Valeria Cammarata / Michele Cometa / Roberta Coglitore

Archaeologies of Visual Culture

Gazes, Optical Devices and Images from 17th to 20th Century Literature

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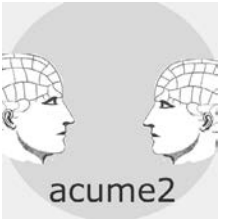

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Contents

ISBN Print: 9783847102205 – ISBN E-Book: 9783847002208

ISBN Print: 9783847102205 – ISBN E-Book: 9783847002208

List of figures

ISBN Print: 9783847102205 – ISBN E-Book: 9783847002208

ISBN Print: 9783847102205 – ISBN E-Book: 9783847002208

ISBN Print: 9783847102205 – ISBN E-Book: 9783847002208

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Michele Cometa

Introduction. Scopic Regimes and Literature

In the following pages we will try to outline a research area that in recent years has involved scholars interested in redefining the boundaries of disciplines that have always been in close cooperation, i. e. art history and literary history. These disciplines have gradually emancipated from their canonical equipment[1], both in terms of *objects* and in terms of *methods*. Within the context of a discipline that has been universally established and goes by the name of *visual culture*, literary studies have been contaminated and thus expanded their original field of investigation not only addressing, as in the past, the question of the relationship between verbal and visual, but also giving substance to this interweaving with an in-depth questioning about the meaning that gazes, images and optical devices[2] or, more generally, visual media, have in literature.

In order to actually weave different disciplines it is necessary to follow the famous warning of Roland Barthes against a tedious application of the principle of interdisciplinary: "In order to do interdisciplinary work, it is not enough to take a *subject* (a theme) and to arrange two or three sciences around it. Interdisciplinary study consists in creating a new object, which belongs to no one"[3].

This is the case of an *object* of investigation made by the cooperation among the most courageous avant-gardes in art history. It is a sort of mediology that has

1 On the *crisis* of art history and the birth of *visual culture* and *visual studies* see Hans Belting, *Das Ende der Kunstgeschichte?* (München: Dt. Kunstverlag, 1983); Mieke Bal, Yve-Alain Bois, Irving Lavin, Griselda Pollock, Christopher S. Wood, 'Art History and Its Theories', *Art Bulletin*, 1 (1996), pp. 6–25; Donald Preziosi, 'The Obscure Object of Desire: The Art of Art History', *Boundary2*, 13 (1985), pp. 1–41; Donald Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History. Meditations on a Coy Science* (New Haven, London: Yale UP, 1989); Georges Didi-Huberman, *Devant l'image. Questions posées aux fins d'une histoire de l'art* (Paris: Minuit, 1990).

2 By *optical devices* I mean a wide range of investigation *objects*, from specific optical instruments to more sophisticated vision technologies such as those media and *apparatuses* that can be described through the Foucauldian notion of *device*. See Giorgio Agamben, *What is an Apparatus? And Other Essays*, trans. by D. Kishik and S. Pedatella (Palo Alto: Stanford UP, 2009).

3 Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, ed. by Richard Howard (New York, Hill and Wang, 1986), p. 72.

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abandoned the theoretical simplifications of the *magnificent and progressive destinies* of technology. It is of course a sort of literary theory recognizing in the history of culture (including technological cultures) a way to study the *contents* of literary writing, but above all – as we shall argue in the following pages – its *forms*, its deep grammars.

This *new object* emerging from an interweaving of disciplines, which in the meantime begins to take shape as an independent field of research – the visual culture –, is the notion of *scopic regime*[4].

Ripened within the field of film studies by Christian Metz and then drawn on by Martin Jay, the concept of *scopic regime* allows to deflect simultaneously an analysis of images – as they are conceived in the context of the so-called *pictorial/iconic turn*[5] – the studies on optical devices, as well as a consideration – shaped on latest cultural studies – of the inseparable interweaving of *gazes* with *bodies*[6].

Not by chance the undisputed icon of contemporary visual culture is the famous engraving of Dürer titled *The Designer of the Lying Woman* (ca. 1538), where the designer's eye frames the body of a highly sexy model through an Alberti's perspective grid.

Fig. 1. Albrecht Dürer, *The Designer of the Lying Woman*, Nuremberg 1538.

4 On the concept of *scopic regimes* see Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Martin Jay, *Between Intellectual History and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Karl Erik Schøllhammer, 'Regimes representativos da modernidade', *Alceu*, 1 (2001), pp. 28–41. As for Italy, *Il luogo dello spettatore. Forme dello sguardo nella cultura delle immagini*, ed. by Antonio Somaini (Milano: Vita & Pensiero, 2005).

5 For a history of *pictorial/iconic turn* see: William J. Tom Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 11–34; Gottfried Boehm, 'Die Wiederkehr der Bilder', in *Was ist ein Bild?*, ed. by Gottfried Boehm (Munich: Fink, 1994) pp. 11–38; Doris Bachmann-Medick, *Cultural Turns. Neuorientierungen in den Kulturwissenschaften* (Reinbek: Rowohlt Verlag, 2006).

6 Hans Belting, 'Image, Medium, Body', *Critical Inquiry,* 31 (2005), pp. 302–319.

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Body, device, image and gaze come into this image in a relationship that symbolically recalls to us the concerns of this new field of studies.

Martin Jay has clearly warned against the possible reductionism that the notion of *scopic regime* may produce, insisting that each regime, for example the perspectivalist scopic regime, must be interpreted as "a contested terrain" in which different "visual subcultures" come into contact (often with quite invasive social effects) rather than as the triumph of a kind of visuality. Jay is aware, therefore, that even the three scopic regimes that led to the Western visuality, the "Cartesian perspectivalism", the "Baconian descriptivism" – that Svetlana Alpers[7] has attributed to Flemish painting of the seventeenth century – and the "Baroque vision" can be further resolved into both geographically and temporally localized visual cultures.

The research hypothesis that holds together the papers presented in this volume commits to literature the precise task of both detailing and distinguishing the major Western scopic regimes, focusing on regions and times that from a bird's eye view could otherwise miss their cultural specificity. The literary text is naturally suitable for this micrological work, but above all it offers, thanks to its narrative nature, the chance to objectify this complexity, making it visible as such. Literature has indeed the task to stage namely the conflicts among different scopic regimes – whatever their importance – and this happens, as we shall see, both by reporting forms of visuality, optical devices and different kinds of gazes, and by incorporating these elements into its own structure, showing the "structural homologies" – a term by Lucien Goldmann which seems convenient in this context of social and literary studies[8] – between literary texts and optical devices.

But how to define a scopic regime?

There is still no agreed definition among visual culture scholars[9]. However, it is not difficult to identify some converging positions especially as regards the elements to be taken into account in order to reconstruct a particular scopic regime, or, more precisely, the overlap between different scopic regimes. In fact,

7 Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing. Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983).

8 See Lucien Goldmann, *Marxisme et sciences humaines* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970) pp. 54–93. In founding his *genetic structuralism*, Goldman was interested in the emancipation of the sociology of literature from the simple content analysis of a literary work. He properly insisted that the *homologies* between society and texts are rather based on *mental structures*, that is on those "categories that organize at once the empirical consciousness of a certain social group and the fictional universe created by an author", Goldmann, *Marxisme et sciences humaines,* p. 57. The same applies, in my opinion, for the establishment of the scopic regimes of a society that affect (and in turn are affected by) the visuality as a social construction and, in the meanwhile, the *optics* of literature.

9 For a history of the *pictorial/iconic turn* see Bachmann-Medick, *Cultural Turns.*

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we could say that the entire discipline that goes by the name of visual culture exactly questions on the complex interplay between subjects and objects, which defines a scopic regime. This interplay takes into account, as we have already mentioned, at least three factors: images, both as a product of a conscious practice and as a figurative expression of unconscious and intangible processes[10]; media, which make *visible* these images and govern their creation (technology)[11]; and, finally, the gaze[12], which rests on those images and those bodies that make possible the presentification and the creation of the images which are offered to gazes.

What follows from this interplay are the forms of interpretation that visual culture has taken on the basis of a norm of references throughout the entire twentieth century. I am referring to the anthropology of images delivered to us by the long tradition of Kulturwissenschaft that from Warburg[13] comes up to Belting, concerned with the survivals (*Nachleben*), the re-semantification and the semantic reactivation of images and of their constituent elements (*Pathosformeln*, themes and motifs); an anthropology concerned with an archaeology of optical devices, an issue that affects not only the science of communication, but involves, in turn, an anthropological study of the changes that media produce; and, finally, an anthropology concerned with a phenomenology of the gaze with all its implications, from sexuality to (bio)politics, from control practices to economy.

The studies presented in this volume particularly focus on the changes in scopic regimes that occurred between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries. Of course we must take into account a much broader past, that is an archaeology of media and visuality concerned with *survivals* and temporal overlaps, or

10 Even intangible images – as the study of literature makes clear – are not only the product of psychic instances, but also the result of changes in imagery governed by media events. Conversely, we should not forget that the theories on psyche are strongly influenced by the mediated experiences of their extenders, as well illustrated by Sarah Kofmann, *Camera obscura de l'ideologie* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1973).

11 Among those media, the anthropology of images (*Bildanthropologie*) by Hans Belting also includes the *bodies*, Hans Belting, *Bild-Anthropologie,* (Münich: Wilhelm Fink, 2001).

12 On the concept of *gaze,* see at least Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting. The Logic of Gaze* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1983); Norman Bryson, *Looking the Overlooked. Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (London: Reaktion Books 1990); Gertrude Koch, 'Ex-Changing Gaze: Revisioning Feminist Film Theory', *New German Critique*, 30 (1985), pp. 139–153; Michel De Certeau, 'The Gaze: Nicholas of Cusa', trans by Catherine Porter, *Diacritics*, 17 (1987), pp. 2–38; Edward Snow, 'Theorizing the Male Gaze: Some Problems', *Representations*, 25 (1989), pp. 30–41; Stephen Kern, *Eyes of Love. The Gaze in English and French Paintings and Novels 1840–1900* (London: Reaktion Books, 1996).

13 See Georges Didi-Huberman, *L'image survivante. Histoire de l'art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 2002); Claudia Cieri Via, *Nei dettagli del nascosto. Per una storia del pensiero iconologico* (Roma: Carocci, 1998).

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– more simply – with the revival of the theoretical problems such as those related to devices. Perhaps we could talk – according to a fascinating hypothesis of Siegfried Zielinski[14] – about a *geological* structure, about the *deep time* (*Tiefenzeit*) of vision media, about a *history* that knows not only progress but also upheavals and recoveries of fragments and experiences of the past.

In terms of *space* the question is quite easier, since we intend to deal in the first instance with a European topography, even though in a context of *Weltliteratur* in the Goethean sense of the term, where crossing borders is already widely practiced and advocated. Moreover, just addressing the issues of visuality, Luis Miguel Fernández, in a study on the relationship between literature and optical devices in Spanish culture between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, rightly spoke of the wide and rapid circulation of these experiences of vision and of the establishment of a real European *esperanto visual* as early as the eighteenth century[15]. The rapidity with which not only texts pass the borders, but also technology, images and gazes, is still surprising. As for the status of literature, it is clear that we must get used to a *larger* notion of it, such as that provided by cultural studies[16], especially considering the fact that in the late twentieth century we have witnessed an excessive *textualization* in research practices and in their objects that ended up marginalizing what cannot be shaped on the model of language. Not by chance we have begun to insist on the *logic of images*[17], which is given not only a value, as the privileged object of study, but also a cognitive significance transcending the limits of language. This is not just about putting the image at the center of the hermeneutic debate, but about reassessing and studying more closely the epistemological potential beside and beyond the language. The *logic of images* is certainly still one of the requests in contemporary research, but the supposed existence and the gnoseological consistency have had at least the effect of making us reconsider the relationship between textuality and visuality, well beyond the tradition that from Lessing has been recovered and re-interpreted by semiotics. It has especially forced us to

14 Siegfried Zielinski, *Archäologie der Medien. Zur Tiefenzeit des technischen Hörens und Sehens* (Reinbeck-Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2002), pp. 9ff.

15 Luis Miguel Fernández, *Tecnologia, espectáculo, literatura. Dispositivos ópticos en las letras españolas de los siglos XVIII y XIX* (Santiago de Compostela: Universidad de Santiago de Compostela, 2006), p. 16.

16 Michele Cometa, *Dizionario degli studi culturali*, ed. by Roberta Coglitore and Federica Mazzara (Roma: Meltemi, 2004); Michele Cometa, 'Il ritorno dei Cultural Studies', in *Introduzione ai Cultural Studies*, ed. by Christina Lutter and Markus Reisenleitner (Milano: Bruno Mondadori, 2004), pp. IX–XXXIV.

17 Gottfried Boehm, 'Jenseits der Sprache? Ammerkungen zur Logik der Bilder', in *Iconic Turn. Die neue Macht der Bilder*, ed. by Hubert Burda and Christa Maar (Köln: DuMont, 2004), pp. 39ff.

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address again the issue of the boundaries between the unspeakable and the invisible as mutual stimuli of knowledge.

From the point of view of literary theory, it has led to the rediscovery of the Foucauldian notion of *device*[18] that, even though originally influenced by twentieth-century linguistic turn, however, has forced literary scholars to address the effects of text production, circulation and reception in the broader context of social practices and institutions no longer reducible to the mere language.

The so-called *pictorial turn* – as presented by W. J. T. Mitchell[19] – has in fact reacted against the imperialism of textuality. Beyond the naive enthusiasm for the alleged quantitative dominance of visual dimension in modernity, it has instead accustomed us to reading the *visual culture* of writers and of literature in this complex device that is the scopic regime.

Contemporary visual culture has been able to decline such requests together with those concerning images, recovering much for a privileged relationship with the textuality as it emerges, to give just one example, from the concept of *image-text* by Mitchell[20], and in the belief, often expressed by the author, that all media are *mixed media*[21]. It is now a matter of accessing this complex interplay from the side of literary text, which is not only a crucial component of the devices, but it can in turn be understood through the weaving of images, optical devices, and gazes.

18 Agamben, *What is an Apparatus?*; *Lo sguardo di Foucault*, ed. by Michele Cometa and Salvo Vaccaro (Roma: Meltemi, 2007).
19 William J. Tom Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994).
20 Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, p. 89.
21 William J. Tom Mitchell, 'There are no Visual Media', *Journal of Visual Culture*, 4, pp. 257–266.

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Part I: Gazes

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Valeria Cammarata

Through Different Eyes. Feminine Science and Literature in Early Modern Culture

Gaze and Vision

Vision has always had a double value in western culture: at the same time primary means among the other senses of knowledge, and means of sin and mistake. Science, aesthetics and also technology have always been fascinated by the mechanism that allows the eye to connect the mind to the outside world, and by the power of imagination so that it is still difficult to understand if it is related to vision or not.

The fascination with vision in western culture was born with Plato and the strict relation between the eye, light and the sun it comes from, which is the supreme knowledge to which men once belonged and that some of them can still reach. This fascination, however, became problematic during the seventeenth century, particularly thanks to Descartes' study on optics. Here the severing between the sensory eye and the eye of the mind was introduced, leading at once to the separation of the subject and the object of knowledge, but also to the separation of the pure intellect and illusory perception.

This fascination never ceased, and the studies on gaze carried out in the twentieth century are one of the most interesting research fields within visual culture and, more in general, cultural studies, considering all the complex mechanisms raising from the practices of the gaze in terms of power, gender and social conditioning.

In introducing *Techniques of the Observer,* Crary provokes the question on how the definition of "the observer of 19th century" can be posed, wondering, at the same time, if such a large generality can be defined for the 19th or any other century. Of course the answer is implicit in the purpose he explains: to study not a single kind or model of observer (and not of spectator) individuated in a space and in a time, but a field of forces, rules and arrangements that all together shape an observer in a defined society. Thus, claims Crary, a "self-present beholder to

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whom a world is transparently evident"[1], never existed, he can only suggest some of the conditions which allow the foundation of a dominant model by which vision has been "discussed, controlled and incarnated in cultural and scientific practices"[2].

Precisely the question of a dominant model will be at stake in this essay, which will try to provoke other questions on the ways in which non-dominant models of vision have tried to spread out in a historical and social period, as dramatic as the 19th century was, and as revolutionary as it still appears. This century is the 17th, and the non-dominant model of vision[3] is that of the female gaze.

Some of the same tools proposed by Crary will help us in achieving this goal. I mean the tools necessary to detect the breaks, the ruptures in an established visual culture[4]: the significance of some optical devices, and the interlocking of literary and scientific knowledge and practices. As Crary has already pointed out, optical devices are significant not only as material objects of a history of technology, or for the models of representation they imply, but mostly, as "points of intersection where philosophical, scientific, and aesthetics discourses overlap with mechanical techniques, institutional requirements, and socioeconomic forces. Each of them is understandable not simply as the material object in question […] but for the way in which it is embedded in a much larger assemblage of events and powers"[5]. The very accurate example taken by Crary is that of the camera obscura "as paradigmatic of the dominant status of the observer in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries"[6]. It produces an objective, almost disembodied vision that, as we will see, puts the observer at a distance from *his* object, and it is supposed to give no chance of acting on it. A dominating, scientific and uncontested gaze operating through microscope and

1 Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer* (Cambridge-London: MIT Press, 1992), p. 6.
2 Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, p. 6.
3 Crary, *Techniques of the Observer,* p. 7.
4 The first treatment of this term in the sense we nowadays intend was in *The Art of Describing* by Svetlana Alpers. She took the term from Michael Baxandall, and used it to show how "in Holland the visual culture was central to the life of the society. One might say that the eye was a central means of self-representation and visual experience a central mode of self-consciousness. If the theater was the arena in which the England of Elizabeth most fully represented itself to itself, images played that role for the Dutch. The difference between the forms this took reveals much about the difference between these two societies. In Holland, if we look beyond what is normally considered to be art, we find that images proliferate everywhere. They are printed in books, woven into the cloth of tapestries or table linens, painted onto tiles, and of course framed on walls. And everything is pictured-from insects and flowers to Brazilian natives in full life-size to the domestic arrangements of the Amsterdammers. The maps printed in Holland describe the world and Europe to itself", Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in The Seventeenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. XXV.
5 Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, p. 8.
6 Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, p. 8.

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telescope as well. We should wait until the romantic discussions on it to discover a new priority for the subjectivity of vision, anyway related only to poets and artists, and still excluded by empiricists and positivists.

Furthermore, even a feminist position such as that of Donna Haraway stresses the importance that the analysis of technology can have in order to understand how ways of life, social orders and practices of seeing affect our knowledge and intervention on the world[7]. In Haraway's opinion, not only the *histories* of science are all *histories* of technology, but they are about skilled practices: "How to see? Where to see from? What limits to vision? What to see for? Whom to see with? Who gets to have more than one point of view? Who gets blinkered? Who wears blinkers? Who interprets the visual field? What other sensory powers do we wish to cultivate besides vision? Moral and political discourse should be the paradigm of rational discourse in the imagery and technologies of vision"[8]. All these questions put at stake many of the most important issues about vision, especially for what concerns the gender matter implied in it: the situating of the view, the reason why we see or, moreover, the reason why we care so much about vision, and, even, the chances we can or cannot give to other senses. However, the most important questions expressed by Haraway are those that introduce the uncanny possibility of unequal positions within the same field of vision, in which someone can wear the blinkers, someone can hold the blinkers, and yet someone else, perhaps from a point of view higher than all others, can interpret the whole field of vision, that is the complex and contested terrain in which subjects, objects and instruments act from different points of view. That is why we need a political and moral paradigm to analyze vision rather than a scientific one. First of all, continuing in Haraway's discussion, the instruments of vision are probably the main causes of disembodied vision. In fact, it is the primary characteristic of capitalistic, colonialistic, chauvinistic power that accords to vision as a means of knowledge no apparent limits, or, at least, limits that can be easily and increasingly exceeded thanks to the optics technologies themselves. In this way, supported by optical devices, vision becomes an *unregulated gluttony* of the infinity of visibility gradually evolving from divine myth – or a *god-trick* – to an ordinary practice, from the illusion of seeing everything from nowhere to the form of a "cannibal-eye of masculinist extra-terrestrial project"[9]. This means in no way, as we will soon see, that a feminist discussion should abandon any project about vision or about analysis and use of optics. On the contrary, it could

7 Donna J. Haraway, *Situated Knowledges. The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*, in *The Gender and Science Reader*, ed. by Muriel Lederman and Ingrid Bartsch (London-New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 169–188.

8 Haraway, *Situated Knowledges*, p. 177.

9 Zoe Sofoulis, *Through the Lumen: Frankenstein and the Optics of Reorigination* (Santa Cruz: University of California at Santa Cruz, 1998) (Phd Thesis).

ISBN Print: 9783847102205 – ISBN E-Book: 9783847002208

well represent a politics of positioning, since it mediates standpoints, making us aware of the mediated nature of vision. This gives light to a new imagery of vision in which privileged and subjugated positions unveil their cultural, social, historical construction.

Another tool, a very significant one, is delineating the way a particular visual culture shapes different kinds of observers. It stays in the interrelation between art and science and in the ways they condition the observer – which little by little is becoming more instable than we presumed at first – through new forms of experiment in visual representation, not only in terms of institutional and economic requirements, but also in symbolic and psychological ones. This is the way in which material objects or technological discourses affect literary and artistic expressions, shaping their topics and their structures[10]. Thus, new observers are created not only by lenses but also by the pages of books celebrating or contesting them.

Not too surprisingly, the question of the non-dominant model is what Crary will not examine: "What is not addressed in this study are the marginal and local forms by which dominant practices of vision were resisted, deflected, or imperfectly constituted. The history of such oppositional moments needs to be written, but it only becomes legible against the more hegemonic set of discourses and practices in which vision took shape"[11].

The claim of hegemony cannot pass unobserved in a field research as that of cultural studies. Such a central term has been coined by Antonio Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks*, especially in the sections devoted to the role of the intellectual in modern society[12]. Hegemony is one of the forms that power can assume in opposition, or in cooperation, to dominion. While the latter acts by means of dictatorship – and it is operated by political society – the former is the function of organizing consent assigned to civil society, particularly the organic intellectuals. Cultural hegemony is thus definable as the organization of consent through ideological structures and their institutions. Power is not expressed through force, rather through a rational and sentimental influence leading to

10 Fundamental studies of the relation between the structure of a scopic regime and that of a contemporary form of literature – which is called structural homology – are those made by Phillippe Hamon and Max Milner. Hamon studied the homology between the scopic regime of world's fairs and the nineteenth-century French fiction in Philippe Hamon, *Expositions, littérature et architecture au XIXe siècle* (Paris: José Corti, 1989), and that between the scopic regime of photography and French narrative of the same period in Philippe Hamon, *Imageries. Littérature et image au XIXe siècle* (Paris: José Corti, 2001). Milner is the author of the study on the phantasmagoric imaginary and the fantastic in nineteenth-century, Max Milner, *La fantasmagorie. Essai sur l'optique fantastique* (Paris: PUF, 1982).

11 Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, p. 7.

12 Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, trans. by Joseph A. Buttigieg (New York: Universiy of Columbia Press, 1996), vol. II, pp. 201–202.

ISBN Print: 9783847102205 – ISBN E-Book: 9783847002208

persuasion. In this way it affects thought and the whole way of life. This is precisely the point in which the dream of Marxist revolution failed: in not having fully comprehended the extent of the cultural instruments of control – school, media and religion. Through these media, workers have been manipulated into accepting dominant ideology, be it bourgeois or religious, without being conscious of that.

If it is true that some intellectuals become organic to the structure, others maintain their traditional role as outsiders, independent from the dominant group. Moreover every human being is an intellectual, because he or she has a proper worldview, and can provoke new ways of thinking. He or she can do that by means of language, for example, that is a crystallized manifestation of a worldview and thus both means of hegemony and of subaltern. Every man and woman, then, has in him or herself the means to resist to this hegemony, even using the same material instruments of dominating class. Revolution is no longer something to be fought for with violence, but with a systematic opposition.

Nearly twenty years later in translating Binswanger's *Dreams and Existence*[13], Foucault defined image as a crystallization that prevents reason from going beyond perceptual aspects of form. It is, as well as Gramsci's language, a crystallized worldview. In fact, production, distribution and consumption of images are part of cultural hegemony, particularly in our age. They seem to be particularly dangerous when they are supposed to be neutral, an objective representation of reality.

One of the main points of focus of this study will be to demonstrate how images have always been instruments of hegemonic propagation, especially during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when scientific images encountered non-scientific worlds, producing wonder and new knowledge, and vision was at the beginning of its *mechanical* age. Some outsider intellectuals foresaw the danger which non-dominant classes could have incurred if they had not apprehended what these images really were and how they worked. Among these intellectuals there were some as marginal as women.

Subjects

As we have already seen throughout these first lines, two terms are constantly recurring: subject and object. It could seem obvious at a first glance. But the question is far from being obvious or still foreseen, being founded on some deeper questions teasing visual culture.

13 Michel Foucault and Ludwig Binswanger, *Dream and Existence* (Atlantic Highlands NJ: Humanities Press, 1985).

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First of all, the question of the relationship between subject and object produces a strong impact when we focus on who the subject is (the active part of the process of vision), and, on the other hand, who or what the object is (the passive part of the game). In so speaking we are already playing on a very contested terrain leading to such cultural and political topics as those related, for instance, to the colonial gaze and to gender questions, in as much as western culture is fundamentally based on a male subject, often colonialist, and on a female object, often colonized. This is the way in which western gaze used to act, almost from the Renaissance until the nineteenth century, holding a central perspective by which mastering at a distance all the history and nature belonging to him, female nature included.

The distance between observer and observed is exactly the topic on which the claim of objectiveness, mostly in science, has been founded and has covered the techniques of observing throughout modernity. Precisely this claim of objectiveness has been questioned by the philosophy of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, that from different points of view has unveiled the constructiveness and the partiality of this model, and has revised five hundreds years of western culture.

Particularly the question related to gender is one of the most debated within this topic, because of the difficulties experienced by psychoanalytic theories first, and then by feminine critics in defying the nature and the action of female gaze.

The complex mechanisms, as we have already talked about, are set into motion by the social arrangements and relationships in which gaze usually acts, that is, in one word, the scopic regimes that, from the cartesian view forward, have influenced the operation of the gaze[14].

Each scopic regime is somehow a more complex version of Alberti's visual pyramid, which connects the eye of the painter, the subject of the picture and the eye of the observer through the painting, considered as an open *window*, and insofar nearly transparent.

In modern theories the field of investigation extends from the arts and cinema to scientific, ethno-anthropological or pornographic observations. In this enlargement and multiplication, the same scopic regimes seem to be profoundly changed and analysis should focus on each of the elements that constitute them: perceiving subject – and not only a creative one –; perceived object – being it more or less able to return the gaze of the subject –; the medium by which one perceives – that is, the device that allows the perception, directing, and thus

14 Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of Gaze* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

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characterizing the gaze –; the environment in which visual process happens, and finally, the image, as the product of cooperation or fight among these elements.

One of the fundamental assumptions of contemporary visual culture is that each of these elements can change the entire structure of vision, producing different and often competing regimes. Indeed, in Martin Jay words "the scopic regime of modernity may best be understood as a contested terrain, rather than a harmoniously integrated complex of visual subcultures, whose separation has allowed us to understand the multiple implications of sight"[15]. The most significant implications arise, as we have already seen, from the relationship between the subject (active) and object (passive) of sight, depending on the type of regime: the relationship between doctor and patient, in fact, is different from that which is established between the biologist and his test sample, or between the painter and his model, or even between the colonizer and the colonized.

Recent theories in visual culture have found general agreement in defining the operation of the Western gaze as sexually oriented, that is made to conform to the male model. In *Ways of Seeing,* John Berger defines in this way the male/female relationship in gaze practices: "Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at [and become] an object of vision: a sight"[16].

Subsequent arguments of Foucault, made in *Surveiller et punir*[17], on the power relations established in prison, but also the educational and health regimes of the panopticon, have supported the hypothesis of a coercive power of the sight, generally if not exclusively exercised by man.

The issue affects many areas of investigation typical of cultural studies, in addition to the aforementioned visual studies. Many disciplines have been, in fact, interested in the elements and mechanisms of scopic regimes: psychoanalysis, by Lacan onwards, is interested in the functioning of the gaze in particular during the childhood mirror stage; philosophy, especially French philosophy of the twentieth century; but also post-colonial studies interested in human exotic objects of Western gaze.

However, the approach most affecting this research is that related to gender and women's studies, of those disciplines, namely, that especially in the twentieth century have undermined the patriarchal structure of society and of Western culture in all ages, showing how male/female opposition is culturally and not naturally determined. Starting from these studies, articulating the concept of *gender* either as an issue to "track, discuss, criticize, deconstruct" or as a "tool that allows the focus of the relationship between a woman and an-

15 Martin Jay, *Scopic Regimes of Modernity*, in *Visual Culture Reader*, ed. by Nicholas Mirzoeff (London, New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 66–67.

16 John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (New York: Penguin Group, 1972), p. 47.

17 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Book, 1979).

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