

MASTER OF METALEPSIS: VISAGE/FACE AND THE MEANING OF THE MOVIE

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with tracing the genealogy of a technique I find at work in Tsai Ming Liang's movie Visage/Face. The technique is derived from the trope called metalepsis. Essentially it is the bringing together on an operating table of a sewing machine and an umbrella, that Lautreamont so famously asserted in the 19th Century. Putting together unusual images with far-fetched connections leads me to examine the history of metalepsis going back to William Blake and Edgar Allen Poe and forward to Mallarme and John Ashbery. I see this tradition as being evoked throughout Tsai's oeuvre and find it fascinating to watch a Taiwanese director engaging the avant-garde of the West in his always difficult but satisfying vision.

Key Words: Metalepsis, Convex Mirror, Tsai Ming Liang, "The Oval Portrait."

The frame was oval, richly gilded and filigreed in Moresque. As a thing of art nothing could be more admirable than the painting itself. But it could have been neither the execution of the work, nor the immortal beauty of the countenance, which had so suddenly and so vehemently moved me. Least of all, could it have been that my fancy, shaken from its half slumber, had mistaken the head for that of a living person. I saw at once that the peculiarities of the design, of the vignetting, and of the frame, must have instantly dispelled such an idea – must have prevented even its momentary entertainment. Poe, 1967:251

In an interview for the Taipei Times on March 25, 2010 entitled 'Film's Death and Resurrection' Tsai Ming Liang gives the interviewer, Noah Buchan, a crucial key to understanding his films.

The film (Goodbye Dragon Inn) was shown at the 2004 Venice Film Festival, and since then journalists and critics are no longer primarily concerned about Taiwan or the movie's storyline. The first question they ask is: *What is a movie?* I got quite excited by this question because no one had ever asked me it before. Buchan, 2010: 13

In 'The Oval Portrait' Poe's narrator is spending the night in a chateau in the Appenines 'one of those piles of commingled gloom and grandeur which have so long frowned among the Appenines [Poe, 1967:251].' What better description of the Louvre, the building in which Tsai Ming Liang was commissioned to make his movie *Visage/Face*. And how does he make this movie? He films people, his family of actors and the French actors he has come to know through his past movies and three paintings at the end. This is a movie of faces, cameos, oval portraits, from the first dance sequence of Latitia Casta, Salome with her oval face framed in white fur, to the confrontation of Hsiao Kang and Jean Pierre Leaud over the bird that is 'all directors,' to Leaud's contemplation, with Fanny Ardent behind him, of his actor's face in the mirror, to Fanny Ardent's face mirrored in the glass wall of the apartment building overlooking Taipei as she waits for Hsiao Kang to wake up from his deep sleep. How many faces are framed in a Poe-like reverie:

And when many weeks had passed, and but little remained to do, save one brush upon the mouth and one tint upon the eye, the spirit of the lady again flickered up as the flame within the socket of the lamp. And then the brush was given, and then the tint was placed; and, for one moment, the painter stood entranced before the work which he had wrought; but in the next, while he yet gazed, he grew tremulous and very pallid, and aghast, and crying with a loud voice, 'This is indeed Life itself!' turned suddenly to regard his beloved: - She was dead. Poe, 1967: 253

In making a movie that questions what it is to be a movie for an art gallery that contains some of the most famous art/faces of all time, Tsai Ming Liang had to develop a 'frame richly gilded and filigreed'. The frame Tsai has developed over the years owes its foundation to the French New Wave of the fifties and sixties. When the central face of the movie, that of Truffaut, is absent/dead, all these other faces, including the Taiwanese are there to hold up a candle to the illusion that he is only symbolically dead and lives on, now, in the vaults of the Louvre, in the filigreed frame Tsai has provided. Like Poe Tsai makes films of death and resurrection.

So what is it to use Truffaut as a lens to see ‘what a movie is’ and what Truffaut had to do with the meaning of ‘what a movie is’? Truffaut over twenty years repeatedly used Jean Pierre Leaud as his mirror self, his doppelganger. From boyhood in *The Four Hundred Blows* (Truffaut 1959) to manhood in *Love on the Run* [1979] Leaud’s face became identified with the directors of the New Wave, in particular Truffaut and Godard. In a similar fashion Hsiao Kang has been used by Tsai Ming-Liang from his first movie, where Hsiao Kang was a boy, *Rebels of a Neon God* (Tsai 1992) to *Visage/Face* (Tsai 2009) for close to twenty years. What is so important about filming the same face over the passing of two decades? What is a face? In the first place these faces are self-referential, they depend on self-presentation of the artist and the director; thereby Poe’s hoax of writing himself into the story of the half-life of the portrait of a wounded man on a dark and stormy night entranced by the face of a dead beauty. It is through the lens of ‘*The Oval Portrait*’ that we see the face of Poe peering out at us, even as he disappears in the last glimmer of the torch of the story. Poe, and following this aesthetic Truffaut and Tsai, recognized that every protagonist he ever created was himself, just as in ‘*William Wilson*’ he creates the doppelganger William Wilson, Poe was always his own mirror image.



From the baptismal beginning of *Visage/Face* Tsai Ming-Liang begins playing with his celebration of John the Baptist as the advent of the New Wave (the new wave of Christianity/the New Wave of film, both water born) in France. Tsai is recognized as a “Second New Wave” director in Taiwan along with Hou Hsiao-shen and Edward Yang. Using his own imagery, famously water such as dripping tears, dripping faucets, a stream of water, a river of water, (the water motifs in Liang’s movies are innumerable) we have in *Visage/Face* a jet of water flooding Hsiao Kang’s house where his mother lies dying. The mausoleum building baptism of Truffaut has begun and continues to begin. In terms of Tsai’s fascination with the French New Wave, I might mention, as particularly relevant to Tsai’s entire oeuvre Truffaut’s collaboration with Jean Luc Godard in 1961, *Une Histoire D’Eau/A Story of Water* (a pun on the S/M erotic novel *L’Histoire D’O* from 1954) in which all of Paris is surrounded by a flood of water. What else could one name a movie about John the Baptist but ‘A Story of Water’, understanding the dramatic irony of the Baptist’s retreat and life in the desert and subsequent life in the river. A desert full of water might describe Tsai Ming Liang’s film aesthetics. However, as this living death metaphor, filmically observed in the resurrection of Truffaut’s film aesthetics in Tsai’s films along with Truffaut’s actors, it is to Godard that Tsai owes a concealed debt in filming in the hallowed halls of the Louvre. In the film *Bande a Part/Band of Outsiders* (Godard 1964) Godard’s characters Odile, Arthur and Franz, attempt to break the world record for making it through the Louvre which they succeed in doing in nine minutes and 43 seconds.

This cross referencing of the *Une Histoire D’Eau* and *Bande a Part* merely underscores some of the innovations Tsai adds to his innovative Christian/Buddhist, Taiwan/France narrative of film as an art form deserving its own place (metaphorically and literally) in the Louvre, with all the qualifications such an honor or entombment, entails. One might also mention the quoting from Poe’s story ‘The Oval Portrait’ in Godard’s *Bande a Part/Band of Outsiders*, as a further example of this genealogy of self-reference, which ends in art stealing the beauty from life. You could take *Band of Outsiders* as the new wave film makers themselves, in Tsai’s film, as the actors who don’t act in the film, or as the referenced story of Salome, Herod, Herodiade and John the Baptist, or finally as the art house audience that will ever see Tsai’s movie and bother to question its relevance.

In the desolation of Leaud without his alter-image/*Visage/Face* Truffaut, staring into the mirror of the camera,(when not staring into an actual mirror), this disappearing Herod (Leaud/Truffaut), leaves his footprints all over this film, as the ghost of Truffaut. Truffaut is the bird that has flown its cage buried by the aging actor Leaud in the cemetery.

That bird kept warm at the beginning of the film by Leaud in his melancholy is the metaphor of all director's worth memorializing. Birds that would not be caged: Hitchcock, Pasolini, Rossellini, and who share the bird's eye view of the lens as a creator of a life/art that can only become autobiography/resurrection in the end.

The surface

Of the mirror being convex, the distance increases
significantly; that is, enough to make the point
That the soul is a captive, treated humanely, kept
In suspension, unable to advance much farther
Than your look as it intercepts the picture[...]
The pity of it smarts,
Makes hot tears spurt: that the soul is not a soul,
Has no secret, is small, and it fits
Its hollow perfectly: its room, our moment of attention.

Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror, Ashbery 1976: 68,69.

It would seem there are three actors playing John the Baptists in *Visage/Face* at different times. There is the French actor Mathieu Almaric in the gay scene in the bushes when Hsiao Kang receives the phone call about his mother's death. Then there is the Baptist character Lian, Norman Atun, who is spun around on a mattress boat by Salome in the under the Louvre river scene. And finally there is the director, Hsiao Kang, as John the Baptist covered in plastic and tomato sauce in the bathtub in the meat cooler for whom Salome dances. So what unites all these Baptists? Foremost they deny Salome, particularly her sexuality. The homosexual theme of the encounter between Hsiao Kang and the man in the bushes (Mathieu Almaric) continues to resonate when Hsiao-Kang refuses her as he is helping her carry her dress up the fire escape, as she torments him with 'why don't you look at me,' 'why don't you love me?' Finally she spins Lian, the Malaysian Baptist on the River Styx beneath the Louvre to which she as Salome/Herodiade will send him. He consistently turns away from her. Yet this scene mirrors the scene when Casta/Salome was spun, singing and writhing with erotic tension, on the convex mirror in the outdoor snow/stag mirror scene. In terms of the lens, this scene of Salome's frustrated eroticism seems essential to Tsai's staging her as someone trapped by her own narcissism. After all her face is first witnessed framed in white in blowing snow in the first scene and she is subsequently frozen by the ice cubes as Hsiao Kang tries to get the proper color he wants into her cheeks. Salome's relationship to chastity seems to extend to a desire to block out the homo-erotic light cast by the Baptists. A desire to escape being seen, while drawing attention to the escape, filling the entire lens of the camera. Yet, even in the darkness, she manages to illuminate her fate as a De La Tour portrait with a Bic lighter. Between her and the man is nothing but the flame. Again I can't help but think of Poe's utterance: 'the spirit of the lady again flickered up as the flame within the socket of the lamp.' And then the triumph of the portrait: "'This is indeed Life itself!' turned suddenly to regard his beloved: - She was dead." I find the virginal severity of the movie, its intimacy with death, to be its most enduring affect.

HERODIADE

I love the horror of virginity,
The dread my tresses give me when I lie
Retired at night, reptilian on my couch,
My useless flesh inviolate to the touch,
Feeling cold sparks from your lucidity,
You who die, you who burn with chastity,
White night of icicles and cruel snow!
And your solitary sister, O mine forever now,
My dream shall rise toward you: already such,
Rare clarity of a heart desiring it so much,
I am alone in my monotonous country,
While all those around me live in the idolatry

Of a mirror reflecting in its depths serene
 Herodiade, whose gaze is diamond keen ...
 O final enchantment! yes, I sense it, I am alone.

Mallarme 1945: 47.



Something is missing and yet there, doubled, in almost every scene, from Fanny Ardent and Hsiao Kang's dead mother, to all the collective symbolism, the invocation of the camera lens in circular mirrors of water and glass, the entire garage sale of Tsai Ming Liang's repeated effects, windows on Taipei, windows on solitude, on forgetting, on sleep. Leaud originally found in a cemetery asleep on the bench, Hsiao Kang falling asleep in Taipei. Again this is a movie of fairy tales of the lost shoe of Fanny Ardent in the snow, of Hsiao Kang's sleeping beauty and the apple Fanny Ardent eats to the chagrin of the ghost of Hsiao Kang's dead mother. Salome is the snow queen, all in white for the dance of the mirrors, then becoming the black eros - covered in animal skin on the convex mirror. No wonder she takes her revenge against our viewing her virgin self with the black tape. She is reminiscent of Tintoretto's *Suzana in her Bath*, or of Ovid's Diana and Acteon. Acteon spotting the goddess Diana naked in her bath is turned into a stag and then has his dogs set upon him. The animal skin on Latitia Casta on the convex mirror is an interesting allusion not only to the Baptist and to the stag wandering around the movie, a heraldic image of fertility but to animal men in general, Fauns in particular. Mallarme writes: "Ces nymphes, je veux les perpetuer," and we see the nymphs of Truffaut arranged around the dinner table awaiting some grand feast. Wallace Fowlie in his monograph on Mallarme considered 'Herodiade' to be the reverse image of 'L'Après Midi D'Un Faune':

He [the faun] is more intoxicated by his art than by his adventure. If the male principle lives by interruptions, failures and recommencements, Herodiade is its counter-part in her determined chastity and coldness where there is no chance of failure, but where on the contrary there is every chance for extinction. She is the phantom which the faun evokes in the final line of his monologue (je vais voir l'ombre que tu devins). Fowlie 1953: 166

One could go on in the comparisons of Mallarme's symbolist art and Tsai's *Visage/Face*, for instance: 'the beauty of Herodiade's eyes and hair [is] essentially a sterile beauty. Her eyes are like pure jewels and her hair is fatal and massive because it reflects the colour of metal (Fowlie, 1953: 132).' From this one recognizes the magnificent metal headdress of Salome/Herodiade on the fire escape with Hsiao Kang refusing her advances. From one frozen frame to another, there is no escaping frames. 'On one level of interpretation, Herodiade is a cold virginal princess who stands aloof from the world of men, but she may also represent the poem itself, so difficult to seize and possess that the poet ultimately despairs of knowing it[...] Herodiade was the poem of Mallarme's winters (Fowlie 1953: 126.)' I am arguing, with Fowlie, that Herodiade needs the animal male principle of Mallarme's lush summers, the daughter Salome on the animal skins with the stag, in order to freeze herself more firmly into the butcher she becomes in Tsai's ice room at the end of the film. The virgin will butcher the virile male (gay) stag.



One day I made the very strange discovery that I am actually very similar to the boy in *The 400 Blows*. Berry: *Tsai Ming Liang Interview*. 2005, 392.

All the relationships between father and son, husband and wife, all return to their most basic and primitive nature. Maybe they are nothing but one lonely person, all alone. Berry: *Tsai Ming Liang Interview* 2005: 384.

I am alone in my monotonous country,
 While all those around me live in the idolatry
 Of a mirror reflecting in its depths serene
 Herodiade, whose gaze is diamond keen ...
 O final enchantment! yes, I sense it, I am alone.

Mallarme 1945: 47

In Truffaut's *The Outsiders* they read Poe's '*William Wilson*' to one another. William Wilson is the story of a doppelganger, of a Parmagianno/Ashbery/Leaud/Tsai/Poe/Mallarme infatuation with the 'glorious lies' of art. This is the prosopopeia (mask) of autobiography reflected in the film. To return to Tsai's fascination with the question 'what is a movie?' I would like to think of Tsai as a symbolist, someone who is experiencing Mallarme's famous 'crise' not of verse, but of film. For Mallarme, as perhaps for Tsai, the spectacle of creation is enough. 'In the face of the Void (le Rien) which is truth, these glorious lies!' Mallarme writes (Smith, 1999:104).

I like this bird's eyes view of the film as the portrait of one man, all the characters substitutions for one another, male and female, queer, narcissistic, father, son, mother, virgin. So 'what is a film?' These chains of substitutes, all glorious lies, leads me to my basic contention, like Ashbery, Mallarme, Poe and the French New Wave along with the Taiwanese Second New Wave, the inherent rhetorical attraction, the tropological structure of Tsai Ming Liang's *Visage/Face*, and of all his work is Metalepsis, an aesthetics of the farfetched, farfetched in reaching two hundred years from Poe to Tsai. And metalepsis, as a most mysterious trope, often a reversing of the teleology of cause and effect and to quote Quintilian is 'nothing in itself, but affords a 'passage' to something.' *Visage/Face* is a passage, 'it's room our moment of attention.'

Metalepsis (from Greek *Μετάληψις*) is a figure of speech in which one thing is referred to by something else which is only remotely associated with it. Often the association works through a different figure of speech, or through a chain of cause and effect. Often *metalepsis* refers to the combination of several figures of speech into an altogether new one. Those base figures of speech can be literary references, resulting in a sophisticated form of allusion.

"For the nature of metalepsis is that it is an intermediate step, as it were, to that which is metaphorically expressed, signifying nothing in itself, but affording a passage to something. It is a trope that we give the impression of being acquainted with rather than one that we actually ever need." -- Quintilian, [1]

"But the sense is much altered & the hearer's conceit strangely entangled by the figure Metalepsis, which I call the *farfet*, as when we had rather fetch a word a great way off then to use one nearer hand to express the matter as well & plainer." Puttenham, George (1569),

"In a metalepsis, a word is substituted metonymically for a word in a previous trope, so that a metalepsis can be called, maddeningly but accurately, a metonymy of a metonymy." Bloom, Harold (1975.)

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metalepsis>

A metonymy of a metonymy, Baudelaire's Paris as Tsai's Taipei, the oval mirror of Poe, the oval mirror of Truffaut, Paris as an oval mirror flooded, Tsai's oval pond at the end of the movie, his convex mirror and the oval canvas on which lies Latitia Casta at the start of the film, all allusions, farfetched, as farfetched as Tsai and the Louvre, as John Ashbery and Parmagianno, a maddening but accurate acquaintance with a character, a narrative, a poem but only brought into being through farfetched allusion, the illusions that allusions can create such as the metallic train, as part of Salome's spectacular coif, carried by John the Baptist, Shiao Kang up the fire escape for Latisia Casta, to what tower we do not know. This is Herodiade as Mallarme envisaged her in an age that can no longer catch the art in simple metaphor, or metonymy but must take it one step further, the double dream of reflecting on a reflection in the void.

In an earlier example of metalepsis, Andrew M. Cooper, shows how Blake exposes the machinations of his own poetry in order for the possibility of 'new forms of imagining.' What is particularly interesting is Blake's 'reversal of cause and effect' as this will inform Paul De Man's discussion of autobiography.

Rather the vital immanency of Blake's self-irony produces a metalepsis, a potentially liberating reversal of cause and effect. By exposing the contingency of the representational conventions on which his satire depends, Blake's design places the viewer at a threshold of vision. Regarded in non-representational terms, the design becomes an image of change, a symbolic mirror of the (still partly representationalist) viewer's mind, analogous to the "shadow of horror" that "is risen" in conspicuously present tense to greet the horrified reader at the poem's outset. Like the poem as a whole, it beckons beyond representation toward new forms of imagining. Cooper 2009: 217. The symbolic mirror of an autobiography, of Poe's 'shadow of horror' in *The Oval Mirror*, because what he is writing about is his own disappearance into art. That metalepsis always beckons but never reaches, never fastens upon but is always slipping away, this is where I see the river of film that Tsai is so famous for introducing into his movies. As Ashbery writes of another river in his poem *The Other Tradition*: 'The roar of time plunging unchecked through the sluices/Of the days, dragging every sexual moment of it past the lenses: the end of something (Ashbery 1975: 2).'

Affectively metalepsis is (dis)interesting in its ability not to engage or to disengage the emotions of the viewer/reader. One is distanced by *Visage/Face* – as Ashbery noted of Parmagianno's self-portrait – Parmagianno is infinitely disappearing, always receding and this leaves one vaguely melancholy as if he were constantly waving goodbye, a Sisyphean or Orphic farewell. It's a synaptic withdrawal from emotive context – you don't feel *Visage/Face*, you image rather than imagine it. Just like the scene of her daughters emptying Hsiao-Kang's dead mother's freezer, frozen package by frozen package, as if to defrost it, only to fill it up again – to keep it frozen – this dis-affective metalepsy, its 'farfetchedness' keeps the viewer scanning for undercurrents which might eddy up into a surface aporia, or as Poe would have it, a maelstrom of meaning pulling the viewer down a funnel of seemingly disconnected associations. It is fun boredom, an autism of sorts, an amusing inability to connect the dots, or faces, which are always escaping, slipping away, as does Leaud after running away from the picture [remembering his presence in the Truffaut film of 1979 *Love on the Run* and leaving a note on the mirror only to re-emerge from/into the Da Vinci Louvre in the final scene. From graveyard to Louvre, all faces must be framed, as is that of John the Baptist above Leaud/Herod as he emerges into the Louvre, as is Leaud in Tsai's lens, made into stills, headstones, markers of passage into the mausoleum of the Louvre, even as Leaud/Herod closes the marble portal after himself. This is equally fragmented to John the Baptist's moment in the butcher shop turned bathtub covered with plastic and tomato sauce, with a mountain of ice bags behind him. Besides the direct engagement of another painter, famously Francis Bacon's beef carcass, the Louvre as slaughterhouse, of the step between life and death is enacted by Latitia Casta's Salome dance in the same cold slaughterhouse. Each step of the movie is contiguous if not continuous performance art. Because when it stops it re-enters the cold archives of the Louvre.

Metalepsy has haunted the table, screen, canvas of the twentieth century since Lautreamont put it together on the operating table, with the sewing machine and the umbrella, since Bracque and Picasso's cubism. Tsai is making moving pictures in *Visage/Face*, filming still life, playing off the tendency of matter towards order, towards meaning, even as it veers off into the Void. Tsai is making a movie for the Louvre, of the Louvre and yet finds himself autobiographically inside that movie, such that the Louvre is making him. The Louvre provides Tsai with the means to see himself.

It suffices to locate oneself (as reader) outside the text (before it) to be able to say that the timing has been manipulated in order to produce the metaphor.

Only a situation supposed to have been forced upon the author from the outside, by history, or by the tradition, and thus (for him) not fictional ... imposes upon the reader the hypothesis of a genetic causality in which the metonymy functions as cause and the metaphor as effect, and not the teleological causality in which the metaphor is the end and the metonymy the means forward this end, a structure which is always possible within a purely hypothetical fiction. De Man 1984: 69.

To understand this discussion, originally directed toward Proust's *In Search of Times Past*, we need to look at what Tsai wants to ask, 'what is a movie?' The situation imposed upon the director, make a movie for the Louvre, a historical collection of history and art, and within the tradition of the New Wave, a technique of film making questioning the role of narrative in film, means we have a film where cause (The Louvre and the New Wave) and effect, (a re-writing of the Salome story) or as De Man places them metonymy (the Louvre and Truffaut in particular) produce the strange and far-fetched metaphors (such as Latitia Casta's taping off the window, or Fanny Ardant carrying around the stag's mounted head (John the Baptist/ Truffaut) while the stag is still wandering the woods, or water and ice) of Tsai's hypothetical fiction *Visage/Face*.

The difficulties of generic definition that affect the study of autobiography repeat an inherent instability that undoes the model as soon as it is established.[...] It aptly connotes the turning motion of tropes and confirms that the specular moment is not primarily a situation or an event that can be located in a history, but that it is the manifestation, on the level of the referent, of a linguistic structure. The specular moment that is part of all understanding reveals the tropological structure that underlies all cognitions, including knowledge of self. The interest of autobiography is not that it reveals reliable self-knowledge – it does not – but that it demonstrates in a striking way the impossibility of closure and of totalization (that is the impossibility of coming into being) of all textual systems made up of tropological substitutions. DeMan, 1984: 71

The specular moment is made up of tropological speculations, of metonymy, metaphor, metalepsy etceera, as Ashbery has noted in his poem 'Wet Casements':

The conception is interesting; to see, as though reflected
 In streaming windowpanes, the look of others through
 Their own eyes. A digest of their correct impressions of
 Their self-analytical attitudes overlaid by your Ghostly transparent face.
 Ashbery 1975: 28.

Visage/Face when seen as an exercise in metalepsy, a taking of the trope of metalepsy in order to juxtapose the question of the living and the dead, as seen through the eyes of others, in a storm of filmic sexuality, is farfetched, necessarily, revolving between one's own specular autobiographical intake of the film, in terms of a hypothetical referentiality to the encoding of Tsai's metaphors of solipsistic narcissism (Salome), homosexual confrontation (Jesus and John the Baptist), heterosexual death (Truffaut's three mistresses at the dinner table) and simply the long jump between Taipei and Paris, East and West and the autobiography Tsai claims for himself and by inference all directors in filmmaking. Thereby the question, 'what is a movie?'

The Louvre is the metonymy that creates the metaphor, or 'the rosy fingers of dawn' from Homer stretch out from the Louvre, the metaphor emerges from the metonymy yet are governed by it and therefore fragmented into 'fingers dawn the rose.' This is why the contiguous chain of images loosely arranged around the Salome/Herodiade story refuses to come into being. We, beings, don't like things that refuse to give us the pretense of being, which is what metaphor will do, it will fuse language into being and yet metonymy is a distancing effect, a removal from the human. Metonymy makes you think and question, distancing, your being, perhaps.

Art was born at the moment whenever unconscious life exceeded its limits and stood outside its biological being to reflect upon itself. Smith 1999: 38.

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