



Laura Marks

## Eyes to See With

The eight videos of Tran, T. Kim-Trang's *The Blindness Series* compose an extended, enormously inventive essay on blindness as both a subject and an aesthetic mode. Interestingly, the series was made over an expansive period—fourteen years from 1992 to 2006—that witnessed significant shifts in practically every single one of the fundamental terms with which Trang is working. Vision and visuality came to signify quite different things by the mid-noughts than they had in the early '90s. Ideas about identity categories, ethnic and sexual and economic, grew more complex (or were shoved aside by totalizing concepts like “globalization”). Nowadays it is supposed to be a lifestyle choice for Asian women to have their eyes surgically opened. Things that were at the front of our minds in the early '90s, like AIDS, shifted to backstage; while other topics in these experimental movies are now at the fore, like the traumatic experience of refugees. The video medium itself, so much the subject of *The Blindness Series*, changed drastically, especially with the shift from analog to digital video production. The rough, blunted, anti-visual textures Trang worked to achieve in the early works are all the more difficult to achieve in the clean new digital medium. The mode of exhibition of short videos like these has been transformed, or has it? And the very concept with which *The Blindness Series* began, that vision is inextricable from domination, has also shifted over these years, in a process the series observes and

participates in. In the later tapes (I still like to call them tapes, even in the new medium), visibility seems to emerge from a shroud, all innocent again, as though to acknowledge that vision itself isn't really the modality of power; it's what you do with it.

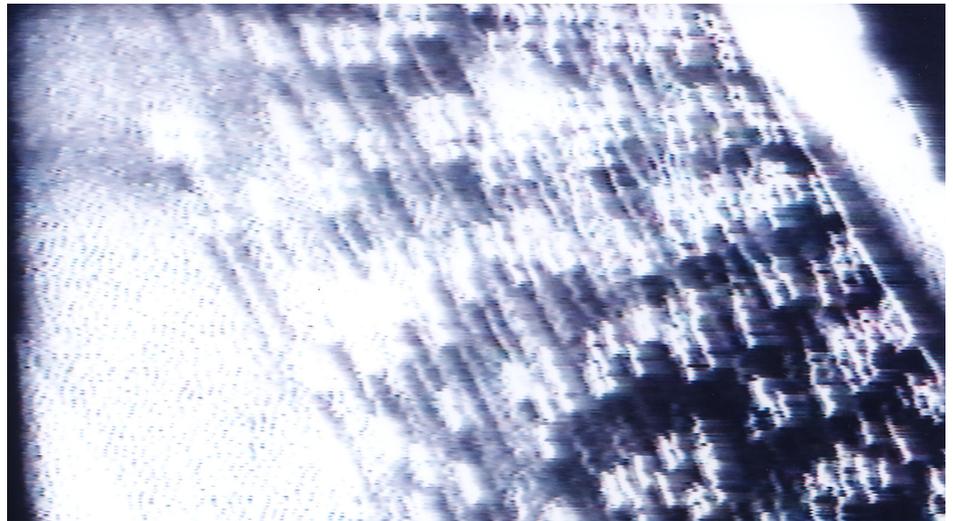
Trang (I use her first name) is not concerned in the series to rehearse the critique of vision and visuality, but to hollow out vision and to “see” from inside the troubled sight that remains, as though blurred with tears. She acknowledges a debt to Jacques Derrida's *Memoirs of the Blind* from the very start, and concludes the series fourteen years later by naming the philosopher as her “(m)other”—the one who started her on a path of differentiation, within a visual medium, from vision. Blindness, she shows, is not the opposite of vision but its underside. She calls on video to yield up other ways of looking: touching with the eyes, seeing through the ears, peeping through one's fingers, spying, reading, being unable to read. All these works trouble perception, both vision and hearing, and halt the audiovisual medium's presumed transparency. From the very first shot of the very first tape, *aletheia*, when Braille letters scream up from the page; to the blobby third-generation images lifted from commercial movies in the analog days; to the murmuring voices; to the tactile skeins of text, maps, and textures that veil the image; to the close-ups that hold objects out for touch as much as vision; to

the educational images and animations that suggest a naive faith in the translatability of interior and abstract processes into visual form: almost every image in *The Blindness Series* troubles or deconstructs our ability to make use of it.

Trang works with a tactile vision that implicates the viewer in things; a viewer must pull close to the image, and also press her ear to the sound, in order to understand it.<sup>1</sup> This is not necessarily a celebration of close vision. Instead, in pulling us close Trang implicates us in the videos' ways of looking and hearing, and those of the technologies and found images/sounds they employ. For example, in *operculum*, when a plastic surgeon is assessing Trang as a candidate for eye-opening surgery, we see the computer screen on which he draws the potential cut line on her eyelid. It's an ugly image: low-resolution, moiré, with a thick black line creeping across her profile. Or in *ocularis*, all the video images are shot with various surveillance cameras, and each is distorted in its own particular way: a greenish, upside-down shot from a car-mounted camera; a

**Source:** Video Data Bank's *Tran, T. Kim-Trang: The Blindness Series, 2009*

<sup>1</sup> I find that Trang works with the three different visual modalities that Gilles Deleuze distinguishes—optical, manual, and haptic—as well as with a cognitive mode that barely passes through the optical. See Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. and with an introduction by Daniel W. Smith (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).



*aletheia*, 1992

blurry, grayed-out image from a camera hidden in Trang's living room.

These images are haptic insofar as they invite us to feel what it's like to be one of these imaging technologies: they make us intimate with the medium, not with the object of its regard. I appreciate this very much. I have written some things on haptic visuality that sometimes, to my utter dismay, have been taken up by a number of writers and artists to justify all kinds of soft-focus, soft-core, artificial closeness, as though visual intimacy could somehow heal the wounds caused by real social and political acts of power. Trang's work, which was one of my original examples of the haptic image,<sup>2</sup> does pull the viewer close to the image, but not necessarily to soothe her or make her feel good about the world.

On the other hand, Trang also creates very beautiful and genuinely intimate haptic images. For example, in *alexia* (one of the works made in digital video), the very delicate images barely render themselves up to perception at all. Against a white ground, a soft iris focuses on a pastel image of fingertips working a Dymo-type labeling machine that is laboriously spelling out texts, letter by embossed plastic letter. As our gaze pulls

in to this tiny center of manual activity, the rest of the world disappears as though in a snowstorm. With a haptic image there is always some sacrifice of distance and the comprehension it allows, and a reward of contact and concreteness.

Let me now spend some time with each of *The Blindness Series* videos, to expand on some of these points and discover others.

The series begins, with *aletheia* (1992), a look aslant or askance at the discourse on visuality, pinpointing the associations between blindness, violence, sexuality, and racism, particularly the Western fear of insufficiently visible Asian eyes. Scratchy, woolly voices recall the stories used to frighten children—if you don't go to sleep the sandman will blind you, the birds will peck your eyes out. Over shots of many different Asian eyes a punk song shouts "Lights out! Poke your eyes out!" A voice whispers, "Is it true that Chinese girls' twats go sideways, like slanting eyes?" Clips from campy movies trot out the cliché that it's erotic for women to be sightless and helpless. In a troubling image, a bewildered woman wandering on the beach, her head enclosed by a box; an accompanying text mentions a case of mass hysterical blindness among refugees in Long Beach, California. Yet between the violently blinded eye and the wide blue eye, a tender whisper eroticizes the Asian eye: "Eyes like bodhisattvas, mischievously slanted eyes... Look into my eyes, my love." *aletheia* begins to propose the dense, not-

quite-optical image that will characterize "The Blindness Series," as well as its typical not-quite-intelligible sound. In that arresting first shot, the sharply lit nubs of Braille text stand like spikes, millimeters from the lens. Layered images, the streets of Beverly Hills obscured by a street map, pair with layered sound, voices reciting addresses while another voice utters a prolonged, muffled howl. We begin to get the idea that Trang is out to undo privilege: of good vision, of wide eyes that are the mirror of the soul, of intelligible images, of the clarity that even in the analog days was sought of video.

After *aletheia*'s visceral evocation of eyes being poked out, it is hard to think of people who willingly have their eyes cut as anything but perverse. *operculum* (1993) has no interest in justifying the decision of thousands of Asian women to get surgery to make their eyes look wider, whether to be more Western or, some say, just more beautiful. She does not need to state that the lack of epicanthic fold makes some Asians believe they are ugly; as she sits in three plastic surgeons' consultation rooms, they say it for her, promising that it's quite easy to "make a good improvement on Oriental people" despite the preponderance of fat in their faces. Trang—whose feisty voice and attitude are so evident throughout the series—sits there and quietly accedes to these judgments. The surgical discourse is unrelentingly bland. Back in the editing suite, Trang tries to cut through the blandness by pairing the consultation scenes on

<sup>2</sup> Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), Chapter 2; updated in "Video Haptics and Erotics," *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).



korē, 1994

a split screen with the gruesome historical account of one Dr. Freeman, who describes how he perfected a technique to perform lobotomies by forcefully driving an ice pick into his patients' eye sockets. This violent montage wants literally to poke holes in the superficiality of a culture in which women (and increasingly, men) sacrifice individuality (and pay thousands of dollars) for a legible appearance. It affects us not intellectually but viscerally. If Trang is insufficiently respectful of the diverse desires and motives that lead women to undergo these surgeries—as has been argued<sup>3</sup>—that is why *operculum* is video art, not a pamphlet.

*korē* (1994) is perhaps the most date-specific work in *The Blindness Series*. Like many safe-sex videos from the early 1990s, *korē* has the competing objectives of politicizing sexuality, by raising awareness about AIDS transmission and treatment among women, and eroticizing politics, by showing how sex can be both “hot” and “safe.” These goals tended to short-circuit in all but the best works of this period. Here the counterparts consist of a manifesto delivered rather stiffly by an AIDS activist, and a lesbian love scene. The love scene, warmly lit and intimately shot with a handheld camera, is all the hotter because the lovers are blindfolded. Here the blindfold's

eroticism is less about domination, for both women wear it, and more about the pleasure of submitting to the close senses of touch, taste, and smell. Trang draws on the ideas of French feminists such as Hélène Cixous and Michèle Montrelay that feminine pleasure is tactile, not visual. I would argue, however, that it is politically and erotically more interesting for all genders to experiment with varying one's proximity to the world by privileging different senses.

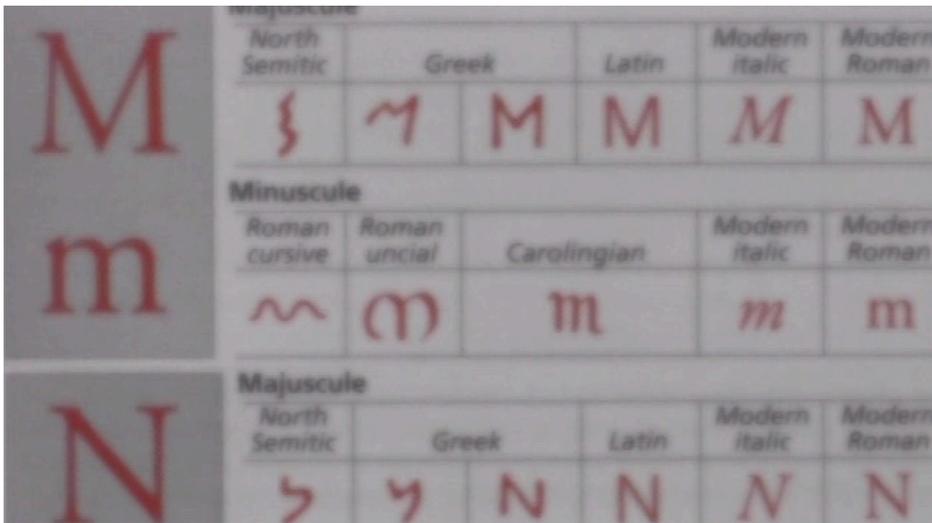
In these first three tapes, we begin to feel Trang's presence as the motivating force of these explorations: a voice is emerging that is determined, subtle, and sardonic. In *ocularis* (1997) Trang comes to the fore, by allowing us to be aware of her presence in the background. This tape, which she notes is probably the most popular in the series, is concerned with surveillance cameras and people's conflicting attitudes toward them. Trang engaged in a social experiment for this work, advertising for people to call an answering machine and record their stories, fears, and fantasies related to surveillance. Fear and fantasy are close indeed, as when one caller says he'd like to be surveyed doing everything except masturbation—“That would be very, very humiliating.” But it is Trang's voice and Trang's actions that shape this piece, performatively, as it is the product of her own acts of surveillance. The barely-visible counterpart to the audio confessions are images she shot with various kinds of surveillance cameras. And, charmingly, by now one can tell that the

funny accented or digitally altered voices are Trang's, contributing her stories, fictional and not, to the call-in line.

Surveillance culture has grown exponentially even in the ten years since Trang made *ocularis*. Much of it is willing, individualistic surveillance, as mobile phones and other ubiquitous media and Facebook-type web sites advertise people's desire to be sought out, to have an audience. Surveillance culture is an attempt to achieve quality through quantity of amassed images, suggesting a naïve belief that all meaning is ultimately visible. This idea is most touchingly and heartbreakingly put forward by a caller who confides, “I would like it if there were some completely seamless technology which would allow a perfect transcription of all of the moments of my life; and I would like it if there was someone who would be interested enough to give up their lives and to spend their life watching my life instead.” The desire to be really known, and for the other to so love us that s/he would rather love us than live—is this not one of humanity's most fundamental and unachievable desires? When another caller confesses that he spied on a good-looking man for weeks before he realized he was looking at his own reflection, this funny story quickly turns sad. At the foundation of spying is a wish for connection, and to realize nobody is watching you or receiving your look is a kind of annihilation.

With *ekleipsis* (1998) Trang returns to this story of dozens of Cambodian women who

<sup>3</sup> Kathleen Zane, “Reflections in a Yellow Eye: Asian I [Eye]Cons and Cosmetic Surgery,” in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), p. 258.



*alexia*, 2000

survived unthinkable agonies under the Khmer Rouge and who, by the time they arrived in the U.S., had gone blind for no physiological reason. Trang tells this story from their point of view by evoking a kind of hysterical vision. A cycle of images recurs throughout *ekleipsis*. At first they appear in mere flashes, and gradually they become more complete: close-up shots of a bowl of rice, jewelry, glasses, pineapple “eyes,” a blood-stained fabric; Cambodian workers in a ditch, a rice field, women soldiers training, a Cambodian girl gazing intensely; and shots of women who may be the refugees of the story. As voice-overs tell the women’s stories, each of the innocent objects and fragmentary scenes gains terrible meaning. Women hid precious possessions like jewelry in their vaginas, so the Khmer soldiers regularly searched for them. People with glasses were murdered because they were thought to be intellectuals. The Khmer Rouge tortured and killed entire families. They slaughtered infants. They ripped a fetus from a woman’s belly. All these stories explain why so many Cambodian women refugees in California suffered from hysterical blindness. One woman attributes her blindness to the smoke from the cooking pot that made her eyes red. But when we learn that some people, starving, sometimes cooked and ate the dead, it is no wonder that the woman preferred blindness to seeing what was in the cooking pot.

These stories and images interlace with a history of hysteria, the somatization of trauma considered, for a shamefully long time,

to be caused by a woman’s uterus floating around her body. But *ekleipsis* is finally a story of recovery. As we gaze upon the slowly cycling images, seeing a little more each time, it is like a therapeutic recovery of memory. Trauma gives way to story. It is especially moving to hear the story of a woman called D.P., who, after arriving to the U.S. spent her days curled in a fetal position. But later, she became able to get up: to take the bus to language classes, to cook, to look after the household, and even to help other refugees. As D.P. began to feel better, she started to be able to see again. *ekleipsis* concludes with a voice-over rebutting the “suggestibility thesis” of hysterical blindness: this notion diminishes the horror of what the Cambodians went through and belittles the importance of their ability to recover their vision. Instead it calls them “ascendant personalities,” women who survived trauma and came back to life.

Of all the videos in *The Blindness Series*, *alexia* (2000) is the one that slips furthest away from the perceptible—it is an ethereal work. In this essay on the psychological condition of word blindness, there is very little to see in diagrams, droll sketches, and the close-up of fingers embossing letters. Receding into a field of white, these images question the physical, cognitive, and emotional grounds of perception. *alexia* recedes from hearing as well, in the gentle sussuration of electronically altered voices; the “Moonlight Sonata,” heard throughout, suffuses the video with a sense of longing and loss.

*alexia*’s form is a metaphor for a particular human dilemma. Human civilizations are built on agreements about what is figure and what is ground. Languages determine what merits attention and what should stay in the background. In a highly visual society, images embody these censorious qualities of language. Charming and strange drawings, borrowed from a psychology text, picture things that are related through metaphor: “fish, winding river, snake”; “broken-down house, moldy swiss cheese, rat”; “woman with jewels; city street; city lit up at night.” They suggest that vision alone does not create meaning, which emerges from the cultural matrix of metaphor. In Kogan’s warning, laboriously spelled out by the lettering machine, “Do not mistake the finger for the moon”: metaphors and language itself are mediators in human perception of the world. Conversely, people who suffer from word blindness understand the sense of words but literally cannot read them. In Trang’s voice-over we hear the journal of someone who is gradually losing the ability to read and must produce language through other modalities. “When a word is spelled out loud to me I recognize it. I like to have letters spelled into my palm or palpated!” As we listen to this agonizing process of loss, water pours onto a written page, washing the words away. Fingers brush the pages as though to absorb the words through touch. “I am thankful that my number reading and musical notation reading is not lost,” writes the sufferer, “for what would life be without music making?”

*alexia* delicately tenders Vico’s theory of language, an argument that language is a tense thread between gods and humans. The history of human communication, Vico’s theory suggests, is a fall from grace. We might believe, with the late maverick neuroscientist Julian Jaynes, that the voices of the gods are really communication between our own brain chambers. But I would prefer to believe with Vico that it is the gods themselves that gave us the infinite ground from which we might tentatively pluck figures—words, images, sounds, meanings. While man has become increasingly talkative (and, I would add, certain powers have retained to themselves the right to speak), the gods have retreated. Confronted with the visual

cacophony of petrified, useless words we humans have created, the gods have gone silent on us.

From *alexia*'s tender mourning for the loss of meaning, the next video, *amaurosis* (2002), rebounds briskly and joyously, enjoying the conventions of the documentary form. As in *ekleipsis*, the subject is a blind emigrant from Southeast Asia to the U.S. Nguyen Duc Dat is a young survivor, an orphan who survived on his wits in Saigon despite being blind from birth, and who had a taste for music. Once he heard a recording by Segovia, Dat determined to become a classical guitarist. We hear Dat's story over films from post-war Saigon and shots of his quotidian activities at home in Los Angeles. It's interesting that, faced with the subject of a blind musician, Trang does not attempt this time to "see through" the optical medium using the many anti-optical techniques she has developed throughout the series. *amaurosis* seems to accept that the distance between sight and sightlessness cannot be bridged by technique. However, human relations can close the gap. So the tape is built around the playful tension between Dat, who wants to talk about music, and Trang, who wants to talk about blindness and who, Rouch-style, makes a deal with her subject: she presents him with a flute, which she will give him if he learns to play it and creates a song for the video. "The flute is so sweet and serene," Dat responds, "it makes me cry... like the wind in the palm trees."

*amaurosis* is a lovely portrait of someone who lives fully through his senses. Dat explains expertly the sound capacities of his different guitars, points out the problems a blind person has in locating the frets, and acknowledges that image matters in performance: "Give people something they like to look at on stage." (Later, footage of a flamenco performance shows the musician in a shimmering satin shirt, his damaged eyes hidden by smart dark glasses.) He has developed his inner vision, thanks in part to Buddhism. He treasures his subjective sense of the beauty of his loved ones, acknowledging that if he could see them, his perception would be colored by conventions of ugliness and beauty. And Dat

translates beautifully into words his multimodal perception of the world: the shape of fire, the wind—"a tensile sheet of air moving around." Interestingly, Dat is more manual than haptic in his use of touch: he uses his hands to affect the world, not just to perceive it.

The wisdom of *amaurosis* is that blind people already have a rich perceptual world: it is the sighted who are blind, or who are not living their perceptions as richly as they might. Vision, as *The Blindness Series* demonstrates again and again, is the perception that most easily gives way to being instrumentalized. Whether it's the conventions of beauty to which Dat refers, or the cliché of wide-eyed Western beauty that leads Asian women to get their eyes "done," or the use of surveillance media to identify threats, contemporary visuality is less concerned with what is perceived than with how it can be used.



*amaurosis*, 2002

Throughout the series arises the observation that many things are not visible, and are rendered into visual form only as translations: the maps and diagrams, the medical technologies, even surveillance technology—which we see laboring, not always successfully, to produce an image. Indeed the 1990s surveillance videos in *ocularis* are pretty dumb next to human vision, which cognition filters to perceive what is mean-

ingful, and also to more recent "smart" surveillance technologies that, by isolating figures from ground (often in order to kill them). The critique is not of vision per se but vision in the service of cliché and control, of mapping, defining, and fixing meaning in the realm of the visible.

Yet finally *The Blindness Series* celebrates vision and visibility. Becoming able to see again marks the healing process of the Cambodian women. *alexia* mourns the loss of reading ability and treasures another kind of reading that allows one to make music. *ocularis* shows that some desire to be enveloped by a benevolent gaze. We even see the upside of instrumental, categorical looking, so heavily critiqued throughout the series, in the last video, *Epilogue: The Palpable Invisibility of Life* (2006): Trang is preparing a Chinese herbal tea to help her along in her pregnancy. As well as simmering together in a pot on the stove, each of the dry ingredients—yam, angelica, Chinese

raspberry—is shown neatly labeled in a diagram with its Latin name. This time, we understand, precision matters, for this is a dearly wanted child. For in a moving conversation we hear Trang's mother—who, like the Cambodian women and the Vietnamese musician, suffered and triumphed in a journey that began in Southeast Asia and ended in the U.S.—begging her daughter to have a child. "Start your family please before I'm dy-



*Epilogue: The Palpable Invisibility of Life, 2006*

ing.” Trang counters gamely, “Well, you have to stay alive for five years if you want to see my child,” but as we learn, her mother did not survive so long: in fact *ekleipsis* is dedicated to her after her death. So this carefully brewed tea, this anxious close-up on the injections of Repronex, these ultrasounds that convert sound wave into visual image, and the acupuncture maps of the body, all render visible and instrumental Trang’s belated wish to give a gift to her mother.

Yet these visual clues are epiphenomena of the invisible, as a statement over shots of Trang’s enlarging belly brusquely reminds us: “Map isn’t territory.” Throughout the series, as she grows, Trang grows gradually closer to us, the viewers. We hear her voice throughout: the digitally deepened voice, the prissy “English” accent, the southern drawl, all betray the idiosyncrasies of our friend the videomaker, her way with emphasis, her slightly sarcastic inflection. We see her fingers, and finally her belly; we hear her stories, observations, and concerns. The videos circle around Trang like wagons. But this is not to say that *The Blindness Series* is autobiographical, not at all. She is more like a “center of indetermination”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Henri Bergson’s term, adopted by Deleuze,

around which the series’ concepts cluster. As I mentioned, the epilogue also acknowledges Trang’s debt to Derrida. We see and hear the words of an interview in which Derrida contends that no philosopher could have been his mother, given that philosophy is or was a phallogocentric discipline, but he hopes some post-deconstructive, feminine philosopher might follow him.<sup>5</sup> Trang parallels this statement with one from her mother: “Great grandmother said to me, you are the last female in your line, you must persevere.” Between the hardscrabble Vietnamese immigrant who, to the disappointment of her Chinese husband, bore a daughter; and the French philosopher, who hopes for one, the pregnant video artist boldly claims her parentage.

In different ways over the course of the series, the spectator of *The Blindness Series* becomes partially blind herself. Hearing begins to give way as well. We are invited to approach these works with all our senses—not to be rewarded with a rich multisensory feast, but, better, to test where sense lies somewhere in between seeing, hearing, touch, and cognition independent of any modality. The videos ask the viewer to struggle to make meaning, and at the same time, as we struggle to privilege the precise image over the blurry one, the clear voice over the indistinct one, we become aware of that hierarchy between clear and unclear meaning. And they remind us of what is precious to see and to know. Beginning with the blindness of vision, *The Blindness Series* gradually, crankily, and finally tenderly, gives us our eyes back.

<sup>5</sup> I can’t help but find it funny that the thinker who founded an ethics around the relentless deconstruction of authority should divide the history of philosophy into two periods—before himself, and after himself—but there it is.

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