primary from secondary qualities in the taxonomical tradition of Aristotle. The former being of such importance that its absence would alter the very category of the object in question; the latter acting as an incidental, or contingent, attribute such that the nature of the entity would not fundamentally change if that quality were not present.

Melville's anti-foundational metaphysical orientation has substantial import on the question of visibility in that the unpinning of Melville's skepticism toward Emersonian individualism is to a large extent enacted through his treatment of the intersections between the visual and the epistemological. Through investigating the problematic implications of any knowledge gained by way of observation, Melville seeks to obfuscate epistemological access to subjectivity. In foregrounding Pierre's anxieties about his subjective states being observed by others, Melville highlights his protagonist's inconsistent strategy to hide what in fact never really existed in the first place. In the end, Melville comes to reject the possibility of an individual's having a fixed essence that might be isolated and upon which incidental qualities might be added.

II.

Even if the visual technologies of the mid-nineteenth century were limited by today's standards, it would be wrong to dismiss that era as a decidedly non-visual one. If the issue is the literature of the time, the conventions of melodramatic narrative—evident in Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* for instance—seem actually more rooted in a framework of visual detection and a supposed correspondence between easily recognizable signs of a certain trait or character type and the existence of that named quality in the assumed entity. Here, we might recall how Stowe draws on our assumption that a well-ordered kitchen is indicative of a morally sound household to easily differentiate the admirable characters from the abject ones. It is precisely this stable system of signs and quality that Melville complicates in *Pierre*. Yet, Melville is up to something more than the typical *bildungsroman* narrative, which indicts the hypocrisy of bourgeois values through the

process of the protagonist's newly discovered knowledge of the fundamental schism between the interior, the calculating, amoral schemes of the mind and the exterior realm of propriety and familial duty that serve as the criteria by which one's adherence to the established codes of conduct in society are measured. In such coming of age stories, the protagonist comes to understand that there is more to the world than appearances. In so doing, the hypocrisy, the lack of correspondence between what one says and what one does, is laid bare. To some extent, of course, this rupture between the public marketplace and the private realm does indeed account for the unscrupulous nature of public life in the framework of capitalism. In such a construction, one is able to maintain one's sense of Christian identity, while at the same time maneuvering within the arena of business transactions in which one is a properly self-interested, rational agent. Within this apparatus the essential concern is to maintain one's public reputation. The world of appearances thus becomes the guiding structure of an individual's consciousness. In an important sense, it is not so much that actions are ethically wrong in themselves, but that the outward signs of conformity are sustained. Melville, however, is not eager to assume that there exists in any individual a sense of seamless integration of the public and the private. Instead, Melville deconstructs the very notion that a unity can exist prior to the incongruity of public and private. The constructed notions of the public and private are mirrored in the dyad of the observable, material world and the subjective, immaterial mind.

All of this has something of a genealogy in Descartes's assumption that the supposedly inexorably distinct realms of immaterial mind and the corporeal body establish the possibility of complete mental privacy according to which other individuals cannot have immediate access to one's own thoughts. Cartesian dualism establishes the epistemic privacy of mind—almost by definition. It would seem that whatever I am thinking is necessarily unobservable, since it is going on in my immaterial mind—an entity which of course is neither physical nor observable.

The critical strategy that Melville adopts, however, lies in his rejecting the notion of a fixed interior essence, thus rendering the question of the possibility of interrogating the visual manifestation of the immaterial mind irrelevant. In resisting the assumption that a bedrock of individuality, an immutable ground for the self, exists, Melville complicates the traditional exterior and interior realms of being and the corresponding framework of visual detection. Thus, the novel's inclusion of Pierre's anxiety toward visibility becomes important. Precisely because identity in that society was becoming increasingly difficult to ascertain, the ability to discern the substantive interior of individuals by their outward appearance became all the more essential. With urbanization, the burgeoning cities of the nineteenth century became places where anonymity reigned. In such a world, how was one to determine the moral character of those one encountered? Out of this milieu emerged the complex semiotic network of appearances, in which vast connotative meanings were ascribed to the most seemingly superficial of exteriors. One learned how to distinguish a "proper" citizen from the motley crew of disenfranchised city dwellers inhabiting the same public space. That is to say that the social milieu that Melville interrogates rests upon a clear visual vocabulary, according to which the

exterior was assumed to seamlessly correspond to the interior of the subject. Into this self-assured world, Melville introduces “the ambiguities.”

Central to Pierre’s complex orientation toward the visual is the appearance of phrenology. Two portraits of the protagonist’s father exist: one painted without his knowledge while he was involved with Isabel’s mother and one commissioned by his wife, Pierre’s mother, in which he appears markedly different. The painter of the first portrait, we are informed, surreptitiously captured the likeness of Pierre’s father, who, having recently learned about phrenology, refused to pose for a portrait. It is this secret portrait that haunts Pierre.

Phrenology emerged in the nineteenth century, responding to the increasing need to develop a means to gain access to the interior essence of individuals by empirical observation and measurement. Proponents of phrenology assumed that the configuration of the skull determined the nature of the subject. We can situate phrenology within the larger movement toward professionalization of crime detection. Knowledge of fingerprinting and handwriting analysis also emerged. These techniques enabled trained professionals to identify an offender by way of comparative analysis of physical trace evidence. However, phrenology was unique in that it assumed one could gain epistemic access to the mind of the criminal. The science of phrenology opened the heretofore private thoughts of the mind to external observation. Transcending the traditional boundaries separating the mind and body within the Cartesian dualist framework, phrenology demanded that the received notions of public and private be rethought, as human subjectivity became a phenomenon governed by the physical world. That phrenology enjoyed such brief popularity speaks to its immense appeal to the empirically-minded sensibilities operating in the post-Enlightenment nineteenth century. Phrenology, promising to decipher the complexities of the mind by way of careful observation of its alleged physical properties, would have considerable attractiveness to the emerging feeling that such inquiry held the potential for discovering truth about the world.

In addition, phrenology also proved tremendously appealing to those inhabiting increasingly populated communities, who desired a means to quickly ascertain the character of those they encountered in their anonymous daily interaction. Notwithstanding the widely discredited science of phrenology, this sensibility has largely remained until the present day.

Melville, however, brays at the suggestion that a strict correspondence exists between the subject’s exterior appearance and his interior consciousness. Melville’s hostility toward those who would insist on unrestricted access to subjectivity in others is manifest in Pierre’s anxieties surrounding the degree to which his mother and his fiancée, Lucy, can perceive his thoughts. When these two insist on having unchecked knowledge of his mental life, he flees their gaze—not simply content to preserve his interior thoughts while in their presence, but also to insist upon a physical distance to prohibit their observation.

The creation of the writer, fueled by print capitalism, fractures its correspondence with the man. The created enters a realm in which it truly

takes a life of its own. The writer then becomes, not the measure of the authenticity of the work, but subordinate to the work itself. That is to say, the original (the man) is measured against his duplication (the book). The same uncanny relationship occurs when one tries to cash a traveler's check: the previously signed signature becomes the standard upon which one's identity is determined. In an important sense, one must be faithful to the duplication. This profound sense of alienation toward reified versions of the self functions as a recurring anxiety in the novel. That Pierre does not provide the press with any biographical details and insistently refuses to have a daguerreotype of himself made for the public illustrates the extent to which identity had become a source of ideological confinement for the writer.

III.

Reorienting our discussion back toward the question of representation and those elusive things which resist representation, we are now ready to discuss how Carax's adaptation is in a unique position to depict the sort of non-essentialist identities that Melville explores in his novel. In so doing, we must first confront the political implications of non-representation in *Pierre*. Melville's insistence on the inability of language to represent subjectivity, evident in the narrator's repeated asides about the inescapable recurrence of "Silence"—"for how can a man get a Voice out of Silence?"—suggests the inability of the present configurations of thought, the current taxonomies of identity, to account for the demands of the present situation [208]. Rather than a deficit, Melville's refusal to posit any positive qualities of the self actually provides its potential for radical transformation. By foregrounding the limits of the current configurations of identity and their utter failure to account for identity, Melville leaves entirely open future realities that might be later created. In the work of Fredric Jameson there is precisely this sense of the fact that the failure of representation and the abstract nature of possible reconfigurations of identity is the foundation upon which the utopian consciousness, the longing for elusive alternative, vaguely conceived realities yet to be thought. This is what Jameson means when he speaks of "utopian thinking" as a "negative" project:

It is that utopia is somehow negative; and that it is most authentic when we cannot imagine it. Its function lies not in helping us imagine a better future but rather in demonstrating our utter incapacity to imagine such a future—our imprisonment in a non-utopian present without historicity or futurity—so as to reveal the ideological closure of the system in which we are somehow trapped and confined. [46]

Jameson's recognition of utopia's refusal to be characterized by particularities, insisting, instead, on abstract possibilities that defy representation, parallels Melville's understanding of the self as a lack, in his deconstruction of Emersonian individualism and his depiction of Pierre's empty identity that cannot be easily subsumed within the system of boundary consolidation required by subjectivity. While dissatisfied with the essential model of identity, Melville aptly recognizes that to establish new

qualities upon which alternatives are grounded risks engaging in the same essentialism that he set out to reject.

William Spanos offers a similar reading of the implications involved in Melville's deployment of "Silence" in *Pierre*:

Pierre's silence means that he has no language with which to resist the 'vengeful' world that has closed in on him in his place of refuge. But for Melville, who, unlike Pierre, does 'complete' his novel *without* succumbing to the disabling metaphysical imperatives of 'comprehensively compact' completeness, it also implies 'e-mergence,' an incipient understanding of the indissoluble continuum of being that is totally foreign to the representation of being that informs the 'world's' discourse. [145-46]

In Spanos's assessment, Melville's ability to articulate the inability of language, and what Spanos, following Derrida, labels the "metaphysics of presence," to account for the full nature of being, position the novel as a successful project that demonstrates through Pierre's failure a realm of thought previously circumscribed, an orientation toward existence, once foreclosed, that is called into thought.

If one applies such a sensibility to Carax's adaptation, then the fact that critics found *Pola X* to be almost "unwatchable"—to quote the words of a reviewer who found it "a very opaque movie"—the strength of Carax's film becomes apparent (Bradshaw, 15). By making the film difficult even to see by virtue of employing numerous poorly lit scenes, a technique that is most prominently employed in the sequences involving Isabel, Carax is drawing on cinema's ability to represent the Nothing by foregrounding darkness in a manner that Melville cannot fully do with the apparatus of language. That is to say, Melville is still constrained in his representation of that which defies representation in so far as he remains within the bounds of coherent linguistic expression: in other words, while his narrator does talk of the inability of words to fully express reality, Melville's novel is composed of expression that does indeed make semantic and syntactic sense. In that respect, Carax's *Pola X* takes Melville's novel to another level of meta-art: it enacts, by way of the medium itself, the sense of linguistic indeterminacy that the novel diagnoses.

IV.

If Carax does fail to live up to the radical nature of Melville's embrace of ambiguity, it comes in his depiction of sexuality in *Pola X*. Although some scholars have argued that Carax's explicit sex scene, which films actual heterosexual penetration, fails to "conform to soft or hard-porn aesthetics," thereby functioning to demonstrate that "these are bodies, communicating mutely and intensely at the edge of bifurcating and dissolving identities," something of Melville's revolutionary rethinking of sexual desire is reined in by this all-too-straightforward sequence (Daly and Dowd, 156). While the attempt to draw out a Deleuzian deterritorialization of the sexual intercourse, invoking the concept of the Body Without Organs, is not

entirely wrongheaded, the fact remains that what is shown remains entirely within the bounds of conventional sexual practice. What makes Melville's deconstruction of desire so important is precisely its attempt to represent sexuality as something that resists adequate representation, its ambiguity reflecting the extent to which our existing modes of reality cannot account. It does, of course, remain a matter of debate as to how much Melville's lack of detail in his description of sexuality was a matter of censorship or artistic judgment. Be that as it may, one rightfully wonders if Melville's project orientated toward subverting normative heterosexual identity and practice, his profound effort to blur the established taxonomies of sexual desire, loses much of its power when subsumed by critics favoring liberationist identity politics.

An impatience with respect to Melville's ambiguities might be one of the problems of Carax's film. He is too anxious to show sexual identity as a positive, existing quality, rather than as an absence. Here Melville's portrayal of sexual desire finds substantial parallels with contemporary queer theory. While this approach to sexual identity as an absence is bound to be a controversial one, it is not without a highly developed genealogy in queer theory. Jonathan Dollimore's work identifies this strand of queer identity in the figure of Oscar Wilde's parody of the self, in contrast to Gide's more conventional liberationist inflection of gay subjectivity [25]. Dollimore also diagnoses this Wildean sensibility in the post-humanist orientation of Foucault and the erotics of betrayal in Jean Genet's work. As explained earlier, it would be wrong to claim that such alternative, perhaps masochistic, queer sexualities are non-existent: rather, as a void, they exist insofar as they foreground the absence of positive content.

The task toward which queer desire is aimed, that of transgressing the given coordinates of sexual desire, practice, and identity, to reconfigure the boundaries of the self and the Other, demands the ambiguity with which Melville describes the "much more than cousinly attachment" between Pierre and Glen Stanly [216]. In its ambiguity, its resistance to representation, queer desire can function to resist the forces which seek to categorize it in fixed cartographies of identity. Recalling the utopian elements discussed earlier in Melville's insistence on the inadequacy of language to capture experience, the more challenging position is one that seeks to frustrate the existing bounds of sexual identity. This, at least, was the position of Foucault, who writes, in the first volume of his historical study of sexuality, that authority is able to deploy language to contain the radical potential of "transgressive" sexuality:

Rather than the uniform concern to hide sex, rather than a general prudishness of language, what distinguishes these last three centuries is the variety, the wide dispersion of devices that were invented for speaking about it, for having it be spoken about, for inducing it to speak of itself, for listening, recording, transcribing, and redistributing what is said about it: around sex, a whole network of varying specific and coercive transpositions into discourse. Rather than a massive censorship, beginning with the verbal proprieties imposed by the Age of Reason, what was involved was a regulated and polymorphous incitement to discourse. [34]

When considering this passage in the context of Melville's and Carax's contrasting treatments of sexuality, it is plausible to conclude that the latter offers the more reactionary depiction. Importantly, while Carax does depict Pierre's murder of Glen and Isabel's suicide, he ends the film with the protagonist in police custody, shaken but still alive. In contrast, Melville's version indicates that Pierre dies as well. This detail is essential in that it demonstrates how the project that Pierre undertakes to go beyond the bounds of language entails a sort of willful drive directed toward self-annihilation. On this note, Leo Bersani's analysis of the self-destructive potential inherent in attempts to figure that which resists figuration finds parallels in the character of Pierre. I quote Bersani at length,

Because the representation of the birth of relations requires a figure of nonrelationality, the danger inherent in any such representation is the erasure of figurality itself. Nothing is more haunting in the work of artists otherwise so different from one another as Turner and Rothko than their reduction of the canvas to the wholly undifferentiated origins of the canvas's work. In the nearly unpunctuated whites of Turner's late paintings, in the blankets of dark sameness on the panels of the Rothko Chapel in Houston, we come as close as we can to suffering the truly rare privilege of seeing nothing—as if the lines of movement in space that art represents could, as it were, be ontologically illuminated only as they almost disappear within a representation of their emergence from nothing. [643]

Bersani claims that this problematic underlies the difficulty inherent in depicting emerging sexual identities that teeter on this precipice between desire for the nothing and the void of non-existence. As he explains in his work *Homos*, in attempting to identify positive characteristics of which same sex desire is composed, one can easily inscribe this alternative configuration in terms of existing structures of normative heterosexuality. Yet, Bersani warns, such a denial of fixed identity threatens to frustrate any organized political mobilization. On this note, Bersani's analysis of the confluence of the death of the subject as figured by Barthes and Foucault and the emergence of queer studies seems particularly incisive. The fluidity of queer identity simultaneously serves as its strength for revolutionary reconfigurations of sociality and its fragility that easily leads to its self-destruction. In an uncanny twist on Althusser's notion of the interpellation of the subject, perhaps we might suggest that to easily recognize oneself as being hailed as "queer" entails that one is not one, if we take "queer" to signify alternative sexual-social configurations that escape existing structures of meaning. In this paradigm to fully embrace the free floating identity of a "queer" would be synonymous with completely submitting one's subjectivity to erasure.

In this respect, I propose that one might read Melville's *Pierre* as enacting such an annihilation of the humanist subject, in which its "queer" holds both its liberating potential and the seeds of its own destruction. To reorient ourselves back to the novel in question, I parallel this concept of queer with the trope of the empty pyramid in *Pierre*: both symbolize an emptiness that defies any taxonomical structure.

In a related vein, Pierre's alienation from language recalls Julia Kristeva's suggestion that melancholy and silence are somehow related. For

Kristeva, masochistic desire for the Nothing seems to correspond with a refusal to engage in language formation:

Let us keep in mind the speech of the depressed—repetitive and monotonous. Faced with the impossibility of concatenating, they utter sentences that are interrupted, exhausted, come to standstill...the melancholy person appears to stop cognizing as well as uttering, sinking into the blankness of asymbolia or the excess of an unorderable cognitive chaos. [33]

This renunciation of language that Kristeva identifies with depression is clearly evident in *Pierre*, a work in which Melville openly cites *Hamlet*, “The time is out of joint;—Oh cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right” [168]. Sharing Hamlet’s status as a son with a dead father, Pierre finds himself at odds with his most fundamental inheritance, his language. Insofar as Pierre frustrates the binary of sexual desire, he manifests this masochistic desire to sunder his relation to language.

Carax, then, is observant of the implication surrounding identity and masochism, when he refuses to situate the opening scene—during which WWII bombers are shown destroying a cemetery—into the larger narrative of *Pola X*. Instead, the short sequences resist integration and contextual meaning. It is simply the self-destruction of liberal individualism on a scale never seen before or since. In addition to this compelling scene, the extent to which Carax depicts Pierre and Lucy in the long dark sequences when they first meet, the film works in a similar fashion as do the black panels of Rothko that Bersani uses to explore the self-annihilating nature of radical reconfigurations of sexual identity: the numerous scenes of poorly lit bodies that Carax shoots enable an art of invisible subjects and emergent identities. It is precisely through the cinema’s ability to show darkness, to occupy the frame with nothing, while at the same time showing the movement of this nothingness through space, that the viewer becomes convinced of a reality that cannot be figured. In the final frames of *Pola X*, the camera focus becomes blurry, the angle goes askew, at which moment the viewer is jarred from melodramatic identification through a Brechtian reminder that the realm in which Pierre exists is utterly foreign to representation, visual or otherwise.¹

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¹ On this point, I disagree with DeAngelis who finds Carax’s protagonist more accessible than Melville when he writes: “Ultimately, it is perhaps Carax’s ability to identify with the central character, and to empathize with his plight with even less judgment than Melville, that makes this version of an 1850s domestic romance such a powerful, politically engaging film” [34]. If Carax’s film is to be praised, it is for the moments it resists the Aristotelian tradition of cathartic identification.

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