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Visuality and Visibility

First steps into the looking experience

Looking at someone who looks back at you is, in a sense, the beginning of all society. But, what if what you think is the face of a fellow human being looking back in fact turns out to be just a full-sized photograph on an advertising billboard in the street, or the head of a mannequin in a shop window? More radically, what if the 'look' that is thus misguided is actually that of a CCTV camera equipped with facial recognition software or, to give an unexpected twist to our example, the flashing yellow eyes on the wings of a beautifully coloured butterfly?

Here we begin to see some of the complications in our social-theoretical understanding of the phenomena of vision. An actor-network theorist, for instance, would simply comment that our puzzlement is a typically humanist one: we are just incapable of accepting some entities as being entitled to perceive. There is an anthropological asymmetry here between looking and being looked at, and once the asymmetry is corrected, including all types of things on the 'looking' side, everything is fixed and will be fine. A neuroscientist working on visual cognitive processes will not be happy with this solution, though. She would point out that looking is a most complex physiological and cognitive process. Consequently, before someone or something is included on the 'looking' side, a number of conditions must be met. In the first place, the existence of one's perceptual system must be proved. Perhaps at this point, security systems developers would stand up and nominate their products as artificially intelligent 'looking' systems. Cognitive capacities will be presented by them as pivotal for the ability to look, regardless of the organic (neurophysiological) or inorganic (robotic) type of perceiving system. On the basis of this argument, a small class of highly

technological inorganic artefacts – and only that small class – should be included among the perceiving entities.

Fewer people, however, will be likely to speak in favour of the dummy's or the butterfly's eyes. One should conclude that no real stare has taken place in those cases, and that the impression of being looked at is to be dismissed as a mistake. For many, the point is that the faked eye will not react to the stare. However, what if those who are looked at 'fakedly' react as if they were really being looked at? After all, in many cases a faked eye can elicit a real reaction. Correspondingly, behind many fakes there is a real plan, and what is a wrong perception on one side may be a right one on the other. Artifice, Deleuze used to say, is an integral part of nature – as faked eyes in natural mimetism remind us. Therefore, there is no possible opposition between natural and artificial. To this we should add that the artifice can be regarded as a sufficient proof that a properly social phenomenon is going on. At this point, we are immediately led back to the original question raised by Georg Simmel and the other classical sociologists, namely: what is a society? More precisely, in our case: how is this looking relationship – artificial or not – linked to social interaction and social intercourse at large?

Even when we confine ourselves to the ontologically and epistemologically more reassuring human family, as classically defined and defended by humanist thinkers, the questions concerning looking and being looked at are no less complex. Humanists, who are eager to establish the distinction and the asymmetry between entities who are entitled to perceive and those who are not, will have to answer the question: where do people with impaired visual abilities – of which there are many different sorts – or even straightforwardly blind, fall in this distinction? Is the distinction to be characterised as a matter of different kinds of beings, or actually a matter of degrees within a shared kind? Besides, we also know that there are many ways of, and strategies for, being forced into one of the two categories – most often, into the category of those who are not entitled to look. Women and minority groups are a clear case in point.

Another set of complications arises from the specificity of the act we are considering. So far we have been talking about the apparently uniform phenomenon of looking. But, what are its modulations? There are so many ways and styles of perceiving, seeing, beholding, looking at, viewing, descrying, glancing, catching sight of, glimpsing, spotting, watching, inspecting, detecting, noting, noticing, recognising, scrutinising, making out, picking out, setting eyes on, peeping and spying.

Apparently, as Wittgenstein put it, there is no *penuria nominum*. There are fluctuations of all sorts in this vocabulary, hinting at variations in duration, intensity, rhythm, depth, intentionality, attitude, status and reciprocity. Because such variations correspond to an incredible variety of tasks, the list suggests that the act of looking prolongs in all sorts of different directions towards different activities involving thought, awareness, understanding, appreciation, recognition, talk, manipulation and control. Furthermore, what happens if these looking relations in all their variety occur, not between single identifiable individual entities, but within multiplicities – if what stares at me is not a single pair of eyes, but hundreds of thousands… a crowd of stares? What type of visual experience is at play in these crowd states? Who looks at whom? Does the existence of collectives of viewers change the nature of looking, and if so, how?

It is not my ambition here to formulate a full-blown theory of social visibility. Rather, I seek to complexify our understanding of visibility as not simply a monodimensional or dichotomic, on/off phenomenon. In order to avoid determinism and essentialism, I present visibility as a phenomenon that is inherently ambiguous, highly dependent upon contexts and complex social, technical and political arrangements which could be termed 'regimes' of visibility. In the following, I will try to differentiate visibility from other visual notions, such as sight, vision, gaze and in particular visuality, the cultural counterpart of the sense of sight. In order to do so, I review various theorisations about perceptual senses, teasing out the most interesting reflections for the development of a sensorialised social theory. The literature on visuality and visual culture is then used to elucidate the anthropology and social epistéme of the visual and its relationship to the other senses. The complex relationships between seeing and knowing are tackled. This chapter highlights two fundamental dimensions of vision: on the one hand, the intersection of vision, lived experience and power (including aspects such as gendered and racialised gaze, visual shocks, scopic regimes, vision of the body, etc.), and on the other, the deployment of vision as a means of interaction for action coordination (like in 'expert vision') and mutual recognition (like in 'face work'). Finally, the chapter introduces visibility as a form of 'visuality at large', making it clear that the visible entails more than the visual, more than the sensorially perceptible, which becomes clear when we consider the fact that the visual itself needs to be visibilised, and examine the ways in which this happens.

Ways into vision: Cultural, methodological and epistemological

We may begin by asking: is the visible split between a 'literal' meaning, pertaining to the immediate sensory sphere, and a 'metaphorical' one that instead pertains to the set of symbolic meanings attached to particular phenomena communicated via the media? In short, the answer I try to give in this book to such a question is: no. In other words, I seek to understand the difference between the 'two meanings' of the visible not as one of nature but of degree and more properly, as will be explored in greater detail in the following chapters, of different regimes of visibility. In other words, the claim is that what we are dealing with is not with the simple phenomenon of the polysemy of the term 'visibility', but with the complex phenomenon related to two different yet inextricably interwoven aspects of the same phenomenon of social visibility.

It will therefore be necessary to elaborate a notion of visibility that *includes* but is *not limited* to the already vast field of visual research. The latter alone represents a rich field of enquiry to which culturalist studies of vision, visual studies and visual research methods have made valuable contributions. Notably, the study of visual culture (Elkins 1999; Evans and Hall 1999; Mirzoeff 1999; Macphee 2002) has illuminated the extreme diversity of the visual world: imaging includes not only visual arts but also signs, symbols, graphs, maps, plans, diagrams and scientific images of the human body as well as of invisible cells and stars. For their part, visual research methods (Prosser 1998; Emmison and Smith 2000; Banks 2001; Knowles and Sweetman 2004; Pole 2004; Pink 2006; Rose 2006; Stanczak 2007; Pauwels 2008) have established themselves as a legitimate and promising methodology for social research. Yet rather than proposing another cultural history of vision or another visual research methodology text, the aim of this book is to explore visibility as a dimension of the social at large, unrestricted to the visual domain.

From a social-theoretical point of view, visibility is interesting precisely because it allows us to enhance our understanding of the social as simultaneously a material and immaterial phenomenon – or better, as a specific prolongation and convergence between the layer of the material and that of the immaterial in the constitution of the social. Visibility is a social dimension in which thresholds between different social forces are introduced. In this sense, the visible can be conceived of as a field of inscription and projection of social action, a field which can be explored as a territory. From this perspective, my main argument, exposed in

more detailed in Chapter 2, is that visibility is to be understood as crucially connected to social territoriality. As such, my analysis of visibility is part of the elaboration of a general attempt towards a territorological analysis of the social (Brighenti 2010a). My endeavour is in part analytical, in that I try to elucidate the basic dimensions of visibility, and in part critical, in that I seek to pinpoint the political stakes entailed by different visibility regimes. However, overall, my approach is neither analytical (in the sense of analytic realism with pattern variable analysis, *à la* Parsons or system-theoretical analysis *à la* Luhmann) nor critical (in the sense that I do not characterise visibility as bad or simply soaked in power, rather as, at most, ambivalent). It could be described as a 'constructive' (dare I say 'poetic'? I doubt very much I would be up to the task, especially in a language that is not my own and laden with the strictures of the academic genre) attempt to draw the coordinates which could be used to build visibility as a concept for social theory and the social science.

Vision certainly occupies a crucial point in the attempt to understand the field of social visibility. Accordingly, it is necessary to begin from a review of how vision has been conceptualised and studied – not least because, just as we need a spatialised social ontology (Soja 1989) or a spatially integrated social science (Goodchild and Janelle 2004), we also need a fully sensorialised one. Thus, we need what could be termed a 'sensitive' or 'sensational' social theory. Unsurprisingly, these two terms are ambiguous and polysemic. Is a sensitive theory also a fragile and vulnerable one? And is a sensational theory also an overdramatised and spectacular one? Indeed, as we shall explore in greater detail, sensorial receptiveness always leans towards, on the one hand, the sensitive pole – involving empathy, openness and care – and, on the other, the sensational – involving spectacle, glamour and shock.

Culturalist interpretations of visuality include a variegated literature on the gaze and the relationship between sight and the other senses, as well as between vision and knowledge, power, identity and pleasure. I draw important insights from such literature, although my specific aim remains social-epistemological rather than culturalist. As noted above, I want to attain an enlarged definition of the field of visibility. In order to do so, it is necessary to understand the act of looking and the phenomenon of the gaze from the point of view of the social forces that are unleashed in these processes. Both looking and being looked at are active social processes which are far from restricted to a merely cognitive or informational dimension. Looking is (also) a *making-do*: it is affective and haptic, it has a grip on objects and especially on bodies.

As Merleau-Ponty (1964a) contended in his study on painting, vision is act, not thought. It is imbued with desire, passions and power. And, crucially for my analysis, such passions and affects are territorialising, they create and sustain territorial orders in social interaction.

We know, for instance, that in street cultures staring is taken as an intolerable form of aggression that 'disrespects' and, as such, elicits instant reaction (Bourgois 2003). Here, the territorial element is evident, but important analogies are also present in the apparently very different case of the medical gaze described by Michel Foucault (1963a), which represents not only a form of seeing that turns the observed person – the patient – into an object that can be (unashamedly) stared at, but also an investigation of a 'dark body' revealing a disease which must be visibilised and abstracted from the single case at hand. In both cases we see that if the stare, a form of look which persists without regard for the reaction of the person who is looked at, goes unchallenged it ends up wholly objectifying the person who is stared at. Such an interplay between the gaze and power was acutely observed by Gabriel Tarde (1999[1898]) who, discussing imitation as a fundamental social process, theorised that influence among persons could be explained as 'thought of the other's gaze'. But how literal is this 'thought of a gaze' and how can it be explained, or better visualised?

Seeing: The modern take

The modernist imagination elaborated a model of vision that by now has been roundly criticised yet remains hard to kill, as demonstrated by the very necessity of continuing to reassert all the critical points against it. I submit that it is perhaps hard to kill because it was never truly accomplished. Its aspect is deceptively simple: the fact that we can name it (the 'modern epistemology of vision') and describe it easily makes us confident that we can also overcome it. But we should already have done so a long time ago; instead, as we come to understand it better, we still find ourselves very much entangled in its *problématique* and its presuppositions – which, on the other hand, turn out to have never been applied as the model presupposed. They never formed a full single hegemonic 'scopic regime' (Metz 1982), rather a plurality of contested regimes (Jay 1993). True, we have never been modern (Latour 1993[1991]), but many have spent time and energies dreaming of having been, being or even becoming so – a fact that cannot be overlooked.

It is perhaps the first in a series of numerous paradoxes concerning vision that the central zone of the human eye, which is opposed

to the periphery and should correspond to the point of best sight, is in fact situated in correspondence with the blind spot of the retina. So, not only do we not see where we are supposed to see best, but in a sort of *mise en abyme* we also do not see that we do not see what we do not see – a foundational notion in Heinz von Foerster's (2003) second-order cybernetics as well as Niklas Luhmann's (1995) social theory. In short, vision is *doubly blind* (Elkins 1999). Our strong natural faith in the correctness of visual experience may also explain why we never fail to be impressed with the fact that our eyes can deceive us so easily and thoroughly. And although, as Berger et al. (1972) once stated, the relationship between seeing and knowing is never settled, it is still a very intimate relationship: not only do we have expectations about perception, but these expectations may hamper perception to an unpredictable degree.

The main characters of the stereotypical definition of the modernist imagination can be summarised quickly: seeing is detached, rational and efficient. It is detached because it is supposed not to interfere with the observed object. It is rational because it is governed by the free will of an aware and self-conscious subject. It is efficient because it provides clean data with sharp edges. Such an idea seems to conjure up a God's-eye view, similar to the type of 'view from nowhere' advocated by nineteenth-century French positivism and dreamt of by the early twentieth-century logical neo-positivism of the Vienna School. The making of the modern Western epistemology, however, is far from linear and far from settled. Likewise, the history of modernist vision was never straightforward and included several vacillations. A seminal moment in its formation is usually attributed to René Descartes. So Descartes, the philosopher of the *idées claires et distinctes*, is usually taken as the assertor of the epistemic centrality of sight and the creator of a model referred to as 'perspectivalism' (drawing on Panofsky's 1991[1927] classic study on perspective as a symbolic form). Putting the visible world into a geometric perspective, the methodical eye of the rationalist opposes itself to the curious eye of the encyclopaedist (Stoichita 1993) and brings vision to perfection.

Descartes' theory of vision is founded upon his metaphysical dualism. This dualism is often reproached, but such criticism forgets that dualism was not a failure on Descartes' part, or an unfortunate side effect of his theories. Dualism was a conscious and explicit achievement for Descartes: he set out for himself the task of *demonstrating* the distinction between mind and body, between thought and matter. And the reason for this was that, in his view, to detach one's mind from

one's senses was the only way to overcome the doubts and deceptions inherent to perception.

Descartes seems to inherit Plato's thesis that sight is the noblest of the senses. However, at the same time, for Descartes sight is reliable only in so far as its way of functioning is modelled upon rationality itself. Vision is a process that involves a deciphering of *signs* in which visual clues allow us to reconstruct the genuine order of the world, whose nature is geometric and mathematical. As Galileo also said in that period, the book of nature is written in mathematical language. Such a model made sense and certainly held some appeal, in that it attempted to avoid direct naïve realism – subject to sceptics' attacks – while preserving a realist orientation. Recently, Clark (2007) has shown how early modern European visual culture was characterised by the collapse of the Aristotelian visual trust grounded in the theory of resemblance. Clark calls this an act of 'de-rationalisation' of sight. In my view, it would be better to speak of 'de-naturalisation'. At any rate, it is clear that modern philosophy set for itself the task of restoring visual confidence against the attacks of scepticism through a new form of rationalisation of vision.

This type of new rationalisation bore important consequences. For instance, in Cartesian philosophy, colour was banished from the basic features of vision and relegated to a 'secondary quality'. The subjective quality of colour was debated for over a century until Newton's optics found a way to absorb it into the 'primary qualities', that is, to quantify it as the wavelength of the light. Similarly, depth was interpreted as a 'width seen by profile', as Merleau-Ponty (1945) stigmatised it in his critical discussion of the classic model of perception. He also added that Cartesian philosophy, with its rationalist model of vision moulded upon thought, is the breviary of a thought that decides no longer to abide the visible in its richness, fullness and intensity (Merleau-Ponty 1964a; 1996). Monocularism is a typical symptom of such reductionism. As Gregory Bateson (1988) noticed, binocular vision or stereopsis is not simply a matter of adding another point of view to the single-eyed perspective. The difference between the information provided by the one retina and that provided by the other is itself information; more specifically, it is information of a different logical type, and it is on the basis of this new sort of information that the seer can add an extra dimension to seeing, depth.

To anticipate briefly a few themes, with respect to the technical domain, the modernist model of vision is functional to a detached manipulation of things and, in fact, it is intimately tied to the technical

domain. In the *Dioptrique* (1637), Descartes describes the functioning of the eye *as* and *through* the device of the camera obscura. From this point of view, human vision is technological well before any manufactured tool comes into play. On the other hand, with respect to the cultural and religious domain, the Western modernist model makes a strong assertion against the enchanted visual world that characterised medieval Europe. In particular, the Protestant reformation strongly criticised the miracles and visions typical of Catholic popular devotion. But the persistence of spirits, ghosts, apparitions, demons, *incubi* and their transformation into dreams and hallucinations reveal the complexity of this trajectory.

Sense ratios

The sensorial continuum can be, and indeed has been, segmented in very different ways in different historical social contexts and through different technological lenses. The anthropology of the senses also tells us that different cultures *hierarchise* the sensorial ways of knowing differently. This means that the very idea of the five senses is a Western cultural achievement, while other cultures recognise more (in some cases fewer) perceptual senses (Howes 1991; 2003; Classen 1993; 1997).

In Greek antiquity, Plato famously described vision as the noblest of the senses. Despite the historical and epistemological distance, this idea seems one of the leading reasons for the sensorial and theoretical centrality accorded to vision in modern Western thought. Such 'visualism' is not only ideological, but is situated and embedded in specific organisational and technical practices. Marshall McLuhan (1964) and Walter Ong (1977) explored how communication technologies work as extensions of perceptual senses – 'extensions of man', as McLuhan put it. Far from being neutral, these extensions contribute to enhancing selectively a specific type of sensory perception and establishing a *ratio* among the senses. Such a ratio corresponds to a hierarchical ranking and, in this respect, argued McLuhan and Ong, the supremacy of vision is contextually linked to alphabet technology, particularly in its typographic period. It is the technology of the printed book that enables the vertical, detached kind of modern visual experience. Sense ratios also affect the type of boundaries that exist between different sensorial experiences, allowing for or, on the contrary, forbidding synaesthetic perceptions, in which there is a fusion of different senses or an exchange between them.

One major effect of the centrality of vision is the marginalisation of the other senses, regarded as epistemologically less noble. In general, the modern epistemology entails the triumph of the distal over the proximal senses. In the modern age, the distance senses of sight and hearing have marginalised the proximity senses of smell, touch and taste. Smell, in particular, becomes a problematic and embarrassing sense (Classen et al. 1994). This means that the sensorial ranking is not simply epistemic but imbued with normative consequences about which perceptions are acceptable and which are not. Similarly to as with smell, prominent observers have underlined the castigation and prohibition of touch (Stafford 1993; Cooper and Law 1995; Elkins 1999; Hetherington 2003; Mitchell 2005).

The relationship between sight and touch is particularly important, and we shall return to it in observing how vision is 'inhabited'. In general, while distal knowledge is dualist and abstract, presenting subject and object as clearly distinct and facing each other, proximal knowledge is one in which there is an intimacy and intricacy between objects and subjects in a specific context. Whereas the distal sense of sight is – as we have already said above with respect to the modernist imagination of vision – stable, detached, clean and efficient, the proximal senses are fluid, unstable and disordered. Consequently, while the former produces as final outcomes objectified data that are visualised in a representational format, the latter produces unfinished and processual performances.

As Flusser (2000) observed in the case of visual representations, to generate an image of something is an act of creating a distance: you have to step back from the object, you need to push it away in order to be able to see it, paint it or even describe it. Such inherent distance of the visual can also be used, as both Walter Benjamin and Paul Virilio did (see Manovich 2001: 175), to reverse the argument and conclude that touch is what is really brutal: visual distance is respectful (or 'auratic') viv-à-vis a sense of touch which is greedy and omnivorous and ultimately annihilates space into a 'negative horizon'.

One should not be misled by the idea of centrality of vision to believe that the sense of sight was always unanimously praised. On the contrary, the ambiguous moral nature of sight is evident in early modern European culture: sight can be pious, as in Jan Bruegel the Elder's *The Sense of Sight* (1617), but it can also be sinful, as in George Hakewill's treaty *The vanitie of the eye* (1608) (Clark 2007). In short, what spans the modern rationalist and idealist takes on vision is the distinction between the empirical phenomenon of sight and the disembodied, transcendental and normative scheme of vision.

Seeing, knocking, twinkling: Epistéme of the visual

The notion of *idea* – from the Greek *idéa*, shape, aspect, whose root is the Indo-European *vid-*, from which the Latin *vidĕo* also derives – is itself visual. And if idea is a vision, theory (from *theōréō*, I look) is literally a way of seeing. Correspondingly, in common parlance 'blindness' indicates refusal to acknowledge, ignorance, lack of receptivity and insensitiveness, while a 'vision' is a motivating and engaging plan of action. The first great Greek historian, Thucydides, based his method on 'autopsy', or eyewitness testimony. The notion, which in modern medicine becomes a very different practice, reminds us of the inherent credibility that is placed on visual evidence, including photographs and all sorts of technical diagrammatic records. Seeing and knowing are so close to each other that they constantly influence and interfere with each other, to the point that the boundary between perception and knowledge fluctuates and practically vanishes. Hannah Arendt (1958) insisted on the fact that the power of the new modern technological instruments like the telescope was eminently linked to their *immediately* perceptual nature, that is, to the fact that it could be easily overlooked that this seeing was also a knowing. So, how do these influences between seeing and knowing take place, and how are the boundaries between them drawn?

In the Kantian philosophical tradition, the nexus between seeing and understanding is explained through the intervention of a-priori schemata that we use to segment the *continuum* of sensory experience. Thus, there is a circularity between visual perception and knowledge: to perceive something *as* something – or, in Kantian terms, to subsume an object into a concept – we need prior knowledge about how properly to segment the phenomenal appearances. Such prior knowledge is a scheme, a procedural rule by which a-priori categories, which are pure forms of thought, are associated with sensible intuitions. Bridging a-priori transcendental categories – like space and time – and empirical a-posteriori intuitions, schemes work as operative definitions to identify objects in the visual field. In short, expectations guide perception by defining them. Following a classical explanation by Walter Lippmann (1922: §VI, 1), social 'definitions' are cultural products that enable the individual to 'pick out' relevant phenomena and meaningfully *see* them.

But this idyllic circularity has never satisfied the critics: as already recalled several times, the relationship between seeing and knowing is never settled (Berger et al. 1972), just like, one may be tempted to add, the never-settled relationship between images and words. Clearly, there

is a tricky correspondence here. For only in a specific modernist conception is knowledge represented as a wholly verbalised enterprise, to the detriment of non-verbal, non-formalised, implicit, tacit and 'mute' forms of knowledge and learning (Polanyi 1958; 1967). Conversely, as will be detailed in Chapter 2, seeing and looking are not simply concerned with images, but rather with aspects such as movement, coordination, body postures and gestures which are not entirely 'imageable' in the classic sense of the word (here, an important discussion on the status of the image opens up, which will be outlined only briefly below). Yet the link between, on the one hand, seeing and images and, on the other, knowing and language is a particularly insidious and persistent one. For instance, Foucault's split notions of *le visible* and *le lisible*, particularly as described by Deleuze (1986) – both are authors about whom I always speak with much affection, reverence and admiration – inherit much of the modernist conception (and, one may want to argue, paradoxically so, given that they are usually referred to as post-structuralist and sometimes even post-modernist thinkers – tags of which I am not particularly fond). Foucault's enterprise consisted in an immensely knowledgeable and illuminating analysis of discourses, which however remains sensorially deprived. Even when he analyses social practices – which are necessarily sensorial – he is in fact analysing their rationality, their diagram or *dispositif*, and when he undertakes the analysis of images, he does so only to claim the priority of discourse over a visible which remains wholly heterogeneous and can never be entirely reduced to it. So, if the *regard medicale* is a type of vision imbued with discourse, a gaze that actively illuminates things rather than simply perceiving and acknowledging their natural light or truth (Foucault 1963a), madness deploys its power in a state of 'pure vision', or mute vision, which medicine will constantly seek to 'make speak' (Foucault 1972). In this sense, Foucault (1977) regards Bentham's insistence on the visual set-up of the panopticon as 'archaic', while he individuates the specifically modern element in Bentham's thought in the latter's interest for a 'technical' organisation of power.

Such a dichotomic epistéme, split between the visible and the articulable, might be one of the leading motifs running through twentieth-century French philosophy. Martin Jay's (1993) monumental *Downcast Eyes* traced a genealogy of the twentieth-century French intellectual tradition from avant-garde movements influenced by psychoanalysis to philosophers and writers such as Bataille, Leiris, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Lacan, Althusser, Foucault, Debord, Barthes, Metz, Derrida, Irigaray, Lévinas, Lyotard and Virilio. This remarkable book has been

wrongly popularised as simply asserting that French philosophers have deposed vision from its traditional supremacy. However, Jay clearly addressed the existence of a *plurality* of scopic regimes, which he regarded as inherently contested. Most social theorists from the last century who dealt with vision cannot be said to simply 'against vision'. Much of this 'denigration' in fact amounts to a denunciation of the extent to which *le visible* has been dominated by and subsumed under *le lisible*. Foucault himself often made a distinction between 'bad' and 'dangerous', claiming that he was not simplistically saying that everything he studied – the medical gaze, surveillance, the apparatuses of security, power and so on – was bad, rather that there are inherent dangers in all those things. So, as far as the visual is concerned, there is no innocent eye. In other words, anti-ocularcentrism essentially consisted in the recognition – and the denunciation – that seeing is neither detached nor rational, or even efficient – that, with Foucault, it can be dangerous.

Such danger somehow recalls Michel Leiris' (1939) quest for the 'horn' in literature, the point when writing stops being a contemplative, detached activity and begins to entail a personal risk for the writer, just like the bull's horn for the toreador. There is a stream in twentieth-century French philosophy – whether we decide to call it antio-cularcentric or not – that tackles the point where the apparently detached mechanism of vision becomes risky and turns into a *personal matter*. An important influence for this quest is Nietzsche's *Augenblick* – the blink of an eye or, as Shapiro (2003) more evocatively suggests, the 'twinkling of the eye' – the moment in vision that reveals the *Abgrund*, the lack of foundation and the abysmal nature of seeing, met by a wince: 'Into your eye I gazed recently, oh life! And then into the unfathomable I seemed to sink' (Nietzsche 1885: §II, 'The Dance Song'). Furthermore, the distinction between the visible and the invisible is here configured as topologically similar to that between the conscious and the unconscious. On this point, Bateson (1988) offered a naturalised explanation to the fact that the processes of perception are inaccessible and only its products are conscious: for all practical purposes, he argued, it is the products of vision that are necessary to the living creature. At the same time, any empirical epistemology cannot but take into account the unconscious nature of the process of image-making and the presuppositions which get built into the finished, conscious image.

Vision exists in a hyaline element; it is permeated by transparency. Transparency means that vision is not only vision *of* something but *through* something. At first, the transparent can be imagined as the

medium of vision; ultimately, however, there is no clear distinction between the medium and its object. Transparency entails constant superimposition and visual ambiguity – a fact that evokes the problem of *depth*, which will be addressed below. Depth *populates* the visual and turns the hyaline into the heterogeneous environment in which mediums and objects are cut across. Depth also raises a fundamentally *haptic* problem. From this perspective, J. J. Gibson's (1979) notion of *affordance* aims to capture the fact that the visible world is not a world of pure shapes, but rather a world of disposable and eliciting objects, which Gibson visually describes as 'surfaces'. Vision is not projected in a vacuum; it is not a tabula rasa. Rather, it is guided by affordances, possibilities of action and invitations to action within a given ecological niche (Alley 1985). The environment is filled with 'pick ups', qualities that make seizing and manipulating objects possible. Notably, social places are filled with such affordances. However, it is precisely on the basis of a phenomenologically inspired notion of environment that Tim Ingold (2005) has criticised Gibson's theory of visual affordances as 'surfaces'. Such surfaces (with sharp, well-defined edges) would once again 'depopulate' vision, flattening its lived depth. We shall soon return to the problématique of the *ecology of visibility* after having considered some basic cognitive and emotional aspects of vision as approached by physiologists and neurologists.

Visual cognitions

Physiologically speaking, vision is a highly complex sense apparatus. It has often been remarked that vision is a process that occurs without much conscious effort: our eyes seem able to find the information we need by themselves. The fact that seeing appears an effortless activity might be one of the reasons for the old philosophical credo that the eyes simply 'mirror' the world. Neurologists, however, have revealed that a lot of hard work is done by the brain to make sense of visual data data and guarantee a seamless visual experience. The sense of sight ranks among the most studied topics in the history of medicine (Goodale and Milner 2004). The very process of constructing the retinal image is a discontinuous and active process, based on constant eye movement, the 'saccades', and a continual sampling through the redirection of the gaze (Findlay and Gilchrist 2003). Cortical research and optical research on eye movements, grounded in biology and neurophysiology (Land and Tatler 2009), have also contributed prominently to the study of visual cognition.

Physiologists and neurologists have found that the visual system is not univocal but is in fact at least dual. There is no single visual system, but different visual *systems* with very different computational modes. Two major neural streams related to the visual cortex V1 have been identified as the 'ventral' and the 'dorsal' (Ungerleider and Mishkin 1982; Mishkin et al. 1983). The former stream has also been described, in a simplified way, as 'vision-for-perception', the latter as 'vision-for-action'. The study of visual pathologies confirms this distinction. Agnosia and ataxia are two different visual disturbances: while the former consists of the incapacity to perceive forms and shapes (damage to the perceptual system), the latter corresponds to the incapacity of coordinating movements (damage to the visuomotor system).

The two visual systems operate at different time scales, with fundamentally different metrics and different relationships to the proper body. The vision-for-action neural stream works in real time and has almost no memory; its philosophy has been described as a 'use it, or lose it' one (Goodale and Milner 2004: 82). In contrast, the vision-for-perception neural stream works on a much longer time scale, which is essential to allow visual recognition of objects and people. The frame of reference, too, is different, given that vision-for-action is scene-based, or impersonal, while vision-for-perception is strongly egocentric and embodied. Tightly connected to this is the fact that vision-for-action works with absolute sizes rather than the relative sizes used by vision-for-perception. For instance, we can easily recognise a cup in a photograph even if it is out of scale, that is, larger or smaller than life, but while looking at the picture we inhibit our visuomotor system, which would be disorientated if we had to grasp the represented image as a real cup.

This distinction between the two visual systems proposed by neuroscientists is interestingly reminiscent of George Herbert Mead's (1959[1934]) distinction – inspired by William James' pragmatism – between I and me, the Self as an individual agent endowed with volition (in today's fashionable terminology, 'agency') and as a socialised subject created by the generalised other. In its absolutism, vision-for-action seems to be strongly tied to an agentic 'I', whereas vision-for-perception seems to be a type of vision that is intrinsically socialised and relativises the agent into a 'me'. More cogently, in the context we are discussing, the modernist imagination of vision is clearly moulded upon the ventral stream, or vision-for-perception. Hence, the 'perspectivalist' qualification of seeing as detached and unobtrusive ensues. In contrast,

the dorsal stream, vision-for-action, which is not representational and remains in large part unconscious, represents that dark side of vision that fascinated anti-ocularcentric theorists and which the phenomenological philosophy of Merleau-Ponty sought to rehabilitate.

Cortical research has also illuminated the fact that far from being a univocal activity, visual processing in the brain involves differentiated strategies of neural organisation, such as population coding, functional localisation, parallel processing, hierarchical processing and association. This gives just a hint of the complexity of the physiological processes at stake. Of comparable, and complementary, importance is the study of eye movements and categorisation. Neuroscientist Michael Land (Land 2009; Land and Tatler 2009) has conducted interesting research on a variety of ordinary activities, including cooking, driving and playing instruments. Recording the eyes' positions of fixation during these tasks, he has revealed that eye movements are inextricably interwoven with knowledge of the situation that is being dealt with. Land describes action sequences as script-based and divided into a series of 'object-related visual actions'.

Object-related visual actions are composed of a series of small saccades, while the shift from one visual action to the next entails larger saccades. So, while the visual experience is smooth for the subject, detailed recordings of people carrying out normal activities in natural contexts show that single fixations of the eyes through the saccades have identifiable functions, which are understandable only as parts of the whole action performed. Single glances are involved specifically in locating, directing, guiding and checking objects and spaces that are being operated upon. While in general the gaze is directed to where information is to be extracted, and vision monitors the ongoing manipulation, the eyes often anticipate the next bodily movements in the script. The gaze moves on to the next object or to the next spot of action about half a second *before* the manual activity on the first object is complete. Object-related visual actions are carried out sequentially and organised in larger blocs or units. For instance, in the case of tea-making, these units are 'find the kettle', 'transport to sink', and so on (Land 2009: 53–54). An important observation concerns interferences and marginal objects. Land has found that the objects that are irrelevant to the action that is being performed are hardly ever looked at. This fact lends support to the idea that the gaze system, in its collaboration with the visual and the motor systems, is guided by schemas in a top-down way. Vision is active in the sense that it does not simply rely

on the salience of what it encounters empirically, but rather follows the meaning of the action into which it is inserted.

Far from being a single, uniform activity, human vision can be said to be *a multiplicity*. Indeed, it involves a multiplicity of visual neural streams, a multiplicity of types of neural processing of stimuli and a multiplicity of types of eye movement.

Inhabiting vision

> Let me put my microscope aside for the moment. Whatever anyone may say, to write with one's eye focused on the object glass, even with the aid of a camera lucida, really is tiring for the vision. Grown unused to looking in unison, my two eyes have to oscillate their sensations slightly before they can work as a pair once more. A screw thread behind my forehead is unwinding blindly to readjust the focus: the smallest object I look at appears to be of enormous proportions, a water jug and an inkwell remind me of Notre Dame and the Morgue. I have the impression of seeing the hand I am writing with in exaggerated close-up and my pen is a spike of fog. (Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant*)

In retrospect, one can appreciate the whole philosophical debate on primary and secondary qualities that spans seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophy as a failed attempt – or a series of failed attempts – to force such multiplicity into a single model of vision. In Descartes, who as noted above is commonly regarded as the father of the specifically modern model of vision, one finds – as in many of his contemporaries – a celebration of sight as the noblest and the most informative sense. Yet in the early modern period the foundation of vision is troubled by a paradox: on the one hand, vision is constituted as a 'technical' process – recall that Descartes approaches the physiology of the eye through a parallel with the camera lucida – while on the other, its ideal model is moulded upon intellectual apprehension. In this sense, the articulation of seeing and knowing becomes circular. Descartes conceded that human vision can be deceived: it is well known that proportions of shapes and hues of colour are easily mistaken at a distance and there are a number of quite impressive optical tricks that can easily be arranged. But what is actually being tricked, he claimed, is not so much the eyes, but rather the relationship between the visual system and the beliefs

that ensue from vision. It is not the senses per se that err, but judgement about sensorial experience. So, it is the correct relationship that is to be ascertained. But, in turn, who is in charge of making the correction: reason or the senses?

The Cartesian theorisation of vision cannot be understood apart from Descartes' confrontation with empirical and sceptical philosophy. Vision and more generally, sensory experience was of course pivotal for empiricists, but the latter's position had a series of weaknesses and shortcomings that were mercilessly pointed out by the sceptics, who had long argued that all the senses are deceptive. Ancient philosophical scepticism, or Pyrrhonism, reappeared in Europe in the second half of the sixteenth century and until the eighteenth continued to challenge and trouble deeply the theory of knowledge. This scepticism amounted to a denial that the senses could grant any form of true, veritable and founded knowledge (*epistéme*). The conditions for such knowledge, the sceptics argued, can never be met, and the inherent unreliability of sensory experience can lead only to the *epoché*, or suspension of judgement on truth conditions. As far as vision is concerned, it is precisely the unsettled relation between seeing and knowing that was attacked by the sceptics in a systematic way, in order to show that *any* inference from seeing to knowing was intrinsically fallacious and thus should have been rejected as mere 'dogmatism'. Descartes' method is a direct response to the challenges advanced by scepticism, based on the rearticulation of the relationship between seeing and knowing through a powerful rational theoretical model that informs the description sensorial experience. Similarly, with his telescope experiments, Galileo created a new, initially counterintuitive, way of seeing that was instrumental in supporting his astronomical theory (Feyerabend 1978).

However, the epistemological stake of such a potentially endless debate changes dramatically when the idea of life and the *lived experience* of the subject appears on the scene of the visible. Foucault's attempt to distinguish between the classical (mid-seventeenth to late eighteenth century) and the modern epistéme (from the early nineteenth century on, that is, as the product of the Enlightenment, with the philosophical currents of naturalism and positivism) is precisely related to the appearance of 'man' as the subject and, at the same time, the object of vision in a new way. Regardless of the periodisation we decide to adopt, it is clear that during the modern age a new dimension of vision opens up – one which was not envisaged by the theory of knowledge and which points to the question of life and/as existence.

The idea that our visual horizon is also our existential horizon can be found for instance in Nietzsche (1881). But it is certainly phenomenology which insisted most clearly that we *inhabit* our vision, as well as more generally our living body (*Leib*). We are not seeing subjects vis-à-vis seen objects, rather we are present in our lifeworld, through an unmistakable sense of 'being there' (*praesentia*). We are placed – maybe even 'emplaced' – in continuity with the world itself. The enigma, observed Merleau-Ponty (1964a), is the fact that our most intimate *topia*, that most natural localisation which is our body, is at the same time *seeing* and *visible*. Elsewhere, Merleau-Ponty (1964b) complements this thought with the remark that the *invisible* is not simply something visible that is contingently out of sight. Rather, the invisible is what it is *here without* being an object. The invisible is intrinsic to the visible; it is what makes the visible possible.

The invisible blind spot of the eye, which we have introduced above as the first of the paradoxes of vision, is simultaneously what makes it possible for the eye to see the rest of the world. This means that the blind spot, the invisible, is what *physically* connects the subject-observer to the object-observed and determines their complicity, their ontological continuity. Visibility, as we shall explore more thoroughly in Chapter 2, is the field of such continuity, the open field and the common ground between the *percipiens* and the *perceptum*. The notion of the 'flesh of the world' is developed by Merleau-Ponty precisely to address this openness of the lived, inhabited vision. The flesh is the common texture of the seeing body and the visible world conceived of as inseparable, an inseparability which corresponds to an actual 'opening of the world'. Phenomenology thus opens the way towards a model of vision which is proximal rather than distal and populated 'in depth' with emotions, shocks and, more broadly, social relationships.

Visual emotions, wonders and pleasures

Next to the official Western philosophical tradition and its preoccupation with the epistéme of the visual, and often interwoven with it, the popular, magical and irrational approach to the visual has always persisted. Such a perspective leaves scope for fantasy, imagery, illusion, art, visual delusion and all sorts of *scopophiliai*. Here, vision reveals itself as a site of wonder; it includes wonders, marvels and tricks and all those activities, whether religious or profane, that hint at the *spectacular* dimension of the visible. Every form of halted, suspended or severed view is, to some extent, 'spectacular'.

Psychologists, sociologists and cultural critics know that there is a powerful emotional charge in the gaze, which breeds positive as well as negative feelings. Both pleasure and trauma are ubiquitous possibilities of vision, sometimes coexisting side by side and even intermingling with each other (Saltzman and Rosenberg 2006). The human body is the site where the emotionality of vision reaches the utmost intensity. On the one hand, there is a tendency to seek pleasure through the visual objectification – and commodification – of the body while on the other, a whole series of fundamental notions concerning honour, dignity and respect are designed to resist such objectification. The body itself is the field of such tensions. An essentially heterogeneous vision of the body is present in many human cultures, according to which the body is divided both in extension and depth into visible and invisible zones and layers, among which clear, fateful boundaries are established. In contrast to this conception there arises an essentially homogeneous vision, heralded by the modern medical gaze, according to which the body is an entirely mechanical and visible matter, the *fabrica humani corporis* of the anatomist. The Durkheimian distinction between the spheres of the sacred and the profane also speaks to the ambiguous location of the body between the two social and political domains of the public and the private, of the visible and the invisible. In Chapter 5 we shall delve into how visibility regimes are constitutive of the domain of the public and how bodies enter this domain.

Almost paradigmatic of bodily visual relationships is the taboo associated with the vision of the genitals, particularly female genitals (as we know, Georges Bataille reflected on the 'impossibility' of looking at genitals – like looking at the Sun and the death). Direct sexual desire is not, however, the only driving factor in voyeurism. The boundaries between the *will to knowledge* and morbid fascination can be difficult to establish, as the case of the corpse makes sufficiently clear. On the one hand, the exploration of human anatomy through autopsy has been fundamental to building the modern medical knowledge of the body; on the other hand, however, there are always deep psychological motives quite apart from knowledge that push people, professionals and otherwise, to seek the sight of a corpse and more, to seek horrific sights in general (Gonzáles-Crussi 2006). What repels also attracts, and what is forbidden does so to an even higher degree.

In a similar way, the modern spectacle of the execution, not certainly inaugurated by but unmistakably associated with Dr Guillotin's

creation (designed, as is widely known since Foucault's analysis, to achieve a less barbaric and more efficient infliction of death), raises *inter alia* the problematic issue of the curious and craving crowds that push at executions (Spierenburg 1984). Looking back to the ancient and early modern period, the modern, 'civilised' observer (in Norbert Elias' sense of the term) is worried or even shocked by such a lust for the vision of the body of the condemned, and denounces it as barbaric. On closer scrutiny, however, one realises that the same psychological and sociological mechanisms are still at work nowadays, disguised in a variety of ways. How many would throng to an 'uncivilised' public execution today? Vision and violence have a long, intertwined history.

The role of the body at the interplay of vision and desire becomes clear in those 'crepuscular' phenomena which include dreams, nightmares (*incubi*), sleepwalking, hallucinations, melancholy, ecstasy, hypnosis, and so on. To these phenomena there corresponds a class of professionals who specialise in 'dealing' with them. The list opens up with saints, witches, magicians, jugglers, mediums and, through hypnotists, prolongs to psychologists and psychoanalysts. Leiris' 'horn' is clearly present in these visual experiences and their peculiar effects. Apart from the obvious equivalence between blinding and castration (and self-blinding as self-castration in Oedipus' case), in Freud's (1919) essay on *Das Unheimliche*, or *The Uncanny*, one finds a classic and still fascinating drawing out of phenomena which, while not causing outright panic or fear, are strangely disquieting. Notably, the idea of being robbed of one's eyes is treated by Freud as paradigmatic of the uncanny. Freud describes the uncanny as the hint or partial revelation of what is *heimlich* (literally concealed, furtive and secret), that is, of a taboo. Something that should have remained secret (unconscious), something which was repressed, somehow resurfaces, unexpectedly presenting itself to consciousness. The uncanny, in a sense, is what occurs when we *see more than what we should know*. Jacques Derrida's (1994) notion of spectrality can be regarded as a sort of reprise on the uncanny. The spectral, for Derrida, is not simply the invisible or the spiritual. Neither soul nor body, but both at the same time, the spectral is a 'supernatural' and paradoxical phenomenon located in between visibility and invisibility. The spectre appears but is hollow, 'departed' in its appearance; it watches but is actually an invisible which sees, a looming 'presence'. Spectral phenomena, suggests Derrida, are found wherever there is seeing.

Visual shocks and the cultural grammar of vision

The third discourse of Descartes' *Dioptrique* (1637), entitled 'On the eye', begins rather straightforwardly: 'If it were possible to cut an eye in two ...'. The idea is later expanded in the famous passage where the philosopher describes the experiment of taking out the eye of a freshly dead man, cutting it in two, and discovering 'with admiration and pleasure' the formation of the retinal image. It is curious to find, a few centuries later, similar adventures with eyes described by the most radical of Jay's anti-ocularcentrics, Georges Bataille – albeit with a stronger emphasis on the element of pleasure (and disgust) than that of admiration. Far from being a coincidence, this unsettling similarity between Descartes' and Bataille's adventures of the eye suggests that the ocularcentric and the anti-ocularcentric positions may be more similar than expected: they are two encounters with the same *problématique* that concerns the nature of vision in social life.

In his preface to Bataille, Foucault (1963b: 272) writes that the eye, this 'small white globe closed upon its own night', is the literal figure of transgression. In Bataille's novels, the violent exorbitation (i.e., the extraction of the eye from its cranial orbit) and the exposure of the empty orbit correspond precisely to this operation of penetrating the hyaline, breaking the illusion of transparency, dethroning the sovereign subject. Transgression, Foucault observes, only makes sense in relation to given limits, and the eye, which is a lamp and a well at the same time, is the exact point in which limits become embodied and are always on the verge of being transgressed.

The transgressive or excessive nature of seeing, which is so emphasised in Bataille's novels (to the point that it becomes unwittingly comic) can be found in a wide range of social intercourses. Biologically and ecologically speaking, the human being is both predator and prey, and its visual experience mirrors this deep-seated ambiguity. In violent situations, reciprocal visual contact becomes crucial (Collins 2008): conflicts produce situations in which gazes are literally turned into shocks.

Another important source of visual shocks has to do with deformity, such as cases of malformations and deviations from 'normal appearances' which are found in 'human monsters' (all quotation marks are due, thanks to Canguilhem). David Lynch's film *The Elephant Man* is one perfect illustration of Goffman's (1963a) notion of stigma, that is, a physical sign that is taken to flag a negative moral characteristic. Goffman insists that stigmatisation links some visible difference (some 'ugliness' or deformity) to the moral dimension (shame). Due to the

stigma, the 'face' (Goffman 1969) of the stigmatised, which represents its moral dimension and its very 'sacrality' as a person, is compromised. Consequently, the physical (but also the moral) monster suffers from an excessive visibility: *monstrum* in Latin is what is shown, exposed to sight. As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2006) has observed, the stigma freezes vision into a *stare*. The encounter with the 'monster' is a visual experience in which astonishment and horror halt the viewer in staring at the viewed. The subsequent visual flight of the viewer to look away from the 'monster' inflicts shame on both. Discussing some cases of facial disfigurement, Garland-Thomson observes how the starees adopt a series of strategies in order to save the ordinary morality of the situation. Notably, under ordinary circumstances what has to be saved is not so much the (moral) face of the staree, but that of the starer. The stigma produces an encounter in which the rules of social interaction are put under strain. Consequently, reparation is required to save sociality and its basic requirements.

Functional vision, the type of rational distal vision 'under control' described by modern philosophy, is not always easily set apart from spectacular vision and its tendency towards excess (of pleasure as well as of fear and revulsion). Here the work of some important contemporary authors has drawn attention to the fact that the grammar of vision is inherently cultural (Foster 1988; Jenks 1995; Mirzoeff 1998; Mirzoeff 2006). From this point of view, it can be observed that the philosophical foundation of the modern visual epistéme constitutes vision as *a privilege*. Vision is a social privilege articulated in terms of class, race and gender. From Baudelaire's *flâneur*, that 'prince everywhere in possession of his incognito' strolling though the city, to Thomas Carlyle's 'hero' endowed with the capacity of 'visualising' world history and its destiny, in the mid-nineteenth century the notion of the subject of vision arises as an essentially elitist one.

The privilege of vision is not only connected to the observer's position but also to access to a specific cultural competence in seeing. Bryson (1988: 92) proposed an analogy between vision and language: just like the language I speak predates me and my linguistic experience, so visual discourses and codes predate my visual experience. Interestingly, the same paradoxes of private language outlined by Wittgenstein (1953) are replicated in the case of visuality: can there be something like a 'private visual experience'? Visuality spans the lived visual experience and more structural social relations, mediated by the technologies that enable the process of visualisation. As Foster (1988: ix) first put it, visuality comprises the physical act of seeing, the current visual technologies

and the discursive formations that articulate vision. Mirzoeff (1998: 13), in particular, has insisted on the properly technological dimension of visuality, to which we shall soon return.

Vision as/in interaction

While the ancient theory of the eye as an active organ emitting particles has been replaced by modern optics, which as we have seen sharply separates the senses of sight and touch, the idea that eyes are points of energy concentration persists through the centuries in both popular beliefs about the evil eye and medical practices such as hypnotism and, through it, psychoanalysis – albeit obviously in a disembodied way. But precisely because in the modern imagination sight allows for no direct contact between the percipiens and the perceptum, the explanation of the reaction to the other's gaze that the modern theory of vision allows is far from complete or even sufficient. The gaze is a critical modulator of social interaction. For instance, in a beautiful short essay Abraham Moles (1984) has described everyday life in a community from the point of view of its 'space of gazes'. Walking in the street, looking from the window, trading, looking after one's children or meeting a friend are all cases in which eye-to-eye contact modulates the social encounter. Interestingly, physiologists and psychologists are increasingly realising that a rich model of vision needs to include social and emotional factors. For instance, Elaine Fox (2002; 2005) has analysed the specific anxiety that derives from a delayed disengagement of the gaze. Similar experiments suggest the immediately *affective* nature of the gaze and its profoundly territorial dynamic. The gaze is not simply *symptomatic* of the intentions people have when they begin an interaction, but rather *constitutive* of the meaning the interaction assumes for those engaged in it.

It has been observed by ethologists and neurologists alike that all social animals place great importance on the perception and recognition of the faces of their cospecifics (i.e., members of the same species). In many cases, social attention is mediated through gaze perception. The classical sociologist Georg Simmel made compelling observations about this. In his excursus on the sociology of the senses (Simmel 1969[1908]), he investigated the 'strictly sociological function' of the eye, specifically the *reciprocal contact* between gazes. The symmetrical immediateness of eye-to-eye contact – a mutual intervisibility which exists only as long as it is *immediate* – is for Simmel the most fundamental type of human interaction, for it yields an understanding of

the other which is not filtered by general categories but is instead truly individual and singular. This presentation is grounded on the reciprocal visual presence of each component in the interaction.

Later, the social phenomenologist Alfred Schütz (1967[1932]: §4) distinguished between *observation* and *relation*, on the grounds that only in the latter does a mutual commitment between the interacting subjects come about (Merleau-Ponty termed this characteristic 'reversibility'). Here again we find an attempt to account for the territorialising effect of the relation of intervisibility in social interaction. Clearly, what Schütz called 'observation' corresponds to the idealised perspectival take on vision we have described earlier and which, as we have seen, is hardly detachable from its haptic counterpart. For his part, Erving Goffman described the subtle ways in which relationships of intervisibility take shape in rituals of self-presentation (Goffman 1959). In particular, behaviour in public places (Goffman 1963b) is always subject to, and conducted through, practices for the reciprocal management of reciprocal visibility among social actors. Similarly, 'face work' (Goffman 1967) requires the positive recognition and respect of the other's aspect and countenance, through which one is ratified as a legitimate participant in a situation. Notably, here we also appreciate that visibility is not homogeneous; rather, it concerns thresholds. In this sense, the 'normal appearance' (Goffman 1971) of a social setting corresponds to its invisibility. In the absence of alarm signals, the setting is transparent to the observer. In other words, the normal is neither noticed nor thematised; on the contrary, it is the anomalous which is marked and transposed to a different register of visibility.

Analysis of the functions performed by reciprocal gaze, in order to coordinate joint cognitive or expressive work with the others, has been conducted by researchers in the field of non-verbal communication, notably by Adam Kendon (1967; 1990) and David Sudnow (1972), and this continued sociologically a line of inquiry already begun by social psychologists (Argyle and Cook 1976). For these scholars, 'seeing-at-a-glance' establishes the temporal synchronisation (timing) of interpersonal action. Glances are interactive phenomena for the joint production of normal contexts. For Kendon, who inaugurated the study of how people look at each other during conversations, reciprocal gaze signals an act of 'taking into consideration' which is determined as follows: the duration of a gaze is directly proportional to the effort spent on the interaction but inversely proportional to the actors' degree of emotional commitment. Because gaze management is deeply imbued with commitment, it can be a highly delicate undertaking, as evidenced

when gaze is perceived as a territorial challenge or as an affront to honour, and gaze aversion phenomena occur.

Kendon experimentally formed dyads of interacting people and recorded their staring behaviour. All sorts of intervening variables were considered, including age, sex, degree of acquaintance, duration of looks, dominance position and so on. Kendon wanted to show that looking and averting the gaze are elements that synchronise the timing of interaction. However, the intervening variables are so many that, beyond some general observations – direct eye contacts are brief and people look more when they listen than when they speak – no specific constant correlation could be discovered (Rutter 1984). Only general trends can be highlighted, but exceptions are always possible.

Visual interaction is also modulated by a wide variety of factors. Consider for instance the uniform as a device that transforms a person into something more than a contingent human being. For instance, a police uniform represents a powerful interactional device which transforms a contingent human being into a 'representative of the authorities'. Patricia Paperman (2003) has discussed how the Metro police in Paris use the visibility of their uniforms both to provoke 'revealing' reactions in suspects, and to check the social meaning – and, essentially, the impression of legitimacy – which passers-by attribute to the overt physical action – at times violent – taken by the police against individuals apparently doing nothing. The uniform's visibility therefore serves to make the occurrence of any potentially illegal situation visible not only to the interacting parties but to all those present.

In general, we know that mutual glance is proportional to engagement within a situation. Yet, for action coordination to occur, in many instances *not looking* at each other it is as essential as looking: for instance, when crossing the road, the pedestrian looks at the car driver to make sure that her presence is noticed and her intentions understood, but subsequently she must avert her gaze, trusting that the driver in question will slow down and halt to let her pass. Averting the gaze becomes mandatory in the mechanism of civil inattention (Goffman 1959), which again highlights the moral dimension of human conduct as it materialises in mutual visibility relationships: there are appropriate and inappropriate staring behaviours. Physicians, surgeons and dentists often find themselves in a condition in which they have to manipulate the body of their patients as if they were objects: in these cases a series of modulations is put in place to 'bracket' the stage in which the patient is reduced to its mere flesh and restored to a ratified social member afterwards. Moreover, it is not simply a matter of looking or not looking

straight at each other. In many cases – for instance the use of mirrors in a dance school – mediated looks are also used abundantly to coordinate action visually within a group. In short, mutual visibility management corresponds to a management of the *foci* of attention in a social situation. It is in this way that vision is bound up with the constitution of the subject.

Subject-making vision: Recognition and control

The relationship of looking at each other constitutes the site of mutual recognition, misrecognition or denial of recognition of the other – in short, the site where we constitute ourselves as 'subjects'. Vision is subject-making: something like a 'subject' is born only through the creation and development of the visibility relationship itself. While such visibility is not simply visual, vision still occupies a crucial role in it. Notably, also, there is no linear progression in this relationship: it is rather a matter of thresholds and points of reversal. We need visual attention to get the social recognition we seek, but its intensity, for instance in staring, can be intrusive and disturbing. Similarly, visual contact helps to coordinate action with others, but in many cases such coordination also involves supervision and control, that is, the exercise of power. Looking inherently entails power, whereby the viewer asserts himself as 'ontologically' superior to the viewed.

The gaze can be employed to direct and impose conduct. Inmates in the panoptic establishment, knowing that they cannot escape surveillance, consciously adapt their behaviour, interiorising certain forms of conduct. Consciousness of being observed plays a crucial role in the process. The guard's gaze may not be continuous, but its effects are. It is the state of continuous visual consciousness that matters: in this sense, Bentham warned that only sane people should be incarcerated because mad people and minors would not be affected by the gaze of the guard. The subject-making potential of vision is deployed by Bentham through the imagination of a field of positions and relations in which subjects are placed and taken. In other words, the dream of an 'automatic functioning of power' through panoptic visibility is based, not only on the asymmetry of looks, but also on its precise hierarchical organisation. Given that the inspector can in turn be subject to inspection, the whole diagram curiously resembles the image of the legal system elaborated by the Kantian philosopher of law Hans Kelsen. Kelsen (1934) described law as a pyramid-like architecture, a *Stufenbau*, or multilayered construction, in which the source of legality of each layer is drawn from

the superior layers and the highest level is presupposed by the whole system. Arguably, it is in this sense that Foucault calls 'archaising' Bentham's reliance on vision as a conforming mechanism, and specifically 'modern' his description of a whole technological configuration of power (the logic of the visibility diagram).

The staree and the those under surveillance are 'objectified'. Stripping a human being naked has always been one of the classic and most powerful ways of humiliating and inflicting violence. But if the viewed are turned into objects, what is the role of objects as such in the visual experience? As we asked at the beginning of this chapter, can they ever 'look back'? Here, we encounter a particularly important notion, that of 'aura'. To confer an aura on an object, Walter Benjamin (1939) first observed in his essay on *Baudelaire's Motifs*, means in a certain sense to endow it with the capacity to stare back. The aura is thus like a look lent to the object or variously bestowed on it. This 'borrowed gaze' – 'now objects perceive me', wrote Paul Klee in his notebook *The Thinking Eye* – entails a form of sacralisation of the object. The auratic object is a *symptomatic* object that embodies a dialectics of distance and proximity; it is an object that stretches toward us and touches us. It is endowed with its specific rhythm, an *anadyomenic tide* of contact and loss (Didi-Huberman 1992), a pulsation.

Gendered and racialised view

> She had not recollected the nickel for the coffee. She would have to do so, unless I left it on the table and walked out. But I wasn't going to walk out. A half hour passed. When she hurried to the bar for more beer, she no longer waited at the rail in plain sight. She walked around to the back of the bar. She didn't look at me anymore, but I knew she knew I watched her. (John Fante, *Ask the Dust*)

It is no mystery that the asymmetry between seeing and being seen is deeply imbued with a sexual component. In Western society, as in many traditional societies, it is typically the male who watches, while it is the female who is watched. Obviously present in this mechanism is a form of control, domination and hypocrisy. The dominant visual representation of the woman is contrived to imply that the woman is always conscious of her being looked at, and that the impersonal gaze of the observer is in fact a masculine gaze (Mulvey 1975; 1989). Gendered vision has long been used as a power device for the domination of

women (Berger et al. 1972; Hollander 1980; Dyer 1992[1982]; Cohan and Hark 1993; Doy 1995) and can be said to form a 'matrix of vision' (Farough 2006). Seduction is a social relation that unfolds wholly within this sexualised dimension of visibility. Sight is a sense that can violently provoke lust, and visuality is often imbued with voyeurism. Visual culture, from the history of the art to advertising, is replete with examples of visual attraction which is implicitly or expressly erotic and sexual.

The counterpart of the sociotype of the monster is the *exemplum*, or *model*, who incarnates not only an idealised beauty but also essentially a role model and a visibility diagram. It has been observed by critical authors that while female models avert their eyes, expressing modesty and submission, male models' looks are represented as dominant and fierce. Women, it is implied, are (should be) passive, men active. In most cases, while not looking back, the female model does so in a way that suggests that she is conscious of the presence of the beholder. It is not simply the presence or absence of the gaze that matters, but also the kind of look: the female model's gaze, when it becomes direct, always suggests invitation and complicity.

Such schemes are grossly stereotypical and advertisers have massively exploited them. More poetically, in *À la recherche du temps perdu* Marcel Proust glosses his impression of a beautiful stranger whose gaze momentarily met his own in the city as 'the gods of Olympus have descended to the streets'. One finds here one of the loftiest celebrations of modern seduction, which is essentially impersonal in nature. Nor is this feeling necessarily only Western. In Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950), one of the bandits remembers the appearance of the wife of the samurai, whom he will end up assaulting: 'A glimpse and she was gone: I thought she was a goddess'. In Fante's quote above, the duration of the gaze is embarrassingly prolonged.

With race, and collective identities in general, the issue becomes even more complex because, while minority group members are often forbidden to look back, they are not so much stared at as rendered invisible. Once again, the issue here broadens from merely a visual one to a more complex one that concerns the articulation of a social field of visibilities. But, even confining ourselves for the moment to the visual side of the matter, what is the *awareness of being observed*? The literary descriptions of men watching women highlight a phenomenon of extraordinary importance for those interested in studying how visibility constitutes itself. Only apparently is watching active, and being watched passive. In fact, at present the social and psychological sciences do not have the tools with which thoroughly to explain how awareness

of being observed unfolds. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological notion of *chair du monde* seems to entail a more promising way, to which we shall return in Chapter 2.

Imitations

The word 'image' shares the same roots as *ĭmĭtor, -āri,* to imitate. As such, the etymology seems to endorse the Platonic theory of visible things as copies of ideas, against which twentieth-century phenomenology has developed its philosophical programme. But what is the place of images in the inhabited vision and the experience of seeing we have outlined so far? Semiologists taught us that images are not flat but layered. They enclose various levels of meaning, a fact to which Roland Barthes (1977) referred as a 'floating chain of signifieds'. The same image, for instance the portrait of a powerful person, can be used to convey deeply different meanings, ranging from unconditional faith to farce and caricature. Photography provides a particularly pregnant illustration because in it the referent seems naturally to 'adhere' to its image. In his book on photography, Barthes (1980) identified the central tension within the photographic image through the notions of *studium* and *punctum*. While the studium represents the background (technical, cultural, etc.) knowledge that is inscribed in the picture, the punctum is the immediate and singular event which constitutes the haptic power of the image, its capacity to shock and elicit reaction. In other words, the punctum is the capacity of the image to act directly upon the viewers – to reach out and take them away, so to speak.

This tension within the image between a direct sensible presence and an inscribed, embedded discourse is created by a complex *temporality*. On the one hand, the image presents itself as here-and-now, it is perceived immediately and as immediately belonging to the present, yet on the other, it also prolongs and stretches towards other places and times, bringing us somewhere else, into a different spatiotemporal dimension. It is perhaps in this sense that Benjamin described the image as an 'immobilised dialectics' (*Dialektik im Stillstand*). Susan Sontag (1977) reflected on a similar aspect describing photographs' 'selective transparency'. The photograph always oscillates between its appearance as a document and its power-producing mechanism which works through interpretation. Because of its objectifying, even predatory side, the photograph, Sontag suggested, became an ideal tool of control, as its use in police offices and police archives reminds us (see also Gilardi 2003). But just as the photograph-as-document claims to 'unmask the world'

in a sort of modern quest for truth, it is also always taken as the apparently opposite pole, making the world beautiful. 'Beauty is truth, truth is beauty', Keats – the romantic poet – wrote. More recently, in her book on the representation of pain, Sontag (2003) stresses that the history of documentary photography and photojournalism – where the ideal of 'objectivity' would be most expected – has been in fact since its inception a history of fakes, and several among the most famous war photographs are *mises en scène* or at least still dubious shots. This reminds us of the deep interweavings between *le visible* and *le lisible*.

Visual commodification is an omnipresent tendency in images. In the case of cinema, only few great directors – who Deleuze (1983) regarded as 'thinkers by images' – were capable of leaving behind verbalised, preinterpreted images and proceeded resolutely towards 'pure' images. The image, Jean-Luc Godard once said, will only come in the time of resurrection. From their earliest stage, modern visual arts were intertwined and often indistinguishable from commodities on display (Foster 2002). These are dirty images. But perhaps they are the same image seen from its two opposite sides. These two opposite poles of the image coexist in a complex temporal *décalage*. In this respect, Didi-Huberman's (2003) reflection on the four pictures of the Birkenau crematorium taken by members of the *Sonderkommando* in August 1944 is extremely important. While accepting that no naïve realism can be applied to photographs, or even images in general, Didi-Huberman stresses how these four pictures, taken in such an extreme situation, *are* documents: they are 'images notwithstanding' (*malgré tout*). Because the extermination of memory was part of the extermination itself, these photographs exist at the point of convergence between two 'impossibilities', but clearly distinct from both of them: the close disappearance of the witness, and the 'unimageability' of the testimony. The survival of the four images from Birkenau refutes these two impossibilities which threaten to swallow them and restores to us the document-image: the existence of these images, Didi-Huberman writes, refutes the claim of the impossibility of imagining what happened.

Once we have the documents, though, we still need the right eyes to watch them.

The visual and the visible

Foster's (1988) attempt to 'socialise vision' through the notion of visuality approximates the notion of visibility as it will be conceptualised in this book. The point, as already stated above, is that the field of the

visible is not equivalent to that of the simply visual. The visible can be better understood as an *extension* or *prolongation* of the visual.

'Prolongations' are connections among ontologically heterogeneous elements comprised within a composite mechanism or an encompassing dynamic. Such a dynamic is neither evolutionary nor systemic. In the work of Elias Canetti (1960), one can find a similar relationship between the mass and the individual: the individual is a prolongation of the mass, or what remains when the 'thriving' mass withdraws and an individuated social entity appears. Similarly, Canetti describes how climbing prolongs into trading, jaws into prison, and excrement into morality. These relations should not be misunderstood as implying a notion of evolution: the individual is not better than the mass, and trading is not a refined version of climbing. Rather, these activities remain distinct but they share specifically topological and 'haptic' similarities. More recent sociological approaches like actor-network theory (ANT) move in a similar direction by stressing the continuity *cum* ontological heterogeneity of the related items, doing so from a perspective which is neither systemic nor evolutionist. From this point of view, prolongation has similarities with what Latour (1993[1991]) used to call 'mediation work' or, elsewhere, '*factiche*' and 'collective of beings'.

Just as one can evidence a visual dimension in the media, so one can show a dimension of visibility in visual interaction. Some scholars of visual culture have emphasised this aspect by adopting a markedly relational approach to the visual. Mirzoeff (1999: 13), for instance, focuses not on the visual object but on the visual *event*, in which the visual sign is technologically produced and culturally interpreted by the viewer. Using the concept of prolongation, one may say that the constitution of the visible is that of a prolongation of the visual *impregnated with the symbolic*. Yet to understand this notion correctly, one must reverse the traditional approach to the study of the symbolic and say, *not* that it is the objects of the field of visibilities (images, gestures and 'representations') that symbolise something (values, social cohesion, identity, etc.), but rather that symbols are specific relations in the field of visibilities, like images, gestures and representations. In other words, symbols are no more or less than whatever *renders* things visible. Thus a peculiar tension is established between symbol and image. Whereas a symbol is an 'image under control' (despite, or perhaps due to, the fact that the content of the symbol is often projected into the realm of the inexpressible), images are never fully controllable; on the contrary, they always comprise an elusive quality.

Consequently, to speak of the visible as the visual imbued with the symbolic is to assume as one's unit of analysis the hybrid nature of the *articulability of the visible*. As recalled above, Foucault (1969; Deleuze 1986) postulated the visible and the articulable as two separate and incommensurable domains corresponding to the non-discursive and the discursive. He insisted on the heterogeneity and anisomorphism between visual display and discursive articulation, as well as on the 'primacy' of the discursive over the visible. The notion of visibility proposed in this book seeks to avoid the dichotomic separation of the visible and the articulable. On the one hand, the visible is stratified – it is a 'fossil', to invoke Benjamin – and among its strata one always finds discourses; on the other hand, discourse itself is imbued with images, with emergent shapes, colours and shades which cannot be reduced to a mere abstract scheme, even less to a structure, a series of functions or a grammar. As recalled above, we should not forget that Foucault was – and always presented himself as – a historian of thought and rationality. As such, his analysis is entirely located within the discursive, and while fundamental for a critical analysis of this domain, it does not say much about the materiality of the social.

The visible and the articulable are co-present in the field of visibility. Contrary to the radical separation of the visible and the articulable, as soon as we try to imagine the pure visible or the pure articulable separate from each other, we rapidly lapse into a paradox. The aesthetic domain (and specifically the aesthetic-visual) certainly impacts upon us first, instantaneously, but only because in reality the political domain (Foucault's articulable) has always been present. The two domains speak different languages, but they support each other and, in a sort of wave-particle dualism, they carry each other forwards. It is not simply that they occasionally mix; rather they are always mixed together. There is no visible without modes of seeing. And the same abstract articulation that makes these 'modes' possible can be understood as an invisible in Merleau-Ponty's sense, rather than a separate, uncorrelated regime. The fundamental ambiguity of visibility derives precisely from these continuous interweavings among its components. *Inscription* in the visible through inscription technologies is consequently a process that always takes place in the dual form of the observable and the articulable.

To say that the visual is visible may of course seem banal. However, less trivial is the corollary that *the visual itself needs to be visibilised*. In this respect, the example of digital visual information retrieval can be illuminating. We have become accustomed to the discourses of the omnipotence of digital convergence. All types of information, we are

told, can now be converted into digital format and exchanged in all sorts of imaginable ways. Enthusiasts claim that we are now entering the age of 'total information', where everything is, technically if not politically, visible. Experts, however, tell us a different story. In the first place, no universal semantic indexing of images exists: there is no Dewey system applicable to images available over the internet, and image tags are only contextual and purpose specific (Enser 2008). But apart from technical considerations about the feasibility of such systems, the theoretically relevant point is that digital images indexing systems are devices developed to *visibilise the visual*, and the difficulty of doing so speaks of the complexity of the field of visibility as it processually unfolds.

We can conclude the chapter by examining some procedures for visibilisation, remembering that failure to find convincing ways to visibilise events, subjects and objects may lead one to being socially marginalised. In H. G. Wells' story *The Country of the Blind* (1904), the protagonist ends up jailed and subsequently enslaved because he insisted on referring to an invisible domain of experience which did not exist, or better *should not* exist. One must not only create procedures for visibilisation, but also create alliances and communities of practice to adopt and support them.

Technical procedures for visibilisation

Foucault described the medical gaze as an expertise that reads the symptoms and visibilises the illness which hides itself in the body of the ill person even when it is in plain view. Being an expert, one might infer, means being able to manage certain visibilisation processes. The expert, Lippmann (1922: §IX) observed, perceives differences to which the lay person is blind, and becoming an expert about a given phenomenon entails multiplying the number of aspects and facets of that phenomenon. Power is not only exercised in seeing without being seen, but also in seeing the invisible through specific procedures for visibilising it. In this sense, technically produced images such as laboratory images can be used by experts as 'signatures of the events' (Knorr-Cetina and Amann 1990), and something similar happens even in the case of figures in social theory and philosophy which, strictly speaking, are 'pictures of nothing' (Lynch 1990).

The expert recognises more differences than the lay person, but not simply that. In the work context of airport personnel, for instance, Charles Goodwin (1996) has studied how the supervision of embarkation and disembarkation procedures via CCTVs takes place. Goodwin

has observed that being able to perceive a significant event – for instance, *seeing* that there is a problem with a movable ramp to connect to the aircraft – is an activity conducted situationally and collaboratively. Coordinated work is achieved through verbal and non-verbal communication jointly, in which team members give and receive 'instructions for seeing': that is, instructions (often in the form of phonetic emissions lasting a few tenths of a second) on how to interpret the images and react accordingly.

To what extent are such 'instructions' themselves visible or invisible? Are they visualised or do they function according to some 'status of visibility'? In trying to answer this question, we are once again led back to considering the technical and technological nature of visibilisation procedures. Recently, Amoore and Hall (2009) have examined the visualisations of passengers' bodies at airports' security check-ins, showing how these visualisations are both political *and* depoliticising (see also Kruger et al. 2008). Biometric controls digitally 'dissect' bodies and hide the political consequences of the enacted social sorting (Lyon 2002). In general, the visualisations offered by technical apparatuses can be hardly challenged or called into question on the basis of their products, precisely because the 'objects' through which they produce their images remain external to the process and invisible: the referent cannot be invoked to discuss the procedure itself. So, every procedure of visualising is normative, but there is a complex way in which normativity turns out to be itself technological, generated 'endogenously' from within a given social local context (Garfinkel et al. 1981; Goodwin 1995).

Just like a 'stigma' in Goffman's sense is taken to visibilise a moral characteristic of the subject, so all sorts of classifications of human beings need to visibilise certain features and certain differences technically to allow for the differential treatment of people. To examine one case: for institutional racism to work, differences between the alleged 'races' must first of all be made visible. From this point of view, racial physiognomics is a science of visibilisation which selects and 'shapes' certain phenotypical traits as relevant markers of 'race' while excluding other potentially conflicting traits. Classifications are techno-epistemic infrastructures which enable the production of sustained visible effects precisely in the moment when they recede into invisibility (Bowker and Star 1999).

Finally, it should be remembered that historically the technologies of visibilisation have varied widely. Maps have provided important visibilising tools for quite a long time, enabling people to perceive and frame spatial relations and routes. Similarly, the telescope and the

microscope created new spaces of visibilisation (Wilson 1995). In this respect, Foucault (1966: 146–150) observed that the microscope (but the same holds for the other mentioned instruments) did not so much widen the visible as it transformed the ways of seeing, creating new scientific procedures for visibilisation. These instruments transformed 'seeing' into 'observing', which corresponds to a systematic, structured, taxonomical – but therefore also inherently focused and 'limited' – type of seeing.

More generally, we can conclude this first chapter by remarking that the recognition of the cognitive, socio-technical and cultural nature of vision, that is the recognition of human vision as a multiplicity, favours the shift towards an enlarged consideration of a dimension of the social and sociality. If vision is subject-making, is constituted as a privilege and serves the coordination of attention in social situations, a rich ecology of visibility must refine the understanding of the unsettled relationship between the percipiens and the perceptum as taking place on a common ground. The open field of the visible is the prolongation of the visual field and the element in which the social territorialises itself.

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