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Seeing Double: A Diplopic Aesthetic in Experience and Performance

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SEEING DOUBLE: A DIPLOPIC AESTHETIC IN EXPERIENCE AND PERFORMANCE

By

Samuel Sloan

A Research Report Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in the field of Speech Communication

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TITLE: Seeing Double: A Diplopic Aesthetic in Experience and Performance

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Craig Gingrich-Philbrook

This investigation uses an autoethnographic approach to investigate the author's personal, phenomenological experience of diplopia, double vision, in order to apply the lived condition to an aesthetic form in performance. Using Kuppers's notion of a “crip aesthetic,” this piece re-functions a potential aspect of disability, the condition of diplopia, as a way of opening up discourses of multiplicity in art and performance. The author also calls for others to integrate non-normative body states into their art praxis.
DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to my Dad, who continues to inform my vision.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Ruth Bowman for nurturing an interest in performance studies and Craig Gingrich-Philbrook for making it feel like home. I am deeply appreciative of the active input and readership of Elyse Pineau, Nathan Stucky, and Susanna Bunny LeBaron. Thank you to my family and my loving parents Linda and Bob Sloan for backing me all these years. For her everyday love, support, and intelligence, I would also like to thank my partner, Nichole. Finally, thank you to my native home of Louisiana, for being polyphonic and resilient.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

What does it mean when vision is no longer the reliable sense once trusted: not gone, not blind, just unreliable? Our ocularcentric culture *zooms in* on visual metaphors, revealing biases *before your very eyes, pulling focus* to rhetorical constructions you have to *see to believe*, though you can *never trust your eyes*. It's an important relationship, that signifier that stays tied to its signified with muscle, sinew, nerve fiber, aqueous fluid, and brain. Perhaps even more mysterious is the *mind's eye* connection to the physical body. When my eyes are out of sync, as they are in diplopia, the condition at the center of this research, is it my brain misfiring or my eye muscles? Can that embodied connection that keeps both eyes moving lockstep be forgotten or forever altered? Which eye’s image will I turn away; which will be the *blind eye*? More importantly, which reality will I choose to politicize: the left at the occlusion of the right, the right over the left, the empty space between, an amalgamation of positions, or what seems to be an ever-increasing lie about the signifier that lies in the center?

This research report is an exploratory autoethnographic text. I am re-visiting the experience of a year of my life when I was diagnosed with and treated for diplopia, essentially a case of double vision. I will be drawing on neuropsychological perception theories, postmodern vision discourse, performance studies praxis, and my own experiences with altered perception in order to exemplify, perform, and invite others to participate in what my vision’s past taught me. Taken literally, the purpose of this writing is to demonstrate the existence and validity of non-normative vision and the possible aesthetic and performative consequences that result alongside that reality. Taken
figuratively, this aesthetic condition has the ability to dissociate vision, generating
disorienting narrative selves, in the postmodern sense. How can we stage bodily
experience? And, more importantly, how can a person’s unique perceptual world
aesthetically enter into performance as a conceptual layer? With this inquiry, I seek to
use personal narrative to provide a critical lens to view other possibilities for aesthetic
perceptual models in staging performances and visual images.

Through a Brechtian defamiliarization, where “the spectator [is] no longer in any
way allowed to submit to an experience uncritically” from the perspective of a passive
observer, I call upon the act of "seeing double" to call stark attention to other ways of
viewing (Brecht 70). This defamiliarization problematizes the ease with which we might
walk through the world and understand performances both conspicuous and in the
everyday. "Seeing double," as a trope, also implies a certain fundamental reflexivity,
forcing me to look at the onset of my condition and its medical “treatment” through the
lens of autoethnography and through the discourse of disability studies. Doing so reveals
that “treatment” as an adaptive technology toward a normalization of sight. By looking
at the varying effects of disorientation within my vision, I will provide a personal account
of the condition, making links to philosophies of vision and performance.

While this first section outlines my project and methodology, the second chapter
serves as a documentation and theorization of my everyday experience of double vision.
Starting with my strange and sudden onset of benign diplopia, I discuss my everyday
phenomenological experience of embodying double vision. In an effort to describe some
of the pathologization of vision in the medical community, I also describe the negative
experiences I had while seeking treatment. I link the symptoms of the condition—nausea
and disorientation—to William Beardslee’s notion of the postmodern disorienting narrative. In addition, I begin to outline the disjuncts I felt in aligning myself with everyday activities of driving and navigating the world.

Next, the third chapter is a review and application of vision literature to my unique case. I use various theories of perception to explicate the diffracted visual system in humans as a metaphor for postmodern embodied experience. My explication will hold Deleuzo-Guattarian notions about the polyphony of human experience in tension with the overarching consensual reality of normative experience. Here, I suggest that—even at the level of neurological perception—experience is diffracted; eclectic; and requires a twofold labor—albeit a typically invisible one—to form a cogent experience from a congress of signifiers in the visual world. Furthermore, understanding the articulation of vision as performative in this way can lead to insights about conspicuous and everyday performances of looking, along with the possibilities for applying a diplopic aesthetic to conspicuous performance or visual media.

In the fourth chapter, which moves descriptively through my experiences undergoing vision therapy to my later understandings of binocular vision in neuropsychology, I seek to theorize and synthesize my experiences using Petra Kupper’s notion of a “crip aesthetic” (90-91). Joseph Shapiro remarks on the reclamation of the word “crip” in certain areas of disability culture, arguing that the word’s “newfound popularity shows that the stigma of disability is being rejected and replaced with a pride in being identified as disabled” and “[t]hat disabled people are reappropriating words to redefine themselves and thinking about ‘the power of negative language,’ . . . a sign of a new and thriving group identity” (90). Kuppers’s crip aesthetic seeks to use the bodily
manifestations of disability as a means of engagement with or through the creation of a text—loosely defined here as any art object, including literature and performance. In this section, I will apply my own lived experience with disability—a year of living with perpetual double vision—toward my goal of developing a crip aesthetic of sight, my diplopic aesthetic.

In the fifth and final section, I lay out three criteria—repetition, proximity, and hybridization—in order to formalize some of the particularities for a diplopic aesthetic. I include a discussion of visual aesthetics of multiplicity in chamber theatre as a means to tap into a genealogy of doubled performance in performance studies praxis. Because I hope to create a practical application of a diplopic aesthetic, the kind that a director might bring to staging practices, I outline several ways that performers/artists can employ this particular trope of double vision. I emphasize the use of digital media as a suitable form for staging this method of art-making, but I move to suggest that my diplopic aesthetic is only one example of a multitude of possibilities that an artist may use to add complexity to a text. I end by offering that readers can use my experience and formalization of an aesthetic as a heuristic possibility for turning their own body-states into staging practices.

Having lived with several disorienting states of visual perception, I also realize that someone with similar issues should be aware of the possible intensity of the visual images generated with this method. Upon experimenting using double vision in video work, I have noticed that audiences experienced mild headaches after watching. As a general note, my experiences with this way of working have led me to believe that any implementation of an intensified sensory experience of this nature should be coupled with a warning, just as a director might announce the use of strobe lights before a performance.
for those who are sensitive to them. Having said this, I have produced a short video art piece called *Diplopic Vision.*¹ I composed this piece with several video scenes from my own life, using the lens of a diplopic aesthetic. I will discuss this video in the final chapter, but I am providing the citation here if you would like to see an example of my diplopic aesthetic while you read this document.

**Methodology**

This is a qualitative study that begins from an exploration of the author’s experience, making conceptual links to largely philosophical and biological issues of vision and their interactions with aesthetic possibilities through performance. Thus, I place this text firmly in the areas of autoethnography and performance studies, of intellectual and performance praxis. I do this recognizing the tenuous position of autoethnography. Like Craig Gingrich-Philbrook in “Autoethnography’s Family Values,” I note the multiplicity and semiotic differences among different forms of auto-writing, from autobiography to personal narrative. For my method, here, please consider the words in this document my intellectual argument and the accompanying digital performance—*Diplopic Vision*—as my formal experiment in visual-art-rather-than-writing-praxis (Sloan).

Furthermore, following Gingrich-Philbrook’s calls toward indeterminacy and the creation of texts that do not claim easy accessibility to an author’s full experience, I have included sections of dense neuropsychology along with my philosophical, aesthetic, and experiential arguments. While this discourse might not traditionally be involved in more sociological or performative investigations of autoethnography, I feel that they fully embody the “professional” voice from the “personal,” “popular,” and “professional”
tripartite criteria which Michael and Ruth Bowman set forth in their conception of autoethnography (165), through their interpretation of Gregory Ulmer’s mystoriography (304). Furthermore, I feel that the style of these three types of texts follows Michael and Ruth Bowman’s ideas of the mystery in a loose, flowing manner, largely through shifting between conversational and academic tones. My rationale for employing this type of autoethnography is to reference a multiplicity of discourses—of the personal, popular, academic, and artistic—in order to widen this document’s possible readership and understandings across disciplines. I seek to work horizontally with meaning, as Gingrich-Philbrook notes, “[T]he call to epistemology does not take place in a single call, but as a rhizomatically spreading architecture of multiple possibilities. Think of our work like that of a potato in the dark, complicating our perception and sensory surfaces by spreading out in search of something real we can use to survive” (“Autoethnography’s Family Values,” 306). In this way, I use a personal narrative of my diplocic experience mixed with popular and professional discourses of vision in order to open up ways of storying and performing non-normative bodily experience.
CHAPTER 2
DIPLOPIA IN EXPERIENCE

Fig. 1. Poem “A Doubled Sense” by Sam Sloan, 2009.

The overall effect was not unlike...
The worlds, I see, have now been torn apart.
It was always like this? I fear to say.
A reprehensible act, this thing
my own repetition with a difference.

The excess of a doubled sense is alarming and nauseous. It presents extra information and re-performs the world. It is a playfully and deceitfully duplicitous sense. As with so many sources of excess, one both adapts over time and learns to ignore the irrelevant information. However, in the beginning, one has neither this benefit of time nor a sublimated routine for disregarding information. In my own condition, I was beset, bewildered by the tension between multiplicity and veracity. What is a “true,” single image? What is the “truth” of a doubled image? How does it mean?

And what is it about the left and right hemispheres of the brain that makes these subtle differences? The talking head on the left looks an awful lot like the one on the right, even though I secretly suspect one of them is staring me down into my very soul. I swear. They're moving at exactly the same time, are dressed the same, and have the same awful haircut. The sound appears to come from the same place, but there are definitely two heads. What? No, I don't think the one on the left is any more intelligent, but I suppose I really can't be sure about that. Well, you see they're not exactly the same; even though sometimes, when they’re side-by-side, they look just like a conjoined twin. I will
proceed to try to make sense of my experience, but first, look at me in the eyes—both of
them—as I tell you this story about myself.

During the summer of the third year of my undergraduate program, I experienced
a shift in vision. The change, at first, was subtle. Being a dedicated internet user, I first
blamed it on eye fatigue. During that period of time, I had been reading web pages and
book chapters for hours on end. While that cause was a salient and reasonable
explanation to others, the problems persisted, even with rest. The funny thing was that I
couldn't put my finger exactly on what was different. I noticed feeling less inclined to be
active, but with the Louisiana summer sun beating down on me at that time, there were
many other reasons for that. As I slogged out of my hibernation chamber to participate in
the world, the only sense I could make of the difference was that everything was, well,
doubled.

My efforts at trying to describe what I was experiencing without a proper
vocabulary were problematic. For me, double vision, without the construct of what that
term means psychologically in the visual system at the time, was understood merely as
disorientation. Weeks of this condition only brought me more of the same, my field of
vision splitting in two: stop signs were doubled, people were doubled, and crowds were
confusing.

The rules of reality didn't seem to apply anymore. My whole life previously
functioned, as the lives of most of us with temporarily abled bodies do, with the
construction of reality where you get basic depth information based on the differential
data from two eyes, spaced modestly apart on the body. More or less, I knew how to
throw something in a trajectory toward a target or goal; more or less, I could walk, run,
and otherwise navigate the world without a ton of extraneous thought. I did and still do see the physical world as definitely constructed through dense social and physical/optical layers, but those layers were more or less stable, unquestioned. With two different versions of reality competing for visual dominance at all times, I had to invent ways of coping. For instance, I walked around with a blank stare and a soft focus because focusing on any single object while moving was difficult to maintain at first.

Goffman asserts that “a performer [in everyday life or in conspicuous performance] tends to conceal or underplay those activities, facts, and motives which are incompatible with an idealized version of himself [or herself] and his [or her] products” (48). This way of thinking or behaving—perhaps heightened through my own previous history of acting—led me to want to downplay my obvious gaps in functioning with acute diplopia, while going about my daily business as if nothing had changed. Here, I would like to define this drive to maintain face as a notion of consensual reality, or that plane where we, beings-in-the-world, more or less agree upon a kind of physical or metaphysical space, cyberspace included, where objects and entities can be mutually co-constructed among subjectivities.

However, when I began to experience double vision, this taken-for-granted notion of a shared physical space among bodies became feverishly apparent. I experienced continual migraines throughout the day, thankful for the moments when I could shut my eyes and rest. Why was this happening now, of all times, as an adult? I was aware of childhood strabismus, a similar—usually congenital—eye alignment issue that also typically has diplopia as a symptom. Family members eventually told me that a cousin or two had historically had the issue, but since it was almost always treated at an early
age—among those who can afford to do so—this “condition” simply didn’t seem to exist for adults, outside of cases of head trauma. Was there something I missed, something I wasn’t seeing?

I eventually went to a lens-store optometrist, the kind I normally saw when getting eye exams. I started wearing glasses for nearsightedness at an early age, so I was familiar with routine eye examinations. But, with no expertise in diagnosing vision anomalies of this kind, the optometrist directed me to a nearby specialist. Unfortunately, I had no idea of the radical differences in ideology that surround eye-care practice, particularly on the diagnosis of double vision. Since these symptoms are sometimes linked by association with childhood strabismus, I soon discovered the institutional medical logic which would seek to link my eyes to the associated popular childhood treatment, namely eye muscle surgery.

Walking into the New Orleans Children’s Hospital at the onset of my 20’s was a surreal experience. Sitting in the waiting room, I looked listlessly at the brightly colored toys lining the floor, struggling to pull them in and out of focus. The eye-care specialist at the hospital worked primarily with young children; therefore, I was not surprised when his diagnosis was the most common childhood vision problem, strabismus (J. Cooper and R. Cooper, “Strabismus”). This is essentially the result of a number of possible physical or neurological problems surrounding “proper” binocular vision in the eye. Most commonly, you may be familiar with the concept of a “lazy eye.” Typically, someone is born with this condition, which begins to manifest as motor skills or reading levels increase. A standard strategy to combat this “misalignment” is eye surgery. However, other options are available in the field of “Orthoptics,” which “regards strabismus as an
eye muscle problem” where “treatment is directed toward muscle strength” and “[v]ision [t]herapy” that takes into account “the neurological control system of the eyes and thus treat[s] the whole visual system (and the whole person)” (J. Cooper and R. Cooper, “Treatment Options”).

Sitting in his office, I was shocked that this specialist, an older man, was so quick to suggest surgery. His official prognosis offered little or no room for alterity or even the suggestion of vision therapy as an alternative. He most certainly assured me of possible or likely success. In his mind, strabismus—as was common in his other patients—was the only acceptable diagnosis for my double vision; for him, this fairly invasive surgery—which he routinely performed on childhood strabismus—was the only option to correct my particular issue. Given my age, my case was unusual, and he merely insisted that other doctors had missed my double vision for over a decade. I simply couldn’t believe that such a major aspect of my life had escaped notice until my early college years. Essentially, he wanted to spread my eyelids widely for full access to my eyeballs, make an incision in my lateral muscles to shorten them, and then fuse the muscles back together.

According to Strabismus.org, surgeries of this kind are said to “improve cosmetic appearance,” while they do “not necessarily improve eyesight or vision.” Furthermore, the site states, “Numerous peer-reviewed scientific studies report success rated for eye muscle surgeries ranging from 30% to 80%. In those studies, the success is sometimes defined as “cosmetic improvement only” (J. Cooper and R. Cooper, “Strabismus”). In my case, I was dealing with a minor alignment problem, and the degree to which my eyes were turned inward was imperceptible to my own close inspection. Other family
members, rhetorically swayed after the doctor visit, insisted that the disparity was larger than it appeared to me. Either way, a simple “cosmetic improvement” meant little, if anything, to my well-being at the time. However, before a decision about surgery could be made, I first had to determine if there were more serious issues at hand.

![MRI scan of author’s brain taken on Halloween. Trick or Treat?](image)

Adult-onset eye issues of this magnitude are rare and often symptoms of greater problems, so late one Halloween night, I eventually submitted to lying in the loud, whirring magnet for a few hours. Was it myasthenia gravis or brain cancer? How might a cosmetic surgery mask this deeper issue? Trick or treat? I felt fortunate, lucky, and ecstatic that the test results came back clean after a month of nervous waiting, but I had no new answers. Perhaps I just hadn’t noticed the doubling my entire life? I had no explanation, just some amusing pictures of my brain and the experience of the doubling that grew more intense with fatigue and anxiety. Due to a clerical error, we never
received the bill for the MRI visit, but with so many out-of-pocket expenses between
doctors during this time, I was grateful for the ability to consider treatment.

A Look Back

Looking back reflexively, I have become very aware that the ability for my
parents to afford medical insurance was a sign of my middle-class privilege and
background. The worry over the specificity and application of medical treatment—which
is commonplace in my family—almost seems more symptomatic of hypochondriac
neurosis or, at least, a deep trust for Western medicine. I seem to have acquired a virtual
graveyard of eyeglasses from various stages in my life, at a rate of about one new pair per
year. These prescriptions range from early astigmatism and near-sightedness, to a
multitude of stages of prism-corrections for double vision, and back to simple near-
sightedness again.

A studious child, ever sitting in front of a book or computer screen starting at the
age of five, it was no wonder that I was prescribed glasses in middle school for near-
sightedness and astigmatism. As I would learn many years later in a psychology class on
sensation, the former is caused when “the eyeball is too long for the optics” of
accommodation an eye’s lenses have, and the latter occurs usually when “the cornea is
not spherical,” such that “vertical lines might be focused slightly in front of your retina,
while horizontal lines are focused slightly behind it” (Wolfe et al. 30). So, while there
may be behavioral factors—such as close reading—which influence my vision, I am also
aware that there is likely a certain biological component that will contribute to my sight
being more near or farsighted, more doubled or singular.
I jest, but perhaps my quest for ideal forms and my dedicated study of the sciences in my childhood had itself stretched and distorted my eyes. From what I understand, that account isn't terribly accurate. Eye strain doesn't really cause myopia, but in these kinds of circumstances, non-use of one's far-distance vision is often—to use the scientific hedge-word—correlationally related to near-sightedness. I always figured that this is why grad students seem to perpetually need lenses of some sort, but I'm aware that many of those are only theoretical. In all seriousness, my fondness for only being able to see close up is likely related to my growing fascination and close attachment to my double vision.

Even in those early times with my first pair of glasses, I do remember taking delight in the fact that I could put them on in order to experience a consensual reality where “everyone” could see and be seen, only to take them off in private and live in my own world of the microscopic and the close-up. The neat thing about having nearsightedness was the ability to do close work with electronics and read ultra-fine print, like the microprinting around now old twenty-dollar bills. On this note, I found nearsightedness quite beautiful, if a tad distressing when I couldn't find my glasses. Such is the manner of relying on any one sense too much, I've found. I love wearing glasses. However, when they break or fail in their intended purposes, how quickly I feel the impending discourse of normalization working its way through my sensorimotor complex. Martin Jay speaks beautifully to this as he writes,

Human vision is also limited by its capacity to focus on objects only a certain distance from the eye, a distance that normally increases with age.

Thus the eye's superiority at sensing objects from afar is balanced by its
inferiority at seeing those very close. Finally, we are often fooled by visual experience that turns out to be illusory, an inclination generated perhaps by our overwhelming, habitual belief in its apparent reliability. Here the compensating sense is usually touch, as we seek confirmation through direct physical contact. (8)

Thus, with a change in vision comes a change in other senses that support it. Certainly, this basic concept of one's sense of touch taking over for vision is found in various tropes and the very fabric of lived existence with people living with any number of visual impairments, but I am more interested in how those worlds are rhetorically constructed. How does conceiving of sight differently affect how we talk and represent the sense of vision? Having discussed the nature of my personal relationship to vision, I will now examine discourses of “wholeness” versus partiality in the visual system, in an effort to more fully describe the processes of normalization in visual culture.

A Look at “Wholeness” Versus Partiality

In what I will continue to invoke here as consensual reality, a major habit I find common among human-animals is this desire to normalize experience into discernible words which reflect upon an experience that is “whole”—not about perceived disjointedness—and which presume those things which an ideal temporarily abled-body might experience, rather than reveling in a differential state. The construction of “taking a walk,” for instance, does not cite all the ways one might not be able to do so. Moreover, the aforementioned phrase is indeterminate in that this chain of linguistic signifiers might also relate to other actions, such as steering a motorized wheelchair
around a city, as Sunaura Taylor, a scholar in disability studies, discusses with Judith Butler in *Examined Life*.

These discourses of “wholeness,” and perhaps even this consensual reality, are also related to Deleuze and Guattari's notion of “state philosophy.” Massumi defines this in his translator's forward to *A Thousand Plateaus* as “another word for the representational thinking that has characterized Western metaphysics since Plato,” a lineage of thought which Deleuze supposes “reposes on a double identity: of the thinking subject, and of the concepts it creates and to which it lends its own presumed attributes of sameness and constancy” (xi). Thus, my metaphorical walk would likely, according to a doctrine of state philosophy, either involve legs in an act of walking or else fail to meet some basic definition of walking: needing some clarifying signifier to indicate that my movement around a specified area might be done by bike, chair, or some other ambulatory apparatus. On this topic, Cusset quotes Barthes on a prevailing state philosophy in Western culture as he writes,

There he evokes, in effect, the slippage from modern scientific theories (abstract and transitive) to the singular designation of a “revolutionary” metadiscourse: theory thus refers to “a certain discontinuity, a fragmentary nature of exposition, almost analogous to an aphoristic or poetic style of enunciation, and therefore a struggle to fissure the symbolic order of the West,” for theory as the “reign of the signifier ceaselessly dissolves the signified,” and excludes it as a “representative of monology, of the origin, of determination, of all that does not take multiplicity into account. (105)
Here, I feel compelled to make the necessary connection between Deleuze and Guattari’s “state philosophy” and instances of monocular centrism, particularly in visual culture. By this token, I mean to explore some manners through which a prevailing state philosophy might seek to invoke a normalized body, in relation to vision, which looks unreflexively toward discourses of the whole rather than a multiplicity of parts.

A prevailing scientific model would suggest that we are socially and biologically programmed with higher cortical functions which have the ability to look for remembered, discursively constructed objects in the world from the “top down” along with the more “phenomenological” or experiential component to vision, the retina, which can notice changes in the world from the “bottom up” (Wolfe et al. 88-96). This biological construct explains how we can have a memory for distinct objects in the world—a favorite chair for instance—while also being able to recognize the appearance of novel objects—things like a new piece of technology or a new animal. The exact nature of cortical exchanges in the brain is subject to debate, but the important idea to note here is that all of the layers of processing occur simultaneously and in concert with each other. The various processing layers produce artifacts much like Guattari’s “‘partial object,’ which derives advantage solely from a 'relative subjective autonomization’” where “the aesthetic object acquires the status of a 'partial enunciator,’ whose assumption of autonomy makes it possible to 'foster new fields of reference’” (Bourriaud, Relational Aesthetics 100). Vision, in situ, is balanced between the ability to form a gestalt—an act of overall sense-making—and the specialization of regions which compete between each other and memory to decode specific things—like language or faces—in the world. I wish to evoke this multiform idea of sight in order to demonstrate that specialization.
When one's vision suddenly shifts from an unquestioned monocular regime to a diplopic one, the change is not a simple doubling; rather, multiplicities are doubled. Competition occurs between eyes and halves of the brain, and the next best sense, often touch, takes over duties previously run by the visual centers of the brain. Having set forth this level of complexity in the brain, I will now relate my own experience to some postmodern ways of sense-making which help me to more accurately reflect on my own experience.

With all this complication, it was no wonder why the idea of heteroglossia in performance made so much sense in my first performance studies classes the next year. It was not a foreign concept to be mastered; on the contrary, it was a “postmodern” condition in my own head that I couldn't turn off. The theory would come in time, but when I first had the headaches, I didn't have the language. I didn't really know what was happening. Even now, I don't really believe I can truly express this performative condition through language, but I can definitely associate words with the embodied experience: sliding, snapping, shifting, locking, overlaying, multiplying, conversing, and nauseating. Explaining it did sometimes sound a bit like a description of being drunk, but I never remembered my vision splitting when drinking or otherwise before that time. The mystery continues.

On a practical level, the situation of my diplopic experience is a bit like asking two people to stand side-by-side and then talking to the empty space between them. The task, in everyday life, seems absurd; yet, I experienced it every day for a year or so. It made me question where we put the identity of people, of objects. The idea of having a literal “space between” the same body reminds me of reading in-between the lines of a text/performance. In a way, it points to an inability to locate an “actual” reality or a
suggestion for a lived possible heteroglossia, a multiplicity that is always already at least double within a “normative” visual system. Yet, I had the ability to point to the reality that lay between the double. Both signifiers, both sets of “bodies” standing side-by-side for instance, did point to a single sign, a person, but the signifiers were in constant contest for dominance, whether it was a pair of my best friend or the same word competing with itself and others on a street sign.

To participate in consensual reality, I could take the necessary time to explain what I was seeing, but I could just as easily pretend that nothing was different about my visual field. As Nicolas Bourriaud claims about aesthetic sensibility:

So reality is what I talk about with a third party. It can only be defined as a product of negotiation. Escaping from reality is “mad”. Somebody sees an orange rabbit on my shoulder, but I can't see it. So discussion weakens and shrinks. To find a negotiating space, I must pretend to see this orange rabbit on my shoulder. Imagination seems like a prosthesis affixed to the real so as to produce more intercourse between the interlocutors. So the goal of art is to reduce the mechanical share in us. Its aim is to destroy any a priori agreement about what is perceived. (Relational Aesthetics 80)

I take Bourriaud’s words as a point of departure for my own diplopic aesthetic that, at its core, hopes to defamiliarize such a priori ways of seeing the world in favor of a more playful relationship with vision. In this regard, I must say that I've grown fond, in the last few years, of talking to my orange rabbit friends. One might dare say that it can even be fun.
In studies with small mammals, when a binocular animal is raised from birth with one eye covered, “monocular form deprivation can cause massive changes in cortical physiology that result in devastating and permanent loss of spatial vision” (Wolfe et al. 71). This severe case points to the vital connection between physiology and the mind's ability to construct perception. However, in cases of a slight crossed disparity error, such as was the case in my double vision, the competing forces are most likely binocular rivalry. This is “the competition between the two eyes for control of visual perception” (Wolfe et al. 149). When watching a person, I would often let one eye be dominant over the other and ask myself, “Which person is the actual person and which is the doppelganger or ‘ghostly twin’ image?” This had an important effect, as I would focus my attention on that “version” of the person who had the most opacity. In truth, however, if I wanted to throw a ball at that person, I would have to throw it in the middle of the pair. However, when I first tried to split my focus between the two, I usually found myself unable to process the situation, seemingly stuck with the internal “pain of postmodernism.”

More to the point, my migraines at this time weren't caused by mere dizziness; the constant work of trying and failing to fuse each eye's information together contributed to the strain. I suppose my ocular muscles—and verbal/cognitive memory—remembered what it felt like to fuse, to normalize the visual fields into one picture. They perpetually tried and failed. Before I had a measure of control over them, the effect was more a continual sliding, back and forth, than a fixed disparity. I do not wish to invoke regimes of causation, but it felt like the sliding caused the dizziness, with the dizziness then causing the disorientation.
Living with diplopia often turned into a game or constant visual joke. It was much like Roger Caillois’s notion of play “in ilinx,” where one “gratifies the desire to temporarily destroy his bodily equilibrium, escape the tyranny of his ordinary perception, and provoke[s] the abdication of conscience” (44). The everyday correlate is very common if you spin in a circle to get dizzy, ride a roller coaster, or consume spirits with the intent of escaping everyday body-states. Ilinx is a type of body-high, specific kinds of which may or may not be culturally sanctioned, given age-specific instances. Quite like being perpetually dizzy or disoriented, I chose to frame my double vision as playful ilinx. This reframing was an important coping strategy. Over time, I began to story my body less in terms of a medical diagnosis—something in need of treatment—and more as an aesthetic condition—a unique perspective on the world. Even after I acquired orthoptic corrections, my glasses with prism lenses, I still would revel in this strange thing my body was doing, that I was doing. After all, I had a limited control. I could choose to fight the splitting or choose to keep it doubled, orienting differently to my disorientation.

My search for an artistic form that matches my experience is related to Beardslee’s discussion of “the disorientating story, the story that assaults our expectations and pulls us out of the world to which we have become accustomed” (167). In this manner, Beardslee is trying to define a new aesthetic story that he sees being crafted in the world: the disorienting narrative. Far from a mere night of ilinx, he asserts that such stories usurp utopian aims, seek meanings “beneath the surface,” and trouble notions of “closure” in storytelling (Beardslee 171). Thus, in the explication of my story, I have made the conscious decision not to use only typographic play to present my condition.
Rather, I wish to show to you—and maintain the complexities within—the particularities of the “chaotic and broken experience” which led me to question the tyranny of signifier/signified dyads (Beardslee 171). By attempting to capture my sense of vision in aesthetic form, I am attempting to subvert “the assumption”—in modernist storytelling practices of orientation—“that there [is] an overall story,” a “unified story, coming to a conclusion that tie[s] up all the loose ends” (Beardslee 164). Just what sense can I make of sense anyway? I recognize that I can only create an artistic heuristic to describe my embodiments, and this heuristic will never fully capture my experience. I have made my peace with this lack of closure, like I have made my peace with the fact that I will always have some double vision. I feel as if I can only dance in ludic recombinations of sight, playing with signifiers: slips of vision, like slips of language. What, then, happens when the play of ilinx becomes serious?

A Look at Driving

I was scheduled for my driving test weeks in advance of the onset of the diplopia. Not disclosing this, I simply went through with the test. Thus, my first experiences driving were doubled: double stoplights, double cars, and doubled anxiety. Consequently, do you know how to find the middle of the road when you’re driving with diplopia? Well, you simply look into the distance where the two roads meet or where the two cars intersect. The middle point between the center of one car and the center of its double is the place where the actual middle is, where the actual car is. This becomes very important while driving, very important. Using this basic knowledge and my performance skills, I was able to pretend that I was not literally on the edge of my seat, both of them, and received my license that very day.
Certainly, there is a certain feeling of danger to driving with diplopia, but at the same time, once you sublimate the extra information and learn to live with the difference, it makes sense. In some ways, I had to disallow the orienting master narrative of driving—that one should have clear 20/20 vision at all times—in order to narrate, for myself, my own disorienting story of being able to drive with double vision.

Furthermore, since I did accomplish some driving in my life before I was diagnosed, I sometimes wonder if the driving lessons showed me a disparity that already existed in an extremely heightened way. Staying in the center road is the same with double vision; there are merely two roads. If a visual scene is too confusing, you can always sport a certain pirate accessory to cover one eye, as I did on a few occasions. After all, plenty of folks with vision in only one eye or varying degrees of strabismus also drive, even if that narrative isn’t referenced in a DMV driver’s pamphlet. Usually, living long term with this condition, a person will “turn off” the extra information from one eye. This is certainly the case when one or both eyes are angled so far out that visual fields from each eye don’t even overlap. For those of us who have a disparity closer to the center, however, there are simply two roads to travel by. Now, in a further effort to frame this project’s larger work of developing a personal “diplopic aesthetic,” the next chapter includes a review of relevant vision literatures on the subject of double vision.
CHAPTER 3
DIPLOPIA IN THEORY

A major source of inspiration for this piece is Rhonda Blair’s *The Actor, Image and Action*, which is grounded in “cognitive neuroscience [that] provides new insights into how the structures and processes of the brain, which is a part of the body, are related to consciousness, carrying the potential to deepen our understanding of acting methods” (3). While Blair focuses largely on verifying Stanislavsky’s acting methodology with an understanding of neurological literature, I find her discussion of António Damásio’s research relevant to my implementation of diplopic aesthetics.

Using Damásio’s “somatic marker hypothesis,” Blair posits that body image or remembered “body-states” have an “interior” focus with “sensory probes”—like rods and cones in the retina—which compete with each other for dominance and are “prompted by an object, rather than mirror reflections of an object” (77-78). Blair’s labeling of visual input as “prompting” cites the communication or negotiation between the perception of objects in the world and an individual’s memory. Thus, while visual sensory perception in adults, for instance, may appear regimented—a chair appears to be chair and a tree, a tree—there is still competition going on at the cellular level in the eye as to how raw data will be sent to the brain for higher processing. Everyday instances of low lighting, similar colors, object occlusion, or eye “conditions,” like diplopia, can cause confusion as to where one object begins and the other ends.

This understanding of perception in the world, for me, cites a negotiation between the types of cells in the eye; the eyes against each other; the artifacts stored in memory; the interactions of aforementioned partial objects; and the multiple areas of the brain
involved in the overall processing of information. So, a performer has unique “Universe of reference” which is biologically and situationally based (Guattari 45). The Stanislavskian actor dredges up the memory of her—or her viewing of another person’s—specific drunken body-state to reproduce a realistic “pattern of behavior” by stumbling or moving in the recalled way (Blair 60). Though I no longer have a feeling of uncontrollable double vision—and therefore do not live continuously in those same universes of reference that I once did—I still remember and manifest those split-feeling body states when stressed and fatigued. However, the confusion of my double vision mirrors, in some ways, the tenuous state of understanding how the information from two separate eyes is interpolated in the brain into a “singular” image of a scene. Having visited the biological negotiations of nerve data, I will now relate how these interpolations are also lingually constructed.

Social Construction of Sight: Language and Aesthetic

Moving into the Western history of the rhetorical construction of sight, Jay offers:

Although the optical mechanism of vision has been well understood since the time of Kepler, . . . the precise manner of its translation into meaningful images in the mind remains somewhat clouded. The image received is reversed and inverted, but the physiological cum psychological processes which “read” it correctly are still incompletely known. The binocular or stereoscopic integration of data from the two eyes into one image with its apparent three-dimensional depth is also not yet fully understood. Indeed, with all the advances science has made in explaining
human vision, its complexities are such that many questions remain unanswered. (7-8)

Using a discursive analysis, Jay describes both the everyday mechanics of the eye—in muscle and sinew—and complementary ways that language and societal norms serve to create and interpret vision. Here, the author links sight and language as he discusses Robert Rivlin and Karen Gravelle’s finding that the “ability to visualize something internally is closely linked with the ability to describe it verbally” (Jay 8). Jay finds “something revealing in the ambiguities surrounding the word ‘image,’ which can signify graphic, optical, perceptual, mental, or verbal phenomena” (8-9). For example, in order to come to the conclusion that “seeing is believing,” one must take the primacy of visual stimuli for granted as *a priori* knowledge. Such a discourse has the ability to normalize sight when language pre-determines concepts like “single” and “double” to serve as master signifiers for embodied optical experiences. Language becomes the measuring stick for determining one’s relationship to consensual reality. I draw a relationship here with Deleuze and Guattari’s discussion of micropolitics and language. They state, “Not only does each [language] have its own unit of measure, but there is an equivalence and translatability between units. The central eye has as its correlate a space through which it moves, but it itself remains invariant in relation to its movements” (Deleuze and Guattari 211). According to this postmodern philosophy of knowing, state power takes hold of meaning occluding the embodied or perceived understandings. A subject who experiences perceptual alterity is, soon after, stratified in a discourse of normalization: constantly comparing herself to the measure and found wanting with a description that may sound more like disoriented nonsense than a legitimate perspective. Even at its most
oppressive, however, this contest between language and experience is historically captured in aesthetic form. As such, the struggle is sometimes analyzed as a reflection of dominant versus avant-garde tendencies in a particular era of art—such as the Dadaists and Surrealists in the early 20th century.

Jay begins his discussion of avant-garde artistic struggles with a consideration of the advent of Humanist/Renaissance painting aesthetics. In this period, a “medieval assumption of multiple vantage points from which a scene could be painted” shifted into a position where “the beholder was now the privileged center of perspectival vision, . . . a monocular, unblinking fixed eye (or more precisely, abstract point), rather than the two active, stereoscopic eyes of embodied actual vision” (Jay 54). Jay continues on this point, insisting that “[t]his assumption led to a visual practice in which the living bodies of both the painter and the viewer were bracketed, at least tendentially, in favor of an externalized eye above temporal duration” (55). The transition point from the medieval perspective of the multiple to the modern conception of the singular, able-bodied viewer can be viewed as a marker for Western society’s growing belief in the enlightenment and—as I will soon discuss—reliance upon capitalism as a dominant sociopolitical model.

Jay insists, “It was this uniform, infinite, isotropic space that differentiated the dominant modern world view [sic] from its various predecessors, a notion of space congenial not only to modern science, but also, it has been widely argued, to the emerging economic system we call capitalism” (57). While constructing an absolute, “causal relationship between the invention of perspective and the rise of capitalism may be problematic,” Jay makes special note of this conceptual shift in the Renaissance
where—for the first time—a clean, marketable perspectivalism allowed “painter and viewer” to emotionally separated. Jay continues by discussing that this time period marked the first where “the oil painting as a commodity to be sold and possessed came into its own” (Jay 57-58). On this point, David Levin concurs that much of modern, Western philosophical discourse since this time has been “not only ocularcentric” but “in contrast to preceding periods in history, ocularcentric in a distinctively modern way (in accordance with the possibilities and imperatives of late capitalism and its advanced technology)” (400). I will not digress into a lengthy discussion of visual regimes and capitalism here, but I would like to make the basic observation that this reading of Jay’s and Levin’s texts serves as a challenge or a reminder that “default” visual compositions may serve dominant political masters. Indeed, the very notion of marketable cinema, for instance, may develop along the lines of the maximum ease and pleasure that one may derive from gazing and participating in an economic system where dominant views—both ideological and cinematographic—reinforce dominant paradigms.

Conversely, Jay offers an alternative Western-aesthetic paradigm through a discussion of Marcel Duchamp’s philosophical interest “with the implications of the stereoscope and the later devices of three-dimensional illusion such as the anaglyph, which produced optical effects in the brain without any material reality behind them” (163-64). The stereoscope is a device with two ocular holes which usually present two slightly different images in order to produce a three-dimensional effect—e.g., the popular View-Master toy. This type of device, at the time of its inception in the 1800s, presented an affront to a monocular scopic regime; it “called into question the assumed congruence between the geometry of the world and the natural geometry of the mind’s eye” (Jay
For his part in the history of stereoscopy, I would point to Duchamp’s posthumously displayed *Etant donnés*: a sculpture/painting installation of the lower half of a nude female figure resting in branches in front of a waterfall backdrop, viewable only through two peep-holes that are set in a large wooden door that obscures the whole scene. Jay explains the particularities of Duchamp’s piece:

The installation also subverts the traditional identification of subjectivity with either a monologic, spectatorial gaze or a dialogic specularity. Rather than the picture returning the gaze of the beholder . . . the viewer becomes the uneasy object of a gaze from behind—that of those waiting to stare at the peep show. . . . As a result, the equation of the “I” with the sovereign “eye” becomes itself unhinged. (171-70)

Duchamp’s trickster-esque piece creates multiple critiques: the singular position and dual nature of the viewing spot, the scopophilic subject matter in terms of an obvious male gaze, the implication of audience-as-unwitting-voyeur, and the irony of a subject that cannot stare back.

Moreover, in a Duchampian way, I am seeking to use my diplopic aesthetic as an alternative to a monocular ideology. Images that inherently comprise two or more viewpoints can have a visually affronting nature that allows for a moment of critical reflexivity. For instance, in the case of *Etant donnés*, the viewer becomes quite saliently aware of the objectification involved in “peeping” and is often shocked—at least in the historical time of the original viewing—by the unfamiliar perspective in the presentation of two art objects: the realistic sculpture of a woman reclining nude in branches, juxtaposed with the corresponding realistic/monoscopic backdrop painting. In my
aesthetic, I feel that diplopic reflexivity can serve a consciousness-expanding function about the presence of non-normative body states. In a diplopic aesthetic, the extended time spent away from a mono-viewpoint—the duration of a performance, for instance—can serve as a defamiliarization of audience expectations for a staging that reifies consensual reality. In this performance situation, the obvious struggle toward—and inability to sustain—a diplopic visual position will allow for frustrations of looking similar to those in Etant donnés. When compared to the relative ease that a cinematic scene—e.g., of drunkenness—might treat blurred vision as a temporary condition, this double vision experiment is a sustained struggle for monocular “comprehension” as a device to question why such a viewpoint is fetishized or desired. In this way, I would like audiences of this sort of diplopic piece to take away the kind of struggle that may be inherent and invisible in every act of looking. But, while competition between eyes is constantly at the forefront of my mind, several theories of phenomenology point to the interaction or dialogic condition that exists between seeing and knowing.

Vision and Phenomenology

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in his Phenomenology of Perception, argues for the primacy or co-creation of the visual field by interactions between experienced, external perception and “empirical,” internal knowledge. He posits a mode of being that is understood not as an actuality or a conscious reality but as a lived experience:

Now, if one's own body and the empirical self are no more than elements of the system of experience, objects among other objects in the eyes of the true I, how can we ever be confused with our body? How can we ever have believed that we saw with our eyes what we in fact grasp through an
inspection of the mind; how is it that the world does not present itself to us as perfectly explicit; why is it displayed only gradually and never “in its entirety?” In short, how does it come about that we perceive? . . . Let us then return to sensation and scrutinize it closely enough to learn from it the living relation of the perceiver to his body and to his world. (Merleau-Ponty 241-42)

My lived diplopia was certainly a confusing bodily condition resulting in an extreme difference when compared to my former ways of interpreting the world. The identity in a visual object was decentered, literally split. Meaning was contextual—as usual—but those contexts, those overall visual scenes, were also split in two. However, I could definitely understand “normal” inter-relationships between things in the world with one eye closed. But, with both eyes open, the “concreteness” existed as a doubling from two different spatial positions. Imagine focusing on a moving car with one eye's attention and on a stop sign with another eye. Both items are important and draw focus, but with a diplopic condition they may rest on top of one another or interact strangely. In this arrangement, I would see: two discernible sets of stop signs and cars overall; each stop sign in close proximity to its double and to each car; and an overlapping hybrid image where a car appears superimposed on a stop sign. These three basic ways of orienting to the world—which I will later use in my criteria for diplopia performance—show how I made my own sense of the phenomenological experience of double vision. So, I consider Merleau-Ponty's critique of empirical understanding to reflect the dislocation of inherent or monologic meaning in objects in my visual field. Though, even now, I have difficulty in articulating this way of seeing and assert that my description in this document merely
touches on the possibilities of describing the particularities of my dissociation of perception.

What I take from this short history of the discursive construction of vision is that often dominant ideologies of a time period will dictate a normalized aesthetic that then serves to inject discourse with a politically loaded viewpoint. Postmodern perspectives on vision and storytelling—e.g., Beardslee’s disorienting narratives, Damásio’s somatic marker hypothesis, Duchamp’s Dada aesthetics, and Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological writings—serve as platforms on which new aesthetics and universes of references can be built. In this vein of multiplying perspective, and in an effort to more fully explain my desire to recreate double vision in performance, the next chapter covers Kupper’s idea of aestheticizing disability as a potential model for postmodern construction of art, visual or otherwise.
Petra Kuppers talks about “the violence of normalization” in her “Performing Determinism: Disability Culture Poetry” (90). She analyses the poetry of Jim Ferris (a prominent disabilities studies scholar, born with a leg-length discrepancy), referencing those violent acts of correcting bodies that society deems to be incorrect. In this piece, Kuppers praises Ferris’s poetry which she feels captures the gait of Ferris’s walk—modified by his orthopedic shoe—in its meter. Kuppers's argument for a “crip culture” aesthetic engenders a burgeoning space for narratives and poetry that reflect the experiences of bodies that do not conform to normal standards (95-98). I see her crip aesthetic as a call for a model of art creation whereby artists engage their embodiment of disability by including traces of it in layers of their work. I do recognize myself as a temporarily able-bodied person, a TAB, but I wish to call on my continued experience of double vision as a marker from which I can begin to understand the normalization of “good vision” and disability. I see some similarities between my specialist's push for what amounted to cosmetic eye surgery and Kuppers's talk about Ferris's leg being surgically broken to “normalize” its length (90).

As Ferris's leg did not take well to the initial surgery and leg breaking, he found a new, enlivened aesthetic in the difference, accepting and wearing an orthopedic shoe which allowed him to walk differently with a cadence which influences his crip poetry (Kuppers 91-92). Personally, my orthoptic prism correction lenses allowed me to see the world through a “normalizing” correction. However, even as my eyes turned more clearly to the “center,” I still found differences in vision when removing my orthoptic
appendage. To be cliché, my vision was straightened but not narrowed. Moreover, when I wore contacts I could sharply see objects around me, but the doubling was a way more intense experience: a clear double vision.

Below, I would like to continue my earlier personal narrative of treatment for diplopia. My purpose for doing this is to emphasize the ways in which vision therapy—rather than the initially proposed surgery—influenced my ability to think about my double vision in ways that were aesthetic—in Kuppers’s crip sense—rather than medical. With the slow progress of vision therapy, I came to terms with vision as processual and changing throughout one’s lifetime, rather than as a static and monocular construct with an “easy fix.”

Vision Therapy

In my case, I was fortunate to be old enough to choose non-invasive therapy over surgery. My ability to conceive of this option, however, was the result of over a month of research. In this time, I was able to dredge up only one reasonably close doctor who was willing to go with this more alternative route. This doctor and his treatment regimen were, of course, not covered on my father’s insurance, but at the time, I felt the impact of normalizing discourses and the need for treatment.

The specialist—a behavioral optometrist—greeted me warmly. I soon learned the difference between an optometrist—a person with a major certification in the measurement and prescription of eyeglasses and basic eye issues—and an ophthalmologist—someone who has completed medical school in order to specialize in disorders of the eye. In my situation, I found the latter to be looking for excuses to perform surgery, with the former—among those optometrists who were well-informed—
seeking alternative medical paths. Actually, my vision therapist was quite emphatic about patients avoiding the knife, especially with children who may face a lifetime of repeat procedures as their vision evolves over time.

Curiously, instead of using prisms that would let me see “normally” for the course of the therapy, this doctor prescribed lenses which had a little less than the typically necessary prism power. The lack of intensity pushed my eyes to continually work to accommodate and fuse images in distance vision. With the correction, headaches were less common during the day, but with the use of nightly computer eye exercises, I strained to focus until I was able to meet certain levels of ocular competence. For these, I used a computer program with opposing sets of random dot stereograms, similar to “Magic Eye” image puzzles. Using three-dimensional glasses, the color-coded visual fields would separate as I stressed the limits of my vision in order to see boxes in the jumble of dots. I would register the location of the boxes—up, down, left, or right—on the keypad, meeting a loud affirmative or ear-piercing negative beep. Without the ability to lower the volume in this old DOS program, I entertained the notion that behavior modification must have been part of the treatment process. In reality, these tests were merely a metric to determine how much my everyday use of fewer prisms caused my eye muscles and brain’s interpretation of the optical signal to reorient over time. Finding out that the exercises weren’t doing the work of “recovery” part-way through the process, I was annoyed but far from angry. There was something comfortable about the numbers which denoted my progress through an exercise, and I watched the prisms in my glasses drop: from six, to five, to four.
I mention these corrective strategies for at least two reasons. First, I would certainly like to advocate for non-invasive and alternative therapy practices in Western medicine; I believe that a wider variety of legitimate treatment options exist outside of current surgical and pharmaceutical standbys. Secondly, however, I would like to visit the idea that medical orthopedics can be an “imperfect” corrective, in that one need not maintain the rhetoric of “the complete recovery.” The moment my prism lenses were “right” for my progress toward the “center,” the doctor would give me a prism sticker—a plastic lens to affix to my glasses—or a new glass lens which made it harder to focus. The goal may have been eliminating the two images before me for a single one, but the method did not follow the surgical logic of a single-day’s fix and recovery. Rather, the milieu of vision therapy followed the notion that I would definitely live with this condition; I would gain a measure of control or a way of functioning with it over time. However, even as I shed the prismatic lenses—moving in power from four to three—I could not shake off the memory of the headaches, the doubling, and the corrective therapy with its triumphs, setbacks, and many beeps.

Had I simply forgotten the idea that my brain and eye muscles were not properly aligned? Was I remembering a previously-felt state or learning something new? I felt like I had more control over what I was seeing, but odd viewing situations like occluded objects and low light still produced the doubling effect. My exercises played tricks on my brain late at night, but I kept plugging away at the computer screen. Wearing the red and blue 3-D glasses, I stared into the abyss of dots with a look reminiscent of audiencing a 1980’s horror movie. The tedium was met with more to visits my orthoptic doctor friend and fewer prisms: four turned into three, three to two.
For that period of time in my life—while going through vision therapy—I reveled in being able to see with both a respect for the center, when seeing “normally,” and an appreciation for a crip aesthetic, when seeing double. With corrective prisms, I could not help but see “singular”; with mere contacts, I could not help but see double. However, with this, my aesthetic appreciation was widened and complicated. For instance, repetition in art and performance became heightened. Repetitive paintings often appeared beautifully three-dimensional; stage scenes with multiple, complex characters had new depths and signifiers of multiplicity. In this mindset, I was able to actively frame an art object as doubled specifically, rather than as just-doubled-like-everything-else.

Superimposition, the placing of one eye’s object on top of the other, became an art I could perform in my own head. While doubled, I would willingly contort my head to make things line up; in fact, when two people were standing side-by-side with their four apparent bodies, it was more comfortable—i.e., less migraine inducing—to make the two middle bodies overlap heads or shapes, condensing down to three bodies. Perhaps this practice reduced the number of people or objects to track visually, or maybe the overlapping was interesting enough to make a perpetually uncomfortable situation more palatable. My relative (lack of) control of the constant superimposition led me to embrace this crip aesthetic of looking, which felt somewhere between intentional and compulsory, somewhere between beautiful and nauseating. As Ferris writes, “I’m not sure if I want all poems to limp, but I know this: all the interesting ones do, all the lovely ones do, in one way or another” (qtd. in Kuppers 93). As the heft of the prisms reduced, I felt the weight of their absence on my face: from two to one, to none.
Even after vision therapy, I wonder how I have actually “recovered” from this ordeal, this “diplopic episode.” I still regularly use glasses, as I have for over a decade, but they have no prism correction. I also can and do use contacts, on occasion. Since I have spent so much time at the cusp of not being able to fuse images in my visual system, I can cause my eyes to converge or separate easily. To recall Blair's biological basis for acting, in true Stanislavsky fashion, I am able to produce an “as-if” body state, based on “recollections and reconstitutions of conscious and somatic experiences” and “imagination” of what that experience was actually like (79). This phenomenological reminder of a former state is just as disconcerting—or aesthetically engaging—as the original condition. It also brings back body memories of that time, and sometimes my eyes seem to want to quickly fuse back, just to make sure they can. As with many embodiments in life, over time, I’ve learned to disregard—rather than discard—this extra information which re-performs the world. The process of fusing a singular, monocular perspective is articulated for me in a way that does not allow me to take-for-granted the complexities of vision.

My vision therapist assured me that I was retraining my eye muscles and the brain's connection to them, my overall sight. Though areas of the brain have certain plasticity, much of the brain's ability to recreate and relearn neural pathways is reduced throughout adulthood. Indeed, he mentioned that I may not be able to “reclaim” my former vision at all. In a sense, he was right. From the position of Kuppers’s crip ideology that champions non-normative aesthetics, my overall experience with double vision has been a positive and enlightening one.
CHAPTER 5

A DIPLOPIC AESTHETIC IN PERFORMANCE

Returning to a practical discussion of staging double vision, this chapter will tie my personal experiences with diplopia into a codified list of three basic criteria for applying the experience as a staging aesthetic. As I mentioned earlier, these three criteria—of repetition, proximity, and hybridization—reflect some of the particularities of my experience in navigating the world with double vision. In this vein, while the particularities of my experience serve as a case study in the application of biology to performance, I hope that readers take away the urge to stage or leave traces of their own unique body states in their work.

In applying a crip aesthetic to performance, Kuppers talks about the notion “biological determinism” as a call for “leaving traces in language” to describe the experiences of bodies that function in other ways, outside of the “normal” conventions (94-95). For my involvement in this aesthetic, I can tell you my story or encourage you to cross your eyes for a day, for a time. Perhaps a crip biological reference embedded in this essay will reach you in its use of metaphor or meta-analysis; perhaps my performance of diplopia will cause you to look twice or to complicate the act of looking, reducing its givenness. Simply consider vision both as an active performance of dialogue—with internal (inter-ocular) and external (interpersonal) negotiations—and as a substantive performative act in locating a meaning for signifiers, a performative view. In this way, vision—particularly directed at performance—is not just a gaze or a means of apprehending the clarity or “meaning” of a scene. Rather, the theater of looking is a
constructed, political act that carries the subjectivity of the performer and the weight of the multiplicity of an audience’s interpretations.

So, it is with the utmost respect for possibility and subversion in performance that I lay out a few criteria for the particularities of my diplopic aesthetic. These three criteria are by no means an exhaustive list of the possibilities for a diplopic performance. Rather, I offer them as examples of sensory embodiments from my own life that can make their way into a performance that employs double vision as a staging device.

Firstly, a director or group of collaborators should pay special attention to repetition in any visual stage imagery. The use of repetition—particularly the act producing at least two of any single object or character—is a device used to indicate literal multiplicity in the visual frame; it functions similarly to the way that I orient to the presence of two copies of the same object in my visual field when I have double vision. As a rule, the general notion of doubling or multiplying—e.g., people, objects, set pieces—should be present in the form of extra copies of things: characters have nearby doppelgangers; items always appear in multiple; and set pieces are chosen for their natural tendency toward repetition, like slats in chairs and porches. Performers can definitely apply a “poor theatre” perspective—one that is “without make-up, without autonomic costume and scenography, without a separate performance area (stage), without lighting and sound effects, etc.”—to a diplopic production, but such a work would likely emphasize the doubling of characters or other elements of staging, such as the close placement of audience rows (Grotowski 19).

Secondly, performers in this style who are “doubled” should remain in close proximity to each other where all movements are choreographed and matched by both
performers. Whereas practices such as character bifurcation—where two performers may represent or embody one character—are already widely used in performance studies productions, this diplopic performance would be more of a pre-configured simultaneous dance with rigid blocking. I could also imagine the use of life-sized puppets for this purpose, but I think that most diplopic performances could be accomplished through media and video representation of two split visual fields captured by a pair of cameras or the image from one camera duplicated. Notably, the latter is the technique is the one I used to create Diplopic Vision, a video piece which I will later discuss (Sloan).

Third, diplopic performances should emphasize the hybridization which takes place when two pairs of bodies or objects begin to overlap. Through the use of blending voices, costumes, character affects, or digital superimposition of video, one can use the hybrid aspect of my diplopic aesthetic to look at the everyday blending of hybrid subjectivities. For instance, imagine a meeting of two doubled characters that form a total of four onstage performers. To perform the kind of superimposition present in Fig. 3 on the next page, the closest two performers may overlap physically or temporarily combine costumes or characterizations to show the visual and conceptual blending of two subjectivities. In part, I see this as the most potentially subversive aspect of a diplopic aesthetic because of the possibilities for strong juxtapositions of body types, genders, races, ideologies, and personalities. When two dissimilar entities overlap in this way, they may soon separate, but the conceptual implication is that, as beings-in-the-world, we are always affecting and being affected viscerally by exchanges with others. I find the challenge of staging such juxtaposition—or of producing one through digital media—to be thought-provoking in terms of how identities are created, recreated, and fluid. So,
having laid out my tripartite criteria for a diplopic aesthetic, I will now discuss how to apply this technique in digital media—where I believe the aesthetic has the most potential.

Fig. 3 “Double Fantasy,” composed by Samuel Sloan with art by Nichole Nicholson.

Using the three aforementioned criteria—of repetition, proximity, and hybridization—I can definitely envision a “live” staged work that would employ my aesthetic. However, in my experience, I have been unable to locate a performance that employs these criteria in a way that reflects the particularities of my diplopic experiences. On the other hand, I can envision using digital media in order to create this aesthetic in art, as seen in Fig. 3. In this instance, I used photo editing software to create a digital superimposition of the image of one camera with its scene duplicated, its images vying for dominance. While one can clearly see the hard line where the pictures overlap, it
would be possible to use two cameras with overlapping fields of vision in order to avoid this issue. The two cameras of this process would satisfy my criteria for repetition, as there are two images; for proximity, as the digitally combined images show objects in close, locked relationships; and for hybridization, as bodies and objects—like my body and the line drawing in Fig. 3—overlap. As in binaural recording, which uses two microphones to simulate input from both ears, the use of two cameras can simulate the vision from two different eyes.

Digital renderings of my diplopic aesthetic may fall within Bourriaud’s ideas in his book *Postproduction*, where an artist can generate new digital materials to be modified or work “with objects that are already in circulation on the cultural market, which is to say, objects already informed by other objects” (13). So, instead of producing a new image—like the photograph in Fig. 3—one may take already existing texts and manipulate them, perhaps as a form of defamiliarization or commentary on the original image. I can imagine elements of close repetition and proximity producing multiplicity in images with this method; I also envision the hybridization aspect of a diplopic aesthetic being used in digital collage to emphasize the remix—or overlap—of two already existent texts that are dissimilar.

*Diplopic Vision* is such an attempt at producing my double vision trope in already existent digital media. I would like to draw your attention to the first vignette in this video—the home movie of myself as a child on a beach—in order to show some of the visual effects of this aesthetic when it is applied to video work (Sloan). By the nature of the video being doubled, there are certainly duplicates of each body in the scene, following my criteria of repetition. Particularly, I would like to point out the repetition of
the umbrellas and houses in this scene. Whereas a monocular viewpoint would see spaces between hotels and beach items, this diplocic aesthetic makes everything appear multiplied: stand-alone houses appear as duplexes; rows of chairs and umbrellas seem tighter, repetitive; two children playing seems more like a group; and birds gather in huge flocks, their large number causing each bird’s duplicate to be indiscernible, multiplied rather than doubled. I would also like to make the observation that in the doubled video—as in my diplocic experience—as a person travels away from the camera, the distance between the person and her double increases. Similarly, when a person is close to the camera, her double becomes almost singular, but as in my experience, the singularity is always tenuous and just as likely to break into two. In many ways, this is a unique relationship to proximity that I find salient in my experiences of double vision. Finally, I would like to mention the ways that overlapping bodies—particularly of my body with other children and adults—seems to reflect a group sensibility of hybridization. In a video with slower subjects than young children, this kind of hybrid overlapping can be a bit more explicit. When particularities like height or hair color match up, the overall effect of blending both erases and preserves differences between bodies in a unique way, it re-mixes them in a way much like the collage art of the Dadists.

I realize that there may be other creative ways, perhaps a use of mirror or sound, to embody my diplocic aesthetic and other bodily realities which would also follow Kuppers’s notion of a crip aesthetic: presenting non-normative possibilities for the senses. Art, in this vein, is certainly made for venues like psychology textbooks to show what synesthesia or so-called sensory disorders might look like. However, that art is
often made with the idea of representing and confirming pathologization—of improving normative treatment models so that temporarily-abled psychologists can more efficiently recognize those whom they believe have a disability. I believe in a crip aesthetic which would reclaim—or begin to free—entrenched signifier/signified relationships when representing the world of bodily experiences. This is a way of thinking that attempts to avoid medicalization in favor of a broader perspective of consensual reality.

Though, in this writing, I do not wish to normalize any particular body. My aesthetics of looking may invoke a diplopic aesthetic, but there might be someone missing an eye who would have a monocular aesthetic: a monocular aesthetic of a different kind than those who forget that they have two eyes. Or, we could look to the aesthetic of those with strabismus—with eyes turned to the side—who see more of the world, perhaps beyond the imagination of those without. If one eye is turned off to the side in this arrangement, things in that eye's periphery might be playing in the unconscious of a disregarded eye which is connected to areas in an unconscious mind, having more depth and more layers literally built into the system than those who would merely interrogate vision intellectually. I'm not talking about theoretical lenses here; I'm talking about actual lenses. If we are to fetishize visual culture, I believe the least we can do is to make sure that different types of vision are seen as both present and presently working in aesthetic objects and performances.

In light of this, I do not necessarily advocate that my particular diplopic aesthetic be promulgated en masse into visual art. Rather, I hope artists will see what different ways of viewing might look like and interpret the world through their own perspective, their own visual world, with all its complications. What about a farsighted staging or one
that makes present the fact that the human eye often receives a yellow tint with age? (Wolfe et al. 112). My argument here is one of formalism, of making present the frame of a performance or adding to the complexity of a scene. Certainly, one might argue that a shift in color onstage or an alternative camera position would be imperceptible to an audience, but I would put forth that embedding things like a character’s (dis)ability into our staging choices adds to the conceptual complexity, the richness of a conspicuous performance. For instance, a director might tint part of the stage with a slight yellow gel when the scene is situated in the perspective of an older character whose eyes have begun to (dis)color. Moreover, in order to use an aesthetic of the eye condition retinitis pigmentosa, a director might occlude part of—or the entire center of—the stage from being lit in order to re-create this condition where “sufferers typically exhibit an overall shrinkage of their visual fields, as well as ‘ring sarcomas,’ bands of blindness between the relatively normal central visual fields and the periphery” (Wolfe et al. 44).

Having invited readers to develop their own bodily aesthetics into performance, I will now discuss some practices that performance studies scholars are already using in order to interrogate similar kinds of multiplicity in their work. In this way, I would like to separate my work from already existing methods while recognizing that staging practices like chamber theatre are well-developed and stylistically permeate much of our work.

By dislocating monocular or unquestioned visual metaphors through performance, one can train an audience to read multiplicity. Certainly, in the performance studies classroom, a basic heteroglossic activity with “performing cultures” as a purview may involve the embodying of two or more identities: adult and child present in the same
body; a white-identified person reading a text written by an African American; or the collapsing of a several performers’ interpretations of a text into a single performer’s body, just to name a few. Typically at stake in such exercises is the ability for the performer to gain insight into the subjectivity of an other and for the audience to see multivocality at play in a body other than the author. In many ways, I find that the kinds of hybridization which occur in my diplopic aesthetic can achieve similar effects of juxtaposition of bodies-as-text, but I do acknowledge the many ways that two superimposed bodies may not have the kind of power of a single performer fully embodying the text of a cultural other. While several other techniques for achieving heteroglossic embodiment exist, I would now like to focus on the use of character bifurcation in traditional chamber theatre as it mirrors my diplopic aesthetic, while differing from it in some major ways.

Breen defines chamber theatre as being “dedicated to the proposition that the ideal literary experience is one in which the simultaneity of the drama, representing the illusion of actuality (that is, social and psychological realism), may be profitably combined with the novel’s narrative privilege of examining human motivation at the moment of action” (5). As such, Breen asserts that “no effort is made in Chamber Theatre to eliminate the narrative point of view which characterizes fiction; indeed, the storyteller’s angle of vision is emphasized through physical representation onstage” (4). By this description, the audience is trained to read the events of the show through a central storyteller’s particular viewpoint. Breen’s performance style, in its initial context, provides a rich understanding of a text and a means to stage the multiplicity of already embedded narrator(s). For example, actors in this form are cast economically, and thus typically
embody more than one character. This leads to situations where a host of characters may be ironically played by one actor across age, race, and gender lines. Furthermore, a bifurcation or trifurcation is possible where a single character’s inner complexity may be played by two or more performers.

Character bifurcation in an aesthetic practice like chamber theatre may be able to re-present, by a manner of conceit, a character or storyteller’s inner world. This strategy was used recently in Susannah LeBaron's *The Amnesiac's Diary*, a show employing several characters-as-archetypes from what appears to be a single person's mind. Nevertheless, this embodiment of bifurcation, trifurcation, etc., can still visually and rhetorically suggest that each performer is a single, stable, solitary self. As Michael Bowman suggests:

> Unfortunately, some of Bahktin’s statements do not support the practice of manifesting heteroglossia in performance, i.e., as spoken dialogue. In particular, dividing the narration among different speakers in an adaptation tends to fix or freeze the dialogical play of voices in a way that appears to contradict Bahktin’s notion of dialogue as “unfinalizable.” Bahktin writes that the “internal bifurcation of discourse,” such that characterizes a typical chamber theatre adaptation, is “merely a game, a tempest in a teapot,” indicative of a monologic reading of heteroglossia. (9)

Here, Bowman’s reading of Bahktin leads me to question the politics of traditional character bifurcation as a shiny ribbon added to tie together a pre-packaged narrative from a fixed viewpoint. In what ways does a resistant staging offer a greater understanding of the human experience? Or, how can a director or collaborators gauge if
a performance is truly subversive or heteroglossic, in the Bahktinian sense? Bowman’s subsequent movement toward a “novelization of the stage” seems “not to ‘express’ or ‘reflect’ heteroglossia, nor of course is it to aestheticize or formalize heteroglossia, but to enact it” (13). Thus, every performance is an experiment with its own rules and conceptual drifts. For a performance using my diplopic aesthetic, I might use literal visual doubling, but the heteroglossia of that world would have its own rules—or lack thereof—which the audience can be taught to read. For instance, an audience would likely realize over the course of the production that two performers who are walking and talking together are meant to represent the same character, and with this reality foregrounded, the audience could, then, read the hybridization of characters overlapping as a kind of visual exchange of subjectivity.

Returning to the The Amnesiac’s Diary—as Gingrich-Philbrook made salient in the talkback session for the show—the continual use of line fragments which are shared by several characters over the course of the production does perform a dissociating work on what might otherwise be seen as the singular bodies of actors (“Talkback for The Amnesiac’s Diary”). This inclusion of indeterminacy of subjectivity may be a method for a poetic auditory diplopia, and similar techniques are certainly deployed in performances of chamber theatre that work heavily with line, pacing, musicality, and chorus.

Visiting another performance in the Klineau Theatre, I would like to contrast the criteria of my diplopic aesthetic with a pair of characters Nichole Nicholson and I created for the show Cybernetic Fruit. The characters, Lobo and Lodi, are a collective cyborg entity which began as two discrete beings—a human and a robot. In the backstory, this pair ended up sharing parts until the point where they collectively exclaim onstage, “We
do not know which is which. We do not care! HAHAHA” (*Cybernetic Fruit*). Never seen apart, Lobo and Lodi scuttle onstage with their trademark blender—a metaphor for the blending of genders and human/cyborg ontologies—which they also integrated into their bodies, their subjectivity. In many ways, this performance typifies my diplocic aesthetic in that two bodies enter closely together, wearing a similar costume that signifies a hybridized connection. The audience can see the visual and physical connections between the two characters, and the monotone affect of their voices makes for a composite blending of audio stimuli through similarity.

However, in regards to my diplocic aesthetic, this performance fails—in a spectacular way—at allowing juxtaposition to be visually fluid and changing at the moment of the staged performance. Instead, the words and actions of the characters focus on a conceptual fluidity—of gender and (post)human status—rather than what could be staged as four apparent bodies—two of Lobo and two of Lodi—interacting in a diplocic aesthetic. Such a diplocic performance might visually highlight the everyday combinatory aspects of the character, while suggesting deep multiplicities, such as masculine and feminine performers of Lobo interacting with masculine and feminine performers of Lodi. At the time, I believe our performance was entirely germane to the goal and overall look of *Cybernetic Fruit*, as a whole. I merely want to suggest, here, the differences that might emerge in a performance that uses a more strict interpretation of a diplocic aesthetic. Suffice to say, not all productions would benefit from this kind of artistic practice. Rather, I would only advocate using a kind of crip or bodily aesthetic in a situation where it makes sense for the overall goals of the artwork in development.
Continuing to talk about the implementation of my aesthetic, I would like to return to Kuppers, who links her crip aesthetic back to the body:

I can perform biological determinism, the living nature of flesh, in writerly practice, the site where language knits meaning. I can show crip culture poetry as a site of these performances, of living life. I can show how these poets craft a suspension, lift of line. New alignments can be made, and the very notion of biology becomes playful. . . . In his crippled poetics, Ferris loves limping poems, finding beauty in the irregular, finding himself and more than himself: finding openings in those certainties of his bodily life, . . . knowing that these are also words to play with, material for making gorgeous things, risky things. (94)

Here, I don’t seek to dis-identify with the notion of my diplopia as disability, but I am also aware that body politics can often circulate in degrees of intensity and authenticity. In my contribution to an understanding of a crip aesthetic, I hope to speak with rather than for the beauty and body that can accompany this kind of art-making. Therefore, I do not wish to claim a grand authenticity in the disability world from my subject position as a predominantly temporarily able-bodied person. But, in this movement, I also do not wish to create a hierarchy which would discourage a director from using or making salient, for example, a basic nearsighted or farsighted aesthetic in staging: perhaps making a stage very far away, very close-up, or visible only through a fuzzy screen. This essay and its broader research project serve to interrogate monocular optocentrism in visual art and rhetoric, while providing my personal frame of diplopia as a tool or heuristic for staging multiplicity in performance. In this way, I view my experience with
diplopia in opposition to my former and current states of “singular,” temporarily-abled vision. My disorienting personal narrative serves as a record of my experience, a cripped possibility of sight. My performance of double vision can then be located in my narrative writings of the experience, the drama of corrective strategies, the audiencing of my body’s differing interpretation of the visual world, and in the remembered coping mechanisms, such as looking in-between two of the same object.

In this sense, revisiting my earlier narrative about driving, two cars which looked exactly alike next to each other were, in fact, the same car. This was part of my awareness because I did have prior experience with a visual system that fused images with “proper” stereopsis, monocular vision. In the exterior, phenomenological sense, I had to deal with the competition between eyes for one interpretation of the doubled image while negotiating with center point that reflected “actual” reality. The competition or conversation between what I saw and what I assumed existed in consensual reality produced the overall effect and affect, the gestalt, of my doubled sight. As I began to use less correction, I began to see the complicated heteroglossic image—once again—as one.

My visual sensation has entered a new evolution which resembles its former state, but my indoctrination back into singular vision is not—and can never be—complete. Stress and fatigue hail the return of the doubling. I do wonder whether these are “actual” states of eye muscles being misaligned or simply body memory of my old internal state, temporarily forgetting the ways I have been able to re-construct what vision should be. These basic understandings fully complicate vision and the act of seeing, for me.

When at home, I might see a banana on the dining room table, with a person sitting nearby whose doppelganger has apparently made quick work of the banana as it is
superimposed onto her stomach. When walking, the pedestrian becomes one with the sign that demarcates her crosswalk. The couple becomes a crowd; a crowd becomes a mass, a blur. Men are superimposed onto women’s bodies with whichever outfit is brightest or most notable winning focus for the hybrid character's garment. Even after acquiring orthoptic corrections and eliminating prismatic glasses, I still revel in this strange thing my body does, that I do. After all, I have a measure of limited control. I can choose to fight the splitting or choose to keep it doubled, orienting differently to my disorientation. I don't know any longer if a “normalized body” has this kind of limited control, but the experience drives me to question what visual aesthetics, social processes, artistic practices, and cultural stories create these “normalized bodies.”

I believe that we must tell our defamiliarizing stories of body—our disorienting stories of experience—through our work. I believe that these stories can also be embedded in our staging and composition practices, rather than being outright expositions. Even if they are not fully understood—in the logical sense—they can be felt and can serve as witness to the fullness of the human experience, to all of the possibilities of polyphony present in consensual reality. I’m not concerned with my three criteria for a diplopic aesthetic encompassing my entire experience with double vision, and I am equally not interested in my audience coming to exactly my same sense-making position on the polyphonic nature of reality. Rather, I hope that readers will take the meaning that they need to take from my personal narrative and reflect upon their own life for traces of their physical bodies that can work their way into art-making practices. Life is messy, short, and complicated, and I think art, at its best, should reflect that.
NOTES

1. I have provided the web link to *Diplopic Vision*, by Samuel Sloan, in the Works Cited below. However, if at any time the link no longer works—or if you would like a DVD version of the video instead—please contact the author using the information included in the Vita.

2. This poem is intentionally doubled in a way that I feel engages with an embodiment of double vision through poetic typographic play. Because of the differing perspectives and visual acuity of each eye in a diplopic pair, I have found that even the interpretation of meaning in one eye can be different from the other.

3. My emphasis on the “con” when describing “*consensual reality*” marks the understanding and normalized discourse of everyday reality as a kind of farce which is often taken-for-granted by those with temporarily-abled bodies.

4. Guattari defines the idea of “Universes of reference” as “ontologically heterogenous modes of subjectivity, constellations of incorporeal Universes of references which take the position of partial enunciators in multiple domains of alterity, or more precisely, domains of alterification” (45). Here, I am using the term “Universe of reference” to show that a person may situationally access specific modalities of knowing or interpreting the world. This discursive move cites that people may perform in everyday life with respect to a kind of *consensual reality*—i.e., my acknowledgement that others do not walk through the world with double vision—while simultaneously navigating the world with a particular embodied experience—driving with double vision, for example.
5. These methods of dealing with place and space also relate to the tripartite
criteria of repetition, proximity, and hybridization which informs my diplopic aesthetic,
as discussed in the final chapter.
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