

**The Gaze of Gustave Courbet's *L'origine du monde*
– a response to Juan Davila**

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In the scopic field everything is articulated between two terms that act in an antinomic way – on the side of things, there is the gaze, that is to say, things look at me, and yet I see them.

Lacan¹

... it is man who approaches woman ...

But what he approaches is the cause of his desire that I have designated as *objet a*. That is the act of love...

Lacan²

In a section of his *Three Essays on Sexuality* entitled, Touching and Looking, Freud writes that:

The progressive concealment of the body that goes along with civilization keeps sexual curiosity awake. This curiosity seeks to complete the sexual object by revealing its hidden parts. It can however be diverted [“sublimated”] in the direction of art, if its interest can be shifted away from the genitals on to the shape of the body as a whole.

Freud adds a footnote in 1915:

There is to my mind no doubt that the concept of “beautiful” has its roots in sexual excitation and that its original meaning was “sexually stimulating.” [There is an allusion in the original to the fact that the German word *reiz* is commonly used both as a technical term for “stimulus”

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and in ordinary language as an equivalent to the English “charm” and attraction.] This is related to the fact that we never regard the genitals themselves, which produce the strongest sexual excitation as really beautiful.³

In an earlier paper I wrote of my encounter with Gustave Courbet’s *L’origine du Monde* which hangs in the Musee d’Orsay in Paris. I wrote of it in relation to Lacan’s Seminar XX – *Encore* – the seminar that is subtitled *On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge*.⁴ My encounter was a surprising and compelling one due, at least in part, to Courbet’s reversal of the more usual artistic representation of the female body, even of the female nude, where the last veil to be lifted is that which conceals the genitals, the genitals which Freud asserts are not regarded as “really beautiful.” In an apparent reversal of both the idea [or ideal] of what is usually considered to be beautiful and of the direction of sublimation suggested by Freud, Courbet not only paints the exposed genitals of a woman but makes them the focus of his work. The rest of the body is not there. To my eye his painting had a certain still beauty.

In my previous paper I focussed on an intriguing aspect of the history of this painting, its screening by those who had owned it privately prior to its being displayed publicly in the Musee d’Orsay. Its last private owner was Jacques Lacan who continued the tradition of having a screen produced for this erotic painting. The screening of *L’origine du Monde* has been explained as necessary to cover “the terrifying eroticism of undisguised sex.”⁵ However a covering, a screening also allows, of course, a revealing. Concealing and revealing, that game of hide and seek so integral to erotic play. Further to these functions of the screen I interpreted this tradition in the light of Lacan’s theorization of the enigmas of feminine sexuality in *Encore*.

But was it really the “terrifying eroticism” that made the screening essential? One could speculate about the horror of castration, the void conveyed by a woman’s genitals. But ...

is it not the inexistence of the sexual relation that is suggested by this painting of the aftermath of the sexual act? A woman is portrayed but only in part – her sexual part, alone and exposed. Love, said Lacan, is what comes to make up for the inexistence of the sexual relation. Could we not see the screening of Courbet's painting then as that which comes to cover this very inexistence? A screening by a protective love rather than by prudery, a screening that also suggests something of Woman as enigma.⁶

In 2003 in an exhibition of recent works in Melbourne Juan Davila produced in both painting and writing a response to his encounter with Courbet's *L'origine du monde*. In his artist's notes entitled *Courbet's The Origin of the World Renamed* Davila records his experience in the d'Orsay and outlines how *L'origine du monde* became the impetus for a series of his own paintings. Davila outlines the intellectual underpinnings of this series. He clearly situates his work as part of a larger project that involves a critique of and response to issues of concern to him in the history of art and in its contemporary position in a market economy. He addresses broader issues of social and political injustice through his art.⁷

While his canvas is a much larger one than I can address in the present paper, both the intensity and the nature of Davila's exposition led me to reexamine my previous propositions regarding this singular painting of Courbet. I will limit myself to several questions which Davila raises with respect to *L'origine du monde*. Davila in his use of Lacanian terms seems at least in part to be addressing himself to psychoanalysis. It is from a psychoanalytic perspective that I will respond to some aspects of Davila's contemporary critique of Courbet.

When Davila writes of his encounter with *L'origine du monde* he records the shock he experienced. He was not only a viewer of the painting but also a witness to a more traumatic scene in front of it.

He witnessed a mother who insisted that her eleven year old son look at the painting despite his obvious embarrassment and discomfort. The boy squirmed and went red in the face. Davila considers this a virtual rape. Davila's recording of his experience in the d'Orsay with the now unscreened work returns us to the question of the function of the screen. Freud's assertion seems apposite that, "...probably no male human being is spared the fright of castration at the sight of a female genital."⁸

Davila then considers the title of the painting that he describes as bombastic and he questions the absence of the name of the artist's model and the fact that subsequent scholarship has not revealed her identity. He proposes that the model was in fact Jo Heffernan, Courbet's lover and model at the time. Having pointed out that the work was one of the erotic works commissioned by a wealthy collector Davila contends:

My intuition is that Courbet had already painted this picture before he received the erotic commission and that it was the study of a model. Here was an opportunity to both get rid of a disturbing image and reap the reward of the commission. It's obviously not a symbol of the origin of the world but perhaps rather a souvenir of a loved woman's genitals... My hypothesis is that complicity with the perception of the desire of the buyer – the other – allowed Courbet to exhibit this product of his own desire in public, albeit in a restricted way.

Why does a man paint a fragment of a woman's body? Why the vagina? Why does he repress her name? It is not easy to represent in painting a loved object; it produces anxiety. It seems likely that Courbet split her body, cropped it in order to represent her. Removing her name seals the objectification. Here is a psychotic moment. On the one hand there is beauty in the rendering of the flesh. On the

other hand emotional intimacy is denied by the erasures. Here Courbet displays one of the major modernist traits... One hundred and thirty years after its creation I have corrected the Origin of the World title. I have repainted the image and called it Portrait of Joe Heffernan. I have also refocused the cropping of the image...The fragment is now that of a woman's torso and face. I feel that these gestures have the power to bring back the emotion lost in the modernist solution.⁹

Firstly the question of the title is raised by Davila. He describes it as bombastic. Davila's reaction recalled my own surprise when my eyes first fell from the arresting image to the title below. The title sits oddly with the image above it. *The Origin of the World*. From an image of a solitary and unnamed woman's genitals, apparently in the aftermath of sex, to a title which places her, or more precisely her cunt, in the symbolic order as the source, the origin of the world. This oddness or lack of proportion between the image and the title that leads Davila to consider the title bombastic I read as a strange kind of homage. When Lacan wrote about sublimation in Seminar VII he wrote of the raising of an object "to the dignity of the Thing". Is there not here in Courbet's title an even further sublimation [further to the sublimation that the painting itself entails] when an object, a part of a woman, her sexual part, is raised, as Lacan writes it, to the dignity of the Thing?¹⁰

Courbet's title places the origin of the world between a woman's legs. He thus juxtaposes an image of the aftermath of sexual *jouissance* with a title that introduces the function of maternity and reproduction. It is reproduction that ensures the survival of the species. But as Lacan points out it is also reproduction that carries with it the knowledge of the transitory life and certain death of the individual. For Lacan the link between sex and death is fundamental¹¹ Perhaps then the "bombast" that Davila perceives in Courbet's title does convey a certain unease, an anxiety associated with the sexual act. An anxiety

that besets the speaking being who must take up a position in relation to sexuality and its partner, death.

Lacan somewhat provocatively suggests that in fact reproduction only occurs due to a misunderstanding of the speaking body regarding its *jouissance*:

Now, the end of *jouissance* – as everything Freud articulates about what he unadvisedly calls “partial drives” teaches us – the end of *jouissance* does not coincide with ... what it leads to, namely, the fact that we reproduce.

That is to say that it only reproduces thanks to misunderstanding what it wants to say, for what it wants to say – namely as French clearly states, its meaning – is its effective *jouissance*. And it is by missing that *jouissance* that it reproduces – in other words by fucking.

That is precisely what it doesn't want to do, in the final analysis. The proof is that when one leaves it all alone, it sublimates with all its might. It sees Beauty, and Good, not to mention Truth...¹²

This lack of coincidence between *jouissance* and reproduction, this misunderstanding spoken of by Lacan seems to mirror the oddness of fit between Courbet's painting and its title.

Davila seeks to restore both a name and a part of her body to the putative model of Courbet's painting. He writes of an anxiety produced for an artist by the representation of a loved object. He proposes that the artist Courbet attempts to deal with this anxiety by splitting the woman's body, cropping it in order to represent her. The words cropping and splitting convey the idea of a whole image, a whole body which is reduced by being cut or trimmed. From a whole to a part. However a further contemplation of Courbet's painting raises the question for me as to whether Courbet does not in fact

rather brilliantly convey in his partial representation of a woman something of the very partiality of the gaze of love. A partiality depicted by Lacan:

When in love I solicit a look, what is profoundly unsatisfying and always missing is that – You never look at me from the place from which I see you. Conversely, what I look at is never what I wish to see.¹³

Davila attempts to redress in his paintings the cropping of the body. But is it possible to redress that mutilation proposed by Lacan as the mutilation wrought by love? In relation to the analytic transference Lacan writes of the “paradoxical, unique, specified object we call *object a*.”

The analysand says to his partner, to the analyst, what amounts to this, I love you but because inexplicably I love in you something more than you – the *objet petit a* – I mutilate you.¹⁴

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- ¹ Lacan, J. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* Ed. J.A. Miller. Penguin. England. 1979 p.109.
- ² Lacan, J. *Encore Seminar XX* Ed. J.A. Miller W.W. Norton & Co. 1988 p.72.
- ³ Freud, S. *Three Essays on Sexuality* St. Ed. Vol VII p. 156.
- ⁴ Clifton, L. *Apropos Encore* Papers of the Freudian School of Melbourne Ed. D. Pereira. Vol. 22.
- ⁵ Roudinesco, E. *Jacques Lacan*. Columbia University Press. 1997 pp. 183-4.
- ⁶ Clifton, L. Op. cit.
- ⁷ Davila, J. *Courbet's "The Origin of the World Renamed"*. Recent work by Juan Davila. Kalli Rolfe Contemporary Art at fortyfivedownstairs, 29 October – 8 November 2003.

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- ⁸ Freud, S. *Fetishism* St. Ed. Vol.XXI. p.154.
- ⁹ Davila, J. Op. cit.
- ¹⁰ Lacan, J. *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. Ed. J.A. Miller. Trans. Dennis Potter W.W. Norton & Co. 1992.
- ¹¹ Lacan, J. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* Ed. J.A. Miller. Trans.A.Sheridan Penguin 1979 p. 150.
- ¹² Lacan, J. *Encore* op. cit. pp. 120-121.
- ¹³ Lacan, J. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* op. cit. p. 103.
- ¹⁴ Lacan, J. *Ibid* p.268.