The Claude Glass: Use and Meaning of the Black Mirror in Western Art by Arnaud Maillet. Translated by Jeff Fort

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When in the early 1980s a Parisian sculptor donated a Claude mirror to the Musée National des Arts et Traditions Populaires in Paris, this gift set in motion a complicated series of events. According to the French art historian Arnaud Maillet,

> a magnetizer who had come to examine it inserted some bits of paper inscribed with signs (for example, Solomon's seal) between the backing and the glass and recommended that it be kept in charcoal, which is reputed to absorb evil forces. This mirror is therefore not exhibited, since someone who knows how to cast spells would be able to use it, even through a glass case. [31]

Little surprise then that the black mirror fell into oblivion! In *The Claude Glass*, Maillet sets himself the task of rescuing it from eternal forgetfulness in an essay which—Maillet promises us—will be part of a doctoral thesis on painters and optical instruments since the second half of the 18th century.

Maillet's *The Claude Glass* is published by Zone Books, of which Columbia University's art history professor, Jonathan Crary, is the founding editor. This is in itself significant, as Maillet is highly indebted to the project that Crary himself set out to undertake in his *Techniques of the Observer* [1990], both methodologically and in terms of the arguments that Maillet wishes to support. Convinced that a history of vision or perception 'depends on far more than an account of shifts in representational practices', Crary took as his problem the observer:

> Vision and its effects are always inseparable from the possibilities of an observing subject who is both the historical product

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> and the site of certain practices, techniques, institutions, and procedures of subjectification. [Crary 1990, 5]

Crary's basic argument was that the early 19th century saw the creation of a new kind of observer. He located in the 1810s and 1820s a rupture in the scopic regime between a geometric model of vision (in which vision was conceived as essentially passive, independent of the subject, and based on a radical distinction between interior and exterior) and a physiological model of vision (in which vision became subjective and the product of visual experience became located in the body of the observer).

Crary developed his argument by contrasting two instruments—the *camera obscura* and the stereoscope—which he considered paradigmatic for his two models of vision respectively. In other words, the optical instruments are not just presented as Martin Kemp did in his ground-breaking and contemporaneous *The Science of Art* [1990], by detailing their material aspects or the diverse uses to which artists put these instruments in their representational practices.

> The optical devices in question, most significantly, are points of intersection where philosophical, scientific, and aesthetic discourses overlap with mechanical techniques, institutional requirements and socioeconomic forces. Each of them is understandable not simply as the material object in question, or as part of a history of technology, but for the way in which it is embedded in a much larger assemblage of events and powers. [Crary 1990, 8]

Crary kept far from any underlying assumption that artists used optical instruments to arrive at photographical realistic images—an underlying assumption recently again brought into the spotlight by David Hockney's *Secret Knowledge* [2001].

> Many accounts of the camera obscura, particularly those dealing with the eighteenth century, tend to consider it exclusively in terms of its use by artists for copying, and as an aid in the making of paintings. There is often a presumption that artists were making do with an inadequate substitute for what they really wanted, and which would soon appear—that is, a photographic camera. [Crary 1990, 32]

Maillet's study of the Claude mirror is, therefore, not aimed at detailing the various uses to which artists put this instrument. Maillet's

goal is to contribute to such a history of vision as outlined by Crary. To that end he brings together insights from history of art, cultural history, literature and literary theory, philosophy and aesthetics.

That this is Maillet's aim the reader only learns by reading on, because the book lacks an introduction (which could have clearly set the problem) and, for that matter, also a conclusion. Otherwise, the book is well-organized in five sections. The first part sets out to define what kind of objects Claude mirrors are, to relate how they got their name, and to conjecture how they disappeared from the historical record. The shortest definition of a Claude mirror is that it is a convex tinted mirror. However, under that general label hide a variety of objects, as the choice of tint (not necessarily black), the convexity and the shape of the mirror (allowing it to be hand-held or not) can vary. Maillet insists that the Claude mirror is not to be confused with the Claude glass. The Claude glass is a filter made of colored glass. It is unfortunate, then, that the title of Maillet's book contributes to the confusion, even if it is the case that in English 'glass' and 'mirror' may be used interchangeably. *The Claude Glass* is a book about the Claude mirror.

The convex tinted mirror was baptized 'Claude mirror', not because the painter Claude Lorraine is known to have used one, but because this mirror gave the landscapes reflected in it the same somber light and golden tint associated with Lorraine's paintings. Maillet tries to convince us that the convex mirror 'refuses to conform to the rigid laws of optics' [38] and, therefore, is generally conjured away in the historical records, such as the inventories of curiosity cabinets or opticians' shops. The Claude mirror was, nevertheless, widely available in 18th-century curiosity cabinets, opticians' shops and—last but not least—artistic circles.

The second section is devoted to the occult associations of the black mirror in Western culture. On the one hand, mirrors were considered a source of errors and illusions. They were used (including their black variants) in necromancy and catoptromancy (divination with mirrors). Maillet argues that in the 18th century mirrors were almost systematically perceived as demonic, and that black mirrors were associated with death and other types of transgressions, from John Dee's famous obsidian mirror to their re-emergence on websites today promoting sado-masochism. On the other hand, the well-known Pauline mirror is a symbol of precision and clarity. Finally,

the mirror attracts and fascinates the gaze. It even brings the observer into a light hypnotic state, Maillet claims.

The third part of Maillet's essay is something like the counterpart to the second section. Inasmuch as the second part wanders off in all directions suggested by the occult associations of the Claude mirror, so the third section of the book is concentrated on the almost sober description of the visual experience which the Claude mirror offers the observer. Drawing on Roger de Piles' *Principles of Painting* (early 18th century), Maillet argues that the Claude mirror offers the observer a reduction of the visual field and of color (not unlike the reduction which a painting offers). This reduction allows a unification, Maillet argues. It unifies all objects into one glance of the eye and it reduces shadow, light, and colors to a tonal unity respectively. First, as concerns the visual field, Maillet's arguments are actually about the convex mirror in general, not only about its black variant. On the basis of the recommendation of the convex mirror by the Flemish painter Gérard de Lairesse, Maillet claims that it served as a compositional aid because it brings, for example, a wide prospect within the mirror's narrower field of view.

Second, as for color, Leonardo and Leon Battista Alberti recommended the mirror as a means to judge the quality of paintings and the force of the colors. Again, in the 18th century, De Piles discussed the Claude mirror in this respect. Finally, the physiological optics developed by Hermann von Helmholtz in the 19th century gave a new momentum to the Claude mirror, as Helmholtz fully grasped the reason for 'smoking' the colors. The painter's problem is that the colors on his palette cannot offer the infinite variety of tones for a single color on a scale from dark to light which reality presents. However, since the human eye is sensitive to the relations between different levels of brightness (rather than perceiving them absolutely), the painter's task is to reproduce these relations (which involves 'a translation into another scale of sensitiveness' [118]). For Helmholtz, painting imitates 'the action of lights upon the eye, and not merely the colors of bodies' [119]. This was more easily accomplished with the aid of a Claude mirror, as Manet, Degas, and Matisse found out.

The fourth section seems to be the most important part of the book conceptually. It discusses the heyday of the Claude mirror at the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th centuries. At

that time the black mirror was lifted from obscurity by an aesthetics dominated by the picturesque *en vogue* in England. It was in those days that tourists visited the Lake District with a Claude mirror in their pockets, that English gardens were perceived and composed like paintings (particularly like those of Claude Lorraine), and that Coleridge and Wordsworth transformed the view in the Claude mirror into an ideal view. However, John Ruskin severely criticized the Claude mirror in the harshest words:

> It is easy to lower the tone of the picture by washing it over with gray or brown; and easy to see the effect of the landscape, when its colors are thus universally polluted with black, by using the black convex mirror, one of the most pestilent inventions for falsifying Nature and degrading art which was ever put into an artist's hand. [148]

Ruskin's allergic reaction to the instrument was inspired both by his dislike of the somber luminosity typical of the aesthetics of Lorrain and by the mechanical aspect of the reflection in the Claude mirror.

Maillet argues that the Claude mirror tends in the direction of a neo-classical theory of imitation which considers the reflection in a Claude mirror always lacking in relation to nature itself. Just like the *camera obscura* for Joshua Reynolds or Canaletto, the Claude mirror was appreciated in a role of comparison in the imitative process; but copying the mirror image or the image in the *camera obscura* was considered inferior to the production of a real work of art. Thus, for all its attraction, the image in the Claude mirror is ultimately 'disappointing', Maillet argues. He also considers the Claude mirror in Ruskin the emblematic instrument of monocular vision and, as such, opposed to the stereoscope (central to Crary's argument), which emphasizes binocular vision. However, Maillet softens the rupture between the geometric and physiological scopic regimes described by Crary, as he argues that the Claude mirror has an ambiguous status, thus suggesting that Crary's two scopic regimes co-existed for a while. Maillet claims that the use of the Claude mirror makes the observer already aware of his own body as an integral part of the reflection. Maillet shows that the Claude mirror offers a solution to physiological problems such as the already mentioned problem of brightness discussed by Helmholtz.

In the fifth part, Maillet looks for the new meanings which artists gave to the black mirror after Ruskin's critique. In his analysis of the use of the black mirror in the work of 20th-century artists such as Gerhard Richter or François Perrodin, the black mirror—devoid of Lorrain's aesthetics—is associated with devaluation, the progressive loss of the image, and abstraction. This section of the book eventually evolves into a meditation on opacity, the blindness of the gaze and melancholy, all of which are especially brought out—Maillet claims—in these 20th-century works of art. In this context Maillet returns once more to Crary's division of the history of perception into two periods and to his own claim that the black mirror belongs to both these periods. However, between these two periods the black mirror changed status. He echoes Crary's view that 'the relation between eye and optical apparatus becomes one of metonymy: both were now contiguous instruments on the same plane of operation' [214; Crary 1990, 129]. This provoked 'a second crisis of the gaze, that described by Crary, for while this instrument serves the eye, the eye also begins to serve this instrument' [215]. Thus, just as Crary, Maillet is ultimately interested in the making of a new kind of observer.

This quote from Crary's *Techniques* of the observer nicely illustrates that the book's heavy reliance on Crary's work is not only a strength, but also one of its principal weaknesses. More often than not, Maillet fails to exemplify the theoretical insights he borrows. One of the most problematic aspects of Maillet's indebtedness to Crary is that he takes over Crary's division of history into geometric and physiological scopic regimes, even when Maillet is repeatedly obliged to point out that the Claude mirror has an 'ambiguous status', as it seems to belong to both these periods. In fact, Crary's sudden transposition of vision inside the body in the early 19th century and his very clear-cut division of the history of observation is precisely one of the aspects that has repeatedly and justifiably come under attack [see, e.g., Summers 2001, Fiorentini 2004]. That Maillet wishes to hold to it anyway (and in light of the criticism of Crary's account, one could ask why) comes at a considerable cost.

> The Claude mirror is thus also an instrument that participates in the transition between these two periods. And it can serve as a transitional element because it was used before and continued to be used after. The use of the black

> mirror is not limited to a period dictated by the fashions of tourism. Nor could it be buried by Ruskin. [152]

Maillet rightly remarks,

> Otherwise, it would be difficult to explain how this mirror was used, for example, by Manet in 1861, by Matisse around 1900, and by Sutherland around 1946. These painters looked to the mirror less for visual characteristics—the proper element of the picturesque—than for a specific mode of vision, and they were interested more in sensation itself than in the objects of sensation. [152]

But then what is this 'specific mode of vision'? And is Maillet not begging the question? Maillet's indebtedness to Crary's categories (which he identifies as problematic) creates serious gaps in his own argumentation about the Claude mirror.

The relevance for the history of science of Maillet's approach to the Claude mirror—in line with Crary's approach to the *camera obscura* or the stereoscope—is that it is an attempt to open up the history of observation. Maillet and Crary rightly question an approach to optical instruments which is limited to describing them solely in terms of their material characteristics and which relies on the kind of technological determinism in which the use of optical instruments is invariably associated with the conquest of an unproblematic realism (as in the famous Hockney-Falco thesis, which is criticized in Dupré 2005). A history of observational practice is in part that of instruments, buildings, and records; and in part that of less tangible cognitive and social practices. However, for all its good intentions, Maillet's history of the Claude mirror ultimately fails to contribute to a history of observational practice.

Notwithstanding the opening chapters, which show that a variety of objects match the definition of a Claude mirror, the Claude mirror of which Maillet wishes to write the history is an ideal type. Symptomatic of the missing materiality of Maillet's black mirror is that the object itself disappears from view in Maillet's approach. For example, in discussing Alberti's and Leonardo's use of mirrors, Maillet stretches the definition of a black mirror:

> Now, according to this experiment, if every mirror already absorbs and reduces the light it reflects, every reflected image

> will therefore be slightly tinted, because it is thus tainted. This means also that every mirror is already in some way a black mirror. [106]

Indeed, most of Maillet's discussion of the painterly use of mirrors is devoted to (convex) mirrors in general rather than to black mirrors. Maillet concludes his account of Alberti's and Leonardo's use of mirrors by writing that 'it is in my view completely legitimate to ask whether a number of these mirrors, notably in Alberti's case, might not be black mirrors' [106]. On which historical basis does Maillet want to claim that the mirrors mentioned were black mirrors; and, in light of the above, does this matter to his argument? In the end there is no longer any object—let alone a historically specific object—that answers to Maillet's black mirror.

> The black mirror thus ensures a breath for sight. As Jacques Derrida has written, the eye blink is nothing other than the breath of sight. It is the absolute speed of the moment, the critical moment par excellence, for then sight no longer sees; it is blinded. But in this critical moment, this suspension of perception, sight is realized and constituted. The black mirror, like the blinking of the eye, plunges the organ of sight into blindness, but this blindness is no less salutary for that. [213]

What is the (historical) status of such claims? Here, and on many other occasions in the book, Maillet fails to give historical content to such theoretical statements.

Maillet's *The Claude Glass* has the merit of discussing a little-known optical instrument. The book is to be applauded for the broad variety of discourses that it brings to bear on the Claude mirror. However, that the materiality of the objects and the historical specificity of the discourses ultimately vanish detracts from the book's relevance for historians of science.

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