# Between the Eyes and the Gaze: A Brief Commentary on Pierre Fédida's 'Anxiety in the Eyes'

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The word '*Augenangst*', which James Strachey has rendered inconsistently into English as 'fears about the eye', 'anxiety about the eyes', and 'anxiety about eyes', is not exactly a *hapax legomenon* in Freud's oeuvre, yet it is fair to say that it is an occasionalism, because it only appears in the 1919 essay 'The "Uncanny"' and more specifically in the context of Freud's analysis of E. T. A. Hoffmann's short story '*Der Sandmann*", which was originally written in 1815 (Freud, 1919, pp. 227-33; Hoffmann, 1982[1815]). It is to Fédida's credit that he has extracted this term from Freud's work and given the first impetus to its theoretical and clinical elaboration, considering the highly charged, ambiguous symbolic status of the eye in Western cultural history—from the protective eye of Horus in Ancient Egypt to the diabolical curse of the evil eye (jettatura) in Mediterranean folklore—and the fact that the psychoanalytic literature on the subject is almost non-existent. As an exceptionally well-read and indefatigably creative scholar, Fédida also effortlessly forges links between art historical perspectives on the optical manifestations of the unconscious, high-brow psychoanalytic conceptualisations of the human body, and his own clinical experience as a practicing psychoanalyst. Drawing on the latter, Fédida deservedly pays attention

to an instance of anxiety that is discussed even more rarely than the '*Augenangst*', but which all clinicians at one point in their career have to face, literally and metaphorically: the anxiety of the analyst.

From the opening paragraphs of his text, Fédida emphasizes the polysemy of '*Augenangst*', which may refer simultaneously to the anxiety induced by someone's eyes, the anxiety that is visible and that can be passively detected or proactively created in someone's eyes, the anxiety that is associated with losing or damaging one's own eyes to the point of becoming blind, and the anxiety that is elicited by the simple act of seeing or witnessing with one's own eyes something that should have remained secret or hidden. Of these four figurations of '*Augenangst*', the last instance is perhaps the most complex and interesting, because it commonly coincides with what René Laforgue, back in 1930, designated as an 'eroticization' of anxiety in the one who is watching, which mutates into debilitating 'fear and trembling' from the moment the watcher is caught in the act (Laforgue, 1930).

In his short story, Hoffmann plays on each of these four variations, which are by no means mutually exclusive, to great dramatic effect, yet both Freud and Fédida primarily focus on '*Augenangst*' as the anxiety of losing one's eyes and thus one's vision. The reason for this restriction has nothing to do with conceptual or intellectual 'short-sightedness', but is to be situated in Fédida's broader project of exploring the sources and boundaries of the human body and Freud's determination to interpret the phenomenology of '*Augenangst*' as a substitute for castration anxiety. In this respect, Fédida effectively agrees with Freud when he argues that the human organ of sight is an assimilation of the genital organ and that castration (anxiety) cannot be dissociated from the physiological function of vision.

However, in 1973, Samuel Weber perceptively pointed out that Freud's unshakeable resolve to detect the devastating impact of (paternally conditioned) castration anxiety in Hoffmann's tale led him to completely misread the story's climax, in which Nathanael and his beloved Clara climb the steeple of the town-hall and Nathanael looks through the 'spy-glass' (*Perspektiv*) he has purchased from the louche optician Coppola at a strangely moving, "little grey bush" his girlfriend is pointing out to him in the distance (Weber, 1973, p. 1121; Hoffmann, 1982[1815], p. 123). In the blink of an eye, Nathanael is thrown into a violent fit of madness, which first drives him to try and push Clara over the railings (she is rescued by her brother) and then compels him to jump to his own death. In 'The "Uncanny"', Freud writes: "Among the people who begin to gather below there comes forward the figure of the lawyer Coppelius [the alleged incarnation of the 'castrating' Sandman], who has suddenly returned. We may suppose that it was his approach, seen through the spy-glass, which threw Nathaniel [*sic*] into his fit of madness" (Freud, 1919, p. 229). However, Hoffmann's text tells a different story: "Nathaniel [*sic*] reached mechanically into his sidepocket; he found Coppola's telescope [*Perspektiv*] and gazed through it. Clara was standing before the glass! Then a spasm shuddered through him; pale as death, he stared at Clara, but soon his eyes began to roll, fire seemed to flash and glow behind them, and he started to roar horribly, like a hunted animal" (Hoffmann, 1982[1815], p. 123).

Hence, either Freud's preoccupation with castration anxiety prompts him to see what Nathanael clearly does not see, or makes him blind to Clara's appearance, or effectively makes him afraid to acknowledge what Coppola's 'spy-glass' reveals to the already fragile and confused mind of Nathanael. What exactly triggers Nathanael's

murderous impulse should not concern us here, yet it cannot be doubted that the young man's vision becomes delusional when he stops seeing what he is expecting to see.[1] In other words, even though, as Fédida emphasizes, "vision is the privileged site of psychic intensity", Nathanael's ferocious and ultimately fatal anxiety on the top of the tower does not so much stem "from the fact that there is seeing", but rather from the fact that seeing is unexpectedly troubled, blocked and disturbed by something that is now staring him in the face, without its therefore directly seeing him. This is the point, I think, where Fédida could have differentiated—as Lacan did in his 1962-1963 seminar on anxiety (Lacan, 2014) and subsequently in the sixth lesson of his 1964 seminar *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (Lacan, 1994, pp. 67-78)—between the eyes, as the organ of sight, and the gaze (the look, or the stare), as what comes to us from another (bodily) space, as what cannot be directly recuperated within the field of vision, and as what turns us, as the passive recipients of it, into anxious subjects of a 'meta-physiological' object whose intentions are everything but clear. When, at the end of his essay, Fédida concedes that "[a]nxiety in the eyes should not however be solely constructed as 'anxiety of a lack'", he employs this observation to stipulate that it is the defence against this lack "that entails the intensification of anxiety". Yet apart from the fact that this statement already assumes that lack does generate anxiety, it remains difficult to understand where the defence would come from and how this defence would exacerbate the anxiety.

[1] For example, Sarah Kofman has argued that Nathanael's delusional state is triggered by his usage of Coppola's telescope (Kofman, 1991[1974], p. 133), whereas Serge André has averred that it was actually Clara's appearance, and thus an expression of femininity, which is responsible both for Nathanael's crisis and for Freud's remarkable act of 'scotomisation' (André, 1986, p. 76; Laforgue, 1926).

In conclusion, if we are to restrict '*Augenangst*' to the anxiety of losing one's sense of vision, then this anxiety cannot be fully understood without moving beyond the fear of enucleation or becoming visually impaired. Anxiety in the field of vision, which may very well make the subject mentally blind when she or he is scared to death, requires the identification of a point outside the subject's body, from where he or she is not necessarily seen, but which nonetheless instils the uncanny sensation that they are being looked at, gazed upon, captured by an agency that beholds them and holds them captive. In this particular instance, '*Augenangst*' is really '*Blickangst*', i.e. anxiety for or before the gaze, which exceeds the boundaries of the bodily ego as much as it transcends the organisation of living matter.

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