

# Derrida's Thinking on the Phenomenon of Blindness

-- From the Invisible to "Ne pas voir"

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**Abstract:** The issue involved in this article is the advancement of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida on the modern problem of "Invisible" through the topic of "blindness". For one thing, Derrida continued Merleau-Ponty's discussion about the invisible and emphasized an absolute invisibility; for another thing, he turned the invisible to the ethical issue, and this is also the change from recognition to gratitude. There are four aspects involved in this process: mirror without image, intentionality without vision, the essence of the eyes, and the suspension of reason.

**Keywords:** Blindness; Derrida; Invisible; Drawing; Truth.

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## 1. Introduction

The concept of "the invisible" has been extensively studied in both classical and contemporary contexts. Plato's Republic distinguishes between the domain of the intelligible and the sphere of the visible, with the former deemed superior and the latter subservient. However, in Merleau-Ponty's work *The Visible and the Invisible*, a new discussion emerges that no longer focuses on the hierarchical relationship between the visible and the intelligible, but rather explores the relationship between the visible and the invisible. According to his perspective, the concept of the invisible might be understood as a complementary aspect to the visible, "The meaning is invisible, but the invisible is not the contradictory of the visible: the visible itself has an invisible section, and the invisible is the secret counterpart of the visible..." ([5], p265) Simultaneously, Merleau-Ponty posits that in the context of blindness, the visibility of the world is contingent upon the presence of unseen elements. Derrida further engages in the discourse by positing that invisibility, namely the blindness, generates the realm of visibility. In doing so, he builds upon Merleau-Ponty's notion of absolute invisible ideas and introduces the concepts of "inapparence" and "aperspective." Moreover, if we consider Levinas' assertion that "You need light to see light", it may be argued that in Derrida's perspective, one need a state of blindness in order to perceive light. Through engaging in a discourse on this matter, he transitions from the state of being imperceptible or unnoticed to a state of consciously avoiding observation, ultimately leading to contemplation on the act of writing and the event itself.

The primary focus of the discourse about invisibility in Derrida's work centers around two key texts: *Memoirs of the Blind* and *Penser à ne pas voir*. The position of *Memoirs of the Blind* holds unquestionable uniqueness and significance. This book originated from an exhibition curated by Derrida in 1989, following an invitation from the esteemed Louvre. However, it is important to note that this book transcends mere criticism, as it also assumes a pivotal role in the realm of philosophy. Within its pages, Derrida grapples once again with the profound phenomenological quandaries he had previously addressed. The initial topic pertains to the examination of the genesis of the drawings, which is once

again linked to the discourse on Husserl throughout his formative years, as Michael Newman said, "For the Theme of *Memoirs of the blind* is, as it was already in Derrida's dissertation of 1953-54, that of genesis. It is a measure of the continuity of Derrida's concerns that *Memoirs of the Blind* also recalls speech and phenomena, published 23 Years Earlier, where the genes of the present takes place in an Augenblick, the spacing of 'the Blink of an Eye' ..." ([13], p265) Then the discussion on self-portraits is associated with the question of self-affection, narcissism and the subject of gaze that Lacan also discussed; The last subject on *Memoirs and Traits* recalls his discussion on the trace in *Of Grammatology*.

Derrida extends on two points of view to advance this question, in his words, one is the transcendental, which is the condition of drawing; The other is the sacrifice, the transplantation and the economy of the eyes. The former involves the problem of the narcissism and "intentionality without vision" proposed by Levinas, while the latter involves the "ne pas voir" and the essence of eyes.

## 2. The Mirror without Image

Here, the discussion related to the vision is first of all the problem of the narcissism and the self-affection, but it is a subject shared by Lacan and Derrida.

Lacan's work "The Mirror Stadium" argues that the ego is produced and identified by the picture in a mirror, that is, by the visual image, "It is enough to Understanding the mirror stage as an identification in the full sense that the analysis gives to this term: namely the transformation produced in the subject when he assumes an image..." ([7], p90) The concept of the mirror stadium in Lacan replaces touch (which Freud emphasizes) with vision. And, while we cannot argue that Derrida emphasizes the tactile over the vision, we can say that this importance is shifted to the act of writing Tactile. Although the mirror and the image are significant in Derrida's concept of blindness, the appearance of the image in a mirror is no longer conceivable.

According to Derrida, as discussed in *On Touching--Jean-Luc Nancy*, both humans and animals can endure a lack of vision, yet the absence of the sense of touch would result in their demise, "A finite living being can live and survive without any other sense; and this occurs with a host of animals that have no vision (it is possible to be sensitive to light

without "seeing"), no hearing (it is possible to be sensitive to sound waves without "hearing"), no taste or sense of smell. But no living being in the world can survive for an instant without touching, which is to say without being touched." ([2], p135) We could argue that touch is a more universal sense. The world continues to exist even after the loss of sight. We employ other senses in place of eyesight, particularly use touch to comprehend the world.

In Lacan, "I see myself seeing me", but in Derrida, I am "seeing the light". According to Lacan, the ego is initially characterized as a passive entity, perpetually subjected to observation, "...I see only from a point, but in my existence I am looked at everywhere." ([8], p69) However, this concept is still conceptualized within the realm of the other, "The gaze that I encounter-- it is to be recognized within Sartre's text itself --is not a gaze that is observed, but rather a gaze that I envision within the domain of the other." ([8], p79) The faculty of imagination has a significant role in shaping one's self-identity. The discourse of Derrida also encompasses the existence of heterogeneity inside the realm of the ego, leading to the emergence of the self-portrait. The self-portrait is mostly associated with the introspective connection to one's own identity and the concept of narcissism.

According to Derrida, there is always a mirror in all self-portraits; the artist manifests himself in this mirror as he develops figure while gazing into it. Derrida posits that within a self-portrait drawing, a mirror invariably exists, wherein the image of the artist is reflected. During the process of creating a self-portrait, there exists a framework through which the artist and the viewer engage with one another. The depiction of the artist within the artwork remains perpetually receptive to the presence of the viewer, with the intention of being supplanted by the spectators. In this context, the conventional mirror is substituted by the discerning gaze of the viewers. The act of perceiving oneself is inherently reliant on the perception of others, and the creation of a self-portrait necessitates a specific framework, "This can only be the self-portrait of a self-portrait that for the other, for a spectator who occupies the place of 'A single home, but in the center of what should be a mirror. The spectator then replaces and obscures the mirror, he makes blind to the mirror by producing, implementing the desired specularity.'" ([1], p64) The observer subsequently conceals and obscures the mirror, rendering it visually inaccessible by manipulating and applying the desired reflective properties. Indeed, the mirror in question possesses the ability to function within the realm of imagination. When Derrida asserts that it "make the mirror blind", he is referring to the point at which the subject initiates their state of "méconnaissance(mistake)" (a word also employed by Lacan).

However, if we continue to pursue this line of inquiry, the existence of a mirror counterpart becomes not only plausible, but also necessary. Subsequently, Derrida shifts his attention away from the internal diversity inside the individual and directs it towards temporal intervals and a transcendental framework that induces a state of blindness in the subject. According to Derrida, the act of drawing entails an experience of aporia for the artist, when they are confronted with the task of both observing themselves in the mirror and producing the artwork simultaneously. There is an inevitable interval between seeing and writing. During this temporal period, memory assumes a state of susceptibility, prompting the artist to rely on recollection for sketching purposes, as the faculties of intuition and representation become unattainable, so

transforming vision into a form of remembrance. As Eliane Escoubas said, "Henceforth, one can say that, even for those who see, there is never 'perception', but always 'memory'. One does not see, one remembers." ([12], p206) And in this process, the self is smeared, "If what is called a self-portrait depends on the fact that it is called 'self-portrait', an act of naming should allow or entitle me to call just about anything a self-portrait, not only any drawing ('portrait' or not) but anything that happens to me, anything by which I can be affected or let myself be affected. Like Nobody, like nobody else, as Odysseus will say as he is about to blind Polyphemus." ([1], p65) When we look at ourselves, the reflexivity in the narcissistic structure still exists, the mirror still exists, but it becomes a dark mirror, a mirror without images. And just as Derrida said in a comment on a drawing by Lucas de Leyde, "A silent auto-affection, a return to oneself, a sort of soul-searching or self-relation without sight or contact. It is as if the blind man were referring to himself with his arm folded back, there were a blind Narcissus, inventing a mirror without image, lets it be seen that he does not see." ([1], p12) The absence of images in this mirror can be attributed to the phenomenon of self-referentiality having transitioned into a more universal reference. When I say "me", in the meantime, I am saying "nobody". This suggests that the one who created the sketch is unable to determine whether they have accurately portrayed myself or another person in the portrait, regardless of the medium used, such as painting or any other artistic method. The phenomenon of self-identification within the ego facilitates the recognition and affirmation of the wider universal existence. The notion of the ego, from its beginning, presupposes an alterity that is crucial for the process of identification. Therefore, it may be deduced that the ego, from its very beginning, is a mysterious phenomenon that resists clear definition. Because the notion of the ego is continuously shaped by the existence and impact of external entities.

### 3. Intentionality without Vision

Derrida's examination of the concept of blindness can be seen as an extension of the theme of invisibility previously explored by Merleau-Ponty. According to Merleau-Ponty, "the visible itself has an invisible membrane" ([5], p265), but in Derrida, "The visible as such would be invisible, not as visibility, the phenomenality or essence of the visible, but as the singular body of the visible itself, right on the visible—so that, by emanation, and as if it were secreting its own medium, the visible would produce blindness." ([1], p51) As we know, Levinas said, "You need light to see light" ([9], p209). That is to say, blindness is a necessary condition for light, and the experience of the blind is no longer limited to the blind, but a shared experience.

The problem is that one can't visually see one's own physical form, specifically the eyes and face, resulting in a perpetual disconnect between individuals. Similar to the portrayal in Greek mythology, it is believed that direct eye contact with Medusa is impossible, as her gaze may only be perceived indirectly, such as through the reflection in a mirror. The aforementioned statement holds true also for the concept of self. When we fall into narcissistic structure like narcissus, a kind of aporia will make us blind at night, "For this cyclops eye sees nothing, nothing but an eye that it thus prevents from seeing anything at all. Seeing the seeing and not the visible, it sees nothing. This seeing eye sees itself blind." ([1], p61) Lacan's perspective on the passive sense involves an examination of the potential for self-constitution through the

faculty of imagination, and in Derrida: "I can see myself seeing, but I can't see myself."([3], p32). In other words, looking at ourselves seeing, this auto-affection will make our senses reach a desperate situation, causing the subject's blindness. But this is exactly the time for "epochè", as in Husserl, he indicates that I doubt my doubts or I think my thoughts are illegal, "The existence of the same material cannot be suspected and determined at the same time." ([10], p58) In Derrida, It is not possible for me to perceive my own act of perception. The occurrence induces a state of visual impairment, during which the presence of light is concurrently halted.

Furthermore, consistent with this visual interruption, Levinas highlights the notion of "intentionality without vision" in his book *Totality and Infinity*. According to Levinas, "Profane voluptuousness she does not see. Intentionality without vision, discovery does not shed light: what it discovers does not offer itself as meaning and does not light any horizon."([10], p291) This caressing experience surpasses expressions, and it does not show anything at the moment of revealing. At the same time, it also surpasses the structure of the subject-object and me-you structure, "He does not grasp anything, has neither the subject-object structure, nor the structure me . . . . . his movement consists in going beyond the possible."([10], p292)It might be argued that the state of meaninglessness is a precursor to the emergence of any form of meaning, as it is inside this state that the potential for any form of expression arises. In the book *On Touching--Jean-Luc Nancy*, Derrida said, "It is as if the passage quoted next moved all but insensibly from an 'intentionality without vision' to what would be an altogether different thing, namely, a 'model of being irreducible to intentionality.' One goes, therefore, from a strange kind of intentionality to what would no longer be intentional at all."([2], p81) The ability of the human perception to perceive its own emotions has been lost. Derrida's claim about the transcendence of blind experiences can be attributed to a conspicuous lack of intentional planning.

Derrida's discussion of blindness returned to the issue of subjectivity; on the one hand, it indicates blind moments in ordinary experience, that is, writing without seeing, subjecting perception to vague tactile sensations; on the other hand, he pointed out that blindness was caused by an aporia in the narcissistic structure. Simultaneously, he described the significance of the blind picture in the Bible and ancient Greek mythology. He returns to Merleau-Ponty's "Invisible" in all of his lectures regarding blindness. Derrida insists on "invisibility" and "absolute invisibility", "This nonvisible does not describe a phenomenon that is present elsewhere, that is latent, imaginary, unconscious, hidden, or past; it is a 'phenomenon' whose inappearance is of another kind; and what we have here seen fit to call transcendental is not unrelated to what Merleau-Ponty speaks of as "pure transcendence, without an ontic mask."([1], p52) That is to say, this "phenomenon" does not appear, and it keeps the invisible things invisible, and it will disappear concurrently with the development of line markings. This is not to suggest that it leaves nothing behind, but rather that it is no longer visible, unseen, or to be seen. Because the traits delineates the boundaries between manifestations and concealed as well as between the visible and invisible. Derrida believed that the purpose of writing or sketching was to maintain something on a limit indefinitely.

## 4. Ne pas voir

The concept of "Intentionality without vision" pertains to the transcendental realm. When considering Derrida's second perspective on the issue, that of sacrifice, switches the emphasis from self-affection to interpersonal interaction or intersubjectivity, going from the invisible to the state of "ne pas voir (do not see)". Derrida's conceptualization of "ne pas voir" within the realm of visual perception can be categorized into five distinct domains: does not need to see, cannot see, should not see, does not want to see and does not understand.

Derrida is not only interested in the cognitive space of blind people, but also in the blindness that resides among all the people: "Writing without seeing. Not with my eyes closed, to be sure, but open and disoriented in the night; or else during the day, my eyes fixed on something else, while looking elsewhere, in front of me, for example, when at the wheel: I then scribble with my right hand a few squiggly lines on a piece of paper attached to the dashboard or lying on the seat beside me."([1], p3) when we close our eyes, we are blind people too.

When writing without seeing, like in Diderot's letter that Derrida referenced, the figures originate from the darkness, therefore there is no need for an eye or for visibility. On one side, according to the perspective articulated by Merleau-Ponty, the physical body is not situated within space, but rather, it encompasses and embodies the very essence of spatiality. Hence, in accordance with Heidegger's assertion that "being-in-the-world" characterizes our existence, our apprehension of reality is not solely reliant on visual sight, but rather encompasses bodily engagement. Additionally, it exhibits a structure that becomes apparent simultaneously with its withdrawal. That is to say, the text is written in a form of encryption.

People who are blind are invisible. He is inevitably to be noticed by others even though he cannot see either himself or others. Blind people are in the opposite situation from Gyges in the Greek mythology, who can see and cannot be seen due to his invisibility cloak, they can only be seen. According to Derrida, they are naked because they are exposed to the outside world: "More naked than others, a blind man virtually becomes his own sex, he becomes indistinguishable from it because he does not see it, and not seeing himself exposed to the other's gaze, it is as if he had lost even his sense of modesty. The blind man has no shame, Luther said in short."([1], p109) So, pornography and blindness are associated. Bataille links the eyeball to the testicles in *The Story of the Eyes*, but Derrida also tells his "Story of the Eyes" using textual metaphor, this time focusing on the struggle between the eyes, the old, and his son, "...duel of these blind men at each other's throats, one of the old men turning away in order to come after me, to take me to task--me, poor passerby that I am. He harasses me, blackmails me, then I fall with him to the ground, and he grabs me again with such agility that I end up suspecting him of seeing with at least one eye half open and staring, like a cyclops (one-eyed or squinting, I no longer know); he restrains me with one hold after another and ends up using the weapon against which I am defenseless, a threat against my sons [fils]..."([1], p16) Through this morphological change between the old man and the eye, Derrida underlines the need to lead an ophthalmology-pathology of culture or a cultural anthropology .

This first involves once again the history of the Cyclops. From Derrida's perspective, Homer's description of the

Cyclops eye in *Ulysses* is also a description of obscene scenes, involving heterogeneous and prohibited expressions, “sometimes it appears open like a wound whose fleshy lips are still bleeding: the obscenity of a scar, the impassible suture of a slit, frontal genitality. Sometimes the anomaly appears invisible or banalized: a forbidden representation, as was sometimes the case, or a spectacle to avoid, the exhibition of an infirmity, the exposition of a shady or sinister squint.” ([1], p92)

This ban is no longer intangible, but it should not be seen. Prohibiting representation or prohibiting viewing involves two aspects, one of which is something that cannot be seen; On the other hand, the eyes are organs of usurpation, just as reason tries to explain everything and the eyes try to see everything.

However, there are times when we restrict our vision in the world of daily life. There are tears and a time of sorrow because of sadness or grateful. The eyes have two extra dimensions that we frequently overlook because we believe they are solely the organs we use for vision, as Jacques Derrida writes in *Memoirs of the Blind*, stroking the eyes is just like Ulysses licking the cyclops' eyes, this is the moment that the other or self is losing sight; simultaneously the eyes can cry over and over, “Deep down, deep down inside, the eye would be destined not to see but to weep.” ([1], p126) It is the tears that allow individuals to transcend animal nature and gain a distinct essence of the eye, “That if the eyes of all animals are destined for sight, and perhaps by means of this for the scopic knowledge of the animal rationale, only man knows how to go beyond seeing and knowing[savoir], because only he knows how to weep...Only man knows how to see this [voir ça]—that tears and not sight are the essence of the eye.” ([1], p126)

The eyes are not just for seeing. In blindness caused by tears or vision loss, we neither see nor know what is happening ahead. It is in this blind situation that acts of witness can exist. The first witness is to restore the vision of blind people, “Turning into martyrdom, and thus into witnessing, blindness is often the price to pay for anyone who must finally open some eyes, his own or another's, in order to recover a natural sight or gain access to a spiritual light. The paradox stems from the fact that the blind man thus becomes the best witness, a chosen witness. In fact, a witness, as such, is always blind. Witnessing substitutes narrative for perception.” ([1], pp102-104)

In addition to the time for witness, the time for choosing is also the same. That's why there are so many secrets in the Old Testament that Esau was deceived by Jacob, and, like Jacob, lost his sight over time. His hands crossed, reversing the order of the eldest and second sons. However, this blind choice is not only a mistake, but also obedience to God's consciousness in the hidden unknown. The loss of vision transforms into an inner vision and a destined foresight, “...Isaac, then Jacob—this obscure lucidity with which they fulfil divine providence. This providence passes through their hands of the blind. It is inscribed on the inside of these hands, which are guided by the hand of God...” ([1], p100) The time of choosing is a time of uncertainty. As Derrida said, in Western history, vision have always been linked to reason. “I see” means “I understand” or “I know”, so “ne pas voir” also means not knowing, not understanding, and this ignorance is the condition for choice.

## 5. The Truth as the Event

Contrary to our previous understanding, Derrida believed that these drawings originated from ruins and blindness from the beginning. Meanwhile, drawing can no longer be based on geometric shapes, but rather on the fraying of traits.

Derrida discusses drawing rather than painting, because drawing only has lines, which is a kind of writing. In the “Introduction to *The Origin of Geometry*”, the problem involves the origin. Husserl's answer always lays the foundation for the first time. Someone always creates geometry for the first time and then saves it in written form. Derrida discussed the substance or productivity of this article in “Introduction to *The Origin of Geometry*” and discussed the issue of origin. In Derrida, drawing occurs at the moment when the blind person recovers their vision, that is, the movement from darkness to light. At the same time, the foundation of the first time is always withdrawal and presentation. It is always related to the absence. Therefore, the origin of painting is no longer revolutionary behavior. This origin is not because it existed and then disappeared, but because it disappeared from the beginning. From the beginning, it was a ruin. Every drawing should return to this origin.

As Derrida said, rationality is always related to vision. When problems involve blind spots, how can rational calculations be carried out? However, the blind person is not without calculation, he also calculates in space, but he cannot achieve the whole. As Derrida pointed out when referring to the same text, Blind persons no longer perceive space through the visual order, instead, they recognize space and images through their hands and more broadly through tactile awareness, “Diderot's *Letter on the Blind for the Use of Those Who See* describes in two places this vision ‘by the skin.’ Not only can one see ‘by the skin’, but the epidermis of the hands would be like a ‘canvas’ stretched taut for drawing or painting.” ([1], p101) In Derrida, the perception of space by blind people is no longer based on the brain, but rather on the hands. They take risks and explore in their own space: “Like all blind men, they must *advance*, advance or commit themselves, that is, expose themselves, run through space as if running a risk. They are apprehensive about space, they apprehend it with their groping, wandering hands; they draw in this space in a way that is at once cautious and bold; they calculate, they count on the invisible.” ([1], p100) When exploring this type of hand, there is a dual effect of anticipation and precipitation. According to Derrida's analysis, ‘precipitation’ is always related to the head, while ‘anticipation’ is related to the hand, with the hand of the blind replacing the head and eyes. That's why Derrida said that when people write without the use of sight, they open an eye on their fingertips, not to see, but to write and draw. Blind people's understanding of space is closer to writing behavior. But what he writes from the beginning was a memoir, a piece of ruins, which has become a kind of our experience.

This will put us back on traits. it will involve two aspects: aperspective and the retrace of lines, “Even if drawing is, as they say, mimetic, that is, reproductive, figurative, representative, even if the model is presently facing the artist, the trait must proceed in the night. It escapes the field of vision. Not only because it is not yet visible, but because it does not belong to the realm of the spectacle, of spectacular objectivity—and so that which it makes happen or come [advenir] cannot in itself be mimetic.” ([1], p45) This is also

because there is a gap between the things representing and the things represented, and the gap between the model and the image makes intuitive representation impossible. Therefore, painting was a form of memory and destruction from the beginning.

On the other hand, according to Derrida, traits only mark the boundaries themselves and no longer form identity and possession. This trait, which is neither intelligent nor sensitive, can only lead to 'obscurity'. Derrida does not endorse the concept of unknowable mysticism. The concepts of transcendentalism, introspective understanding, and contrasting remnants serve to illustrate the notion that the absence of sight is a prerequisite for perceiving illumination and the emergence of veracity. On the one hand, as Derrida pointed out, there were two directions of blindness in Plato's thoughts about caves, "But before this dazzling ascent, an anabasis that is also an anamnesis, before this passion of memory that, at the risk of another blindness, will turn the soul's gaze towards the "intelligible place," these prisoners suffer from sight, to be sure, and they will suffer again, because "there are two kinds of disturbances of the eyes, stemming from two sources—when they have been transferred from light to darkness and when they have been transferred from darkness to light" ([1], p45) , on the other hand, the moment of blindness is also a time of *epoche*, "This is what I also call the hypothesis of sight, that is, the suspension of the gaze, its "epoch" (*epoche* means interruption, cessation, suspension, and sometimes the suspension of judgment, as in the *skepsis* that we spoke of in the beginning)." ([1], p117) As Vincent Houillon said, Derrida retains the concept of "*epoche*": "Therefore, Derrida put forward a concept that we can call the *epoche* of deconstruction, instead of reducing phenomenology to itself, a living present life, and self, perhaps: what Deconstruction touches is renewal, which explains the movement of works returning to themselves. The warrants detained during suspension have not been renewed or restored to their original state." ([11], p287) In other words, Derrida's "*epoche*" includes a suspension of existence and oneself. The beginning of suspension is not the restoration of existence, but the opening up to the future and events containing the truth. Meanwhile, this suspension is conditional on blindness. The core of the problem is that the occurrence of events can be expected, but cannot be predicted. It is no longer based on rational truth, but on the truth that is coming.

## 6. Conclusion

Derrida's examination of blindness encompasses not just the philosophical aspects of subjectivity but also the phenomenological concerns that he had previously addressed during his early career. Similar to Lacan, Derrida likewise posits the existence of a heterogeneity problem within the narcissistic structure from its inception. However, Derrida introduces the concept of time intervals to further elucidate the discourse surrounding narcissistic structures. On one hand,

his exploration of blindness in relation to Levinas' concept of "intentionality without vision" underscores the notion that this intentionality is essentially the impossibility of intentionality, extending from the tactile realm to the visual realm. On the other hand, Derrida builds upon Merleau-Ponty's notion of absolute invisibility and introduces the concept of "invisibility" within this dimension. Simultaneously, there is a transition occurring from the subject's blindness to intersubjectivity, wherein the previously imperceptible becomes perceptible to others who share a similar perspective. These talks are essential to his critique and deconstruction of Logocentrism. The concept of blindness serves to highlight a perceptual or narrative style that diverges from the visual paradigm. The discourse surrounding blindness does not aim to advocate for Agnosticism. The transition observed here is characterized by a shift from foresight to expectancy, and from truth derived from rationality to truth that is in the process of being shaped. Furthermore, it expands the scope of research pertaining to the conceptualization of cognitive illumination and the interpretation of veracity within artistic expression.

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