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# Seeing in the Dark<sup>1</sup>

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*Imagine a solid mass of rock tilted... like a fat, 1,200-page dictionary lying at an angle. The gold bearing reef would be thinner than a single page, and the amount of gold contained therein would hardly cover a couple of commas in the entire book. It is the miner's job to bring out that single page—but his job is made harder because the page has been twisted and torn by nature's forces, and pieces of it may have been thrust between other leaves of the book.<sup>2</sup>*



This word-image appears in a little volume published in the 1960s by the Public Relations Department of the Chamber of Mines in South Africa. The Chamber was the representative body of the finance houses and the mining companies. Formed only one year after the discovery of gold on the Witwatersrand (in 1887), its purpose was to pursue industry interests with government and mitigate competition between companies over wages. The word-image of the earth-as-book might thus be understood as a projection of the great book-makers of the extractivist era, bookmaker being, in English, the term for a gambler. Speculative capital is at the origin of this story, and functions as the locus of a gaze—the condition of possibility—of a new order of visibilities.

In the Chamber's image of the earth as a great book, the comma signifies the problem of mediation. It mediates, without resolving, two opposites, namely plenitude and dispersion. After the initial discovery of gold, diggers realized that there was much more gold to be had deep beneath the surface: unprecedented reserves of gold, but widely distributed and deeply embedded, bound to conglomerate rock. Separating gold from rock became the great technological challenge of the era. The comma in this image is therefore not only the signifier of paucity, but also the mark of separation, as it is in grammar, where it marks the separation and apposition between the smallest units of a sentence. Further, it is a directive: the point at which the text assumes its most immediately performative dimension. 'Breath,' says the comma.

Gold had been extracted, processed and traded in Southern Africa for centuries. The residual but abandoned workings were strewn across the landscape: the marks of vanished mineralogical cultures and their own inscriptions on the land that colonialism would overwrite. But they were not always legible as such, and, indeed, their illegibility constituted a form

of invisibility. Jacques Derrida's (early) claim that arche-writing is everywhere to be found where human beings mark, narrate and recognize the land they inhabit might be borne in mind here. Recall his argument with Claude Lévi-Strauss's assertion that writing is correlate with empire and that there are societies without writing. In my mind, the relation between these two orders of inscription is not so much oppositional as nested and iterative, but the imperial over-writing of the land is an indisputable fact of colonial history, whether or not one believes that prior narrations and markings of the world can be thought of as writing...

Let me hazard a formula for the difference: the image of writing precedes and, at the same time, constitutes a necessary precondition of writing's (in the narrow sense) actualization as the line which can disappear into its signified, and become invisible *without* losing its capacity to reappear. It is therefore always a technique of memory, and an anticipation of future recall. I want to explore this claim with reference to images that emerge from, and are addressed to, the problem of landscape and seeing in the dark.

The mine shaft—a puncture mark or wound in the earth—has its forms of visibility, for those who know how to read them. But the mine shaft also enjoys a privileged status as a figure for the task of making visible. It is like the cave of Plato's allegory, or the catacomb of Félix Nadar's photographic experimentations with darkness. This is because, underground, beyond the (day)light and its shadows, the question of representation is not simply one of producing likenesses but of generating the conditions of possibility for seeing—*both visibility and legibility, both illumination and signification*. It is a matter of engaging blindness and its limits. Consider, in this context, Nadar's memoir of his efforts to make photographs in the Parisian catacombs: "The picturesque is quickly exhausted here, the points of view are not varied, and even if we always spun ourselves around we would not see anything different."<sup>3</sup> Nadar wanted to "penetrate, to reveal the mysteries of the deepest, the most secret caverns" but not to see it himself. This was, he implied, impossible. So, he asked his lens "to do without daylight in order to 'render' to us what 'it sees' with us."<sup>4</sup> His remarks can help us understand something of the nature of image-making in and of the mines—at the point where the line loses its capacity to constitute the elemental unit of landscape, but where it persists as the remainder of that performative inscription made by extractivist capitalism, the word-image of the earth-book mediated by the comma.

The desire to see in the dark, by means of a radical prosthesis, to see from within the grave, as though from the perspective of the dead—or the blind—expresses something of the dream that animates Jacques Derrida's book, *Memoirs of the Blind*. In that text, written to accompany a show of drawings at the Louvre, which, according to its curators, "speaks of blind men and visionaries," Derrida describes a moment in which he writes notes to record his thoughts and dreams in the night, the very dead of night. He

fumbles at his bedside, finds a pen, and, remembering the shape of the letters that have become second-nature to him, inscribes his dream without turning on his lamp. Derrida, the philosopher who writes non-philosophically about philosophy's blind spots, asks himself the following question:

*What happens when one writes without seeing? A hand of the blind ventures forth alone or disconnected, in a poorly delimited space; it feels its way, it gropes, it caresses as much as it inscribes, trusting in the memory of signs and supplementing sight. It is as if a lidless eye had opened at the tip of the fingers, as if one eye too many had just grown right next to the nail, a single eye, the eye of a Cyclops or a one-eyed man. This eye guides the tracing or outline (tracé); it is a miner's lamp at the point of writing, a curious and vigilant substitute, the prosthesis of a seer who is himself invisible.*<sup>5</sup>

As he writes, Derrida is looking, in his mind's eye, at the images of blind men in which the hand, reaching out, imploring, feeling its way, dominates the scene. The blind man is a figure of the artist, insofar as the artist draws of and upon the memory of the world from which he extracts or abstracts its trait, its line: "If to draw a blind man is first of all to show hands, it is in order to draw attention to *what one draws with the help of that which one draws*, the body proper [*corps proper*] as an instrument, the drawer of the drawing, the hand of the handiwork, or the manipulations, of the maneuvers and manners, the play or work of the hand—drawing as *surgery*."<sup>6</sup> But it is less surgery than a laying on of the hands that is summoned by Derrida's own comma-enabled gesture of apposition, which he makes by virtue of etymology, and classical nostalgia—*chirurgie*, as the translators of the volume indicate, comes from the Greek word, *kheir*, meaning hand. Still, we might ask: Why does he invoke this figure of the surgeon to iconicize handiwork? Why not the miner, he who wears a headlamp as prosthesis, and who is thereby enabled to see in the dark?

In the passage I've just cited, Derrida renders the miner as a double for the Cyclops, the one-eyed divine beast who, in Hesiod's rendition of the myth, is associated with the forge. The Cyclops is always duped and defeated by being blinded. What Derrida calls lidlessness—the condition of not being able to keep the light out, is also and at the same time, the condition of not being able to let it in. Seeing depends on difference. And this is why he describes reading as an act in which one "listens in watching."<sup>7</sup> The miner, with his lamp, is, of course, looking, seeing, discerning. Which is to say, reading. He is reading the earth for the signs of gold. He is following the line.

In the cave, and in the mine, the eye is useless without a lamp. Blindness here is not the loss of an eye but of a light. The image of the Cyclops perhaps blinds us to this fact, that this light is not the organ of receptivity but the origin and order of visibility. It comes from behind, as Luce Irigaray reminds us in her rereading of Plato's parable of the cave. And what is

behind for the miners, in both industrial and postindustrial contexts, is the long history of gold's fetishization, and the reading of the earth as a vast reserve of value which, nonetheless, is dispersed and thus requires both knowledge and labor. Plato's parable is a story of knowledge without labor. Perhaps Derrida's is as well. Even with a lamp, or a torch, one only sees if one knows how to look.

The fire in Plato's cave has been lit by freemen whose location behind the fettered spectators renders them as the spatial analogs of ancestors for the enslaved.<sup>8</sup> In Plato's Greek, the fire is itself in the image of the sun. In the gold mines, it is the idea that gold is the ultimate means to settle debt that casts its light and its shadow underground. Sometimes, however, the fantasy of identity fails. Sometimes, it is not possible to sustain the illusion that the gaze and the look, the light and the eye are one. Sometimes the fact of difference shows itself. Could one make an image in the gap between the two? Could this image expose the non-identity of luminous power and the penumbral world? As Derrida tells us, the artist draws in and from memory and this memory is mediated by an unconscious—the very unconscious that produces the illusion of identity between light and eye in the figure of the Cyclops. The miner knows the difference, though, knows that his eye is not the light, that he is captured by the gaze but does not possess it. The artist must also understand this truth, his blindness.

#### NOTES

1. The text presented here is a truncated version of a paper given at the "Cartographies of the Image in the 21st Century" symposium on April 14, 2019. See "Symposium Abstracts" below for full details.
2. Transvaal Chamber of Mines, *Gold in South Africa* (Johannesburg, 1969), 10B, quoted in Francis Wilson, *Labour in the South African Gold Mines*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972, 20.
3. Félix Nadar, "Subterranean Paris," in *When I Was a Photographer*, pp.75–94, translated by Eduardo Cadava and Liana Theodoratou, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015 [1900], 83.
4. Nadar, *op. cit.*, 86.
5. Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, translated by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993 [1991], 3.
6. Derrida, *op. cit.*, 4–5.
7. Derrida, *op. cit.*, 2.
8. Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, translated by Gillian C. Gill, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985 [1982], 250.

#### IMAGE

Rosalind Morris and Ebrahim Hajee. Still from *We are Zama Zama*.