

Eyes Without a Face: Ramón à Clef.

By Alan Clinton

I'm not sure, but I believe that I may have one time worked in a silo. The reason I'm not sure is because if I did, it was a virtual silo, or more properly, a silo culture. And also, as Diamond, Stein, and Allcorn explain in "Organizational Silos: Horizontal Organizational Fragmentation," "Silos, with their built-in 'barriers,' are more often than not solutions to problems we can scarcely articulate (what we call autistic organizational artifacts)—because they are embedded in American culture and, therefore, unconsciously driven."¹ I can say that I have definitely had intuitions of working in a silo, however, and can articulate the events precipitating the most tangible feelings. In doing so, much like an analyst attempting to understand latent structures by examining manifest contents, I may be able to shed light on my particular situation. Since my middle name is Ramón, I've decided to call this attempt a "ramón à clef," but will conduct my narrative with the same optimism an analyst brings to a case study—that the contours of the general can be discovered in the rocky fragments of the particular.

Like many young scholars, I have migrated across state institutions that share many of the same unconscious silos, artifacts that repeat with variation inasmuch as they arise from a shared culture. But in one place in particular, I found the silo effect especially strong and equally incomprehensible. I cannot say whether I was right or wrong in the surrounding events because assigning blame per se is not the goal of analysis, and I am not sure whether this essay will look more like the product of Freud or Dr. Schreber, or some oscillation between the two. Perhaps every product of "knowledge" should submit to the possibility that it arises from a doctor who is mad also. There is so little I know about the events I wish to analyze, which I believe is built into the silo effect itself. It is to the institution's advantage if its employees cannot see far beyond their particular silos—it knows all too well the power of the gaze.

I distinctly recall, one winter afternoon, gazing into someone else's mailbox: "Good, I thought, he has received the materials he asked for; the recommendation will be forthcoming." But then a familiar, uncanny shape in the shadow, lay there. I picked up the book, from someone else's otherwise empty mailbox: *Story of the Eye* by Georges Bataille, the City Lights edition. On the back of the book—I knew what quotes were there—Jean Paul Sartre writes, "Bataille denudes himself, exposes himself ... [and] has survived the death of God," while Susan Sontag

affirms that Bataille “indicated the aesthetic possibilities of pornography as an art form: *Story of the Eye* being the most accomplished artistically of all pornographic prose I’ve read.” For those who do not already know, *Story of the Eye* is a sort of Bonnie and Clyde narrative. Its most notorious scene involves Simone, an unnamed male ingenue who narrates the novel, and a priest whose murdered body becomes Simone’s sexual toy:

Simone gazed at the absurdity and finally took [the priest’s eye] in her hand, completely distraught; yet she had no qualms, and instantly amused herself by fondling the depth of her thighs and inserting this apparently fluid object. The caress of the eye over the skin is so utterly, so extraordinarily gentle, and the sensation is so bizarre that it has something of a rooster’s horrible crowing. Simone meanwhile amused herself by slipping the eye into the profound crevice of her ass, she tried to keep the eye there simply by squeezing the buttocks together. But all at once, it zoomed out like a pit squooshed from a cherry, and dropped on the thin belly of the corpse, an inch or so from the cock.²

I find this passage, from the standpoint of the university, compelling for several reasons. First, it attacks traditional models of wholeness, through the anatomical metaphor, that traditional knowledge relies upon. Here the body is torn apart, rearranged, reinvented through play. Thus, the passage anticipates postmodernism’s concept of knowledge as invention rather than as revelation of pre-existing verities. The only problem is that, inasmuch as the contemporary university is a reactionary institution, it must refuse the anti-oedipal implications of such knowledge.

Eyes are meant to stay in their sockets and see the truth; they were not made for caressing, for play, certainly not meant to be shot out of our asses like rockets. If an eye gets out of hand, it must be nailed back into place. And so I opened the cover of the book and found the magistrate’s seal there. Which magistrate? The one who placed the book in someone else’s mailbox, a signature declaring ownership of a book being lent to someone else. Only in this case I had intercepted it with my gaze, which at that moment was as invisible as the machinations that had placed the book there in the first place.

The next morning I received an e-mail from someone else, also a magistrate, which read as follows:

Dear Ramón,

I received your materials [at this point I am already thinking, the question of “my materials” has grown infinitely more complicated] yesterday, and plan to look them over shortly.

It has come to my attention that you are thinking about teaching *Story of the Eye* next semester.

I don't think this is a good idea for several reasons. Can we meet say, this Friday, around 1:30 to make sure we are on the same page?

Sincerely,

Someone else

It had come to his attention. The classic "discretion" to prevent me from identifying the forces at work as anything other than the music of the spheres, a discretion that, by sheer chance, had been foiled by my own indiscretion. But, just because I knew which magistrate had set into motion these recent machinations, didn't mean that I really knew very much about the forces at work which, as "autistic organizational artifacts," were somewhat immune to simple articulation. Someone else had deliberately put me on a different page than he and the magistrate were reading, which is not to say that the institution itself had not placed each of us "off the page" altogether.

I had to emphasize to someone else that there was at least one page that the three of us shared, and that what was at stake was larger than an individual page, book, or person. After much deliberation, I gave my completely truthful reply:

Hello someone else,

I would love to meet you any time on Friday afternoon, just let me know, since it's always a genuine pleasure regardless of the subject matter. But the fact of the matter is that I was not considering teaching the offending book this spring (call the [local as opposed to the corporate] bookstore if you don't believe me), so I'm not quite sure how that rumor got started. Well, that's not exactly true, I do know the magistrate provided you with the evidence because I noticed your box while searching for one of the dutiful children's³ boxes (to put an assessment folder there) on Tuesday afternoon. Great I thought, he got my material. But wait, that lone book in there looks familiar. I don't make a habit of such things, but curiosity got the best of me and I opened to the first page, where the magistrate's name was printed. I'm not generally superstitious, but I seem prone to such bewitched moments at times.

At this point I paused to consider some of the implications and ironies of the situation. First of all, the magistrate, in questioning my choice of teaching materials, was actually replicating their content. Like Simone, he had dislodged an "eye" presumably belonging to someone else (me) and inserted it into someone's "box." Secondly, I, one of the illegitimate, prodigal children, had discovered this information en route to willingly take part in a department-wide "assessment" or legitimization process. Finally, I thought of my use of the word "bewitched," which was not innocent, since it has a personal resonance for me that always leads to the same passage, one that someone else may have been aware of, but likely does not think about every time the word

“bewitched” is invoked. It too is a letter of admonishment: “Your study is located at the crossroads of magic and positivism. That spot is bewitched. Only theory could break the spell.”⁴ In short, Walter Benjamin’s bold experiment in historical form, *The Arcades Project*,⁵ with its assemblage of quotations and minimal commentary, was so fragmented that it did not look like “serious” discourse at all.

Since then, history has proven both the prescience of Benjamin’s project and the institution’s resistance to such experiments in form. As Jacques Derrida has put it, “What this institution cannot bear, is for anyone to tamper with language It can bear more readily the most apparently revolutionary ideological sorts of ‘content,’ if only that content does not touch the borders of language and of all the juridico-political contracts that it guarantees.”⁶ Benjamin’s tampering took the form of breaking the continuity of the academic book or essay. Anticipating the more “participatory” reading strategies discussed by poststructuralists and hypertext theorists, *The Arcades Project* stands or falls on the reader’s ability to draw connections between the book’s various, sentence-length to paragraph-length fragments. One could argue that any traversal of this text is, by design, radically incomplete. As such, it resists more teleological ideas about history as “progress” that can be narrated in the form of a *bildungsroman*. And here, dear reader, my troubles began:

I did teach the book a year ago, and I guess the magistrate and/or some members of the religious right followed the rule of thumb that there is a high rate of recidivism among “sex offenders.” The book came at the end of the semester devoted to an extensive contextualization/historicization of revolutionary sentiment in French literature, and the students were encouraged to read the text in that light. I don’t know why I’m telling you this (or cutting and pasting some responses to the book from “mediocre” students who seem to me to be the real targets of a successful general education course) other than to assure you that I did my best to teach the text as an artifact, like an anthropologist would, and encouraged students to interpret it this way as well.

Casting myself as a sex offender was meant to add a bit of levity to the situation, although in some ways I had already been cast as such, I assume, by someone. The fact of the matter is that someone else read the student extracts and concluded that I was indeed on the same page, particularly since the offending pages were not on my spring syllabus. In addition, he must have realized that the book had been taken out of context and used to represent the entire course I was planning to teach. Thus, since the fragment was masquerading as a whole (me, my teaching, etc.), it could not be said to resemble the sort of open, above-board fragmentation that exists in

writers such as Benjamin and Bataille. In retrospect, I feel that my “offense” against the institution was not primarily that of a sex offender (although that, undoubtedly, was the manifest content), but introducing an irredeemable fragment into the institution—further evidence to follow.

I want to return to the scene of a real course, not the virtual one I had been accused of teaching in the near future, although it also took on a virtual identity. The previous fall I had submitted a course description, including assignments, for a course entitled “Revolting Literature,” the content of which is summarized above. Now, who does one submit something like this to, and for what reasons? It was a second submission, the first being a public one so that students could decide which courses they wanted to sign up for. The second submission was to something called a “writing committee,” of which I was an elected member. So, on the one hand, I was submitting my course description to myself. On the other hand, I was submitting it to no one, a bureaucratic entity lacking the qualities of an organic recipient. I do know that I received a printed list of all the course proposals to which I was to “respond” as to their “suitability.” I responded to two of perhaps twenty proposals, making comments solely on departmental requirements (such as reading load, number of assignments, etc.). I kept my responses to a minimum because I was genuinely impressed by the range and complexity of the courses these Ph.D. holders had proposed. I avoided content because I had, in fact, been elected to discourage what other professors had felt was an ad hoc policing of content favoring those fields with which the writing committee was familiar. The pressure to police was strong, decreed by the magistrate, but the question of how to police or what to police was never clearly articulated. One might say that in this institution, as in many others no doubt, there was a general feeling for the virtues in “policing for policing’s sake.” After declaring the need for policing, the magistrate receded into the background, much like Duke Vincentio in Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*:

Therefore indeed, my father,
 I have on Angelo imposed the office,
 Who may in th’ ambush of my name strike home,
 And yet my nature never in the fight
 To do in slander. And to behold his sway
 I will, as ‘twere a brother of your order,
 Visit both prince and people. Therefore, I prithee,
 Supply me with the habit, and instruct me
 How I may formally in person bear
 Like a true friar. More reasons for this action

At our more leisure shall I render you.⁷

Ah yes, the reasons, they must always be deferred. But the role of Angelo was assigned to the dutiful children (see note 3). I published my comments on the syllabi to the group, but they never published their comments to me. As representative of the postdoctoral contingent, I was the enemy and, by definition, was not to be on the same page.

Now, the title of my course was a sort of a joke aimed at the committee. How could they “approve” of something revolting? But it was also an idea I felt worth pursuing; its *double entendre* proposed an open-ended question for my students—was there a relationship between revulsion and revolution? In answering this question, students would draw from texts as diverse as Julia Kristeva’s “Approaching Abjection,” Rikki Ducornet’s *The Fanmaker’s Inquisition*, and yes, Georges Bataille’s *Story of the Eye*. I had been discussing the importance of Bataille with a colleague of mine all semester, who had employed Bataille’s “Critical Dictionary” as a model for writing about culture in ways that access the poetic and intuitive dimensions of the psyche in addition to the time-worn method of analysis. I became convinced that Bataille would be indispensable to the question my course was proposing and that the hybrid methodologies of the “Critical Dictionary” would form the basis of my final assignment.

Interestingly, it was my final assignment that prompted the only communication made to me by my fellow committee members. I received an e-mail from one of the committee members to this effect: “I am not familiar with the work of Roland Barthes, but don’t you think that your final assignment’s focus on research as a form of ‘academic fetishism’ will undermine the very values we are trying to instill in students?” First, I had to try to overcome my disbelief that I was working in a Research university where the validity of courses in “cultural studies methods” was being judged by people unfamiliar with Roland Barthes. To this day, I have not been successful in this endeavor. What was more disturbing to me was that this dutiful child had chosen to make such a large claim about my course without at first trying to familiarize herself with Roland Barthes and his relationship to “academic fetishism.” It was going to be difficult to engage in a scholarly conversation with such stalwart anti-intellectualism. What *interested* me was the implicit assertion that in teaching cultural studies research methods we were really “instilling values” in our students. Starting from that premise, how could one deny that anything related to “fetishism,” which in the popular mind had come to mean one thing and one thing only—sexual perversion—was the very antithesis of “values”? Once I recognized this logic, I did my best to

summarize what I meant by fetishism (attention to detail, the part rather than the whole) and how it related to Roland Barthes and research. The reply came back that she still thought I was going to undermine the very values of the course but that she would “trust” my judgment as long as I thought I was doing the “right” thing. How generous, given that it was apparent the fetish was hers, based upon the disavowal of the fragment.

But of course, the fetish is not just hers; it is the very fetish on which the unity of the institution is based, the fetishism of wholeness. Another dutiful child attempted to justify the haphazard surveillance known as “review of syllabi” by invoking the cliché that “the right hand must know what the left hand is doing.” But in fact, it is that very assumption that not only Bataille, but postmodern theory as a “whole,” has subjected to scrutiny. It was interesting for me to note how, in this institution, buzzwords such as “cyborg,” “posthuman,” and “rhizomes” were tossed about, their theorists valorized, but without any seeming acknowledgment of the fetishistic, fragmentary implications of these concepts. One linguistic oddity struck me as more revealing than the others, the tendency to pass over the term “virtual reality” in favor of something called “augmented reality,” as if somehow we have more reality now than we once did. Rather than acknowledging how the embodiment of the cyborg places the concept of wholeness under erasure, the term “augmented reality” suggests that we can become more and more whole. Why settle for a C-cup, when technological “progress” will soon give us all double-D’s. In this sort of environment, which I fear is not atypical, there is no room for someone like Bataille who would threaten to dismantle the wholer and wholer body.

Let me aver that I have never personally experienced this wholesomeness, this infinite augmentation, within the institution. Its existence seems more virtual to me than embodied. Explanations, recommendations, have not been forthcoming. My left hand has been smacked, but I’m reasonably sure that *my* right hand was not the culprit. I used to work in a building that literally circled itself around a column of thin air. It wasn’t a real silo, but a silo effect was undeniably in that thin air, that whole air, that air where bodies and their minds were made virtual by being disciplined, restrained from their desire to be torn apart.

Notes

1. Michael A. Diamond, Howard F. Stein, and Seth Allcorn, “Organizational Silos: Horizontal Organizational Fragmentation,” *Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society* 7, no. 2 (2002): 283.

2. Georges Bataille, *Story of the Eye*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (San Francisco: City Lights, 1987), 83.

3. The “dutiful children” will make other appearances in this essay. I have so named them because the magistrate, in my opinion, is a reminiscent of King Lear and Duke Vincentio of *Measure for Measure*. Both figures wish to abdicate power and assume it at the same time, and both do so by attempting to transfer their duties to “dutiful” subordinates who share qualities of both malevolence and incompetence. It is their “dutiful” nature which recommends them and nothing else.

4. Theodor Adorno, “Letter to Walter Benjamin,” trans. Harry Zohn, in *Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. Fredric Jameson (London: Verso, 1938/1980), 129.

5. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

6. Jacques Derrida, “Living on: Borderlines,” in *Deconstruction and Criticism* (New York: Seabury, 1979), 94–5.

7. David Bevington, ed., *The Complete Works of Shakespeare* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 411.