

Edited by  
**Salman Akhtar**  
**Nina Savelle-Rocklin**

# **EYES, MIND AND VISION**

Visual Realities and Metaphors  
in Psychoanalysis



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Psychoanalysis

*Edited by*  
**Salman Akhtar**  
*and Nina Savelle-Rocklin*



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To

**ALEX LEVIN**

Internationally renowned ophthalmologist, kind person, good friend

SA

&

**SHAHZRAD SIASSI**

Who helped me “see” this world in a beautiful new way

NSR

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**Alan Michael Karbelnig**, PhD, practices psychoanalysis, psychoanalytic psychotherapy, and couples therapy in Pasadena, California. He earned

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**Toni Mandelbaum**, PhD, is a clinical social worker in private practice in Philadelphia with more than twenty-five years of experience in the field. She completed her BA in psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, her MSW at Columbia University, and her PhD in social work at Bryn Mawr College. She has written journal articles, chapters, and has authored a book on attachment theory, titled *Attachment and Adult Clinical Practice: An Integrated Perspective on Developmental Theory, Neurobiology, and Emotional Regulation* (2021). Additionally,

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**Anneliese Riess**, PhD (1910–2005), was a New York-based psychologist/psychoanalyst who held the ranks of assistant professor of psychiatry at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine and adjunct associate professor of psychology at the City College in New York. She authored only two papers in her career and both were devoted to the topic of eyes. The first (1978) pertained to mother's eyes and is reprinted in this book with the permission of its publishers. The second (1985) elucidated the power of the eyes in nature, nurture, and culture. Dr. Riess passed away in 2005.

**Nina Savelle-Rocklin** is a psychoanalyst, author, and podcast host. She is the author of *Food for Thought: Perspectives on Eating Disorders* (Rowman & Littlefield) and coeditor (with Salman Akhtar) of *Beyond the Primal Addiction* (Karnac Books) and *Food Matters: A Biopsychosocial Approach* (Phoenix Publishing House). She also wrote *The Binge Cure: 7 Steps to Outsmart Emotional Eating* and its companion workbook, *The Binge Cure Journal*, as well as *Beyond Binge Eating: 100 Powerful Reflections to Transform Your Relationship with Food*. Dr. Savelle-Rocklin contributed chapters in four scholarly books, including her chapter "The origins and fundamentals of psychoanalysis" (in *Freud & The Buddha*), and wrote more than fifty articles on disordered eating for publications such as *Psyche Online* and *Psychology Today*, the National Eating Disorders Association, Eating Disorder Hope, and other national and international organizations and publications. Her media appearances include being a featured guest on "The Dr. Drew Podcast" and more than twenty radio shows and podcasts worldwide. Her radio program, "The Dr. Nina Show," on L.A. Talk Radio aired for more than six years and can now be heard as a podcast. Her other podcasts include "The Forking Truth," "Mind Matters," and "The Binge Cure with Dr. Nina." Dr. Savelle-Rocklin is also on the board of Rose City Center, a psychoanalytically informed flexible-fee counseling and training center, where she is the director of the Development Committee.

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**Thomas Wolman**, MD, was born and raised in New York City, where he now lives after residing in Philadelphia, PA for forty-four years. He attended Johns Hopkins University and the Pennsylvania State University Medical College. Subsequently, he trained at the Philadelphia Psychoanalytic Institute where he taught in both the psychoanalytic and psychotherapy training programs. Until his move to New York, he held the title of assistant professor of psychiatry at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine. Dr. Wolman has written on Winnicott, Mahler, Kohut, and Lacan and on issues pertaining to privacy, greed, and bereavement. In recent years he has followed his long-standing interest in psychoanalysis and film, offering courses in, among others, the films of Stanley Kubrik. This winter his topic will be the films of the late David Lynch. He teaches a course on the history of psychoanalysis at the New York Psychoanalytic Institute and has recently published a book, *The Erotic Screen: Desire, Addiction, and Perversity in Cinema* (2020).

## Introduction

In a *Festschrift* dedicated to his dear friend and a well-known Viennese ophthalmologist, Leopold Königstein (1850–1924), Sigmund Freud (1910i) elucidated the phenomenon of “hysterical blindness,” declaring it to be “the result of a dissociation between unconscious and conscious processes in the act of seeing,” and that “hysterically blind people are only blind as far as consciousness is concerned; in their unconscious they see” (p. 212). Freud went on to say that a resurgence of childhood sexual curiosities, owing to a related trigger in adulthood, was responsible for hysterical patients’ sudden loss of sight. It was as if a punishing voice scolded the patient, saying “Because you sought to misuse your organ of sight for evil sensual pleasures, it is fitting that you should not see anything at all anymore” (p. 217). Freud’s explanation remains valid although “crude” conversion symptoms including blindness have become rare in most Western and urbanized societies.

Winnicott too addressed the importance of eyes and vision. In a remarkable, though largely unnoticed paper, “Ocular psychoneuroses of childhood” (1944), he stated that “children quite naturally feel that they are custodians of their eyes, or of any other part of their body, and if they do not keep their eyes healthy, they feel they have failed in a trust” (p. 85). Winnicott went on to describe three groups of psychological symptoms

involving eyes in children: (i) *neurotic symptoms* including eye-rubbing, assigning all sorts of private emotional meanings to eyeglasses, excessive blinking, etc., (ii) *depressive symptoms* including hypochondriasis involving eyes, “the dry eyes that belong to a flight from sadness [and] predispose to conjunctival infection and irritation” (p. 87), and excessive reading as a manic defense and thus becoming “slave-drivers to their eyes” (p. 89), and (iii) psychotic symptoms including “internal squint” as an introversion toward the memory of the maternal beast, “external squint” as a concretized split in the ego, and an excessive looking in the mirror in order to stabilize a fragile and fragmented self.

Freud’s and Winnicott’s observations regarding the involvement of eyes in diverse psychopathologies, however, do not exhaust the symptom-complexes and psychodynamic constellations that are to be encountered in this realm. Here is an annotated list of such maladies.

- *Visual hallucination*, which is defined as seeing an external object when no such object is present in the visual field; it is a perception without an external stimulus. Generally associated with organic brain syndromes, visual hallucination can also occur in normative conditions (e.g., hypnagogic states while falling asleep) and genuinely psychogenic maladies. Its form varies greatly, ranging from the greyish blank “dream screen” (Lewin, 1946) and the rhythmically approaching and receding round objects of the Isakower Phenomenon (Isakower, 1938) to the Lilliputian hallucinations, “memory hallucinations” (Freud, 1911b), and “unilateral hallucinations” (Magan, 1893) whereby only one eye is subject to abnormal perception. Visual hallucinations are transient, hazy, and shifting, which belies their consistent, vivid, and narrative-based portrayal in the otherwise excellent movie, *A Beautiful Mind* (directed by Ron Howard, Universal Pictures, 2001).
- *Autoscopy*, which is a specific form of visual hallucination whereby one sees oneself outside of one’s bodily confines. While certain organic conditions (e.g., brain tumors, epilepsy, migraine) can produce this symptom, it can also be psychogenic (Hinsie & Campbell, 1968). An embodied dissociation, autoscopy is reported to be accompanied by sadness, bewilderment, and psychic helplessness.

- *Extracampine visual hallucination*, which refers to seeing non-existent objects not with eyes but with sensory organs unrelated to visual pathways in the brain. Thus, someone who claims to see a tiger or a nude or a baby in their ear is regarded to be having an “extracampine” hallucination (Bleuler, 1930); the suffix “campine” is derived from the last part of “hippocampus,” the region of the brain located in the inner folds of the temporal lobe, and generally involved in memory, learning, and spatial orientation; it underscores that the given perception is localized outside of its sensory field.
- *Negative visual hallucination*, which is the obverse of the “customary” visual hallucination. When an otherwise visually intact person does not see what is readily visible to others, he or she is regarded to be having a “negative visual hallucination.” The range of phenomena involved here is wide, and extends from the “Oops, I did not see you!” claim of one who bumps into another person to psychologically motivated scotoma of grave proportions. Green’s (1990) “work of the negative” seems to be a major causative factor in such symptomatology.
- *Negative autoscopy*, which is a specific form of “negative visual hallucination” where the inability to see is restricted to one’s reflection in the mirror. Bram Stoker in his classic horror fiction, *Dracula* (1897) invoked this as a characteristic of the bloodthirsty count’s personality with the implication that such lack of mirroring fueled his carnivorous desires. Psychoanalytic thinking would compel us to trace the birth of his unmirrored (invalidated, unwanted) self to his maternally deprived childhood.
- *Feeling invisible*, which is an uneasy sense that somehow others cannot (or will not) visually register one’s existence. Elucidated with powerful erudition in Ralph Ellison’s (1952) novel *Invisible Man*, the anguish of remaining unseen (i.e., unrecognized, unwelcomed, invalidated) is played out as a politico-cultural metaphor for a black man’s experience in the United States. On a psychopathological level, the sense of not being seen often reflects the lack of healthy mirroring during infancy and childhood. All this, of course, needs to be distinguished from childhood wishes to become invisible; these are related to curiosities about

the primal scene as well as wishes to find out parents' "real" reactions to oneself and one's siblings.

- *Feeling watched*, a topic of one of the chapters in our book, which is a distressing sense of being under constant visual scrutiny, usually of a critical and disapproving type. While neurotic forms of it can be associated with stage fright and erythrophobia, the more consolidated and pervasive malady of being watched (by others, surveillance cameras, television, traffic lights) suggests an underlying psychotic tendency, even though the person might not be overtly disorganized. Of note here is the frequent appearance of the "persecutory secret eye" (Arieti, 1974, p. 359) in the drawings and paintings of schizophrenic patients.
- *Voyeurism*, which is another entity that forms the focus of a chapter in our book. Essentially, voyeurism refers to a sexualized use of the eyes to pry open the intimate privacies of others in the course of their undressing, bathing, and being sexually intimate. Derived from the conflation of oral hunger and visual curiosity, voyeurism also seeks to remove the proverbial fig leaf of shame and oedipal prohibitions. That defiance of such sort is fueled by heightened aggression, if not sadism, goes without saying. This aggressive mechanism becomes explicit when the dynamic tables are turned and the exhibitionist compels an unsuspecting other to look at his genitals and draws pleasure from their shocked response.

Alongside these functional disturbances of sight and vision exist the culturally prevalent notions of the destructively envious "evil eye" and, more importantly, psychologically motivated actual interferences with the working or even the very existence of eyes. Oedipus' blinding himself as a talion punishment for his incestuous entanglement with Jocasta might be a fable and Joseph Mengele's macabre "experiments" on the eyes of captive Jewish children during the Holocaust might be the most diabolical form of medical racism, but what are we to say of a young woman who got herself blinded by getting acid poured in her eyes by a clinical psychologist because she believed that being blind was her true identity (Sims, 2015)? And then there are the cases of psychotic self-enucleation of the eye that one occasionally encounters in state hospitals and psychiatric emergency rooms.

Taking a step forward from such gross nosologic entities to metapsychological considerations shows us the myriad ways in which eyes and the acts of seeing, looking, and watching (and their passive versions of being seen, being looked at, being watched) are involved in childhood psychological development and adult psychosocial functioning. The range of such actual and metaphorical roles of vision is astonishingly vast. It extends from the early identity-giving maternal gaze through the ubiquitous “peek-a-boo” and childhood sexual prying to adolescent preening to be the object of others’ admiring gaze and romantically locked eyes of adult lovers, to tears of separation with children growing up and leaving home and wistful glances, during late middle age, at one’s changing body. People can look at each other with respect or contempt and eyes can express love and hate, among numerous other affects. Far from being restricted to the myth of Narcissus, the mirror finds its way in the philosophy of Socrates and Søren Kierkegaard, the fiction of Bram Stoker and Oscar Wilde, the poetry of Mirza Ghalib and Jorge Luis Borges, and the psychoanalysis of Donald Winnicott, Jacques Lacan, and Margaret Mahler.

This vast and intriguing ocular universe is at the center of our book. Its Prologue consists of a previously published seminal paper by Annaliese Riess. In it, the author emphasizes the importance of eye-to-eye contact in the infant–mother dyad. With the help of two illustrative clinical vignettes, she demonstrates that a stern or unavailable maternal gaze led to severe inhibition of spontaneity and guilt that can persist over a lifetime. Individuals thus abandoned pleasurable pursuits and had chronically conflicted interpersonal relationships. Long-term psychotherapy or psychoanalysis is then needed to “soften” the harsh superego attributes of such patients.

The “main” body of the book, following this Prologue, is divided into three parts. Part I is titled Developmental Realm and contains two chapters. The first chapter is written by Toni Mandelbaum, a Philadelphia-based psychotherapist and the author of the well-received *Attachment and Adult Clinical Practice* (2020), who underscores that “vision” is more than physical eyesight and that it becomes a “feeling seen” in relationships. Using an attachment theory lens to understand the meaning of “seeing” others and being “seen” by them, the discourses that these abilities reveal are uniquely shaped and moderated by interactions

with significant others across the lifespan. The developmental pathways of both attachment and adaptive separation between the caregiver and child are explained as a mechanism of the development of an integrated self. The second chapter is authored by Cemile Gürdal, a rising star on the Turkish psychoanalytic scene and a translator of Stefano Bolognini's (2021) recent book, *Vital Flows between the Self and Non-Self* (2021). Gürdal begins her contribution expectedly with Freud's celebrated account of his patient, aphoristically named the Wolf Man, but then moves on to forge links between classical theory and more modern theoretical viewpoints. Locating the visual trauma within the labyrinth of memory and fantasy, as it can be traversed via fumbling reconstructions, she provides clinical material of convincing power and thought-provoking value.

Part II of our book is titled Cultural Realm and consists of three chapters. The first chapter comes from New Delhi and is written by Nilofer Kaul whose recent book, *Plato's Ghost* (2021), has been very well received by the global psychoanalytic community. In her contribution here, Kaul examines the "oculocentrism" (centrality of sight) in Western narratives. She notes that a dominant strand insists upon the link between truth and sight but there is also a powerful interrogation of this equation. Moreover, a closer look reveals the notions of unseeing eyes, partial sight, prosthetic eyes, and blind seers, all of which interrupt the easy binary of blindness/sight. Kaul's discourse raises many intriguing questions about the overvaluation of sight and vision in psychoanalytic theory. The second chapter is by New York-based psychoanalyst and film historian, Thomas Wolman, whose recent book, *The Erotic Screen* (2022), has been highly acclaimed. In the contribution to our book, Wolman explores three films that illuminate the interior lives of blind individuals. The unifying theme he highlights pertains to such people's struggle for autonomy and independence. Objectively, this implies a drive to negotiate their way through this world without the aid of canes or seeing eye dogs. Subjectively, blind people strive to surmount their handicaps and seek to realize their full human potential. Following this poignant essay, Alan Karbelnig, a highly sought-out teacher of psychoanalysis and author of the recent book, *Lover, Exorcist, Critic* (2024), uses blindness as a metaphor for the denial that pervades among a large swath of the world citizenry when it comes to climate crisis and the

risk of a nuclear war. He anchors the disavowal of these civilization-threatening perils in the concepts of existential anxiety and defenses against them. Karbelnig then delineates specific strategies to channel fear and helplessness into socially meaningful actions.

Part III of the book involves the Clinical Realm and has four chapters. The first chapter, written by South Africa-based psychologist and researcher, Brian Watermeyer, deals with specific challenges faced in psychotherapy and psychoanalysis by persons with visual impairment. The author emphasizes that these struggles are not unique to such individuals; what their disability does is to propel them into a confrontation with them instead of the usual human tendency to narcissistically refuse such psychic encounters. In this sense, visual impairment, like other human experiences involving trauma, can be profoundly growth-promoting. The second chapter is a reprint of a widely read and truly novel contribution by Michigan-based psychoanalyst, Richard Hertel (who sadly passed away while we were preparing to include his paper in our book). It elucidates how childhood visual impairment affects adult psychosocial functioning. Using vivid clinical examples, the author shows how validating the patients' lifelong visual "confusion" enables access to deeper fantasies about self and object relations. Working through them leads to improved self-integration, improved self-esteem, and finer engagement with the outside world. The third chapter addresses the ever-fascinating topic of voyeurism. It is written by one of the coeditors of this book and truly prolific contributor to psychoanalytic literature, Salman Akhtar. This contribution surveys the vast phenomenological and etiological terrain associated with the sexual perversion involved in secretly looking at others' bodies. He pays attention to evolutionary, cultural, and developmental tributaries to the causation of voyeurism and also delineates technical issues in the treatment of voyeurs. The last chapter of this section is by this book's other coeditor, Nina Savelle-Rocklin. She is a well-established psychoanalyst and eating disorders expert in the Los Angeles area, and has authored many books (e.g., 2015, 2016) on her specialty. Here, Savelle-Rocklin tackles the dysphoric experience of being watched that torments many paranoid and socially phobic individuals. She explores how visual interactions with early caregivers shape the

child's sense of bodily and psychic self. Noting how the disturbances in such formative scenarios underlie the syndromes of hypervigilance and body dysmorphia, Savelle-Rocklin elucidates the technical implications of visual dynamics in the psychoanalytic setting.

The three "main" sections of the book are followed by the Epilogue that circles back to the book's Prologue on mother's eyes except with the twist that instead of mother's, it elucidates the significance of the analyst's gaze. The erudite Philadelphia-based psychoanalyst Suzanne Benser, who has written masterfully on privacy and intimacy (Benser, 2018), explores the analyst's visual experience in the context of contemporary theories of embodied communication. She discusses the use of the couch which protects both partners in the clinical dyad from the discomforts associated with looking and being looked at. Benser also lets us see through her own eyes certain clinical moments that brought forth unconscious transference and countertransference material and thus became important variables in the clinical process.

While covering a large terrain, this breathless summary of the book's contents hardly does justice to them. There is much more to the sum than its parts. There are conceptual innovations, linguistic nuances, illustrations from fairy tales and folklore, film criticism, global concerns, sexual perversion, and ample clinical vignettes that bring the book's theory and conjecture to life. The beauty of the book, as the old saying goes, shall ultimately be in the eye of the beholder and our book is devoted to explicating the receptive, rejective, evocative, and communicative prowess of that very organ. In doing so, it has become a pioneering effort at laying down the foundation of a "psychoanalytic ophthalmology"!