

**Gazes in Thomas Eakins *The Agnew Clinic***  
Michael Stone - December 3, 2006

Though officially commissioned by the graduating medical class of the University of Pennsylvania to memorialize Dr. D. Hayes Agnew<sup>1</sup>, Thomas Eakins' 1889 painting: *The Agnew Clinic* accomplishes far more: it effectively develops and contrasts two different modes of seeing, the cutting gaze and the dull gaze, which it argues represent the desirable future and the unattractive past, respectively, of surgery and, covertly, of gender relations.

That the painting describes some binary division of the world is strongly suggested by a series of intense visual comparisons that Eakins asks his viewer to make between the foreground and the background of the painting. Some comparisons between the regions are forcefully stated: the two regions are prominently divided by brilliant lighting and by a wall which physically separates the space of the stage of the operating theater from the audience's seating. However, there are other more subtle distinctions between foreground and background which offer some insight into what connotations Eakins wishes to cause his audience to assign to the figures in each space. For example, the fact that the foreground figures are well-proportioned and painted in flesh-tones while the figures in the background have distorted bodies and have faces painted in sickly red-green complements argues strongly that Eakins sees the figures in the foreground in a more positive light (literally as well as figuratively) than those figures in the background.

Beyond comparisons of the manner in which the foreground figures are painted vis-à-vis the background figures, Eakins' audience is invited

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Johns. *Thomas Eakins: the heroism of modern life*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983): 79.

to compare the substantive differences in character that are assigned to each group through posture and facial expression: while all of the figures in the foreground have intent, focused expressions, many of the background figures are painted with bored (center, center-right figures) or sleepy (left-most figures) countenances and sleepy or resigned postures (the figures leaning on one another and the ones leaning on the rails).

If posture and facial expression describe character, then the two most interesting characters in this scene are certainly Agnew himself and the lone nurse, tucked away in the middleground at the far right. Agnew stands out as Eakins' model for the heroic surgeon. His white hair, stature, pose, illuminated features, and powerful condescension all serve to lift him out of the background gloom and into the surgical limelight. Note, that since we can see his head in three-quarters profile, his gaze is directed at the ground beyond the anesthesiologist's right shoulder.

The nurse is a striking foil - she's the only one as tall as Agnew is, and, like him, her head is contrasted with the background by her white cap. As she faces him, it's tempting to see her simply as a visual rhyme to him. However, to stop there would ignore the many ways she violates the paradigm that he represents: she opposes his masculinity with her femininity, his age with her youth, his contrast against the background with her blending of black and white attire, his separation from the surgical team and the procedure with her proximity to it, and his condescension with her thoughtful, sensitive gaze. Note that her gaze is highlighted and directed by the strong diagonal of the rail behind her down to the patient's chest, perhaps to the site of the

operation. Unlike the situation with both Agnew and with the nearby lecherous orderly with the darkened, ruddy face who crouches over the patient, we can easily observe her empathy for the woman on the table through her open, well-lit countenance and humble, attentive gaze.

The significance of these differences in gaze, gender, age, ability to work as a team, and humility reiterate the significance of the differences in lighting, clothing, and composition that distinguish the foreground from the background; namely, (as I am about to show) that these elements sharply contrast the possibilities of present innovation (with its implicitly bright future) and a darkened past.

Between foreground and background, present innovation is marked by white garb (demonstrating recent advances in producing sterile operating environments) and by the availability of intense artificial lighting<sup>2</sup> set on top of a darkened background of dark-suited (hence contaminated, old-fashioned), bored, sleepy, caricatured onlookers. Between Agnew and the operating drama itself, the same relationship is recapitulated by the arrangement of the figures on the stage: surgical teamwork (save for the red-faced orderly) is presented as the bright, new, young innovation, in contrast to the older, less attentive, more arrogant model of the lone surgeon as expressed in the person and figure of Agnew. Finally, the relationship is re-expressed a third time between traditional old Agnew and his female opposite member whose gaze itself, turned on her patient and her patient's future, marks her as the most recent in a series of innovations. The key fact is that Eakins was dismissed from the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts<sup>3</sup> in 1886, only three years

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 79.

<sup>3</sup> Joann P. Krieg, "Thomas Eakins and an Aesthetic of Pain", *Journal of Medical Humanities* 20 (3): 200.

prior to painting *The Agnew Clinic*, for the offense of having his female drawing students work from nude (male) figures. Combined with the unique highlights given to the nurse's gaze by the rail behind her, her unique dress and hat, her status as the only conscious female in the room, and the fact that hers is the only lit face aside from Agnew's, this historical twist seems to me necessary to explain Eakins' purpose in giving her gaze such unique clarity and weight in a room pierced with the gazes of thirty other men: her gaze embodies one future for which Eakins had already sacrificed dearly - the future in which success comes to those who can look at the world like Eakins, which is to say, incisively.

Having determined that Eakins bestows his favor on the figures in the foreground more than on those in the background, still more on the surgical team than on Agnew, and most of all on his personal project, represented by the nurse, we are ultimately led to ask what these comparisons show us about what Eakins thinks makes up the essential character of the future's gaze, as opposed to the past's. My analysis argues that Eakins is showing us that the future's gaze will be shared by both men (like him) and women (like the nurse), that it will be capable of both criticism and compassion, that it will take in both the finest details and the broadest arrangements, and that, most of all, it will not be darkened or turned away from its rightful subjects by either condescension, lechery, fatigue, or boredom. It will be sharp where those failings render the past's view dull. It will dissect flesh in the service of painting, just as painting will reveal anatomical truth in the service of surgery. It will create a partnership of the scalpel and the paintbrush, of the surgeon and the painter. Ultimately, it will

distinguish those students who are fit to be surgeons and painters from their inadequate (in Eakin's presentation) bretheren by virtue of their powers of observation - by whether they are able to stare deeply and long enough into Eakin's painting to discern its hidden commentary on the future's gaze or whether they will walk away thinking the painting merely an imposing commemorative portrait.

## References

Elizabeth Johns. *Thomas Eakins: the heroism of modern life*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983): 79.

Joann P. Krieg, "Thomas Eakins and an Aesthetic of Pain", *Journal of Medical Humanities* 20 (3): 200.