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ART IN THE AGE OF VISUAL CULTURE
AND THE IMAGE

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2.

Antonio Somaini

On the 'Scopic Regime'

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The debate around the concept of 'visual culture' and the status of 'visual studies', initiated in 1996 by the *Visual Culture Questionnaire* published on «October»¹ and recently mapped and commented by Margaret Dikovitskaya in her *Visual Culture: The Study of the Visual after the Cultural Turn*², has raised a number of important theoretical issues that cannot be ignored by scholars in the fields of art history, aesthetics, film, media or communication studies, even in countries like Italy which have not (yet?) witnessed the restructuring of the academic programs dealing with the 'visual' which is occurring in the US and the United Kingdom. The core of such debate seems to revolve around two main issues: what is the meaning of 'visual culture', and whether 'visual studies', intended as the study of visual culture, should be considered as a new discipline capable of redefining the status and the boundaries of 'traditional' disciplines such as art history or film studies.

The question on which I would like to focus my attention in this paper derives directly from one of the ambiguities that need to be clarified concerning the term 'visual culture'. Reading the different interviews collected by Margaret Dikovitskaya, a certain divergence emerges between authors like Nicholas Mirzoeff, who believe that 'visual culture' should be understood as an expression whose aim is to describe the current proliferation of images made possible by the development of digital media and the increasing importance attributed to the value of visibility in contemporary culture, and those –

¹ *Visual Culture Questionnaire*, in «October» 77 (1996), pp. 25-70.

² M. Dikovitskaya, *Visual Culture: The Study of the Visual after the Cultural Turn*, Cambridge, London 2005.

like W.J.T. Mitchell, Thomas Gunning or David N. Rodowick – who think that it should be considered as a term that can be applied to *any* socio-historical context, following the example of the first authors who have contributed to the introduction of the term, Michael Baxandall and Svetlana Alpers. If, as I believe, the term visual culture should be employed not only in relation to contemporary culture but also in the context of historical investigations, then the problem is to understand what can be considered as part of the visual culture of a specific historical period. Should we take into consideration the entire ‘domain of images’³, whether explicitly produced and recognized as ‘artistic’ or not, thereby suggesting that visual studies should be understood as a discipline which overcomes the traditional elitism of a certain kind of art history in order to give place to a general theory and history of the images which might include, besides traditional artworks, the forms of visual representation that circulate in the fields of medicine, science, technology, advertising and information? Or should we consider as part of the visual culture of a specific socio-historical context the entire (and virtually unlimited) domain of objects and artifacts whose *visual experience* is worth of being investigated: not only the various forms of artworks circulating within the domain of the so-called ‘visual arts’, but also design and fashion, architecture and interior design, landscapes and cities, shopping spaces and holiday resorts, as long as they are considered in the light of their visual experience⁴? The question is not of secondary importance, because in the first case, by considering visual culture as consisting mainly of *images*, we understand visual studies as a general and possibly systematic *Bildwissenschaft*⁵, whereas in the second case the focus is on *vi-*

³ See J. Elkins, *The Domain of Images*, London 1999.

⁴ The need for the study of visual culture to reach beyond the realm of images has recently been reaffirmed by Matthew Rampley in the Introduction to the volume *Exploring Visual Culture: Definitions, Concepts, Contexts*: «Not only does art consist of practices *other* than the making of images – one should mention sculpture and, more recently, installation or text-based conceptual art – but also material artefacts play a crucial part in the visual articulation of cultural values and identity. These range from fashion designs to crafted objects, designed commodities or buildings and entire cities. Indeed, one could argue that visual culture begins with the human body, with bodily adornment and the language of bodily gesture. Most of these practices are usually absent from accounts of visual culture, with their focus on the mass media of photography, television, film and the Internet. [...] Given that the generation of visual meaning involves complex interactions between images and material artefacts, and that the various practices of visual culture frequently rely on such interactions, exclusive attention to images is open to interrogation» (M. Rampley (ed.), *Exploring Visual Culture: Definitions, Concepts, Contexts*, Edinburgh 2005, p. 2).

⁵ See, for example, the interdisciplinary project carried out in the recent collective

visual experience in its variety. Visual experience intended in a very broad sense: as a social and cultural construct whose study has to reach beyond the field of image-making and especially of 'artistic' image-making, and as comprising not only the conditions of spectatorship that are dictated by visual artworks and so-called 'visual' media, but also those ordinary modes of viewing which compose that 'vernacular visibility'⁶ which occurs in everyday life.

If the study of visual culture, as W.J.T. Mitchell has stated recently, is about 'showing seeing'⁷, then there seems to be no reason to limit it to 'the visibility of contemporary culture'⁸. Visual culture, in my opinion, should not be considered as a sort of synonym for society of spectacle, simulation, postmodernism or the panopticism of 'control' society, even though the contemporary forms of visualization and the power/knowledge structures which they reflect and constitute are certainly one of the main topics of visual studies. Visual studies can and has to be also a historical and eventually genealogical enterprise, since its field of investigation, the various forms of visual experience, has a history which unfolds together with the history of images and the multiplicity of the social, cultural, and technological factors which surround and structure the process of seeing and the conditions of spectatorship.

But if visual experience has a history, the problem is to understand how such a history may be reconstructed and described: which are the documents and the traces that have to be investigated, and whether or not art should have an axiological preeminence over the wide range of devices, techniques, discourses and texts which constitute and witness the attitude towards the visual of a specific historical period. Furthermore, one may wonder whether the individual acts of seeing and the different forms of spectatorship that circulate in a specific historical period could be better understood if considered as part of some over-arching systems of 'visuality'⁹ or

volumes edited by Klaus Sachs-Hombach: *Wege zur Bildwissenschaft. Interviews*, Köln, 2004, and *Bildwissenschaft. Disziplinen, Themen, Methoden*, Frankfurt a.M. 2005.

⁶ The term is used by W.J.T. Mitchell in his interview with Margaret Dikovitskaya: see M. Dikovitskaya, *Visual Culture: The Study of the Visual after the Cultural Turn*, loc. cit., p. 240.

⁷ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture*, in *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*, Chicago, London 2005, pp. 336-356.

⁸ This seems to be the position assumed by Nicholas Mirzoeff in the interview with Margaret Dikovitskaya, where he states: «I don't think that visual culture is simply an alternative to art history; it is something very different, at the interface between all kinds of disciplines where the visibility of contemporary culture impinges on them» (*Visual Culture: The Study of the Visual after the Cultural Turn*, loc. cit., p. 225).

⁹ The term has been introduced by Hal Foster in a volume he edited entitled *Vision*

'scopic regimes'.¹⁰ Both terms are meant to underline the social and cultural constructedness of vision as well as its historicity, but the questions they raise are just as many as the answers they give. What is the relation between culturally constructed 'visuality' and the process of seeing? Is the first historically variable, while the second could be analyzed in a-historical terms as a 'natural' physio-psychological act, or described within the context of a phenomenology of perception? If systems of visuality and scopic regimes, rather than images and artefacts, become our 'object' of investigation, how can we identify the ones that are coexisting and perhaps competing within a certain historical context? From which 'vantage point' – and the metaphor here could not be more appropriate – shall we evaluate them and eventually compare them with the ones in which we ourselves are absorbed? What is the purpose, today, of a research on past scopic regimes – for example, the 'scopic regimes of modernity' described by Martin Jay? Can a genealogical approach help us understand the role of vision in contemporary culture, detect the emergence of new forms of spectatorship, isolate the current scopic regimes and the ones who are still to appear? Can or should it help us look for alternative modes of visuality, which can be located perhaps in the past or outside western culture?

and *Visuality*, where he describes the relation between the two terms in the following way: «Although *vision* suggests sight as a physical operation, and *visuality* sight as a social fact, the two are not opposed as nature to culture: vision is social and historical too, and visuality involves the body and the psyche. Yet neither are they identical: the difference between the terms signals a difference within the visual – between the mechanism of sight and its historical techniques, between the datum of vision and its discursive determinations – a difference, many differences, among how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see, and how we see this seeing or the unseen therein» (H. Foster (ed.), *Vision and Visuality*, Seattle 1988, p. IX).

¹⁰ The term 'scopic regime' appears in an essay by Martin Jay entitled *Scopic Regimes of Modernity* (in H. Foster, *Vision and Visuality*, *loc. cit.*, pp. 3-23) and is derived by Jay from Christian Metz's *Le signifiant imaginaire*, a study on cinema and psychoanalysis. In this text, Metz develops an analysis between film spectatorship and voyeurism. According to him, enhancing the essential property of the voyeuristic gaze – that of keeping the desired, seen object at a safe distance from the viewing subject – cinema locates its own data in the forever inaccessible, in a realm which is incessantly desirable but that can never be possessed, in 'the scene of absence'. Cinema, in other words, shows us the world, and at the same time it takes it away from us. As Metz writes, «what defines the properly cinematographic scopic regime is not the maintained distance, nor the care exerted in maintaining it, but the sheer absence of the seen object. Cinema is therefore a form of absolute voyeurism: it is founded on an unbridgeable distance, on a total inaccessibility» (see C. Metz, *Le signifiant imaginaire*, Paris 1977).

Some of these questions may perhaps be answered through a synthetic overview of how the project of a history of what may generically be called 'visual experience' has been pursued by a number of authors ranging from the early 20th century to the present, in order to compare different forms of periodization and the different value attributed the various documents and traces – including artworks – through which a determined scopic regime may be reconstructed.

A significant aspect of the researches of the art historians between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, in fact, was dedicated to the project of a history of styles conceived as directly correlated to a history of perception and of vision in particular. The idea of the historical nature of perception and vision is constantly reformulated within the writings of Riegl, Wölfflin, Panofsky and Benjamin¹¹. By referring to the essay *The Problem of Form* (1893) by Hildebrand, both Riegl and Wölfflin tried to root their 'art history without names' within the sphere of the conditions of possibility of experience and of seeing in particular. Such conditions of possibility, though, are not related to a kantian, a-historical transcendental subject but are a domain in constant transformation. Given that artistic styles evolve in time, and given that such styles are rooted in the corporeal sphere of sensible experience, the conclusion is that perception itself has a history. Different historical cultures have observed and shaped the world in different ways, activating from time to time different 'optical possibilities' which can be detected through the evolution of artistic styles. The phases through which is articulated the history of late-Roman artistic industry by Riegl, as well as the five couples of oppositional values individuated by Wölfflin in order to define the distinction between 'classical' and 'baroque' style, are both based on a broad distinction, derived from Hildebrand, between 'tactile' (or 'haptic') and optical, between 'close vision' and 'distant vision'.

Riegl refers to the distinction made by Hildebrand between *Nabbild* and *Fernbild* and describes a historical development which moves through the three phases of 'close' or 'haptic vision' [*Nabsicht*], to 'normal' vision [*Normalsicht*] and finally to 'distant' vision [*Fernsicht*], linking the progressive emphasis on the optical rather than on the tactile to the evolution of the ancient *Weltanschauungen*. Each *Kunstwollen*, according to Riegl, produces its own world

¹¹ On this topic, see A. Pinotti, *Il corpo dello stile. Storia dell'arte come storia dell'estetica a partire da Semper, Riegl, Wölfflin*, Milano 2001, and A. Pinotti, *Piccola storia della lontananza. Walter Benjamin storico della percezione*, Milano 1999.

and refers to its own *Weltanschauung*: each art-historical style does not express the gaze over a pre-constituted world but is in itself the constitution of a world which is shaped and made visible. Referring to the same oppositional poles described by Hildebrand, Wölfflin roots his distinction between ‘linear’ and ‘pictorial’ style in the distinction between different optical possibilities, suggesting that the stylistic changes depend on the change in the attitude towards the realm of visibility: one sees in a different way and sees different things, and each style refers to its own specific schemes of vision, to the angle of vision which defines the *Weltanschauung* of each historical period.

Panofsky, in his essay on perspective, seems on the one hand to consider the perception of space as a-historical and transcendental with respect to its artistic and conceptual interpretations, while on the other hand he links the evolution of the artistic styles and forms of representation to that of the ‘sentiments’ of space and world [*Raum- or Weltgefühl*]. In an intriguing passage of his essay, he says that both the ‘aesthetic’ and the ‘theoretical’ space – that is, space as it is represented in art and space as it is conceptualized by philosophy and science – are different but parallel *translations* or *expressions* with which ‘the perceptual space [*Wahrnehmungsraum*] is shaped in one identical ‘feeling’ [*Empfindung*], which in the first case is symbolized, in the second logicized’, thus alluding to a possible historical evolution of the ways in which space is perceived and *felt*¹². Between what is historically variable – the sphere of artistic styles and forms of representation – and what could be considered as transcendental and a-historical – the sphere of sensorial experience – there is thus, according to Panofsky, an intermediate plan which is constituted by those *Anschauungen* and *Empfindungen* which characterize the perception of space within a determinate historical age.

In Walter Benjamin’s *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, finally, this idea of the historical evolution of visual perception is further developed, with a particular attention for the role played by the various techniques of image production and reproduction. According to Benjamin, within long historical periods, together with the modes of existence of human collectivities, what undergoes transformation are also the modes and genres of sensorial perception. The way in which human sensorial perception is or-

¹² In the translation by Christopher S. Wood the passage reads as following: «‘Aesthetic space’ and ‘theoretical space’ recast perceptual space in the guise of one and the same sensation: in one case that sensation is visually symbolized, in the other it appears in logical form» (E. Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, New York 1997, p. 45).

ganized is not only naturally but also historically conditioned. In a famous statement, he claims that

the age of barbarian invasions, during which appears the late-Roman artistic industry and the *Wiener Genesis*, not only was characterized by a different artistic style with respect to classical antiquity, but also by a different form of perception.

Statements such as this, or such as the one concerning the 'optical unconscious' which is unveiled by photography and cinema, together reaffirm the link between the historical evolution of techniques, that of artistic styles, and that of the forms of perception, vision, and spectatorship. What nevertheless distinguishes Benjamin from Riegl is the absolute reversal of the latter's description of a progress from close to distant vision, from tactile or haptic to purely optical perception. Benjamin's perceptual history, constructed around the idea of a decline of the aura of the work of art, proceeds from the *distance* which characterizes the cultural and auratic relationship of the spectator to the *hic et nunc* of the work of art, to the *reduction of distance* made possible by the diffusion of photography and mechanical reproduction.

In more recent years, the project of describing the history of visual experience has been reformulated in a number of studies by authors such as Michael Baxandall, Svetlana Alpers, Martin Jay, Régis Debray and Jonathan Crary. Taken together, they offer different answers to the question of how a history of visual experience might be described. Baxandall's *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*¹³ can be considered as the text that has introduced for the first time the idea of 'visual culture' in a historical study, thereby initiating the debate that is still engaging us today. His reference to the idea of visual culture serves the general purpose of his study, which is to reconstruct the various attitudes, habits and beliefs which substantiate the 'Eye of the Quattrocento'. According to him, pictorial styles need to be studied in the context of the various sectors of social life within which certain visual habits and capacities are established. Such visual habits characterize a culture as a whole and penetrate also in the artistic production. The reconstruction of this 'period eye' is nonetheless based on a strict distinction between a physiological dimension of vision, which is intersubjective and remains uniform in time, and a psychological and social dimension of seeing which instead is his-

¹³ M. Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style*, Oxford 1972.

torically and culturally variable. This second dimension is made by all the schemes, categories, perceptual and deductive habits which compose the 'knowing style' of an individual, and by the whole number of codes, conventions, social habits and forms of representations which are common to a whole society. The mental instruments through which an individual organizes his or her own visual experience vary from culture to culture and from time to time. They include the categories through which he or she classifies the various visual stimuli, the knowledge with which the results of immediate perception are integrated, the attitude towards images and various forms of representation. The visual capacities a person uses in front of a painting are the same that inform his or her own common visual experience, which are deeply shaped by culture and society. As Baxandall writes,

some of the mental equipment a man orders his visual experience with is variable, and much of this variable equipment is culturally relative, in the sense of being determined by the society which has influenced his experience. Among these variables are categories with which he classifies his visual stimuli, the knowledge he will use to supplement what his immediate vision gives him, and the attitude he will adopt to the kind of artificial object seen. The beholder [...] is likely to use those skills his society esteems highly. The painter responds to this: his public's visual capacity must be his medium.¹⁴

As it is evident from this quotation, art, and painting in particular, is still the main centre of interest in Baxandall's research. Both he and Alpers move beyond traditional iconographical analysis of artworks towards the wider horizon of visual culture in order to then produce a better understanding of the beliefs, ideas and values that surround the artistic production of a certain historical period and influence its appreciation. Different, instead, is the attitude of an ambitious study such as *Vie et mort de l'image. Une histoire du regard en Occident* by Régis Debray¹⁵, in which the focus shifts from the relation of artistic production and the surrounding visual culture to a more general history of images and of the gazes that are directed towards them. Debray's work, which recurs abundantly to some sort of Hegelian triadic and dialectical schemes, is to describe certain historical *a priori* of the Western eye and the shifting thresholds between the visible and the invisible. The eye, the gaze has a history, and each historical age has its own optical unconscious: its relation-

¹⁴ *Ivi*, p. 40.

¹⁵ R. Debray, *Vie et mort de l'image. Une histoire du regard en Occident*, Paris 1995.

ship towards the visibility of the image and its invisible substrata is constantly redefined, the invisible codes of the visual are constantly changing. The history of art has to be replaced by a history of what made it possible: the history of the gaze directed to visible things which represent other things (that is, the images). The attention to history and genealogy is central for the project of Debray, who situates his history of images and of the gaze within the context of a new discipline, *mediology*, which investigates in their full variety of manifestations the processes of historical cultural *transmission*. With respect to bordering disciplines such as semiology and sociology, the project of mediology is more directly involved with time, memory and genealogy. The history of techniques and of materials is strongly intertwined with that of ideas and *mentalités*: Debray insists repeatedly on the importance of investigating the symbolic effects of techniques and the technical conditions of symbols. Within this context, the history of vision formulated by Debray is organized in three broad periods, each one of them being characterized by a certain predominant form of transmission or 'mediasphere' (writing, print, tele-vision), by a predominant type of image, and by a mode of seeing:

- a) the *logosphere* (the age that goes from the invention of writing to the invention of print) is dominated by images conceived and worshipped as cultural 'idols' and by a 'magical' gaze;
- b) the *graphosphere* (the age that goes from the invention of the print to the diffusion of televised images) is dominated by images conceived and looked at as artistic 'representations', and by an 'aesthetical' gaze;
- c) the *videosphere* (the age inaugurated by the global diffusion of television) is finally dominated by a new generation of fast-circulating and immaterial images for which a new term is needed, the 'visual', and by an 'economic' gaze in which seeing becomes yet another form of consumption.

Both Debray and Crary acknowledge in different ways their debt to Benjamin's attention to the role of technique in influencing perception and experience, and to Foucault's idea of 'archaeology'. The approach to the history of visuality which lies at the base of *Techniques of the Observer* by Jonathan Crary¹⁶ is at the same time *archeological* – as it is well expressed by the phrase by Virilio which Crary puts at the beginning of his volume:

The field of vision has always seemed to me comparable to the ground of an 'archaeological excavation' – and *materialistic*, in the benjaminian sense of a his-

¹⁶ J. Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, Cambridge, London 1990.

tory written from the perspective of the present and particularly attentive towards the phenomena in which present and past suddenly coalesce in one meaningful and recognizable pattern.

As Jonathan Crary writes, «if there is today an ongoing mutation in the nature of visuality, what forms or modes are being left behind? What kind of break is it? What are the elements of continuity that link contemporary imagery with older organizations of the visual?»¹⁷.

The aim of Crary's essay is to criticize two widely accepted theses: that according to which the end of the perspectival paradigm of representation would have occurred with the advent of impressionism, and that according to which between the *camera obscura* and the birth of photography there is a constant and gradual passage. To both these theses Crary opposes the conviction that a broad and important transformation in the makeup of vision has occurred in the early 19th century: a passage, a fracture that art history has not registered because it occurred outside the field of artistic representation, and instead within the field of the study of the physiology of vision and that, to this strictly correlated, of the various optical devices which run across early 19th century popular culture. If the observer of the 17th and 18th century was a disembodied figure whose visual experience was modelled on the incorporeal relations of the *camera obscura*, during the 19th century this observer is given a body. Psychophysiological phenomena like afterimages replace the paradigms of physical optics, and new optical devices like the stereoscope and the phenakistiscope grow out of a radical redefinition and new interpretation of the optical experience. Geometrical optics gives place to a physiological account of vision: from the paradigm of the *camera obscura* to the model of the body as producer of a non-veridical vision relatively indifferent to worldly reference.

Broadly speaking, the end result of Crary's argumentation leads to a sharp redefinition of the role of artworks and of artistic styles in determining and witnessing the historical transformations in the field of visuality. Every historical figure of an *observer* – and the insistence by Crary on the term 'observer' rather than on 'spectator' or 'viewer' is no coincidence, given the meanings of the Latin term *observare*, which include the idea of *observare leges* [to obey the laws] – is a figure which is located within a prescribed set of possibilities, embedded in a system of conventions and limitations, and such

¹⁷ *Ivi*, p. 2.

conventions go way beyond the artistic representational practices. As Crary writes,

if it can be said that there is an observer specific to the 19th century, or to any period, it is only as an *effect* or an irreducibly heterogeneous system of discursive, social, technological and institutional relations. There is no observing subject prior to this continually shifting field. There is no a-historical, transcendental observer running in its sameness through the course of history.¹⁸

The different ways in which vision is analyzed and understood, as well as the different optical devices such as the *camera obscura* or the *stereoscope*, determine the advent of new forms of spectatorship and visibility.

The example of the *camera obscura* is particularly meaningful, given its ambiguous status of optical device for the observation and production of images, as instrument of popular entertainment and artistic practice, as scientific means for the study of vision (from Leonardo to Kepler and Descartes), and as philosophical metaphor through which to define the nature of the mind and a model of subjectivity, as it happens in Descartes, Locke and Leibniz. As Crary writes,

for nearly two hundred years, from the late 1500s to the end of the 1700s, the structural and optical principles of the *camera obscura* coalesced into a dominant paradigm through which was described the status and the possibilities of an observer. During this period the *camera obscura* was without question the most widely used model for explaining human vision, and for representing the relation of a perceiver and the position of a knowing subject to an external world.¹⁹

A subject located in a position of withdrawal from the world, in an autonomous and privatized space, immersed in a condition of darkness which symbolizes, as it is evident in the writings of Descartes and Malebranche, a whole metaphysics of interiority.

The final model of a possible history of visibility to which I would like to concentrate my attention, is the one presented by Martin Jay in his brief essay on the 'scopic regimes of modernity'. The question which lies at the center of Jay's essay is whether there is only *one* unified modern 'scopic

¹⁸ *Ivi*, p. 6.

¹⁹ *Ivi*, p. 27.

regime' or whether there are several, perhaps competing ones. Jay's answer is that 'the scopic regime of modernity may be best understood as a contested terrain, rather than a harmoniously integrated complex of visual theories and practices. It may, in fact, be characterized by a differentiation of visual sub-cultures'.²⁰ The task of the historian of visibility is therefore the one of isolating the 'competing ocular fields in the modern era', keeping well in mind that «with its own rhetoric and representations, each scopic regime seeks to close out these differences: to make of its many social visualities one essential vision, or to order them in a natural hierarchy of sight».

In Martin Jay's essay, the term 'scopic regime' is not used to define the spectatorial mode of a specific form of representation, cinema, and becomes the term used to denominate the specific *mode* or *model* of visibility of a certain age. Not so much a socially and culturally determined style of vision or visual habit which conditions the artistic styles, in the sense of Baxandall, but a theoretical model which competes with others within the same historical framework. The three scopic regimes isolated by Jay are the so-called *Cartesian perspectivalism* – which is, briefly, the junction of the gaze presupposed by the perspectival image together with Cartesian epistemology –, the *art of describing* mentioned by Svetlana Alpers²¹ in order to describe Dutch 17th-century visual culture as opposed to the rhetoric and the theatricality of Italian Renaissance and Baroque art, and the baroque *madness of vision* as described by Christine Buci-Glucksmann in her *La folie du voir*²²: a mobile and dynamic gaze provoked by the dazzling, disorienting and ecstatic surplus of images in baroque visual experience, and which is characterized by the proliferation of points of view and by a return to the sensuality of touch. Of the three models, the clearly dominant one, and the one that has undergone the heaviest criticism in contemporary philosophy, is clearly the *Cartesian perspectivalism*, with its reduction of perceptual space to mathematical and homogeneous space, with its understanding of vision as monocular, static, fixed and immediate, distant and objectifying, purely theoretic and disincarnated. The really alternative model is not so much the *art of describing* – which seems to be more a variation rather than an alternative with respect to the ocularcentrism of *Cartesian perspectivalism* – but rather the so-called *madness of vision*, with its emphasis on obscurity rather than on transparency, on the haptic rather than

²⁰ M. Jay, *Scopic regimes of modernity*, in H. Foster (ed.), *Vision and Visuality*, loc. cit., p. 4.

²¹ S. Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century*, Chicago 1983.

²² C. Buci-Glucksmann, *La folie du voir: de l'esthétique baroque*, Paris 1986.

on the optical, on the indecipherability of the visual rather than on the panoptic gaze of a transcendental subject.

What final considerations can we make on these last two examples of history of visibility, by Crary and by Jay?

Crary invites us on the one hand not to presuppose a transcendental and a-historical viewer, and on the other not to reconstruct the historical figure of a viewer too quickly in terms of cultural forms, as if the viewer had no other site of formation. The questions his essay raises concern the importance of where to locate exactly the fractures in the history of visibility, and whether it is possible or not to speak of such synthetic and over-arching figures such as 'the observer of the 19th century', given the multiplicity of elements and factors one has to take in account.

Jay's approach, on the other hand, seems to be different both from the ones of turn-of-the-century art and culture historians, as well as from the ones of Michael Baxandall, Régis Debray and Jonathan Crary, which we just briefly analyzed. He does not start from the historical evolution of the conditions of perception and of vision in order to explain the historical evolution of artistic styles and of forms of representation (like Riegl, Wölfflin and at least partially Panofsky), nor does he start from a micro-historical analysis of social habits of vision (like Baxandall), nor from the historical development of observational techniques and spectatorial forms (like Crary). His attention is not concentrated on the broad history of the attitude towards images (like Debray), but rather on a mix of representational forms (perspective), epistemological models (cartesianism), and diffused visual cultures (the Dutch 'art of describing' and the baroque).

What his essay shows is an unresolved conflict between the temptation to isolate broad and over-arching modes of visibility – for example, 'Cartesian perspectivalism' – and the recognition of the different forms of visibility that a complex figurative language such as perspective was able to determine, especially if we take in account also its metaphorical interpretations. Jay, in fact, underlines the way in which the perspectival construction and its lexicon were able to become a reference point both for the epistemology of Descartes with its emphasis on evidence and clarity and on the preeminence of the *ego cogitans*, as well as for the pluralistic ontology of Leibniz with its harmonic proliferation of points of view; both for the anguishing search for a center of stability in Pascal (according to whom the right point of view is impossible to find without abandoning oneself to religious faith) as well as for the relativistic perspectivalisms of Chladenius and, later, Nietzsche.

Perspective, in other words, does not determine the univocal emergence of a single 'scopic regime'. When the point of view ceases to be unique and belonging to a transcendental and universal subject, and becomes the site of a particular and individual vision, the relativistic implications of perspectivalism become explicit, and the unified nature of reality is dispersed in a multiplicity of incomparable views. In this respect, Jay's essay presents the same apparently inevitable problems which affect the histories of visuality developed by Debray and Crary: the broad over-arching categories used by the former to describe the evolution of images from idols and icons, to artistic representations, and finally to the 'visual', the idea of 'a 19th-century observer' opposed to a 17th century one advanced by the latter, just as Jay's ambition of isolating 'the hegemonic scopic regime of modernity', they all expose themselves to the possible criticism of being oversimplifying categories which become unmanageable the moment we start to take in account, for example, all the nuances and metaphorical meanings of a representational language such as Renaissance perspective. A language which was able to determine such a variety of alternative epistemological models and modes of visuality that could hardly be reduced to one single dominating scopic regime.