Susanne von Falkenhausen

BEYOND THE MIRROR

Seeing in Art History and Visual Culture Studies

[transcript] Image

Susanne von Falkenhausen
Beyond the Mirror

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Two foundations have helped to finance my sabbaticals for the research on this book: The Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) and the Fritz-Thyssen-Stiftung (Opus-Magnum-Programm). The Clark Art Research Center in Williamstown, Massachussetts let me stay for five months of peaceful work in a beautiful location, with Michael Ann Holly being an extraordinary host.

Over the years many students took part in the discussions around the topic of this book, and, in order of appearance, Bettina Uppenkamp, Valeria Schulte-Fischedick, Ildikó Szántó, Margret Lüters-Bach have been patient and rigorous readers of the German manuscript. Hanne Loreck and Birgit Pelzer have helped to deal with Lacanian implications. With his translation Nicholas Grindell lifted my kind of idiom to a higher level of exactitude. Marcia Pointon undertook the heroic task of going through the English manuscript with me. I cannot but repeat my thanks to them all. Any incoherences and errors are of course my responsibility.

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Seeing in Art History and Visual Culture Studies

Translated by Nicholas Grindell

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The publication was subsidized by the Open-Access-Publikationsfond of Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin.

The translation was subsidized by Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin on behalf of the Exzellenzinitiative von Bund und Ländern.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek
The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at http://dnb.d-nb.de

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First published as Jenseits des Spiegels. Das Sehen in Kunstgeschichte und Visual Culture Studies by Wilhelm Fink Verlag, Paderborn 2015.
English edition, slightly revised, published in 2020 by transcript Verlag, Bielefeld.
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Cover layout: Maria Arndt, Bielefeld
Cover illustration: Man Ray, »Gräfin Casati«, 1929, © Man Ray 2015 Trust/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2020
Printed by Majuskel Medienproduktion GmbH, Wetzlar
Print-ISBN 978-3-8376-5352-6
PDF-ISBN 978-3-8394-5352-0
https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453520

Printed on permanent acid-free text paper.

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Introduction

In the early 1990s, the political battles of the 1970s seemed to be over, with class struggle as a driving force supposedly rendered obsolete by the end of the Cold War. Certain aspects of these battles had shifted into the universities, mainly thanks to teachers who themselves had participated in the political movements of the 1970s. I was one of those teachers. As an art historian I found myself within a discipline that I wanted to teach, but that in many ways did not satisfy me. The 1980s had brought feminism into academia, reshaping it into gender studies, a transformation I had tried to be part of. And in Britain and the United States, not only women asserted themselves as new subjects in academic discourse, but also those groups of individuals who were fighting for visibility and a voice as the Other of dominant ethnic, cultural and sexual categories. Visibility became a currency of social recognition, and a political issue. From the late 1980s, it also became an academic issue. And from the early 1990s in Britain and the United States it brought forth a new discipline, visual culture studies, which in turn brought forth a new concept: visuality. This book is about a particular intellectual struggle that originated in the 1970s and continues today. Two disciplinary fields will be in play in my analysis: art history and visual culture studies.

A hotly contested debate in the early 1990s unfolded between art history and visual culture studies over the interpretation of contemporary visual culture, a dispute whose impact can still be felt today. Visual culture studies declared art history incapable of responding to the specific problems resulting from global migration flows, identity politics in the conflict between the global and the local, new media technologies and the media cultures emerging from them. In the view of visual culture studies, art history represented elitist western traditions that manifested themselves in a hierarchical concept of "high" art versus "low" popular culture, in a colonializing view of the art of other cultures, in the mythologization of the (male) artist, in the per-

petuation of a history of styles associated with national traditions, and in an inability to respond to the revolution in media technology that has taken place in recent decades. Where, in art history, were the voices of new, postcolonial subjects? Where was the critique of the western canon? Where was the discussion about the power and consumerist exploitation of the art market? Where was the questioning of the elitist distinction between high and popular art?

Faced with this situation, art history in both the English- and German-speaking worlds was put on the defensive. New political and ethical dimensions had opened up that went beyond attempts by left-wing art historians in the 1970s to add class struggle to the epistemic interests of the discipline. Those wishing to take these new dimensions seriously had to call the existing cognitive fundamentals of the discipline into question.

In Germany since the mid-1980s, it had been feminist art historians (a marginal group within academia) who asked such questions, me among them. With regular conferences and publications, we had tried to shake up the heuristic status quo of the discipline, and we found ourselves obliged to look beyond its boundaries for suitable theoretical tools.[1] We read Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser, Jacques Derrida, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Judith Butler, Teresa de Lauretis and Kaja Silverman. We also read our British feminist colleagues Griselda Pollock, Marcia Pointon and Irit Rogoff, whose academic context was very different to our own, shaped by the intellectual climate of universities like Manchester, Birmingham and Leeds where cultural studies had become established in the 1970s, laying the theoretical basis for visual culture studies.[2] By comparison, the culture of art history in Germany felt confined.

---

1 See publications resulting from the conferences of women art historians held from 1984, including: Ilsebill Barta, Zita Breu, Daniela Hammer-Tugendhat, Ulrike Jenny, Irene Nierhaus, Judith Schöbel (eds.): *Frauen. Bilder. Männer. Mythen. Kunsthistorische Beiträge* (Berlin 1987); Ines Lindner, Sigrid Schade, Silke Wenk, Gabriele Werner (eds.): *Blick-Wechsel. Konstruktionen von Männlichkeit und Weiblichkeit in Kunst und Kunstgeschichte* (Berlin 1989); Silvia Baumgart, Gotlind Birkle, Mechthild Fend, Bettina Götz, Andrea Klier, Bettina Uppenkamp (eds.): *Denkräume zwischen Kunst und Wissenschaft* (Berlin 1993); Susanne von Falkenhausen, Silke Förschler, Ingeborg Reichle, Bettina Uppenkamp (eds.): *Medien der Kunst. Geschlecht Metapher Code* (Marburg 2004).

2 More on this in Chapter 6, and in Margaret Dikovitskaya, *Visual Culture. The Study of the Visual after the Cultural Turn* (Cambridge, MA 2005).

Some of our American colleagues, too, were clearly unhappy with art history and "defected" to the new field of visual culture studies.[3] In the United States, the culture within art history was different, shaped by a double legacy: on the one hand, the German strain of art history that Erwin Panofsky brought with him to his American exile, a scholarly history of ideas with its method of iconology; and on the other, a heightened formalism that had gained new topicality thanks to America's "high modernist" painters (Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman) and the critics who supported them (Clement Greenberg, Michael Fried). Both of these schools were now attacked by the representatives of visual culture studies – including "defectors" from art history (e.g. Michael Ann Holly) and literary criticism (e.g. Norman Bryson, Mieke Bal) – for being elitist, unpolitical and western-white-male-dominated.

American art history responded with a series of articles in its journal of record, *The Art Bulletin*, running from 1994 to 1997 under the title "A Range of Critical Perspectives", asking leading representatives of the discipline to reflect on the need for new approaches, with topics directly related to these issues: The Object of Art History; The Subject in/of Art History; Aesthetics, Ethnicity, and the History of Art; Rethinking the Canon; Art History and its Theories; Money, Power, and the History of Art.[4] As I remember it, this series went unnoticed by art history in Germany.

In 1996, a counterattack was mounted by *October* magazine in a survey of art historians making a vehement appeal against extending the domain of art history beyond art and in defence of the special position of art within society – an energetic attempt to secure the discipline's status and salvage it as a specialist domain. Interviewed in 1997, the magazine's co-editor Rosalind Krauss clearly stated the motivation for this survey:

> "RK: I hate visual culture.
>
> SR: You hate visual culture?
>
> RK: In fact, *October* magazine, which I coedit and cofounded in 1976, recently

3 More on this in Part Two, 4.

4 *The Art Bulletin*, statements for the series "A Range of Critical Perspectives" in the years 1994 to 1997 under the following titles: 1994: "The Object of Art History", "The Subject in/of Art History"; 1995: "Art> <History", "Inter/disciplinarity", 1996: "Aesthetics, Ethnicity, and the History of Art", "Rethinking the Canon", "Art History and its Theories"; 1997: "Money, Power, and the History of Art".

> did a special issue that was an attack on the visual culture project. Like cultural studies, visual culture is aimed at what we could call pejoratively, abusively, deskilling. Part of that project is to attack the very idea of disciplines which are bound to knowing how to do something, certain skills."[5]

From the mid-1990s onwards, then, hostility reigned between the old-established discipline of art history and the young discipline of visual culture studies. Portrayals of visual culture studies as anti-elitist, multicultural, postcolonial and democratic depended on art history being described in negative terms as elitist, formalist-cum-Hegelian, nationalistic and obsessed with artistic genius. However, the rebuttals of these mutual accusations remained within a close-up view that obstructed critical reflection on each side's own contexts and cognitive objectives.

This became very clear when I read the texts generated by this dispute with my students, reinforcing my wish to overcome the mental and discursive blockades of these increasingly clichéd debates by analysing selected texts by the antagonists in terms of the history of academic discourse, seeking out their inner motivations. In order to get away from the turf wars and border patrols between visual culture studies and art history, and to probe each side's epistemic interests for their theoretical and methodological implications, I developed a research project that was originally titled "Visuality as a Paradigm: Art History and Visual Culture Studies". The plan was to make a comparative study of the concept of visuality in terms of its application and effectiveness.

It soon became clear, however, that visuality would not work as the main term for such a comparison since it did not feature in the methodological vocabulary of art history – even if this hard-to-define concept from visual culture studies certainly can also be related to the context and practice of art history. As a specialized visual practice, art history could become subject matter for visual culture studies with a focus on visuality, but the reverse would not be possible. Using visuality as the key term of comparison would have oriented my readings more strongly towards visual culture studies, thus disturbing the desired balance. I needed to find a term that applied to both art

5 See the Visual Culture Questionnaire, in: *October* 77 (Summer 1996): 25-70; for the interview see http://www.thecrimson.com/article/1997/5/16/krauss-and-the-art-of-cultural/ (accessed 26 Sept 2016). See also Rosalind Krauss, "Der Tod der Fachkenntnisse und Kunstfertigkeiten" in *Texte zur Kunst* 20 (1995), 61-67 (unpublished in English: "The Death of Skills").

history and visual culture studies, if not in the same way then at least with the same weight. This term is seeing: it structures the visuality of visual culture studies as fundamentally as it does the modus operandi of art history.

Seeing and the concept of visuality

The concept of visuality is, I argue, closely associated with a specific political agenda: visibility as a socio-political resource. The visual, or visuality, has become a political category, and visibility has become a resource in struggles for recognition by marginalized identities. This is the main basis for the arguments used by visual culture studies against art history. But what status does seeing have within this concept and within the resulting practice of visual culture studies as a discipline? Besides the huge implications in terms of method, I began to ask myself whether this basic strategic interest might actually limit the heuristic usefulness of the concept of visuality itself. On the other hand, with its emphasis on relationality, communication and agency, one can also ask whether the approach in which seeing is embedded here might also be rendered productive for art history with its focus on objects.

In the course of my reading, I soon came across differences between art history and visual culture studies which derived from their respective roots in the history of academic disciplines: art history, developed as a discipline devoted to the classification (by period, style, artist, region) of (art) objects, encounters a new player whose agenda is anchored in a single core concept, that of visuality. And in turn, rather than referring to definable objects, this concept of visuality is itself both object and theory of a social, cultural and political field insofar as it manifests itself visually: in objects, but also and above all in practices and technologies of seeing and being seen, of seeing in the sense of an exchange between people on all levels of culture and sociality. Visuality describes events as well as actions, communication and symbolic production; it is a concept that attempts to grasp the visual aspects of the relationality and performativity of human life (or of subjects) in societies and cultures. This is a significant structural difference to the genesis of art history with its focus on objects (however much art history, too, may take the context of its objects into account in its analyses). In a sense, then, we have now named the elements of parallel but also conflicting structures, and thus several key coordinates in the complex relationship between art history and visual culture studies which will guide the close readings in this book:

art history	visual culture studies
art	visuality
focus on objects	focus on performativity/relationality
object/artwork	visual

These elements are not identical with the concepts my readings will explore, such as culture, identity, the gaze, or representation. They offer a structure, albeit binary and simplified, for addressing the basic assumptions of the two disciplines regarding their practices of scholarly seeing. It may seem strange that visibility is not included here. Visibility as a political resource in the struggle for recognition is central to identity politics. As such it is linked to the political agenda of visual culture studies and has no counterpart in art history. Visibility is vital to any understanding of the concept of visuality, but it is not identical with it, being just one of its multiple aspects. Narrowing visuality to this aspect alone would thus seriously impede the methodological possibilities of this concept that I regard as the most important contribution of visual culture studies to the humanities.

Trains of thought – readings

As mentioned above, I wanted to explore the complex relationship between visual culture studies and art history beyond the usual barriers to thought and dialogue, and beyond the increasingly abbreviated debates, by examining exemplary texts from the perspective of the history of discourse and learning/science. This led to a research project and eventually to this book. Above all, then, it is a project based on reading, rather than a synthesizing overview. Large-scale syntheses tend towards distortions and a lack of transparency; however easy they seem to make it for the reader, they can also be condescending. I aim to be transparent, most importantly about the situatedness of my readings, which aim not to be objective but to create and be part of an open debate. The reader should be able to follow my reading closely and grasp it in critical terms. This book, then, is neither an introduction nor a grand narrative, but a kind of archaeology, an excavation of texts that exposes and renders visible their various layers. Of course, the choice of texts

is crucial here: they have influenced and continue to influence debates both within and between disciplines. The texts chosen involve the history of the two disciplines and their discursive links that focus on seeing as a key factor determining their practice.

The book concentrates on the complex relationship between art history and visual culture studies; what it does not deal with is their relationship to the discipline of *Bildwissenschaft* (literally "picture studies") that has emerged in the German-speaking world.[6] Today, *Bildwissenschaft* has developed a diffuseness similar to that of visual culture studies, and some German speakers mix the two terms to the point of indifference or use them as synonyms.[7] This does not foster clarity when attempting to grasp the (not always evident) epistemic interests involved or to reflect on the theoretical and methodological conditions of one's own academic activity, which is why I chose not to broaden my focus here. This also bears on the question of my position as an art historian: I am not interested in expanding the remit of art history; I also remain committed to it as a discipline, since its object, art, is not just one instance of visuality among others. The status of art, as well as the status of individual art objects, is not a given; it is subject to discursive negotiation. Nonetheless, or precisely for this reason, there is a need for skills informed by art history that allow an engagement with the complexity that inheres in a discrete object, the artwork, as the result of a specific differentiated cultural

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6 I have commented on this relationship elsewhere: Susanne von Falkenhausen, "Verzwickte Verwandtschaftsverhältnisse: Kunstgeschichte, Visual Culture, Bildwissenschaft", in Philine Helas, Maren Polte, Claudia Rückert, Bettina Uppenkamp (eds.), *Bild/Geschichte. Festschrift für Horst Bredekamp* (Berlin 2007), 3-13.

7 Recent publications: Marius Rimmele, Bernd Stiegler: *Visuelle Kulturen/Visual Culture* (Hamburg 2012) trace a genealogy of visual culture outlining differences and similarities between *Bildwissenschaft* and visual culture studies based on Gottfried Boehm and W.J.T. Mitchell (see p 69ff.). On the current tendency to integrate visual culture studies into *Bildwissenschaft*, see Gustav Frank, Barbara Lange, *Einführung in die Bildwissenschaft* (Darmstadt 2010); Klaus Sachs-Hombach (ed.), *Bildtheorien. Anthropologische und kulturelle Grundlagen des Visualistic Turn* (Frankfurt 2009). By contrast, in their book *Studien zur visuellen Kultur. Einführung in ein transdisziplinäres Forschungsfeld* (Bielefeld 2011), Sigrid Schade and Silke Wenk give a differentiated view of the position of *Bildwissenschaft* in the German academic landscape (see p. 146ff.). In their view, the "research field" of visual culture is founded on semiotics; in this they follow Mieke Bal (see chapter 6). In their portrayal of this research field, they essentially follow the themes of their own art historical practice; consequently, their book differs from my project in its orientation.

practice and discursivity. But the discipline of art history can only retain its vitality by constantly calling its epistemic interests into question and by communicating with other fields and disciplines to keep abreast of their activities. My comparative survey of art history and visual culture studies is thus undertaken from a position of a restless art historian who has been shaped by this discipline but who does not unquestioningly identify with it.

Art history and seeing

Strangely, approaches that address the activity on which art history is based have a hard time in art history today. In descriptions of art historical method and theory, seeing remains underexposed. And the kind of seeing we were encouraged to "practise" when I began studying in Vienna in 1970 struck me as a tenuous affair. No one could tell me what it actually was and how it was supposed to affect art historical practice. The same applied, incidentally, to the "style analysis" that seemed at the time to be the ultimate heuristic exercise. Taken together, these implicit notions of seeing plus style as a hermeneutic benchmark constituted the mystifying and highly imprecise ideology of art history at the time, which still followed the pattern of the post-war decades. Years later, in 1977, Otto Pächt's *The Practice of Art History: Reflections on Method*[8] was published, a collection of texts including the lecture which, unsuspecting and with the beginner's lack of understanding, I had heard in Vienna in 1970 and which, had I read it with the requisite concentration, could have helped me understand better. Only today do I consider myself capable of reading this text.

The status of the image is less fraught than that of seeing in German-language art history. Although seeing has been explained physiologically to a certain degree, it remains hard to "grasp" in thoughts and words. And although something similar applies to images, there is at least a seemingly ineluctable, materially verifiable object for theorists to engage with – ineluctable insofar as it ultimately has no analogue in language, in spite of all the various endeavours of art historical interpretation. This quality seems to be what fuels the abiding fascination of *Bildwissenschaft* with a leading question like: "What is an image?" My scepticism towards such leading questions focuses above

8 Otto Pächt, *Methodisches zur kunsthistorischen Praxis. Ausgewählte Schriften*, Jörg Oberhaidacher, Artur Rosenauer, Gertraut Schikola eds., (1. Edition, München 1977).

all on the desire for definitions that tend to act more as axioms. To quote Gombrich, "there are no axioms, only agreements."[9] Definitions are figures of thought which (at least when they represent an end in themselves) block relational thinking. And thinking about seeing is necessarily relational.

As an art historian, one of the metaphors for which I envy visual culture studies, and which I have appropriated, is that of the "visual field". It covers both the realm within which visuality operates and the realm of its theorization. This opens up potential applications and intellectual spaces for art history that go beyond the simple duality of (art) object and context, rendering this duality multiple and dynamic. So how can this visual field be conceived of in relation to seeing in art history? In the practice of art historians, seeing the object marks the beginning of any cognitive approach. We look at the artwork because we want to analyse it. This seeing is an active kind that opens up a field of relations: between the object, the viewing art historian and the producer/artist. The metaphor of the visual field is very well suited to these relations, making it possible to reflect on one's actions as an art historian in terms of interdependences. Moreover, the visual field can be extended to include the framing of its protagonists: the historical and cultural factors relating to the history of academic discourse that influence viewer, artist and artwork. It configures the acts of seeing of all involved – the viewer, the artist, and the artwork that "looks back". This may sound simple, but it turns out to be a theoretical minefield that art history has to date largely avoided. It is symptomatic of the way art history takes the practice of seeing for granted that this practice itself is barely subjected to theoretical scrutiny, giving the impression that this key cognitive tool exists without presuppositions. Consequently, my reading of texts from art history extrapolate the theoretical and methodological presuppositions for this kind of knowledge-generating seeing.

The texts of art history

Art history does not make it easy to find out about its past and present thinking on the subject of its own acts of seeing. In most cases, it remains an unspoken presupposition of the discipline's practice. To coax it out of this latency

9 Ernst H. Gombrich, "'Wenn's euch Ernst ist, was zu sagen …' – Wandlungen in der Kunstgeschichtsbetrachtung", in Martina Sitt (ed.), *Kunsthistoriker in eigener Sache: 10 autobiographische Skizzen* (Berlin 1990), 87.

into a more open, manifest form, it must be surgically extracted from the methods and objectives of the discipline. As a relatively long-established discipline, art history possesses a differentiated structure of positions, methods and practices – sediments laid down over two centuries. For a comparison with the young discipline of visual culture studies, providing a full overview of this period seemed as unhelpful as including every single historically defined position. My choice of reading matter was guided by two criteria: firstly, the texts should deal explicitly or implicitly with the theme of seeing/looking, and secondly they should be "canonical" texts that have been and continue to be influential in the discipline's internal discussions of objectives and methods. My readings include the reception history of these texts, as this history often displays connections with visual culture studies, highlighting moments of shared background.

One might think there is a contradiction with what I stated above: that art history does not reflect on its own ways of seeing. In different ways, the texts analyse how images are formed by viewing processes: of the painter (Panofsky, Gombrich), of the painter's customer or the general public (Baxandall, Alpers), or of the spectator (Pächt, Kemp). But I found only one text dealing directly with the art historian's own act of seeing: Otto Pächt's *The Practice of Art History: Reflections on Method*. The positions on the activity of seeing underlying art historical interpretation are structured by pairs of opposites: culturally informed versus empirical seeing, interpretative versus scientifically verifying seeing, historically evolving versus biologically/optically fixed seeing. Each of these positions implies a specific relationship between subject and object, between interpreting present and historical alterity, or unfamiliarity, between the object and its context. The questions I address to the texts of art history are as follows: In which discourses are the positions of seeing embedded and which metaphors are used to articulate them? Does seeing have to do, for example, with authenticity or purity? Does it imply a concept of truth? How is the threefold seeing that "surrounds" an artwork (making, viewing, interpreting) dealt with? How is seeing (all three kinds) historicized? How is it (explicitly or implicitly) "constructed" as a presupposition of method and practice? Does the concept of seeing in question bring context into its interpretation, or does it view art in isolation? How is the act of seeing situated within the basic assumptions of scholarly research? Which relationship between subject (artist/viewer) and object do these assumptions imply? The six selected texts are grouped under three headings indicating the motivations that informed their authors' acts of seeing: "Interpreting forms of representation" (Panof-

sky and Gombrich), "Experience and the visual" (Baxandall and Alpers), and "Through the eyes of the spectator" (Pächt and Kemp).

My readings begin with Panofsky's essay on *Perspective as Symbolic Form* (1927). This text, which remains hugely influential, is a good place to begin for several reasons: for one thing, it received renewed attention in the context of the New Art History of the 1990s,[10] thus providing a bridge to the art history immediately involved in debate with visual culture studies;[11] for another, it offers a macro-historical view of models of seeing as visualized in art. The potential links to recent constructivist models of seeing are also clear. Like Panofsky's essay, Ernst Gombrich's *Art and Illusion. A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (1960) has had a long and controversial reception, centred on the question of whether its model of seeing is empirical-scientistic or constructivist-subjectivizing. The texts by Panofsky and Gombrich are not about seeing as practised by those who interpret, but about the forms of representation in which seeing the world appears in art, as a subject of art history. What their reflections on this subject reveal about their own mode of seeing as an instrument of scholarly research has to be inferred from their texts.

Michael Baxandall's *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy* (1972) is associated with the concept of the "period eye". With his reconstruction of historically unfamiliar modes of seeing, Baxandall links empiricism and constructivism in a way that prompted Clifford Geertz (in 1976) to formulate ideas that became central to cultural anthropology. Here, the focus is neither on exploring the difference between the picture and the reality portrayed (Gombrich), nor on the analytical gaze of the art historian (Pächt), but on reconstructing the experiences of seeing that shaped both the painters and those they painted for, thus also determining what the period expected from artistic forms. For this reconstruction, painting is a historical source. With *The Art of Describing* (1983) by Svetlana Alpers, we come to a position that is often thought to have sparked the concept of visual culture studies. Based on Dutch painting of the 17th century, she reconstructs a culture in which the practice of visual observation was held in high esteem and which she refers to as a visual culture. This clearly forms a bridge between the two disciplines,

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10 See Jonathan Harris, *The New Art History. A Critical Introduction* (London, New York 2001).

11 See Christopher S. Wood, "Introduction", in Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, translated and with an introduction by Christopher S. Wood (New York 1991), 7-24.

but one that must be carefully contextualized in order to highlight its distinct position as compared with the subsequent program of visual culture studies.

The final readings from art history are from the German-speaking world: Otto Pächt's *The Practice of Art History: Reflections on Method*,[12] the only text reflecting on the discipline's own modes of seeing, offers in its precision and focus on concrete objects, paired with theoretical restraint, important insights into the problems connected with overcoming the historical remoteness of the object via a hermeneutically empathetic gaze. Unlike Gombrich's book, Pächt's text has been and continues to be little discussed, confirming my impression that art history as a discipline tends to avoid reflecting on its own (seeing) actions. For all its focus on the art historian's practice, Pächt's book has made little concrete impact on the culture of the discipline. With my reading, I therefore also want to strengthen his position within the discipline and examine its current relevance, following its introduction into the Anglo-American debate by Christopher Wood in 1999.

Wolfgang Kemp's *Der Anteil des Betrachters* (The Beholder's Share, 1983) positions seeing within the framework of reception theory. With reference to Diderot's reviews of the Paris Salons and the reader response theory of Iser and Jauss, seeing is conceived of here from a narratological perspective. Kemp sees the viewer prefigured in the picture's internal eye-directing structure. Hence, although his approach has the viewer's response in mind, this response is seen as being determined by the picture and its narrative strategies. The texts by Alpers and Kemp were published the same year. Although Alpers' text could be read as a transitional position to visual culture studies, I discuss Kemp after Alpers – firstly because Alpers' reference to Baxandall's concept of "visual experience" from 1972 strikes me as more important than her status as a conceptual precursor to visual culture studies, and secondly because I see Kemp's narratological approach as more closely related to the methods of visual culture studies (especially Bal) than the descriptive approach taken by Alpers. Moreover, Kemp links his position, among others, with those of Bryson and Bal, who soon after became key figures in visual culture studies.

12 Otto Pächt, *The Practice of Art History: Reflections on Method*, trans. David Britt, with an introduction by Christopher Wood (London 1999).

Seeing in the visual field: visual culture studies

For visual culture studies, unlike for art history, seeing is a point of intense theoretical debate on several levels. Reading the texts of visual culture studies, one gains the impression that any analysis of an object must be preceded by a clarification of the specific concept of seeing being applied. And since the object is more often a starting point for such a positioning than an end point, the object in question is often chosen from the viewpoint of the theoretical model to be underpinned, and not the other way round. For visual culture studies, then, the concept of visuality is not only an analytical tool but also an object of study in its own right. The resulting interplay of (visual) object, viewer and producer is thus entirely different to that found in art history.

The point of departure for the concepts of visuality found in visual culture studies is the kind of seeing discussed in Anglo-American theory, via Sartre and Lacan, as the gaze. It centres on a subject that sees and is seen. As well as constituting the subject, this seeing and being seen also threatens it.[13] Finally, the subject figures here as both the starting and end point of the analytical activity; this has far-reaching consequences for the structure of subject-object relations, and it also represents a crucial difference between visual culture studies and art history.

The texts of visual culture studies

As a young discipline, visual culture studies has yet to pass through a canonization process comparable to that undergone by art history. Looking at its short history, one is confronted with a flood of texts; typically for a young player in the field of academic politics, there is a strong wish to give the discipline a solid theoretical foundation. In addition, a number of diverse disciplines were and still are involved in the emergence and evolution of this discipline (or "indiscipline",[14] as W.J.T. Mitchell has termed it). As a result, a very revealing internal debate is taking place over the key concept of visuality, with direct implications for the theoretical basis, conceptual framework and

13 See chapters 5 and 7.

14 W.J.T. Mitchell, "Interdisciplinarity and Visual Culture" in *Art Bulletin* 77, no. 4 (1995): 541.

stated focus of visual culture studies. Within this debate, there is considerable potential for conflict between the different positions.[15]

The canonization of visual culture studies has, however, progressed far enough for there to be a first history of its introduction into American university teaching.[16] This was preceded by several scholarly introductions featuring American and British authors that offered canons both of methods and of texts and theories.[17] Such books included (and continue to include) names from various different disciplines (sociology, anthropology, communications studies, cultural studies, film studies, design, art history). In 2006, a new (to me) genre appeared: a meta-reader, bringing together introductory texts from a large number of introductions and readers on visual culture studies[18] – offering an overview of the superabundance of different attempts to define and situate the discipline. Unlike in the case of art history, this sprawling diversity prompted me to preface my readings with a brief genealogy of visual culture studies. It is intended to illuminate what I consider to be the two key contexts in the emergence of the discipline[19] (the political and the academic) and outline its key categories (visuality and identity).The questions guiding my reading of the texts of visual culture studies are: How is the field described in which seeing is embedded? What is the relationship between seeing and sociality? To what extent is seeing conceived of as an activity? How important

15 See for example the confrontation between Bal and Mirzoeff over Bal's identification and rejection of "visual essentialism": Mieke Bal, "Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture", in: *Journal of Visual Culture* 2, no. 1 (2003), 5-32, and: "Responses to Mieke Bal's 'Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture', ibid., 229-268.

16 See Dikovitskaya, *Visual Culture*.

17 Lisa Bloom (ed.), *With Other Eyes. Looking at Race and Gender in Visual Culture* (Minneapolis 1999); Fiona Carson, Claire Pajaczkowska (eds.), *Feminist Visual Culture* (London/New York 2001); Jessica Evans, Stuart Hall (eds.), *Visual Culture: The Reader* (London 1999); Chris Jenks (ed.), *Visual Culture* (London/New York: Routledge, 1995); Amelia Jones (ed.), *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader* (London/New York 2003); Nicholas Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (London/New York 1999); Nicholas Mirzoeff (ed.), *The Visual Culture Reader* (London/New York 2002) (first ed. 1998); Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies. An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials* (London 2001); Marita Sturken, Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking. An Introduction to Visual Culture* (Oxford 2001).

18 Joanne Morra, Marquard Smith (ed.), *Visual Culture. Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies*, 4 vols. (London/New York 2006).

19 On debate over whether visual culture studies should be called a discipline, see W. J. T. Mitchell, "Showing seeing: a critique of visual culture," in *Journal of Visual Culture* 1, no. 2 (2002), 165-181; and Bal, *Visual Essentialism*.

is the passive side of seeing (i.e. being seen), especially in connection with the identity politics of visibility? What kind of subject-object (and subject-subject) relationship does this imply? What influence does the political agenda of visual culture studies have on its understanding of seeing, and what impact does this have on its interpretative practice?

The texts I have selected stand for the diversity of concepts of visuality within visual culture studies. In spite of this variety, they have one thing on common: they all build (in very different ways) on the above-mentioned theories of the gaze developed by Sartre and Lacan. I have therefore grouped the most influential variants into themed chapters with individual readings: "Visual culture studies' foundational concept: The Gaze - Looking and power" uses two examples (Norman Bryson, Margaret Olin) to analyse reception of the gaze as a regime of power; "Visual culture studies' operational concept: Visuality - Seeing in the cultural field" deals with attempts to define visual culture and visuality that were particularly influential in discussions within the discipline (W.J.T. Mitchell, Nicholas Mirzoeff, Mieke Bal); and "Seeing as a political resource in visual culture studies" presents two extremely contrasting examples of the use of the theory of the gaze in the register of visibility as a political resource (Norman Bryson, bell hooks), plus a case study focussing on the production of evidence on the basis of the model of the gaze (Martin A. Berger). This chapter concludes with an analysis of two texts by Nicholas Mirzoeff, from 1998 and 2011, that propose two models of the gaze as new paradigms for visual culture studies. These models are an attempt to position visual culture studies as a practice of political resistance via definitions of utopian-subversive gazes. With the model of countervisuality, Mirzoeff embeds visual culture studies into a historical construction with an extensive claim to validity, and he insists on the political relevance of the discipline.

Seeing as an ethical question[20]

The final chapter, "Towards an ethics for the act of seeing", draws conclusions that have both a critical and a questioning dimension. The recognition of *alterity,* of that which is unfamiliar, *in the act of seeing* has emerged as a core problem, a mode of seeing that perceives and accepts the otherness of what it sees, be it an object or a subject. Art history and visual culture studies deal very differently with this problem. Art history is mainly confronted with the historical otherness of its objects, visual culture studies with the cultural otherness of objects and subjects. This final chapter discusses the disciplinary "scopic regimes" that shape approaches to the problem of alterity in terms of their methodological impact on interpretative seeing: brief outlines of historical and cultural otherness are followed by a critique of the reception of Lacan's model of the gaze in visual culture studies concerning its impact on interpretative seeing (the narcissistic circle). I then bring approaches to interpretative seeing in art history and visual culture studies together under the headings "Attention and Recognition" and "Narration and Observation", comparing them in terms of an ethics of seeing as an activity of scholarly research that recognizes the otherness of what is seen. This raises an old theoretical problem concerning the relationship between an object and the person interpreting it, as reflected in strategies and concepts like objectification and distance on the one hand and identification and subjectivity on the other. Although at the time of its publication in 1988, Donna Haraway's now somewhat forgotten text on "situated knowledges"[21] was aimed at the natural sciences and their objectivizing hegemonic gaze, it can be referenced today to prompt an approach to this problem that preserves the tension between the

20 Susan Sontag (*On Photography*, first published New York 1977), Ivan Illich ("Guarding the Eye in the Age of Show", in *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 28, 1995, 47-61) and Kaja Silverman (*The Threshold of the Visible World*, London, New York 1996) have spoken of ethical implications of looking from very different viewpoints. The issue is also raised in discussions of Georges Didi-Huberman's book *Images In Spite of All* (Chicago 2008, originally published in French in 2003 as *Images malgré tout*) on the photographs from the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, and more generally concerning the representability of violence. I use it here only with reference to the ethical dimension of seeing as a practice of scholarly research.

21 Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (London, New York 1991), 183-201, first published in: *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988), 575-599.

interpreting viewpoint and the otherness of what is being interpreted. Haraway explains her critical model using metaphors of visuality ("self-identity is a bad visual system"), and her aim is to uphold the tension between the object under study and the studying subject (and their respective contexts), between objectivity and subjectivity. Moreover, she clearly rejects a moralization of academic rigor that demands identification with the victim based on a logic of sympathetic concern, as such an approach resolves this tension in a subjectivity based on morals. Where the tension between the interpreting subject and the otherness of the object is preserved, on the other hand, it creates a destabilization that makes a key contribution to a capacity for critique of the structures of power and discourse in which our subject matter has its origins and within which we work.

One last point, dealt with in my concluding remarks, is the rapid technological change often referred to as the digital revolution. While the readings in the book do not deal with this, I conclude with an outline of the prospective consequences of this development, especially for the central notions of visual culture studies (visibility as a political resource in the form of the visual representation of identity) and art history (art as object and subject).

Part One: How do Art Historians See?

1. Interpreting Forms of Representation

Visual order as concretized worldview – Erwin Panofsky's *Perspective as Symbolic Form*

Described by W.J.T. Mitchell as an "epic of visuality", Panofsky's essay on perspective, originally published in 1927,[1] is a concentrated synthesis of the history of perspective, as well as a history of visuality as cultural practice. The text has received renewed critical attention during the founding phase of visual culture studies.[2]

Perspective – "seeing through" as Dürer, quoted by Panofsky, called it (27)[3] – refers not to the process of seeing but to the method of translating what is seen into a representation, with reference to the transfer of seen three-dimensional space onto the two-dimensional picture plane. The best-known technique of this kind is central or one-point perspective, an achievement attributed to the Italian Renaissance that has shaped European painting in its quest for accurate portrayal of objects in space ever since. Although it is just one of the available options, one way among many to produce an image of the world, central perspective has since become a metaphor for the modern way of viewing the world. In recent decades it has faced criticism on several fronts. Most interestingly in the context of this book, poststructuralist critiques of the claim to truth made by Enlightenment rationality deployed perspective as

1 Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, trans. Christopher Wood (New York 1991).

2 Mitchell's essay "The Pictorial Turn", which announced the turn designed to dethrone the "linguistic turn", offers a very positive rereading of Panofsky's essay on perspective: "It aims at nothing less than a critical iconology, a self-theorizing account of visual culture." This is also Mitchell's yardstick for Jonathan Crary's *Techniques of the Observer*: W.J.T. Mitchell, "The Pictorial Turn", in Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (Chicago 1994), 11-34: 23.

3 For smoother reading, page numbers for quotes in Part One are placed in brackets in the text rather than in footnotes.

a metaphor for Cartesianism, logic and western reason's hegemonic worldview. This critique also played a part in the genesis of visual culture studies, something I will return to in chapter 4.

As early as 1927, Panofsky attempted to historicize the changes undergone since antiquity by perspective as a "symbolic form" in the sense of Ernst Cassirer's *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms.*[4] From this viewpoint, one-point perspective, like the other techniques, is a phenomenon that can be explained in historical and cultural terms, but it is not the only "correct", objectively right method of depicting the world with a unique claim to truth. According to a quotation from Ernst Cassirer cited by Panofsky, in symbolic forms "spiritual meaning is attached to a concrete material sign and intrinsically given to this sign" (41). Perspective as a model for representing three-dimensional seeing on the picture plane is thus the concrete material sign that Panofsky will link back to the spiritual meanings which have been (and continue to be) "intrinsically given" to it. Although perspective can be seen, it is not simply "visible", needing instead to be extracted from its specific application in a given picture. Panofsky carefully examines his prize witnesses (frescoes, vases and canvases from antiquity to the Renaissance) in search of evidence pointing to their specific model for converting three dimensions into two. This raises the question of whether Panofsky's interpretation "proves" something that is undeniably there, or whether he presupposes something that his seeing then detects or, to put it more pointedly, constructs. By describing perspective not just as a practical artistic technique, but as a "sign" linked with a "spiritual meaning", he also turns the artist's seeing into a construction in the sense of something culturally determined, a cultural practice, subject to historical change. This construction even extends to the physiological conditions of seeing itself; the eye is a creature of habit, so to speak, and not just an optical bio-mechanism. As an example, Panofsky cites Kepler, who "fully recognized that he had originally overlooked or even denied these illusory curves only because he had been schooled in linear perspective. He had been led by the rules of painterly perspective to believe that straight is always seen as straight, without stopping to consider that the eye in fact projects not on to a *plana tabella* but onto the inner surface of a sphere" (34).

From his own observations, combined with source texts and the results of previous research, Panofsky extracts descriptions of three models of per-

4 Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms:* Vol. 1, *Language*, 1923; Vol. 2, *Mythical Thinking*, 1925; Vol. 3, *Phenomenology of Knowledge*, 1929.

spective – for antiquity, the Middle Ages and the early modern era. He then reads each model as a sign of basic intellectual dispositions specific to the historical period in question. In the art of antiquity, for example, the rendering of bodies is persuasively illusionistic; it focuses on bodies and surfaces, showing only what is tangible as well as visible (41). But these bodies remain isolated, not inhabiting a homogenous overall space. Instead, space here is "only that which remains, so to speak, between the bodies" (41); there is no "continuum of a higher order" (41). At this point, Panofsky introduces the key conceptual distinction between "aggregate space" and "systematic space": the space of antiquity is an "aggregate space; it never becomes that which modernity demands and realizes, a systematic space" (42). This is then applied to the worldview of ancient philosophy (43-44). Based on pictorial structure, then, Panofsky draws a parallel between perspective, view of space and worldview in which what is true of this pictorial structure is also claimed to be true of the corresponding view of space and worldview. The heuristic advantage of this approach lies in the elucidation of the uniform spiritual character of an age via its individual components, as well as the integration of art into the character of a historical period. The periods are in turn integrated into a telos that transfers horizontal period-uniformity onto the vertical axis of historical time: modernity with its notion of homogenous and infinite mathematical space. However, when Panofsky postulates that modernity "demands" this space (and, apparently, none other) then his logic of analogy, structural parallel and mutual elucidation begins to smack of circular reasoning.

The same paradigm of uniformity and development is used to explain the apparent break with antiquity's body-space illusionism in the art of the Middle Ages. Panofsky's argument is as surprising as it is brilliant: "If Romanesque painting reduced bodies and space to surface, in the same way and with the same decisiveness, by these very means it also managed for the first time to confirm and establish the homogeneity of bodies and space." (51) Although Romanesque art abandoned the reproduction of physical three-dimensionality, it overcame the additive structure of antique space in favour of a unity, thus creating the basis for the systematic space of the early modern period. Here, too, Panofsky draws parallels with the history of ideas, this time to the theological worldview of the Middle Ages. But with Giotto, the "vista or 'looking through" that was blocked in the Middle Ages begins to open (56), becoming a window – Alberti's metaphor for painting. With van Eyck, the picture becomes a "slice of reality" (60-61) and with the invention of "costruzione legittima" in 1420 the development from aggregate space to systematic space

is complete (65). This systematic space is "nothing other than a concrete expression of a contemporary advance in epistemology or natural philosophy": the development of the concept of "an infinity not only prefigured in God, but indeed actually embodied in empirical reality" (65). From the additive, body-oriented worldview of antiquity, the path leads via the Christian postulate of unity – oneness in God – to the mathematically unifying abstraction of empirical reality as infinite space.

Having reached the goal of his developmental history, with perspective as a necessary concretion of the modern worldview, Panofsky opens up the supposed closure of this model of seeing by highlighting its ambivalences. Central perspective as an "objectification of the subjective" proves to be a "two-edged sword" (67): "Perspective creates distance between human beings and things [...] but then in turn it abolishes this distance by, in a sense, drawing this world of things, an autonomous world confronting the individual, into the eye. Perspective subjects the artistic phenomenon to stable and even mathematically exact rules, but on the other hand, makes the phenomenon contingent upon human beings, indeed upon the individual: for these rules refer to the psychological and physical conditions of the visual impression, and the way [these rules] take effect is determined by the freely chosen position of a subjective 'point of view.'" (67) The following sentences are worth quoting in full: "The history of perspective may be understood with equal justice as a triumph of the distancing and objectifying sense of the real, and as a triumph of the distance-denying human struggle for control; it is as much a consolidation and systematization of the external world, as an extension of the domain of the self. Artistic thinking must have found itself constantly confronted with the problem of how to put this ambivalent method to use." (67) The telos of this history of development is thus, on the one hand, a "sense of the real" whose mode of seeing combines distance and objectivity, and, on the other, its opposite, described as a struggle for power expressed in the denial of distance. For readers today, this is surprising insofar as recent decades have produced a discourse on perspective that views objectivizing distance as a function of control and power;[5] a discourse that emerged, among others, in feminist art history and which, interestingly, coincided with the perfection of techniques of visual simulation aimed at negating distance between the

5 See also a more recent publication: Linda Hentschel, *Pornotopische Techniken des Betrachtens. Raumwahrnehmung und Geschlechterordnung in visuellen Apparaten der Moderne* (Marburg 2001).

viewer and what is viewed (as for example in virtual reality and other immersive image-technologies), a development that cannot be seen as an emancipatory counter-model to the controlling distance of the viewer. With regard to seeing, distance and immersion constitute a pair of opposites that reflects the old problem of the differentiation of subject and object in updated form, with all the attendant consequences (e.g. for questions of power and control). Panofsky clearly stands on the side of the Enlightenment model of distanced and distancing looking, describing it as the "consolidation and systematization of the external world". Proximity or even merging of subject and object, on the other hand, he finds suspect; denial of distance is human struggling for power, something he describes as an "extension of the domain of the self", as if an undistanced gaze would result in the subject incorporating the object. In such a scenario, the subject's struggle for control would come at the cost of the external world. Such rebellion against perspective is not a phenomenon of recent decades, however: Panofsky refers to the "most modern aesthetic thinking" that accuses perspective of being "the tool of a limited and limiting rationalism" (71), and in a footnote he describes El Lissitzky's critique from 1925: perspective allegedly "limited space, made it finite, closed it off", conceiving of it as "rigid three-dimensionality" (154). The most recent art, he claims, tries to break these bonds, "exploding the entire space" by "dispersing the centre of vision" (154).

For Panofsky, perspective as an "ordering of the visual phenomenon" (71) becomes an arena for conflicting forces: objectivity, distance, solidity and rationality face off against subjectivity, volatility and denial of distance. Perspective signals the end of antique theocracy and the emergence of "modern anthropocracy" (72) – Panofsky's scepticism towards this new ruler is unmistakeable. For Christopher Wood, Panofsky's perspective is a metaphor for another metaphor: "It is perspective, after all, that makes possible the metaphor of a *Weltanschauung*, a worldview, in the first place."[6] Insofar as worldview is criticized by theories of difference as a model tending to promote unity, the same will apply to perspective. Panofsky's analogy between perspective and modern anthropocracy, on the other hand, at least opens up the criticized unity of his model of progress to doubt.

Seeing, for Panofsky, is an activity whose psychophysical character can be studied, but which only becomes visible in the depiction of something seen. And this depiction, in turn, can only be the result of a cultural and in some

6 Wood, "Introduction" in Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, 13.

cases symbolizing activity – making it an object of study for the iconologist. Together with perspective, however, Panofsky also turns the visual order on which it is based into a sign, a symbol in Cassirer's sense. The ordering or convention that governs depiction is just as open to interpretation as the depiction itself. What is not covered by this system of interpretation is the gaze and act of seeing of the one doing the interpreting. It reveals itself implicitly in the evidential power of those elements that are "extracted" from what is seen (the artworks) by this gaze. Seeing in Panofsky's essay is highly selective. It looks for both similarity and difference, it compares and abstracts from isolated cases to groupings of similarities oriented towards clearly defined historical periods. It is a structural seeing, guided by the aims of inquiry, but Panofsky does not specifically address it as such. One could refer here to the well-known fundamental problem in the theory of science that structural interdependencies may exist between epistemological interest, research method, interpretation and result, potentially leading to tautology. Far more interesting, however, would be to ask how, if this is the case with Panofsky's essay, it is still possible to get so much out of reading it?

We could ask a different question: What does Panofsky actually see? One criticism often levelled at iconologists is that they see not forms but only objects that mean something, that they look beyond or through the forms at an object (such as the lily that symbolizes Mary's innocence). In Panofsky's case, this would mean that if he wishes to study the visual order of spatial representation, he sees the surface and the forms that determine how the objects stand on the surface and in relation to each other. But his descriptions show that he deliberately abbreviates this moment of seeing to those formal elements that provide evidence for his argument – as in the case of the floor tiles in 14th-century painting[7] that allow vanishing points to be more precisely identified. In the unwieldy concept of the symbolic form, this tautological tendency is already present: this form is actually an object, an object of symbolization.

Seeing as a psychophysical process only figures in Panofsky where it is a matter of underlining its distinctness from constructed perspective. This creates a kind of base and superstructure model: the empirical process of seeing as the base for the superstructure of perspective construction. Finally, it remains uncertain how the relationship between base and superstructure is to be conceived of. We are left with a dichotomy of nature (empirical seeing) and culture that displays parallels with recent debates such as those between

7 One lovely example being that of Master Bertram of Minden (59).

empiricist and constructivist positions. For Panofsky, this doesn't seem to be a problem: he addresses the phenomenon of seeing where it becomes visible – in cultural practice. From today's viewpoint, he reinforces the constructivist position when he uses the example of Kepler to show how perspective as a cultural convention dominates and transforms empirical seeing. This is doubtless one of the reasons for the current renewed interest in his essay and for its compatibility with today's concepts of visuality. What is problematic is the importance accorded to the authorial prerogative on interpretation – a prerogative which includes, as both precondition and consequence, the fact that the act of seeing itself remains undiscussed. The essay is also problematic in terms of its macro-historical findings. Such aspects are criticized by current constructivist-leaning readings like that of Christopher Wood.

Seeing as an approach to reality – Ernst Gombrich's *Art and Illusion*[8]

The book's cover shows Magritte's painting *Le Palais des Rideaux, III*.[9] Against some wooden panelling, on bare floorboards, a small distance apart, stand two identical, irregular seven-sided pictures in pale grey frames. On closer inspection, the obviousness of the way the pictures are arranged in space becomes less clear, causing a strange flickering of the visual effect: Are the pictures resting against the wall? Their slight backwards inclination suggests this, but the shadows on the floor and wall suggest not. On a pale grey-blue ground, the picture on the right features the word "ciel" (sky) in cursive script. The left-hand picture shows a slightly cloudy sky in blue-grey-white. Magritte's picture offers a pointed visual remark on the question of painterly representation, but with a thrust that differs from Gombrich's: the painting points to the difference between text and picture, while Gombrich is interested in the difference between perception and picture.

Gombrich begins with a question: Why does pictorial representation have a history? The backdrop against which this question makes sense is a presupposition that he formulates as another question: Why did it take so long

8 Ernst H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion. A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (first published 1960), eleventh printing with a new preface (Princeton, Oxford 2000).

9 *The Palace of Curtains III*, 1928-1929, Museum of Modern Art, New York. This cover was used for the eleventh edition, published in 2000 (Princeton Paperbacks). Other editions have had different covers.

for humanity to develop the means for plausible rendering of visual effects, to create the illusion of "lifelikeness"? (291) This implies a kind of historical determinism: the history of the picture or, more narrowly, the history of painting, is placed under the necessity, the telos, the unwavering goal of achieving such "lifelikeness". Illusionism becomes an anthropological constant, or at least a dimension welcomed by all people. This opens up the problem also posed in a certain way by Panofsky in his perspective essay: How to explain the fact that there have been periods in the history of (European) art when painting did not look at all as if it was concerned with a plausible rendering of reality? Panofsky locates these differences in the field of historically changing ideas about the world; for him, the various ways of portraying figure and space are symbolic forms of the specific worldview in question. Gombrich constructs a different model to explain the differences between representation and reality: In a first step he tries to understand perception with the help of experimental psychology (very popular in the 1950s) and gestalt psychology.[10] By referring to disciplines that have the status of natural sciences capable of generating falsifiable results, he wishes to show that art history, too, is able to bring forth such results. He assembles a series of arguments around seeing that show him in a fundamental dilemma: On the one hand, he writes against the myth of the "innocent eye" according to which seeing is understood as a purely passive registering of the outside world, uninfluenced by any knowledge, unformatted (to use a fitting metaphor from computer culture), and against painting as a faithful reproduction of the image on the retina. Here, he follows psychology in assuming that seeing takes place on the basis of subjective "schemata" that format perception (to stick with that metaphor), thus opening up his construction to the *subjectivity* and relativity of what is seen and depicted. On the other hand, he insists on an *objectivity* not subject to human influence that must remain a benchmark for the representation of what is seen. And this benchmark can only be the outside world – that which is represented. Gombrich's dilemma is essentially the elementary conflict that runs through western attempts to explain the relationship between individual and world – the conflict (in very simplified terms) between constructivism and positivism.

10 He refers, for example, to: Rudolf Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception* (1954); Edwin G. Boring, *Sensation and Perception in the History of Experimental Psychology* (1942); F.A. Hayek, *The Sensory Order* (1952); Charles E. Osgood, *Method and Theory in Experimental Psychology* (1953).

To my mind, experimental psychology seems to reflect this conflict rather than bridging it, when it attempts to render the processes of perception themselves objectively understandable by means of experiments. Here, too, the question is: is seeing purely passive (with the objectively existing world encountering "empty" perceptive organs) or is it subjectively shaped and focused by pre-existing knowledge? The psychology of perception assumes the latter, while attempting to generalize this subjective element in terms of objectifiable patterns ("schemata"). These patterns are considered not as individually unique, and thus subjective, but as common to all people. And if these patterns and schemata are assumed to be universal, then perception, located within the subject and its pre-knowledge, can be objectified.

Gombrich takes these insights from psychology and applies them to his thinking about the kind of seeing that is relevant to art history: the seeing of painters and viewers. As mentioned above, he believes painting to be driven by the desire to achieve a plausible representation of the illusion of "lifelikeness". He thus considers seeing under this premise. What does this have to do with historically changing ways of representing reality in art? Art shows itself as historical precisely by these changes, be it a development towards a specific endpoint (for Gombrich: the perfect illusion of three-dimensional space on a flat surface) or not. Gombrich calls this historical quality "style" or "manner". Measured against what he sees as the endpoint of the development, style is what deviates from the perfect illusion, and thus also what confounds the viewer attempting to reconcile what she sees in the picture with external reality. Style is convention (291), the share of seeing based on patterns which the viewer (referred to by Gombrich always as the "beholder") brings with her, patterns that guide seeing and make it an active process; conventions, schemata, prior knowledge are modified and corrected in seeing via a comparison with reality. At this point in my very brief account it becomes clearer that linking Magritte's *Palace of Curtains* with Gombrich's agenda brings forth a strange reading of the painting – as if Magritte's aim had been to highlight this difference between perception and objective reality, between image and reality, between innocent seeing and convention. But Magritte seems to have placed enough clues in the picture that constantly lead the viewer back only into the picture's own reality, also blocking the path into another parallel world, that of text.

In his review of *Art and Illusion,* Nelson Goodman gave a brief account of its basic questions that can be summarized as follows:[11] To say that we know what we see is no more true than to say that we see what we know. Perception depends on conceptual patterns; there is no innocent eye. The "raw material of seeing" cannot be extracted from the "finished product". Representation cannot consist in simply rendering the world as it is or as it is "correctly" seen. Differences in style are not explained by differences in eyesight or dexterity; what is to be represented depends on the schemata within which things are seen. Conversely, one cannot say that the painter reproduces what s/he knows rather than what s/he sees. A painterly representation transfers something into two dimensions; it does not duplicate, but describes in painterly language. Gombrich explains the evolution of representation in terms of the development of such a language. By trial and error, via ongoing experimentation and modification of our perception and our methods of transferring what we see, we gradually realize increasingly effective representations.

For Gombrich, this activity based on trial and error resembles a scientific approach, both on the side of the painter and on that of the viewer: "… the very process of perception is based on the same rhythm that we found governing the process of representation: the rhythm of schema and correction. It is a rhythm which presupposes constant activity on our part in making guesses and modifying them in the light of our experience. Wherever this test meets with an obstacle, we abandon the guess and try again, much in the way we proceeded in reading such complex pictures as Piranesi's *Carceri*." (271/272) Seeing is equated with the acquisition of knowledge, as described by Karl Popper, whom Gombrich cites: "In this emphasis on elimination of false guesses, on trial and error in all acquisition of knowledge 'from the amoeba to Einstein,' I am following K. R. Popper." (272)

The problem to be solved by painter and viewer is described by Gombrich as follows: the painter transforms the visible world into a piece of painted canvas. But he cannot simply copy what he sees, since "the successful *trompe l'œil* no less than the striking caricature are not only the results of careful looking but also the fruit of experimentation with pictorial effects. The invention of these effects, as I have tried to show, was stimulated by the dissatisfaction which certain periods of Western civilization felt with images that failed to look convincing." (xli) This "gradual modification of the traditional schematic

11 In *The Journal of Philosophy* 57, no. 18 (1960), 595-599.

conventions of image making under the pressure of novel demands" (xlii) constitutes the history of art.

By analogy, the same applies to the viewer, whose "reading" of the picture means "to collaborate with the artist and to transform a piece of coloured canvas into a likeness of the visible world". In the case of Piranesi's *Carceri* with their baffling spatial structures, this is especially problematic, as Gombrich explains, since it proves impossible to understand the illusion of three-dimensionality based on the logic of strict perspective. Gombrich is sure: "We enjoy nothing more than the demand made on us to exercise our own 'imitative faculty', our imagination, and thus to share in the creative adventure of the artist." In this context, rather than creating fantasy worlds, the imagination reconstructs the reality whose illusion is created by the picture: the pleasure we derive from illusion lies in the intellectual effort of bridging the difference between art and reality, as Gombrich says, quoting Quatremère de Quincy (278/279). As a result, his suggested approach to an interpretation of the *Carceri* involves imagining the stage set that could have served as the model for the illusions in Piranesi's etchings (245/246).

This brings to mind the concept of narrative: the viewer is called on to develop the narrative of a plausible spatial continuum for the picture. When Gombrich uses this construction to resolve the conflict between the subjectivity of seeing and the "objective standards of representational accuracy" (xli), he is basically fulfilling a need of his own, though one that remains latent: Just as he claims that the "beholder" (who, for all the historicization of his schemata, remains abstract) desires to perceive a plausible illusory space, he himself clearly follows his desire for a logical correlation between imagination and picture. There must, then, be an explanation for the unfathomable interweavings of space in Piranesi's work; faced with such resistance to interpretation, the creativity of the viewer's imagination lies in devising a semantics that secures the picture as a (spatial) *unity*. For the *Carceri*, this would be the construction of a stage set. Similar to words forming a plausible sentence or the sequence of film images forming a narrative continuum, the focus in Gombrich's model (plausibility, matching with reality, picture making) seems to be on perceiving logical units rather than fragments or, rather, on cognitively shaping perceived fragments into units. It is in these activities that the psychological element he refers to in connection with painterly representation resides.

Any engagement with *Art and Illusion* must itself remain fragmentary. Even examining the different readings of Gombrich's book since its pub-

lication, in various disciplines from philosophy to art history, would be a worthwhile large-scale project – and a contribution to the history of science. Criticism of Gombrich's ideas has been diverse: the earliest and most theoretically rigorous critique came not from art history but from Anglo-American philosophy, the main focus here being the confrontation between objectivity and relativity of cognition.[12] In recent decades, with changing paradigms in the humanities, the character of the critiques has shifted. In art history since the 1980s, Gombrich's aim to establish a history of style in scientific terms (for him this means falsifiable in terms of Popper's critical empiricism) has been resisted on several grounds: on account of his Popperian rationalism, his emphasis on a biological basis for perception, his clinging to objective standards of representation and what would now (from a poststructuralist viewpoint) be called the "grand narrative" of naturalism as the telos of western art history – resulting in Gombrich's inability to integrate the art of the 20th century into his historical model. The fact that this critique was formulated primarily within Anglo-American art history can be linked to the key influence exerted by Gombrich (and Panofsky) on the whole field of art history in Britain and the United States – so that the so-called New Art

12 One example of a relativist critique is Dominic Lopes, "Pictures, Styles and Purposes" in *British Journal of Aesthetics* 32, no. 4 (1992), 330-341. In his review of Gombrich's *The Image and the Eye* (*The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 42, no.1 (1983), 85-89) David Blinder gives an instructive insight into the debates between objectivist and relativist positions on Gombrich's psychology of perception. This debate involves primarily Gombrich himself, Nelson Goodman and J.J. Gibson. In this book (*The Image and the Eye: Further Studies in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, Oxford 1982) Gombrich underpins his theory of "innate" schemata from *Art and Illusion*, originally based on psychology, with more recent findings from neurology and information science. Among others, he claims (in Blinder's paraphrase) that we are "biologically programmed to react to certain configurations" (Blinder, 86). According to Blinder, Gombrich shifts his argument from physiological mechanisms towards "information-processing systems" (ibid., 87). A very different and essentially uncritical review came from Leslie Cunliffe, "Gombrich on Art: A Social-Constructivist Interpretation of His Work and Its Relevance to Education" in *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 32, no. 4 (1998), 61-77. The philosopher David Carrier was highly critical: "Gombrich on Art Historical Explanations" in *Leonardo* 16, no. 2 (1983), 91-96. Carrier also raises the question of whether geometric perspective is a convention (Goodman) or whether it possesses objective status (Gombrich), highlighting the conflict between the constructivist-relativist approach (Goodman) and Gombrich's objectivization of perception in a concrete example: "Perspective as a Convention: On the Views of Nelson Goodman and Ernst Gombrich" in *Leonardo* 13 (1980), 283-287.

History couldn't help but adopt a critical position with regard to these father figures.

At this point, it is useful to recall what Gombrich's attempted scientification of art history was directed against, which involves shedding light on the historical situation from which he was arguing, eleven years after the end of World War II, when he delivered the lectures that formed the basis for *Art and Illusion*. Gombrich was turning against the post-Hegelian historical determinism in German art history that spoke of zeitgeist and *Kunstwollen* (the will to form), the latter a metaphor used by Riegl which Gombrich calls a "ghost in the machine, driving the wheels of artistic developments according to 'inexorable laws'" (19). Be it *Kunstwollen*, the spirit of an age, race or period, he saw such "mythological explanations" as a danger because "the habit of talking in terms of collectives, of 'mankind', 'races', or 'ages', … weakens resistance to totalitarian habits of mind" (20). His main witness on this point is a compatriot of his own generation, the former Nazi acolyte Hans Sedlmayr, against whose "meaningful self-movement of the Spirit which results in genuine historical totalities of events" (20) he quotes Popper, who considered such "spirits" to be nothing more than symptoms of a vacuum that was meant to fill sociology with something more sensible such as the analysis of problems arising within a tradition. For Gombrich, styles are elements of such traditions that cannot be explained in terms of supraindividual "spirit" (21). Instead, their history is one of "preferences, of various acts of choice between given alternatives" (21). As pragmatic as this may sound, however, Gombrich's concept of scientificity ultimately requires a considerable degree of normativity. By founding the universality of his model of perception on the scientifically obtained insights of experimental psychology, he believes he is able to replace totalizing mythology with falsifiable results.

This has been argued against not only by constructivist philosophers like Goodman, but also by a younger generation of aesthetic theorists and art historians who criticize determinisms found in Gombrich's approach, be they methodological (borrowing scientific falsifiability for fine art) or theoretical (the holism inherent in a teleological view of attaining painterly life-likeness).

In 1981, Alan Woods argued energetically against equating scientific and artistic problems.[13] More influential was the critique formulated by Norman

13 Alan Woods, "Gombrich's Art and Illusion" in *The Cambridge Quarterly* 10, no. 2 (1981), 130-166.

Bryson in his 1983 book *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze*.[14] Bryson represented a poststructuralist-semiotic school of art history that shared at least one concern with Gombrich: a critique of the totalizations and great myths of traditional art history, such as the cult of genius. Bryson also disagreed with biological explanations of perception. His position was one of sociocultural constructivism that viewed perception as dependent on culture. Compared to Goodman's ideas, this was a further shift, this time towards a cultural semioticization of perception and representation. In this way, Bryson also shaped the later (rather simplified, one-dimensional) reception of *Art and Illusion* that accused Gombrich of understanding visual representation as being based exclusively on biologically determined perception, i.e. without taking cultural influences into account. But this would be precisely the "innocent eye" that Gombrich specifically opposed – although *Art and Illusion* remains relatively unclear on whether the "schemata" that format seeing might be explainable not only as patterns in the sense of experimental psychology but also as cultural constructions.

In 2000, Christopher Wood edited an anthology of texts by art historians of the Vienna School (Riegl, Sedlmayr, Pächt, Kaschnitz von Weinberg, Novotny).[15] In his extensive introduction, an interesting reading from the viewpoint of the "new" Anglo-American art history, he comments on the "structural analysis" practised by these writers, which he says robs artworks not only of their mimetic reference but of meaning altogether. In contrast to this, he argues, Panofsky and Gombrich tried to "heal" the instability they found in the artworks of the past by injecting them, wherever possible, with some "redeeming universal or humanist content."[16] For Wood, both positions give rise to problems – on which I cannot go into more detail here.

Finally, Gombrich addressed a phenomenon of art history (changes in the pictorial style of representation) not through an art-historical but a scientific approach. Seeing interested him only insofar as it was relevant to the search

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

15 Christopher S. Wood (ed.), *The Vienna School Reader. Politics and Art Historical Method in the 1930s* (New York 2000). Nine years later, Wood widened his overview of the reception of Gombrich's *Art and Illusion*, including not only art historians and philosophers but also the literary critic Wolfgang Iser with his narratological approach: see Christopher S. Wood, "Art History Reviewed VI: E.H. Gombrich's 'Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation', 1960" in *The Burlington Magazine* 151 (2009), 836-839.

16 Christopher S. Wood, "Introduction" in *The Vienna School Reader*, 9-72: 51.

for "an explanation for the phenomenon of style. […] Style became one of my worries, one of my problems, because the idea that style is simply the expression of an age seemed to me not only to say very little, but to be rather vacuous in every respect."[17] There is another thing Gombrich shares with the "New Art History" – his low opinion of connoisseurship. But his reasons were different: rather than accusing connoisseurial art history of being partly responsible for the art market, he simply wasn't interested in it at all. History as a factor of change, which had been the main focus of previous art history, was of secondary importance to Gombrich – because history as a discursive practice had often enough been guilty of politically suspect forms of mythologization. As the academic discipline of history in the tradition of the 19th century offered no way out of this dilemma, he looked for one in the "hard" sciences. This in turn meant that in contrast to Panofsky's iconology, his fundamental research gained little influence in art-historical practice.

17 Ernst H. Gombrich, "An Autobiographical Sketch and Discussion" in *Rutgers Art Review* 8 (1987), 123-141.

2. Experience and the Visual

The "Period Eye" – Michael Baxandall's *Painting and Experience*[1]

The notion of the "period eye" was put forward by Michael Baxandall, an approach exemplified by his book *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy. A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style,* which has been through several editions since it first appeared in 1972. Baxandall's first sentence – "A fifteenth-century painting is the deposit of a social relationship" – reveals his specific approach: for Baxandall, the artwork does not depict such a deposit, it is a deposit. In other words, the point of departure, centre and task here is not an artwork but a social relationship. In this view, the artwork is the visual materialization of this relationship. Baxandall develops his model using the painting of the Quattrocento in Florence – more precisely: using his description of the social relationships that determined the production of this painting. The painters' "clients" dictated the framework within which artists produced their commissions; individual talent or even genius played a marginal role. As Baxandall writes with typical dryness: "In the fifteenth century, painting was still too important to be left to the painters. The picture trade was a quite different thing from that in our own romantic tradition, in which painters paint what they think best and then look around for a buyer. … The fifteenth century was a period of bespoke painting, however, and this book is about the customer's participation in it." (3) Reviewing the book's second edition in 1988, a sociologist made a telling link to her own discipline: for her, the "period eye" is "a deep account of the ideological congruence between the *habitus* of a class of men, as Bourdieu would say, and meaningful cultural

1 Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy. A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style* (1972), 2nd edition (Oxford 1988).

forms".[2] Rather than being static, however, this habitus is a cognitive style, rooted in the visual practice of the client that became the raw material for the painter. So much for the sociological recasting of Baxandall's project.

This brings us to the subjects of the "period eye" – the clients. It is their seeing that Baxandall attempts to reconstruct. He develops a method to make the eye of the historical client accessible to today's viewers and readers. This takes place not via a process of seeing today, but by reconstructing the context of seeing at the time in question – from an outside, so to speak. This seeing is a skill, a learned ability that arises not primarily from dealing with art but as an everyday visual practice that in turn impacts on what clients expect from painting.

For the Florentine art of the 15th century, Baxandall locates his historical point of departure in the practices of art trading (and other kinds of trade), because the social group commissioning the works consisted essentially of the patrician merchant class. He thus begins by giving a vivid picture of the customs of this clientele when dealing with art, in particular the modalities of contracts between customer and artist – an unusual choice of subject matter to get readers in the mood for the painting of the Quattrocento. These modalities are of interest above all insofar as they show how the value of art was perceived: gradually, for example, the use of precious materials became less important than the personal involvement of the master of a given artist's workshop; rather than buying a specific amount of gold and lapis lazuli in the picture, then, the customer now paid for the master's particular skill, a shift in values for which Baxandall supplies documentary evidence. Apart from stating what should be done by the master and not by his assistants, however, these contracts provide no further description of the skills in question, and other sources on the painting of the time use qualitative linguistic metaphors that can no longer be translated into a visual-painterly equivalent, prompting Baxandall to inquire into "how Quattrocento people, painters and public, attended to visual experience in distinctively Quattrocento ways, and how the quality of this attention became a part of their pictorial style" (27). This introduces the key concept of experience. We are not talking about a hypothetical, abstract viewer like the one assumed in the mathematical construction of one-point perspective (where this viewer is even reduced to a *single* eye), nor about the similarly hypothetical viewer of experimental psychology as presupposed

2 Magali Sarfatti Larson, review of *Painting and Experience* in *Contemporary Sociology* 25, no. 4 (1996), 454.

by Gombrich. Baxandall's viewer is a historical and social variable; his/her eye, or rather his/her seeing as a cognitive activity, is shaped by experience and by the physical, mental and emotional skills, habits and activities required by everyday life in the art-consuming social groups in Florence at the time. This shares certain implications with the metaphor of the "embodied eye"[3] as used since the late 1980s within art and cultural studies in discussions of the body as a focus of social, media, technological and cultural processes.

The "period eye" begins at the point of transition between the physiological process of seeing and the interpretation of the optical data in the brain (29). This interpretation is based on "innate skills" (29) and skills developed through experience. Baxandall groups these acquired interpretative skills, "the categories, the model patterns and the habits of inference and analogy" (30), under the concept of "cognitive style" (30).[4] In this way, he turns "style" from a category for describing art into a category for describing the way art is seen. This cognitive style, on which the period eye is based, consists of "a stock of patterns, categories and methods of inference; training in a range of representational conventions; and experience, drawn from the environment". The process within which these factors take effect is "indescribably complex and still obscure in its physiological detail" (32). To illustrate what is described here in brief, abstract terms, Baxandall offers practical examples relating to technical issues of artistic practice in contemporary Florence (the arrangement of figures, the construction of three-dimensionality on a flat surface, colour, the figures' body language).

Baxandall's seeing is practical and physical, for example translating experience with dance as a social practice among the educated classes into an ability to interpret patterns of figures. Baxandall sees this as a visual skill and a set of expectations shared by the painters and their clients, forming the context and background for the arrangements and gestures of figures in Botticelli, a claim he backs up with treatises on dance and other written sources that link Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*, the group of persons involved, and a dance composition (78-81). Another specifically Florentine context cited by Baxandall for the visual expectations of customers and the visual habits of artists

3 Christopher S. Wood, "When Attitudes Became Form. Christopher S. Wood on Michael Baxandall (1933-2008)" in *Artforum* 47, no. 5 (2009), 43-44.

4 "Cognitive style" is a concept from anthropology and psychology. See Allan Langdale, "Aspects of the Critical Reception and Intellectual History of Baxandall's Concept of the Period Eye" in *Art History* 21, no. 4 (1998), 479-497: 486. In Baxandall's work, the background of this concept (and of some others) remains unexplained.

is religious drama which, as he shows, features constellations of figures and narrative strategies similar to those found in painting (71-76). A highly practical skill possessed by merchants that influenced the way they perceived art is the calculation of the capacity of barrels using geometry and mathematics (86/7); such three-dimensional seeing aided comprehension of the volumes portrayed in the painting of artists like Piero della Francesca or Pisanello. Here, too, Baxandall cites sources that convincingly link context and painting, including a mathematical handbook for merchants by Piero della Francesca (87).

The metaphor of the "period eye" does what figures of speech are supposed to do: it blurs categorical boundaries of the kind that hinder comprehension of historically "unfamiliar" phenomena (as Pächt would say, see chapter three) but that accompany most debates on method in art history: the line between art and context, between historical and present-day reception; between artist and consumer; between the optical-physiological basis of seeing and what one would now call its cultural construction; between physicality and sociality; but also, and this is a difficult point in methodological terms, between historically specific but not reconstructable individuals (in this case artist and client) and what can be said in general terms about these individuals in the sense of a typical viewer of a specific place or time. This last point drew criticism from Gombrich, for example, concerning the use of totalizing concepts like zeitgeist, national style or *Kunstwollen*.[5] Sociologists like Pierre Bourdieu and anthropologists like Clifford Geertz, who were interested in insights into social groups, and thus in the generalizability of individual observations within specific limits, were significantly more sympathetic to the "period eye" than their art historian colleagues. For Bourdieu, who in 1981 published the chapter of *Painting and Experience* dedicated to the period eye in French with a foreword of his own,[6] it offered the methodology for a sociology of perception; in his 1976 article *Art as a Cultural System*, Geertz took it as his point of departure

5 On Gombrich's critique of Baxandall's "period eye", see Langdale, "Aspects", 480. Unfortunately, Langdale gives no more specific details, except for a reference to an interview with Baxandall conducted for his unpublished dissertation (see ibid., footnote 21).

6 Michael Baxandall, "L'Œil du quattrocento" in *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 4 (1981), 10-49; Pierre Bourdieu and Yvette Desault, "Pour une sociologie de la perception", ibid., 3-9.

for an analysis of the visual culture of a society, providing one of the most important stimuli for the subsequent emergence of visual culture studies.[7]

What progress did Baxandall's method offer in cognitive terms? He takes art as his starting point; he treats style as an important concept. However for Baxandall art is the starting point but not the end of his endeavours. He has a concept of painting, at least in the specific case of the Quattrocento, which leads away from painting itself towards an epistemic interest that lies beyond it – to the "social relationship" of which painting is the "deposit". This sounds like a social history of art of the kind we have known since Arnold Hauser – an approach that offers no answer to the question of the inner connection between the manifestations of art and sociality, working instead with mostly suggestive, non-verifiable analogies between stylistic periods and forms of society. With his period eye, on the other hand, Baxandall inquires, with a precision based on historical evidence, into the verifiable relationship between the manifestations of art and the visual conditions dictated by the society where its production and reception take place. In this way, he finishes by bringing the way we see today into play: based on the assumption that forms and styles of painting respond to social conditions, a knowledge of social practices and conventions may "sharpen our perception of the pictures" just as, conversely, the forms and styles of painting can sharpen our perception of society (151).

According to Baxandall, the possibilities within social history for reconstructing past societies are limited to written sources, imposing a crucial limitation on attempts to reconstruct *experience*. And this is where painterly style becomes important: "a pictorial style gives access to the visual skills and habits and, through these, to the distinctive social experience" (152). This implies that a painting can be read like a written source, and the period eye is Baxandall's proposal for such a method of reading. This makes it possible to avoid both the mistakes of an "illustrated social history" and "facile equations" between social milieus and painterly styles – his negative examples being the equations of bourgeois milieu with realistic style and aristocratic milieu with idealizing style (152). At the end of his book, Baxandall clearly states the essence of what he wants to achieve with the "period eye": For the "students of charters and parish rolls", the visual facts may appear "hopelessly lightweight"; "They are certainly a distinct kind of fact: what they offer is an insight into what it was like, intellectually and sensibly, to be a Quattrocento person. Such insights are

7 Clifford Geertz, "Art as a Cultural System" in *Modern Language Notes* 91, no. 6 (1976), 1473-1499. Cf., Langdale, "Aspects".

necessary if the historical imagination is to be fed, and the visual is here the proper complementary to the verbal." (152-153) The path of an empathy that overcomes historical time thus leads not back to art but through art to the historical individual; however, and this is important, this historical individual is typified and generalized at the level of relatively homogeneous social groups – like the "church-going business man, with a taste for dancing" (109).

Experience is joined here by two more concepts that are just as impossible to reduce to language: insight and imagination. Here, then, Baxandall takes his metaphors for the process of scholarly learning from the field of the visual, deploying them against the supposed facticity and objectivity of a form of historiography reduced to written sources; herein lies their significance and their methodological weight. Baxandall tries to introduce visuality into the academic discipline of history as a fact. In subsequent decades, however, as mentioned above, his proposal was taken up mainly by other disciplines with more of a focus on the present, in particular sociology and anthropology – disciplines that later came to occupy places at the core of visual culture studies. Such uptake of the period eye has increased especially since the 1980s, always with the same motivation: an analysis and critique of culture based on the relations of the social – and not, for example, on the isolated specifics of an object or a genre of cultural production.

These readings are exemplified by Clifford Geertz's article "Art as a Cultural System". Geertz is often named as being partly to blame for two of the "turns" of recent decades: the cultural and the linguistic turn. It is true that his text combines culture and semiotics, but it specifically opposes a brand of semiotics that views signs merely as a means of communication, a code to be deciphered. He calls on the analytical forces of semiotic theory, "whether Peirce's, Saussure's, Lévi-Strauss's, or Goodman's", to turn their attention away from an "investigation of signs *in abstraction* toward an investigation of them in their natural habitat – the common world in which men look, name, listen, and make".[8] This embedding of experience into semiotics is his adaptation of the period eye: as his chief witness for experience as the site where art, seeing, everyday practices and society meet, he cites Baxandall's example of the Florentine merchant. In his book, Baxandall himself never argues in the sense of semiotics; he sticks with experience as the concept that brings the various fields together. The reason for this, presumably, is that he is not in-

8 Geertz, "Art as a Cultural System", 1498, (my italics).

terested in interpreting the pictures he cites as examples.[9] This in turn means that the horizon of experience shared by painter and viewer, which he defines as the medium of art (40), is not something he wishes to apply to the pictures as an interpretative tool. Baxandall does not establish a *system*, not even a system of signs; in contrast to the comprehensive, emphatic definition of culture put forth by Geertz,[10] he uses the concept of culture very pragmatically and very sparingly.

Today, "experience" is making a comeback in cultural studies; evidence for this includes Christopher Wood's reading of the period eye, published in his obituary for Baxandall.[11] He describes Baxandall's approach in *Painting and Experience* in a way that is characteristic of the altered perspectives of recent years: Baxandall, Wood writes, called on the reader "to occupy the body of the fifteenth-century Florentine patron of altarpieces and frescoes, typically a 'church-going business man, with a taste for dancing'". This is where the metaphor of the "embodied eye" comes into play; the embodied eye belongs to the body of this businessman. The reader, Wood argues, is invited to participate in the historically remote everyday life by a "process of bodily triangulation: We would feel with our bodies, and see with our embodied eyes, what the beholders of Masaccio and Filippo Lippi saw." This body metaphor is one of his adaptations of the category of "experience"; another is to be found in the time-oriented concept of "process". In Wood's view, Baxandall demystified the art of the Renaissance, releasing it from the grip of iconological expertise and references to antiquity, recasting it as "process art, whose very content is materials, labour, the mass of the body, the force of gestures". Wood then makes an astonishing link to *When Attitudes Become Form*, an exhibition of contemporary art shown in Bern and London in 1969 featuring conceptual, performance and installation art – currents within the neo-avant-garde that sought to revolutionize the concept, genres, spaces and institutions of contemporary art. For Wood, the parallel between the painters of the Quattrocento as described by Baxandall and the artists of the neo-avant-garde lies in the interaction of work and materials, in the emotional commitment of

9 He addressed the problem of interpretation in a later book, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures* (New Haven, London 1985), a series of "fiercely antimethodical lectures", as Wood remarks in his obituary: Wood, "When Attitudes Became Form".

10 For Geertz, culture is "the general system of symbolic forms" (Geertz, "Art as a Cultural System", 1488), a position that echoes Cassirer's philosophy of culture.

11 Wood, "When Attitudes Became Form". All quotes in this paragraph, ibid., 44.

the artists, and in their direct link with the audience. Baxandall's readers in the 1970s, Wood writes, would have appreciated the description of an art context where painters and audience escaped the control of the church and which had not yet withdrawn into the cabinets of the collectors, taking place instead "in the piazza, in public, where they listened side by side to the mendicant preacher who coordinated the biblical tales with the affections of the heart, and where all practical men, susceptible to the beauty of things, could openly share their intimacy with materials, tools, and craft. In this way, inside the scholarly treatise, art and life find their way back to each other." Baxandall's Quattrocento was attractive to the 1970s, then, because it spoke to the utopia of a unity of art and life in a harmonious society – for as Wood critically adds, Baxandall's "social history" is not dynamic, knowing no diachrony, conflicts or breaks. This contrasts strongly with early cultural studies and John Berger's approach based on a Marxist critique of ideology in *Ways of Seeing*.[12]

Wood's description of Baxandall's "scholarly treatise" is so lively that one forgets that Baxandall meticulously backed up every one of his links between lived reality and pictorial form with references to written sources – sources that had previously gone largely unnoticed by art history because they did not belong to the canon of iconology. Since the 1970s, this in turn marked Baxandall out not only as a contemporary of recent ethnology, but also of recent academic history with its interest in everyday life and mentalities.

Although his approach did meet with interest in the context of Anglo-American adaptations of structuralism, it is not easy, however, to describe Baxandall's linking of everyday life and cognitive style as structural. The category of experience, with its refusal of a structurally fixed outline, strikes me as a more fitting one to describe his approach with its pragmatic restriction of its methods' scope and a refusal to construct closed theoretical frameworks. His method implies an appeal to today's viewers: in order to be able to comprehend the life and art of a given historical period, they must learn something that is historically unfamiliar and that goes beyond what has been reproduced in language. Baxandall calls for an understanding of unfamiliar cognitive skills in order to recognize historical habits of seeing.

12 With Sven Blomberg, Chris Fox, Michael Dibb, Richard Hollis, 1972 BBC TV series, book published the same year.

Between presence and representation – Svetlana Alpers' *The Art of Describing*[13]

In her 1977 article "Is Art History?", Svetlana Alpers reviewed the main tendencies of the New Art History in terms of method.[14] This new current first announced itself in a series of studies of individual artworks under the title *Art in Context*, published from 1972 by John Fleming and Hugh Honour as a counter-model to the traditional art-history-by-period of the "Pelican History of Art" series. For Alpers, the main concerns of this "new" art history lay in a shift of attention to the context and reception of art; as its most interesting proponents she named T.J. Clark with *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution*[15] and Baxandall with *Painting and Experience*. For Alpers, as her title suggests, the key here was that the individual artwork was treated as a piece of history. One might say that the question of art's context (who commissioned it, who was the audience, where was it shown, etc.) made such a focus on individual works necessary. Alpers describes the New Art History as a movement to democratize the discipline: Clark uses context to demystify the concept of solitary artistic creativity by embedding it in its social setting; and Baxandall does the same to seeing by situating it as a social practice.[16]

Alpers' thoughts on whether art is history then take an unexpected turn: inquiring after the epistemic interests of the "new" art historians, she accuses them of having neither a subjective standpoint nor a shared position. Instead, she argues, their project of reconstructing context pursues a "notion of objective historical research".[17] What Alpers demands is, firstly, clarification of individual art historians' own subjective positions as a precondition for research, and secondly, going beyond this, a moral humanist commitment to research of the kind advocated by Panofsky and Warburg, and by Gombrich with his harsh critique of totalizing zeitgeist concepts. Alpers criticizes Baxandall as "a most sophisticated spokesman" of this supposed objectivity and quotes a phrase from *Painting and Experience* (151): "quattrocento intentions happened in quattrocento terms, not in ours". For Alpers, "Baxandall's

13 Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing. Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago 1983).

14 Svetlana Alpers, "Is Art History?" in *Daedalus* 106 (1977), 1-13.

15 T.J. Clark, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 1973).

16 Alpers, "Is Art History", 2.

17 Ibid., 9.

disembodied desire – one shared by many art historians today – to see quattrocento art in quattrocento terms is as much an intellectual structuring *of our times* as the others. This too is knowledge we *make*."[18]

Why mention this debate? One reason is the metaphor of the disembodied desire for objectivity, which matches that of the disembodied eye in the later debate surrounding the critique of perspective as logocentric and abstract. Interestingly, Baxandall's "objective historicization" of visual practices was meant to combat precisely this abstraction of seeing – contrasting it with the seeing body of a quattrocento businessman "with a taste for dancing". For Alpers, however, the assumption of having reconstructed this body as an objective historical reality implies the elimination of another seeing body, i.e., that of the viewer who erroneously believes it is possible to disregard his/her own condition of seeing as a situated practice. Pächt did not pursue this strategy: like Baxandall, although he spoke of the unfamiliarity of historical modes of seeing, he tried to integrate the stylistic preferences from the viewer's present into his analysis as factors influencing his/her perception and choice of historical image structures. We might also note that Pächt's view did not take the artwork purely as its starting point, but also returned to it. In other words, he looked back and forth between artworks as a way of accessing historical formal structures, both synchronously and diachronically – an operation that might be theoretically linked with today's concept of interpictoriality.[19] Baxandall takes a different approach, viewing artworks as "lenses bearing on their own circumstances", as something through which to view history. "The suggestion is not that one must know about Renaissance Germany to enjoy the sculpture, but that the sculpture can offer a fresh focus on the cultural history of Renaissance Germany."[20]

This view is what gave rise to the concept of visual culture, sometime between 1977 and 1983. It came into the centre of art historical debate with the publication of Alpers' *The Art of Describing. Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century*

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18 Ibid., 10, my italics.

19 Several "inter"-concepts are in circulation in the field of visual culture studies and media studies, inspired by the poststructuralist concept of intertextuality (see, for example, Ralf Adelmann, Andreas Fahr, Ines Katenhusen, Nic Leonhardt, Dimitri Liebsch (eds.), *Visual Culture Revisited. German and American Perspectives on Visual Culture*, Cologne 2007) which rebutted the notion of authorship, arguing that texts arise from interaction with other texts.

20 Michael Baxandall, *The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany* (New Haven, London 1981), vii.

(1983): "What I propose to study then is not the *history* of Dutch art, but the Dutch *visual culture* – to use a term that I owe to Michael Baxandall."[21] Alpers does not provide a reference for this; surprisingly, the term is not used in *Painting and Experience*, first appearing in Baxandall's book on German Renaissance sculpture. This work has a similar structure to *Painting and Experience:* here, too, there is a chapter entitled "The Period Eye", but since Germany, unlike Italy, lacks treatises on art that give a primary insight into the visual habits and aesthetic judgements of the time, it is necessary to look elsewhere, "in the wider visual culture".[22] This is intended to provide insights into categories that might be authentic for the "general visual experience" of the period in order to get closer to its sculptures, and it is also meant to offer a view "through and beyond the sculpture" to the culture that influenced the "artistic manipulation of visual experience". I quote these passages at such length because they illustrate the links installed by Baxandall via the concepts of visual culture and visual experience.

With his concept of "visual culture", then, Baxandall almost incidentally brings into play a bridging concept that links conditions of seeing and culture. The concept's "right of primogeniture" lies with art history, inspired by input from other disciplines, primarily the cultural ethnology of Clifford Geertz and new approaches in the humanities dealing with the history of mentalities and everyday life. In the years that followed, rather than systematically pursuing this approach, Baxandall turned to other methodological problems,[23] which explains the pragmatically limited reach of his concept.

Alpers, on the other hand, is less pragmatic than programmatic in her use of the concept when she proposes to study not the history of Dutch art but Dutch visual culture (xxv). How can this programmatic aspect be described more specifically? In *The Art of Describing*, concrete application, theoretical considerations and engagement with art history as a discipline are so tightly interwoven that it is hard to focus on a single aspect. Instead, a look back to an article published in 1976, *Describe or Narrate? A Problem in Realistic Represen-*

21 Alpers, *The Art of Describing*, xxv, my italics.
22 Baxandall, *The Limewood Sculptors*, 145.
23 See in particular Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention*.

tation,[24] will help to shed light on the context in which she first encountered this problem to which she would go on to devote her book.

Alpers' article is an appeal for a new focus on painting that is not narrative but descriptive. The major theme of her book is already fully formulated here: she "rebels" against the dominance of iconographic readings of art, a dominance whose historical roots lie in the fact that European art history as a whole is assessed using criteria derived from the position of high esteem occupied by the art of the Italian Renaissance. Narrative, idea and history (the inherent textual quality of Italian painting since the Renaissance which, with Alberti's "istoria" and "costruzione legittima", links storytelling with the pictorial space of one-point perspective as a narrative space) have, according to Alpers, been the benchmark of success in the history of European art since Giotto, just as interpreting this content has been the benchmark in art history. This emphasis, which also implies a methodological restriction, is countered by Alpers with something she refers to in *The Art of Describing* (1983) as "descriptive painting". In "Describe or Narrate?" she speaks of the "dazzling descriptive surface of Dutch painting" and confronts "the Renaissance commitment to narrative art … which continued to challenge ambitious artists well into the nineteenth century" (16) with those descriptive tendencies in art, especially the art of the 17th and 19th centuries, that were discussed in the 1970s under the heading of realism. With a wealth of source material from art theory and art description since the early Renaissance, she shows that in the traditional hierarchy placing the intellect over the senses, the argument in favour of a legible, narrative art goes hand in hand with an attack on art that "delights the eyes of the ignorant".[25]

This is the basic agenda that also motivates *The Art of Describing*: Alpers wants to revise this hierarchy by focussing her work on painting that (also) describes rather than (only) narrating. But is it "merely" a question here of

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24 Svetlana Alpers, "Describe or Narrate? A Problem in Realistic Representation", in *New Literary History* (8:1, 1976), 15-41. Interestingly, this issue of *New Literary History* was subtitled *Readers and Spectators: Some Views and Review*, and the contributors included Gérard Genette, the poststructuralist literary theorist and proponent of narratology, and the film semiologist Christian Metz. The focus was on the reception of art, on legibility and visibility, an approach pursued by literary theory since the late 1960s that was only gradually becoming established in art history.

25 Alpers, "Describe or Narrate?", 17, translation of a quotation from Boccaccio about Giotto, who he praises because his art "addresses the intelligent with recognizable figures".

stepping into the academic breach to defend undervalued works? Several metaphors in "Describe or Narrate?" offer clues to additional, implicit motives. Discussing Caravaggio's *Conversion of St. Paul*, she claims that the light interpreted by scholars as heavenly "illuminates and thus involves us in the material things of this world rather than in the miracle of another". However much the light is meant to point to the miracle of conversion, in worldly terms it also makes the viewer "physically part of the event that took place on the road to Damascus". For Alpers, it is thus entirely clear that for Caravaggio, "the road to salvation is through immersing oneself in *this* world" (19, my italics). What is appealing about Caravaggio's art, she argues, is the direct, immediate quality of his description. The life imitated in intense painterly description breaks through the art into "our" space (19/20). "We are party to the undoing of art as the tables are turned by life." (20) Caravaggio's painting plays with the possibility of tearing down the barrier between "artifice and life, between the fictive world and the actual world of the beholder" (19). This is surprisingly similar to the metaphors of a blending of art and life in the avant-garde discourse of the 20th century: immediacy, immersion, presence without (narrative) representation. And indeed, Alpers cites Michael Fried here (18), a writer associated with New Art History who has argued along these lines concerning the art of the 1960s and in his studies of the art of the 18th and 19th centuries. In his now-famous polemic against the large objects of Minimal Art published in 1967,[26] Fried called for a "pure" presence of art that does not distract the beholder from his/her equally pure contemplative state by asking him/her to read – that does not destroy the asemantically pure presence of art in favour of inherently narrative structures of representation.

Alpers' agenda can thus be summed up by terms like authenticity, presence, directness and anti-narrativity. It is an approach that finds itself confronted (like the artists of the neo-avant-garde)[27] with the problem that the status of pictures is caught in an irresolvable (and unavoidable) tension between presence and representation. In her introduction to *The Art of Describing*, Alpers speaks of the "pleasurable effect of the suspension of narrative action

26 Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood", *Artforum* 5 (1967), reprinted in Gregory Battcock (ed.): *Minimal Art. A Critical Anthology*, introduction by Anne M. Wagner (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 1995), 116-147.

27 This is why I would say that in historical terms, her discourse belongs more in the context of the art-life discussion of the neo-avant-garde of the late 1960s than in that of a structural or structuralist renewal of art history.

in the name of delight in *representational presence*" (my italics) in order to criticize the polarization between narrative and descriptive pictures in the work of writers like Louis Marin, Roland Barthes and Leo Bersani.[28] This polarization and what Alpers says about it are interesting in the context of this book insofar as the equation of action with narrative and of passivity with description, which she criticizes, addresses types of seeing. For Dutch painting, at least, Alpers rejects this dichotomy: "far from being the ideal suspension of a restless narrative mode, descriptive images, in the seventeenth century at least, were central to the society's active comprehension of the world".[29] For Alpers, both descriptive seeing (by the painter) and the viewer's seeing what is depicted *as such* (and not as something else, e.g. as part of a narrative), are *active* attitudes towards the world. In order to make her claim suitably incisive, however, she dramatizes the narrative mode as "restless", implying hyperactivity.

The polarization between narration and description in literature and fine art raises complex theoretical and methodological problems. Alpers picks up on the connotations of the two poles and harnesses them to her position. Narration is associated with action, activity, active reading/seeing, with a meaning "behind" the surface of pictures, with the iconography that interprets this meaning. There follows the denial or dismissal of the painterly surface and of the forms and materiality of painting. To Wollheim this denial constitutes a "transparent view of art" because it looks "through" the surface at the meaning that lies behind.[30] Narration also implies a hierarchy of pictures and how they are dealt with - history painting then being the highest in the hierarchy of genres - and a narrative space based on perspective. All this for Alpers is incorporated in the Italian model of fine art. On the other hand she links description with passivity since no action is narrated. In her account description is linked with the surface and materiality of the pictures, with showing only what *is*, [31] and with a perceptually pragmatic approach to a pictorial space that deviates from the mathematical model. Her approach concerns itself with seeing pictures rather than reading them. Alpers' aim is to revaluate the descriptive mode, one that is not exclusive to Dutch painting, and

28 Alpers, *The Art of Describing*, 235f. The associated theoretical problems and debates concerning the status of the picture cannot be gone into in more detail here.

29 Ibid., 236.

30 See ibid., xxiv, where she quotes Wollheim.

31 Often known as realism, although Alpers does not wholly agree with this, Alpers discusses this in detail in "Describe or Narrate?".

to render it productive. And she feels justified in this by reference to an art-historical tradition that is interested in art beyond the norms of Italian art. She names Riegl for Dutch group portraits, Pächt for the art of Northern Europe, Baxandall for German limewood sculpture and Fried for "absorptive or anti-theatrical (for which we may read anti-Albertian)" French painting (xx). Alpers asserts: "The Dutch present their pictures as describing the world seen rather than as imitations of significant human actions." (xxv) However simple this characterization of Dutch painting may appear, it should be clear by now that the consequences are less straightforward. We can see this in *The Art of Describing*, which opposes the "recent rash of emblematic interpretations of Dutch Art" (xxiv).[32] In his *Early Netherlandish Painting,* Panofsky had already examined this painting in terms of its "disguised symbolism" by which (to use Alpers' terminology) he meant that painting concealed meaning under its realistic surfaces (xxiv).

If there is no hidden meaning in Dutch painting, Alpers asks, how should we view it? (xxiv) This is a revealing question as it implies that for Alpers, too, there is a fundamental link between the act of viewing and the search for meaning. Any form of seeing without this search is alien to her, or at least hard to justify, as well as being hard to structure in methodological terms – a gaze into the void, so to speak. And what does Alpers do? Instead of turning firmly towards the surface, towards the painterly appearance of things – as Pächt does, for example, in his description of the miniatures in the *Admont Giant Bible* – she refocuses her attention from the picture to its circumstances: "My answer has been to view [Dutch art] *circumstantially"* (xxiv, my italics). What she refers to here as "circumstances" is what we already know as context: "I mean not only to see art as a social manifestation but also to gain access to images through a consideration of their place, role, and presence in the broader culture." (xxiv) What I assume she is doing here is avoiding the potential accusations of formalism that make focussing one's attention on the formal appearance of things in painting so risky.

In various guises, the dichotomy of form and content has always been a part of German art history, and it also touches on the status of art-historical seeing. The problem may be suppressed in Anglo-American art history of the

32 The drastic choice of the word "rash" and an epilogue that tries once again to specifically refute this approach may explain why Alpers' book received such a polemic review from E. de Jongh, the main practitioner of this kind of interpretation (see *Simiolus, Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* 14, no. 1, 1984, 51-59).

Gombrich-Baxandall-Alpers line in a way that can be felt in the "emptiness" of the image beyond meaning (as suggested in the above-quoted question by Alpers) and in the way she redirects attention away from pictures towards context. Whereas Baxandall's pragmatic reserve (diagnosed by Alpers as objectivization) leaves little scope for attack on this count, Alpers' struggle for a position and method is far more openly symptomatic. To put it concisely, one could say that the attention she devotes to the context of painting is intended to cover up the self-reflexivity (or "emptiness") of its surface, but also to open it up to the outside. Where iconography scans painting for symbolic-textual prefigurations, a context-based approach looks at the sociocultural conditions of its production.

To return to Alpers' characterizations of Dutch painting, whose descriptive character she sees as being based on active seeing aimed at a knowledge of the world: "Already established pictorial and craft traditions, broadly reinforced by the new experimental science and technology, confirmed pictures as the way to new and certain knowledge of the world." (xxv) She names and interprets qualities that she attributes to this orientation: departures from a viewer position determined by one-point perspective ("positioned viewer") in Dutch painting give the impression that the world is more important than the viewer; the use of major contrasts in proportion shows that man is not the measure of all things; the absence of a frame within the frame implied by the composition (framing groups of trees in landscapes, for example, or the order of figures in a space determined by perspective) makes the picture appear a random segment of the world that continues beyond the arbitrary limits of the frame. Also notable is a marked sense of the picture as surface, resembling a mirror or a map but not the Albertian window, and an emphasis on craft skills in the painterly rendering of objects (xxv).

All of these attributes, then, have to do with the status of painting as a site of knowledge about the world. Visual culture, discussed here prominently for the first time, is thus a culture of knowledge. Alpers even claims that it played a key role in society: "One might say that the eye was a central means of self-representation and visual experience a central mode of self-consciousness." (xxv) This goes far beyond the role of everyday skill attributed to seeing by Baxandall; its elevation of visual culture to the status of a paradigm of sociality comes closer to the later basic assumptions of visual culture studies – with one crucial difference, specifically with reference to Dutch painting and culture. "In Holland," Alpers states, "if we look beyond what is normally considered to be art, we find that images proliferate everywhere." (xxv) This

resembles the self-legitimization of today's visual culture studies when it diagnoses a new age of relentless, omnipresent images.[33] Images are not only everywhere – in books, on fabrics and carpets, on tiles and in frames on the wall – they also show everything, from insects and flowers to Brazilian tribespeople to the interiors of houses and churches. Central examples of the importance of visuality in the Dutch culture of the 17th century are maps and atlases that describe "the world and Europe to *itself*" (my italics). Knowledge about the world, articulated and communicated in seeing and visual description, is thus also a factor of self-consciousness.

In *The Art of Describing*, Alpers builds up context (which she suggests should be studied in dealing with non-narrative painting) in layers: she begins with Constantijn Huygens who as a leading figure in the country's cultural life testifies for Dutch visual culture as a contemporary witness to the intellectual, cultural and scientific currents of the period, as well as its taste in art. Huygens enthuses about new optical instruments like the camera obscura, the microscope and the telescope, and his writings provide detailed support for Alpers' theory of a visual culture of knowledge via observation of the world. The next layer deals with a specific quality of the pictures in this culture: their "lifelike appearance" (26). This lifelikeness is not to be taken for granted, it goes beyond the usual standard of mimesis in painting since the Renaissance and needs to be explained. To this end, Alpers introduces Kepler's model of the eye and seeing as a factor of the cultural milieu, providing her with a workable model for dealing with Dutch painting. This is followed by a contextualization of painting as a highly skilled craft of the kind required for lifelike portrayals. As well as a steady hand, this also depends, even more crucially, on an attentive eye. Here, then, a culture of knowledge based on observation (layer 1) is linked with a school of painting whose "model" Alpers bases on Kepler (layer 2).

This layered structure culminates in the theory of a "mapping impulse in Dutch art" (119ff). Here, the map as a pictorial genre brings visually represented knowledge about the world together with the mode of the picture itself. With this strategy, Alpers means to escape from the argumentative structure of analogy (e.g., the analogy between Kepler's model of seeing and descriptive painting) into the concretion of an object. Her main example is Vermeer's *The Art of Painting* (1666), a picture whose theme is painting itself

33 One example among many: Nicholas Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (London 1999).

and which features a map in a prominent position as a picture within the picture. At this point, then, the path leads away from context into the picture – and back out again towards the Dutch love of cartography.

From this broad but detailed spectrum of historical contextualizations, I take a closer look at the analogy between Kepler's model of the eye and painting. "Where is the art?" Alpers asks when pictures show something that looks like a copy of reality without telling a story: "When images are situated at the threshold between the world and our perception of it how can they be considered as art?" Vermeer's *View of Delft,* for example, "is just there for the looking" (27). In this painting, Alpers argues, the world (not the painter!) stains the surface of pictures with colour and light, "impressing itself on it" (27) – a use of metaphor that recalls William Talbot's description of photography in *The Pencil of Nature.*[34] And Alpers really does view Dutch painting as a historical precursor to photography; the Nordic descriptive mode of painting shares many qualities with photography (43) – its fragmentariness, the arbitrariness of its framing, the immediacy of its contact with reality. This immediacy refers both to seeing and to the transfer of seeing into painting; it is also guaranteed by the camera obscura, the microscope, the telescope and other lenses that acted as optical aids at the time, ensuring maximum analogue transfer of what was seen into the image. In Alpers' model, this mode forms the historical equivalent of photography, understood as the indexical transfer of the world into the image. What Alpers' argument does not take into account is that right from the start, photography was never a "purely" descriptive medium. In other words: the photographic image, too, is not merely a media transcription of the world; instead it involves a selecting and composing authorial eye that orients itself towards the aesthetic norms of its time.

As a metaphor, immediacy must be read here against a mediatedness like that introduced by the narrative function of Italian painting between the world "as it is" and the picture/viewer. This gives rise to a chain of signifiers of world, description, immediacy, northern painting and photography that seems to lack what its counterpart (narrative, mediatedness, southern painting) brings with it in and of itself: meaning and with it the possibility of integrating the picture into the broader context of interpreting the world. The series of polarizations could thus be continued: meaning versus "the world is as it is"; painting as a function of narrative versus painting as tautology:

34 William Henry Fox Talbot, *The Pencil of Nature* (London 1844-1846).

"What you see is what you see", as Frank Stella remarked in 1964 on the self-referentiality of his pictures.[35]

To counter this danger of the tautology of world and lifelike image, I would argue, Alpers introduces Kepler's model of seeing as a historical context, but also as a model that structures both seeing and image production in 17th-century Dutch culture. Kepler's definition of the human eye as a "mechanical maker of pictures" and his formulation that seeing creates a painting (pictura) of what is seen on the surface of the retina (34) form the basis for Alpers' argument. Kepler views the eye in isolation as a seeing mechanism and he also accepts its distortions as optical facts (35). This lends seeing a new, emancipated status; the sense of sight is relieved of the usual charge of deception; seeing including its naturally inherent distortions is accepted and isolated as scientific fact – and it is in this sense that Alpers uses it as the context for Dutch painting. This signals another contrast to Baxandall's "period eye": the period eye is not a natural mechanism, but a "skill", a socially and culturally conditioned and trained eye that brings forth corresponding *forms* such as the creation of volumes in the quattrocento or the floral forms of German late Gothic – forms that have to do with learned habits of the eye that lead to the objects of the world being seen and painted *in a particular way*.

Kepler equates seeing with "picturing" (33). "Visual perception is itself an act of representation in Kepler's analysis." (36) This is the bridge established by Alpers between seeing and the painting of pictures: the "artifice" then lies not in the invention of a picture, but in the coincidence of nature and art. Vermeer's *View of Delft*, which Kenneth Clark called "the nearest which painting has ever come to a coloured photograph" (27), could thus be seen as a display of this artifice. "A claim is made on us that this picture is at the meeting-place of the world seen and the world pictured." (35) In the Netherlands, Kepler's mathematically defined line between nature and "artifice" is a matter for painting, and not just since Kepler, but beginning with van Eyck. With her analogy between the models of mechanical seeing and descriptive painting, Alpers secures a further bridge: that between the world and its representation. Just as a trompe-l'oeil is an optical fact, the deception in painting (of which it is accused) is not a moral problem but an epistemological one: "there is no escape from representation" (35). If the eye sees not "what is" but what the eye's optical mechanism makes out of what is, then this divergence contains the

35 Bruce Glaser, "Questions to Stella and Judd" (1964) in Battcock (ed.): *Minimal Art*, 148-164: 158.

unavoidable fact of representation – because seeing *is already* representation. In this way, representation in descriptive painting is marshalled on the side of nature.

Now the difference between the narrative, Italian norm and the descriptive Dutch mode of painting becomes clearer: on the one hand, the framed picture as an object in the world, the Albertian window through which we look, from a position defined by perspective, at a narrated world; and on the other, the picture that *takes the place of the eye itself*, leaving the frame and the viewer-position undefined (45). The latter also applies to the position of the painter: according to Alpers, it is dissolved within the picture; the painter, absorbed in attentive observation of the details of the world, "merges" with the picture, anonymizing him-/herself in this kind of "selflessness" (83). In Vermeer's *The Art of Painting* this manifests itself in the back view of the painter: "Like a surveyor, the painter is within the very world he represents. He disappears into his task, … Observation is not distinguished from the notation of what is observed." (168)

The image of the painter disappearing into the painted world would be a good place to link Alpers' model with the critical theories of the subject and authorship proposed by Foucault and Barthes. Apart from a cursory reference to Foucault's *The Order of Things*, however, Alpers herself does not situate her approach within a structuralist or poststructuralist context. Interesting here is Louis Marin's review of her book, under the ambiguous title "In Praise of Appearance". Marin sees parallels and differences between Alpers' model and structuralism. As one key difference he cites the fact that Alpers does not abstractly deduce her fundamental oppositions (e.g., narrative versus descriptive) from a "basic structure of signification; rather, they are discovered in history".[36] Conversely, he credits Alpers with "magnificent appreciation of appearance and surface", culminating in her critique of the "Albertian" subject, which she counters with a multiple, fragmented subject, even a "nonsubject, at once everywhere and nowhere" – a verdict in which Marin gathers together all of the motifs of poststructuralist critiques of the subject that have since become common currency. And Marin's reading gains something else from Alpers' version of the disappearance of the author, arguing that it paradoxically brings forth an animation of the objects themselves *in their representation*, a kind of "visual autorepresentation, a kind of 'object-consciousness'"[37] –

36 Louis Marin, "In Praise of Appearance" in *October* 37 (1986), 98-112: 100.

37 Ibid., 112.

which brings us back to the void around which Alpers' book revolves: the tautology of an "unmediated" representation of things. It is this tautology that makes her less a structuralist and more a contemporary of the neo-avant-garde of the 1960s with its call for a "pure" presence of objects beyond meaning and interpretation. I am thinking, for example, of Carl Andre with his brick works, about which the critic Peter Schjeldahl wrote, on first encountering them: "The bricks *were.* … Here, at last, was the purely and clearly existing heart of the matter."[38]

In the avant-garde discourse of presence, a central role is played by Michael Fried's engagement with Minimalism. For Fried, Minimalist objects have no presence because they are theatrical. This suggests an analogy in which the stage is a context that determines meaning, deflecting attention from the non-functional absorbed state of seeing and rendering presence as an effect of perception impossible – comparable with Alpers' critique of emblematic readings of Dutch art. Fried's "tautology of presence" certainly bears similarities with Alpers' argument: "It is this continuous and entire presentness, amounting, as it were, to the perpetual creation of itself, that one experiences as a kind of *instantaneousness:* … it is by virtue of their presentness and instantaneousness that modernist painting and sculpture defeat theatre."[39] The "perpetual creation of itself" and the "instantaneousness" both recall Alpers' take on Vermeer's *View of Delft*: it is "just here for the looking". In this reading, the non-interpretative seeing of the Dutch painters is a historical equivalent to the avant-garde discourse of presence. Both focus on an "object-consciousness" that creates an "immediate" link between viewer/artist and art/world. But Alpers leaves a certain tension between object and seeing: she situates seeing in a historically determined field – the field of *visual culture* as a culture of knowledge.

The question of what art might be, beyond meaningfulness, is also addressed by both Fried and Alpers. For both of them, the key to the answer lies in the type of perception dictated by the artwork, and for both of them what characterizes art is the "absorption" of the gaze of an isolated eye, the eye of both producer and recipient: in its aesthetic make-up, art shows that the eye of both artist and viewer is absorbed in its seeing, isolated in the sense of an independence from the surroundings in the moment of seeing – a gaze

38 Peter Schjeldahl, "Minimalism" in Malin Wilson (ed.), *The Hydrogen Jukebox, Selected Writings of Peter Schjeldahl 1978-1990* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 1991), 204-205.

39 Fried, "Art and Objecthood", 146.

that is not “pure” in the sense of a biologically fixed predisposition, but that is extremely focused on what it perceives.

3. Through the Eyes of the Spectator

Seeing the Other – Otto Pächt's *The Practice of Art History: Reflections on Method*

While Gombrich views art history from outside, Otto Pächt adopts a different position: Pächt, who, like Gombrich, studied in Vienna,[1] argues from within the discipline. Or, more precisely: from within its practice. The above-mentioned lectures from 1970/71, first published in German 1977, systematically describe what remained vague to me as a beginner: seeing in art history as an analytical activity. In my conversations with fellow students and staff at the Vienna Institute of Art History at the time, there was much talk of "style analysis", a term no one was able to adequately explain to me and which, interestingly, Pächt does not use. Pächt's lectures have also been translated into English and published 1999 as *The Practice of Art History: Reflections on Method*, with an introduction by Christopher Wood, revealing that Wood's reservations concerning Pächt are considerably less serious than the reservations harboured by recent Anglo-American art history with regard to Panofsky and Gombrich. One reason for this may be that Pächt's influence in the English-speaking world never reached a level that would have called for distancing gestures in the sense of a "rebellion against the father figure". Another aspect also strikes me as important. Pächt did not claim to offer a complete theoretical framework. Rather he was interested in: "finding initial approaches to a method that is not devised speculatively but obtained by developing an awareness for the processes of perception that take place when we are 'getting

1 Gombrich, born in 1909, studied from 1928 to 1934 and emigrated to England in 1936, like Pächt. Pächt, born in 1902, obtained his doctorate in Vienna in 1925.

our eye in' with artworks."[2] Any accusation of a holistic or determinist basic position, as formulated by Wood against Gombrich, Panofsky, and the structural analysts of the Vienna School, can thus not be levelled at Pächt – who systematically examines practice without subjecting it to a unified theoretical model. Rather than offering closed answers to questions such as the value of an artwork or the telos of art history, he addresses these issues as open problems for which there are no pertinent solutions – although he is also at pains not to abandon art history as an academic discipline to unrestricted relativism. This preserves the processual openness of research itself, which is far closer to the critical thinking of New Art History than the universal or scientistic models of people like Sedlmayr and Gombrich.

Pächt's art historical practice also differs from that of Panofsky and Gombrich in the place it accords to seeing as the central heuristic operation of the discipline, defining its methods and objectives in processual terms. In particular, this approach problematizes the heuristic trap of seeing what one is looking for, what one wants to see. Hence Pächt's attempts to describe how it might be possible, via a form of "analytical" seeing (my term, not Pächt's), to set aside what one is looking for and then, by comparing it with the results of this other seeing, to check and if necessary revise it. Attendant questions here include: What *can* be seen by seeing an artwork? How does seeing an individual artwork and reaching specific conclusions relate to arriving at conclusions that apply to a group of works? How does today's seeing relate to the unfamiliarity of a historically remote culture whose artistic legacy one is looking at? What is the situation concerning the verifiability of such findings and their claim to scholarly rigor? What does such analytic seeing focus on? As these questions show, Pächt's attempt to frame seeing as a heuristic activity gives rise to conflicts that are usually either not addressed at all (as was the case when I was studying in Vienna) or compensated for by models that are superimposed over the empirical practice of visual knowledge production (models that Pächt criticizes in emphatic terms): the conflict between "innocent" and pre-informed seeing, between individual findings and the generalizability required by scholarly method, between the cultural and visual influences on interpreters today and their historically "foreign" object, between seeing and the transfer of its results into language, between form and content (this

2 From Pächt's forword to the third, revised edition of the book: Otto Pächt, *Methodisches zur kunsthistorischen Praxis. Ausgewählte Schriften* (Munich 1995). (trans. NG). All other quotations are taken from the English edition.

latter being a basic conflict within art historical tradition, especially in Germany). All of these conflicts have genealogies and effects both theoretical and methodological.

In the following I will subject Pächt's text, which fills a small book, to a selective reading, concentrating on his discussion of the art-historical *act of seeing*. As he says in his introduction, he is interested in *Arbeitshygiene* (work hygiene), stressing the importance of a clear-cut approach "to the practical exercise of our craft as art historians." For him, this means developing both the "mental and sensory receptive organs" and the "conceptual apparatus", in turn calling for "introspection: we must look both at ourselves, the viewer, and at our object, the work of art" (19). Here, then, attention is focused for the first time on the viewer as a practicing art historian, for only via historical scrutiny is it possible "to transform object into work, the material substrate into the artistic phenomenon" (20). It should be added that this relationship between artwork and viewer is being discussed here with specific reference to art *history*. I emphasize this because the history of 20th-century art is marked by a similar view whose influence is felt not only in interpretation but also in the production of art itself – the view that an artwork is only realized in the eye of the beholder/viewer. Pächt, by contrast, does not deny art materiality or reality beyond its perception. Instead, he is interested in the character of art history as a historical discipline and the resulting problem of the unfamiliarity of the "art objects" under study that are to be released from this unfamiliarity by a specifically trained mode of seeing, rendering them visible as aesthetic phenomena to today's eyes. In a single sentence, Pächt then manages to make a fundamental critique of Gombrich in passing, without mentioning him by name: "The danger of mistaking the art object for the work of art is greater with naturalistic representations than with non-naturalistic ones." (20) We recall: Gombrich's narrative of progress in fine art turns on the problem of imitating nature. As deviations from this narrative, styles like that of the Middle Ages require complex explanations. For Pächt, by contrast, rather than being special cases, they actually justify the practice of historical seeing on account of their specific "unfamiliarity" to today's viewers.

This "unfamiliarity" is Pächt's way of rephrasing a central problem in art-historical research; on the one hand, it brings the necessity of interpretation into play (how else can today's viewer attend to an art object from a bygone period?), while at the same time implying the relativity of interpretation and the embeddedness of art object and viewer in a network of relationships. If something is unfamiliar, why, and from which viewpoint? Assuming artist

and viewer to be in possession of an "innocent eye" would be quite wrong. This unfamiliarity refers not only to the content of the work in the sense of conventions, symbols, gestures, objects and customs that would have been known to viewers at the time (and that are deciphered within art history as material culture and iconography), but also to the "habits of seeing and thinking, modes of the pictorial imagination. The question, therefore, is this: how are we to make ourselves familiar with these idiosyncrasies of vision?" (23) While Baxandall develops a method to make the eye of the historical client accessible to today's viewers and readers, based on its reconstruction through written sources, Pächt wishes to historicize the eye of today's *viewer* by embedding his/her seeing in a process of learning historically unfamiliar visual habits. He calls on the viewer to pay attention to him-/herself, his/her own habitual ways of seeing; he cites examples of the rediscovery of art from the past in which a significant role is played by an "affinity with the prevalent stylistic fashion of the age when the rediscovery takes place" (24), as in the love of the Impressionists for the painting of late antiquity. But he finds such dependence on fashions of taste problematic: he is interested in insights that can be rendered objective: "When we think we have finally managed to see the work of art correctly, how do we know that this is really so?" (29) – that we are not taking a subjective interpretation for the correct one? This is where the above-mentioned "work hygiene" comes into play, requiring hypotheses to be verified. Art history does this by viewing the individual artwork in "genealogical perspective", which for Pächt means situating it within a development. "If we can manage to locate the work within a genealogical sequence – that is to say, if the properties that we discover in it turn out to follow logically from something outside it – then we can safely regard our findings as verified." (61) This frees the individual work from its isolation, thus "eliminat[ing] the open-endedness that lays it wide open to subjective interpretation" (30). For readers today, it may seem strange that the artwork is to be stripped of so much open-endedness (elsewhere, Pächt writes that "artistic phenomena are notoriously open to multiple interpretations" (73)). After all, it has since been widely agreed that the artwork is something "open" and polysemic,[3] a consensus based primarily on contributions from the field of semiotics. But for Panofsky, Gombrich and Pächt, this would not fulfil the conditions for scholarly rigour that prevailed when they were writing. The way Pächt deals with

3 This refers, of course, to Umberto Eco, *Opera aperta*, 1962 (*The Open Work*, Cambridge MA 1989).

this, however, is remarkable: he sets the bar for objectivity pragmatically low; subjective interpretations undergo thorough scrutiny via comparisons with earlier, later and contemporary works, and via the conclusions drawn – but not within the framework of a metahistorical interpretative model.

Pächt describes the process of seeing in diverse, eloquent terms, for example with the colloquialism "getting one's eye in" (87), sometimes with metaphors drawn from work with texts, with pictures also being "read" (23). For Pächt, interpretation involves both "seeing-with-understanding", which he also calls "adapting our vision" (100), and "enunciating the vision once correctly seen" (100), by which he means description. He demonstrates this using examples of painting, sculpture and architecture from the medieval and early modern periods, each of which highlights one basic problem of "getting one's eye in". Two miniatures from the *Admont Giant Bible* with Moses receiving the laws on Mount Sinai (31-40) show how an "unfamiliar conception of space" (41) is translated into two dimensions; the *Holy Sepulchre* in the Minster at Freiburg im Breisgau shows how "an unfamiliar attitude to time" creates an "obstacle to access" (41-45); unlike the initial unfamiliarity of medieval renderings, Donatello's *Judith und Holofernes* initially appears easily comprehensible on account of its naturalistic "visual logic" (46), but on closer inspection it becomes increasingly puzzling (46-52); at first glance, the Pazzi Chapel by Filippo Brunelleschi (53-61) seems to be accessible via a purely factual description, but this impression is short-lived.

In his introduction, Christopher Wood focuses primarily on Pächt's treatment of the miniatures from the *Admont Giant Bible*, doing so for reasons that are interesting in terms of a history of reception: Pächt describes the miniatures not as deviations from the standards of illusionist rendering of space, but via the formal peculiarities of a system of representation that must appear unfamiliar to our eyes accustomed to naturalism. He describes a layering of zones separated by bands of colour; there is a "definite indication of behind and before, and therefore a rudimentary space; but everything constantly reverts to the picture plane" (36). The logic here is not one of space but of the picture plane, causing this system of representation to resemble ornament. To enable himself to see this, Pächt begins by suppressing his prior knowledge on the subject and avoids an object-based reading: "Of course, such an inhibition is rather artificial. In practice, our eyes react quite differently. Led on by our own prior knowledge, they see what they expect to see: [...] For this very reason, it is often a useful corrective to experiment with an object-blind vision." (32) According to Wood, Pächt rewrites the story of Moses receiving

the laws as a "formal narrative. He flattens the representation into a pulsating, mesmerizing pattern of interlacing bands of colour. By the end he has in effect created a new work that looks more like one of Kandinsky's *Compositions* from the early 1910s." He describes Pächt's approach as the "extraction of formal dramas out of non-classical … or even ugly pictures" (16-18).

By identifying formal structures in their specific and unique character, Pächt can interpret modes of portrayal and systems of representation from different periods and styles in a way that is free from the allegiances and preferences of someone like Gombrich (illusionism) or Panofsky (renaissance humanism). In this phase of analysis, forms are viewed neither in terms of their references to reality nor in terms of their correspondence with an identifiable object, but in relative autonomy as a formal event, before they are historicized by means of comparison; for, as mentioned above, the individual work of art must be "released" from its isolation (60) and embedded within a genealogical perspective. The aim of such a perspective is "a new attribution – to period, place or artist" in order to establish "whether or not the work fits organically into a particular slot in a particular historical context" (62).

One possible product of this approach is the bringing together of artworks that have previously resisted attribution, creating a consistent œuvre whose supposed author is then given a name. This search for an author-subject is particularly characteristic of research into the late Middle Ages as practised from the late 19th century. For this practice, too, Pächt offers a prominent example, the Master of Flémalle, discussing the ways this "case" bears on the history of science (63-65). What is at stake here is not merely attribution, as that depends on the existence of a reliably identified œuvre with which the authorless works might be compared; here, by contrast, the comparability of the "formal opportunities" for the authorless works is what makes it possible to deduce and create an author. At the end of the 19th century, the "Flémalle question" (64) was still dominated by the "idea of personal styles", a parameter that was later replaced by the concept of a period style. Pächt describes the historical development of research into "the Master of Flémalle" as an increasing differentiation of seeing: "The process of seeing – of visually grasping the identity of a work of art or of an artist – is a process of growing differentiation. When we first encounter a work of art, what we perceive is not its specificity but its analogies with what we already know. … In a gradual process of visual differentiation, the specific crystallises out of the general. This is a fact that has still to be properly faced. Indeed, it stands in blatant contradiction to everything in the literature of the subject. Far from

being abstracted from many individual cases, the generalised impression is the primary experience that affects us when we confront the individual work of art." (65) What does this mean? Pächt offers a very basic explanation of his view of seeing as a research activity. This implies a constant switching between individual observation and reference to a more general position. The one feeds the other as possibility: we see individual works by Rogier van der Weyden and other works from his period and milieu, among them those later grouped together into the œuvre of a newly identified master. Out of this singular seeing of individual works arises a background of visual knowledge that leads to new results when the individual works are looked at again. This seeing is "primary" not in the sense of purely optical registering; it is a seeing-with-thinking for which the "dismissal of normative aesthetics" (70), the relativization of aesthetic standards, is of crucial heuristic importance.[4] In this model, it is only once aesthetics is relativized that art-historical seeing can be rendered objective. This makes it clear that Pächt is interested not in recognizing the situatedness of seeing, but in overcoming it. Although the art historian sees subjectively, using Pächt's method of seeing s/he is able to check his/her insights, to generalize them, and thus to objectivize them.

I return now to the generalised impression of seeing an artwork for the first time. With this approach, Pächt opposes another method of seeing that aims to isolate small details with the smallest possible meaning as a way of obtaining objectivizable results when attributing artworks: the so-called "Morellian method", developed in the late 19th century by the medic and art connoisseur Giovanni Morelli. For Pächt, the matching of small details like the shape of earlobes or fingernails "affords no valid evidence unless they [the details] can be made to harmonise with the overall design principle of the work in question" (66-67).

We recall: this "overall design principle" can only be seen by first acknowledging the unfamiliarity of what is to be looked at, rather than judging it by an aesthetic norm. In practice, this means that the viewer must overcome his/her visual "prejudices", such as the influence of the fashions of the moment. This in turn happens, secondly, by "getting one's eye in" with the unfamiliar, learning the visual language that brought forth this work. The fact that this learning process might itself be effected by fashions and the viewer's own

4 Pächt considers this problem of normative seeing (such as Burckhardt's dismissal of the Baroque as a "Renaissance gone to seed") to have been overcome by Riegl; see Pächt, *The Practice of Art History*, 69-70.

preferences (as Wood suspects is the case with Pächt's analysis of the *Admont Bible*, in my opinion correctly) is clearly of no importance to Pächt, as this can be neutralized by the verification techniques of comparative art history. In any case, this temporal fixedness of the viewer can offer new perspectives on historically "unfamiliar" aesthetics, although this is something Pächt himself does not discuss; in his view, the changing fortunes of specific styles and periods can only be identified retrospectively by studying reception history.

Only by overcoming a normative way of seeing the art of past eras does it become possible to use the interplay between artwork and seeing and to turn art-historical seeing into a heuristic tool. Pächt describes this process using metaphors from optics: "The instructions that works of art give us are like an invitation to try out different lenses. Initially, many aspects of the object may seem to make no sense. … Through one lens, much is clear, but some things are distorted or blurred; through another, this may be reversed. Clearly we want a lens through which as much as possible, and indeed everything, is clearly in focus."[5] It is a matter, then, of finding the right approach, one that "succeeds in eliminating all contradictions, anomalies and inconsistencies: an approach that makes a thing that might be otherwise into a thing that has to be just the way it is. That is an approach that turns chaos into order … an approach that allows as many details as possible to be understood in terms of a small number of design ideas or principles; an approach that reveals a maximum of referentiality" (69). The artwork should be assessed "not by inappropriate, alien criteria" but by "its own, inherent criteria" (69). The problem Pächt tries to solve here in a series of formulations recalls more recent debates, in fields including ethnology, on how to deal with the Other and the challenge of understanding it without annexing it, thus rendering it newly unrecognizable. Pächt's concern here is to avoid absolutizing ways of thinking that result in dichotomies, like those he finds in Sedlmayr – whose approach of *gestaltetes Sehen* (configured seeing) he otherwise approves of (67-68).

What later generations would refer to as function, Pächt calls a "formal opportunity" (52). Discussing the wellhead for which Donatello made *Judith and Holofernes*, he makes a significant distinction with regard to the concept of function: "The sculpture or the painted image must subordinate itself to an overall structure: a structure with an artistic organisation with its own, infinitely variable but always tied to function. The sculpture or painting thus

5 Published translation (from page 69) altered for meaning.

becomes part of a whole – which means that it will possess a number of characteristics that cannot be deduced from its essential nature as art." (52) In this way, Pächt insists specifically on the historically immanent relativity of the forms as we see them, and he does so in a way that describes form and function within a tension between aesthetic autonomy and functional dependence, but without submitting to the temptation to resolve this tension. This strikes me as a very typical example of Pächt's thinking.[6]

Pächt's system does have a centre: the artwork in its historicity. But in the process of art-historical seeing, he tries to (re-)activate the relations embedded in and accreted to this centre without bringing a meta-history or other totalizing model into play that would isolate one of these elements (artistic genius, the autonomy of form, meaning, etc.) and allow it to prevail over the "uncertainties of the visual dimension" (73).

Let us once again inquire into Pächt's aims of inquiry: according to what we have described so far, one might gain the impression that Pächt adhered to the conventional "ways of art historians" (65) with their focus on attribution and dating. He was clearly aware of this, and he asked himself and his reader: "Why do we take such a burning interest in the attribution of works of art, the determination of date and authorship? Is there not something obsessive about the way in which ... art historians, when they see an object, know no peace until they think they have found the right pigeonhole for it?" Could they not be interested solely in the content of an artwork, leaving aside the "historical classification that leads to a museum label"? His answer: "a correct attribution defines the view that alone reveals the true essence of the work ... Attribution is ... ultimately ... a matter of content." (65-66) Pächt does not state the exact nature of this content. The key basis for all that follows involves

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6 Though I will not reproduce it in all its complexity and incisiveness here, Pächt's critique of iconology is similar. He criticizes its monopoly on the interpretation of art, instead assigning it a clearly circumscribed task: "What was once a living visual experience may well have vanished long since – or, where the civilisation concerned is an alien one, it may never have belonged to our store of notions at all. Here, then, some artificial help is required. And this is where iconography comes in. I would define its primary task as that of teaching us what knowledge we need to have in our minds when we look at historic works of art. We need iconography to reactivate whatever was spontaneously known at the relevant historical moment." (81) Iconography should thus help to reconstruct the historical act of seeing in its spontaneity, but it should not reduce the artwork to a pictograph or hieroglyph. See especially Pächt, *The Practice of Art History*, 77-83.

ascertaining the historical peculiarity of the object under study. Art-historical seeing involves finding out the situatedness of the object in historical terms by taking into account the situatedness of the art historian's gaze. This gives the relationship between the situatedness of the object and its viewer, the relationship present in the act of seeing and interpreting, a specific weight. This relationship between the art historian and his/her "Other", the art object, is built on the recognition of the (historical) otherness or "unfamiliarity" of the object. Pächt is the only scholar in art history to thoroughly investigate this relationship and to reflect on the methodological consequences of it. The recognition and acceptance of the object's otherness is of central concern also for the discussion of the modes of seeing in visual culture studies later in this book.

Focus on reception - Wolfgang Kemp's *Der Anteil des Betrachters*[7]

Wolfgang Kemp's contribution to art history's engagement with hitherto underexposed elements of the triad "artist – artwork – audience",[8] differs from that proposed by Baxandall and Alpers. Kemp's approach is via literary theory, from which he borrows the concept of *reception aesthetics* for his project of finding a theory and method for the share of art that is addressed to the viewer. With the concept of reception aesthetics, Kemp situates his approach in the field of theory, more precisely in the sub-discipline of philosophy dealing with art: Aesthetics. At the same time, he also wishes to develop a method and apply it in practice. A third important point is typical for art history as a discipline: its focus on objects. Kemp's reception aesthetics sticks close to the artwork.[9] In order to get from this to a theory and model of reception, he

7 Wolfgang Kemp, *Der Anteil des Betrachters. Rezeptionsästhetische Studien zur Malerei des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Munich 1983). Not published in English; all quotations here translated by NG. The title refers to Gombrich's concept of "the beholder's share", see Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, Section 3.

8 Wolfgang Kemp (ed.), *Der Betrachter ist im Bild. Kunstwissenschaft und Rezeptionsästhetik* (1985), new edition (Berlin 1992), 9.

9 By referring to the object as *art*, I make clear that here, unlike in visual culture studies, it is not (yet) about abolishing the special status of art with regard to other artefacts. The context of art, which in the work of Alpers, for example, is central to reconstructing the visual culture of the viewer, is only taken into account by Kemp to the extent that it determines structures within the picture. This also sets his approach apart from Baxandall's model of the "period eye" that reconstructs the culturally and historically deter-

looks to literary theory where he finds an approach dealing with the reading of literature and adopts it for the viewing of art. Kemp's viewer is an implied viewer, he is quite literally in the picture.

As with Alpers, it is worth taking a look at the specific object of Kemp's analysis. What 17th-century Dutch painting was for Alpers, the painting of the 19th century is for Kemp in *Der Anteil des Betrachters*. While Alpers focuses on the "immediacy" of descriptive non-narrative, Kemp deals with painting that is narrative in the broadest sense: the 19th century offers him an animated field between the tradition of history painting, as it continued to be celebrated in the Paris Salons, and the emergence of modernist painting that paid less and less heed to conventions of pictorial narrative like perspective and framing. The roots of his approach actually lie in the 18th century, in the "picture of the crowd"[10] of the French Revolution, whose programmatic pictures "demanded participation" (7), and in Diderot's ideas on the relationship between viewer and picture.

Participation is a good keyword for Diderot's aesthetics, whose driving paradox Kemp sums up in his opening sentence: "The viewer enters the sphere of art theory in the 18th century only to be told he is not to enter the sphere of art." (10) Strictly speaking, Diderot's ideas aim not to keep the viewer out of the sphere of art, but to keep art from intervening in the realm of the viewer, as this would disturb the viewer's communication with the picture. For his model of how a painting should be in order to allow viewers to connect with its contents, Diderot turned to the theatre. Contrary to the then common practice of actors addressing the audience directly, Diderot thought that the action on stage should be presented as if the viewer were not there: "When speeches are directly addressed to the audience, then the playwright has departed from his subject, and the actor has stepped out of his role. To me it is as if they had both left the stage and come down into the audience. As long as the monologue continues, the action is suspended for me and the stage is empty."[11] The stage and the auditorium should remain strictly separate spaces; only then does the "action" acquire the unity and plausibility that allows the

mined preconditions for seeing on the part of both artist and viewer as a "medium" for the painting of the Quattrocento.

10 See Wolfgang Kemp, *Das Bild der Menge (1789-1830)*, in *Städel-Jahrbuch* 4 (1973), 249ff.

11 Denis Diderot, "Conversations on *The Natural Son*" (1757) in *Sources of Dramatic Theory, Vol. 2, Voltaire to Hugo* (Cambridge 1991), 44.

viewer to project him-/herself into it; only an intact fourth wall makes identification with the protagonist possible. Modern narrative cinema is based on the same conditions. Both resemble a (moving) painting.

In narrative painting, too, it had been common practice into the 18th century to make figures in the picture communicate with the viewer via glances and gestures. Around 1760, Diderot still experienced this technique as pleasant, as long as the figures did not "step out of the scene",[12] but he later rejected it on the grounds that "the canvas encloses the whole space and there is no one beyond it."[13] Only when the action portrayed in the picture "knows nothing" of the viewer can s/he become wholly absorbed in these events. Kemp describes this as follows: the "picture should make an impact, but if it is to make an impact, it must do so via the stringency of its inner action and all of the strength of the figures and all of the artistic means must be invested in this procedure, any reference to the outside would weaken the unity of action." (11) Kemp, too, is referring to theatre when he speaks of the "unity of action".

There is an element in Kemp's take on Diderot that modifies the exclusive anchoring of a painting's impact in the picture by making the viewer not only implicit but also active: Diderot does not allow his absorption in a picture to be disturbed by small formats and heavy frames of a kind that would prevent a viewer accustomed to today's standards of immersive visual experience from forgetting that s/he is looking at a picture rather than a reality. What is important is the viewer's imagination, enabled by the picture's inner dramaturgy to experience the painted scene as something happening in time and space, even with sound – as in a small painting of a shipwreck by Vernet described by Diderot in *The Salon of 1767*: "I saw or believed I saw, as you prefer, a vast expanse of sea opening before me. I was distraught in the shore, having discerned a burning ship … I saw the unfortunates … run along the deck, start screaming."[14] Vernet had clearly done a good job, then, even

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12 Diderot, "Salon de 1761" in *Œuvres Complètes X* (Paris 1876), 143. "J'aime assez dans un tableau un personnage qui parle au spectateur sans sortir du sujet."

13 Diderot, "Pensées détachées sur la peinture" (1776). in *Œuvres Complètes XII* (Paris 1876), 101. "La toile renferme tout l'espace, et il n'y a personne au delà."

14 Diderot, "The Salon of 1767", in *Diderot On Art II* (New Haven, London 1995), 124. See also Susanne von Falkenhausen, *Kugelbauvisionen. Kulturgeschichte einer Bauform von der Französischen Revolution bis zum Medienzeitalter* (Bielefeld 2008), 150f. In this book, I address the dynamic of immersion and viewer distance in connection with new technologies of visual immersion.

though the figures are so small as to make facial expressions, for example, all but indistinguishable. Diderot's "I saw or believed I saw" refers to a factor of his reception that Kemp does not discuss: the imagination that is the driving force behind the viewer's absorption in the painted action. Immersive experience of a picture depends on an obliging, willing viewer with an active imagination.

Kemp takes Diderot's paradox of the independence of the action in the painting from the viewer and makes it the precondition for reception, establishing it as the basis for his question about the "share of the beholder". In so doing, he also solves a key methodological problem of historical reception studies: it may be hard to research the reception behaviour of today's audiences, but for a historical audience it is more or less impossible, since there are few historical sources documenting responses to paintings (apart from texts by professional critics, who follow the laws of their literary genre and thus barely qualify as "authentic" sources of visual experience). From what I call Diderot's paradox – the picture's autonomy from the viewer as a precondition for the viewer's communication with that picture – it follows that reception can be deduced from the picture's *inner* structure.

Before discussing the consequences Kemp draws from this, I want to take a brief look at his historical review of reception aesthetics, whose roots he traces from Diderot to the end of the 19th century in the work of John Stuart Mill, Hegel, Ruskin and Riegl. For the 20th century, on the other hand, he notes a limited interest in the question of the relationship between viewer and work. "The already flimsy and vulnerable tradition running from Diderot via Hegel to Riegl breaks off with [Riegl's] *The Group Portraiture of Holland*," the reason being art history's now dominant interest in "questions of formal and stylistic analysis, in the analysis of content and structure" (24). We might add that the 20th century also saw a golden age of "autonomous art": the self-referential painting of abstraction that refuses any kind of "legibility" (in the sense of structures of reference to anything outside the painting) in order to achieve the kind of pure being and pure presence that Michael Fried, for example, had in mind. Concerning the decision in favour of an exclusively immanent meaning of the aesthetic object, art history and art occupied the same discursive field, especially in the early post-war decades.

According to Kemp, it was literary theory that caused the aesthetics of reception to regain currency in the 1970s. From literary theory he borrows the model of an aesthetics of reception and applies it to art history. We might add that here, too, art was a precursor: new practices of the neo-avant-gardes

since the late 1950s, such as happenings, and their new media, such as closed circuit television and video,[15] aimed to address the audience directly, to encourage audience participation, and to break out of the isolating "autonomy" of modernist art. Artists often referred to theories and academic disciplines beyond art, above all phenomenology, cybernetics, sociology and psychology, in order to develop and explain their approaches. At the time, especially in the German-speaking world, as well as having no answer to this, art history actively excluded contemporary art from its remit, leaving it to art criticism. Kemp's project of applying the model of reception aesthetics to art history can thus also be understood as a contribution to overcoming this methodological stagnation.

Let us briefly follow Kemp's systematic account of this approach: "An aesthetics of reception aims to take into the account the simple fact that a text is read, a picture looked at, a piece of music listened to. That every work is part of a process of communication that cannot be broken down into the active and passive roles of transmitter and receiver, but which instead can only be understood as a dialogical process. The work is made to be received, it possesses certain means of creating, shaping and maintaining a relationship with the recipient. And rather than being a pure medium in which the intentions of the artwork are fully realized, the recipient is configured for reception by aesthetic and non-aesthetic norms and forms of behaviour." (28) In the light of our previous readings, links, analogies and differences emerge. We start with the activity of the recipient, in this case the act of viewing; this act meets with a work that is already "waiting" to be viewed. This resembles the positions of Baxandall and Alpers. Both work and viewer actively participate in a dialogue, meaning that there can be no "pure" or passive seeing. This, too, matches Baxandall and Alpers, as well as Gombrich. The last sentence of the passage quoted implicitly brings an interesting factor into play: if no identity is established between the intention and the reception of the artwork because the viewer is not a pure medium, shaped instead by norms and behaviours, this can only mean that the factors shaping the viewer are different to those shaping the artwork (Baxandall would have spoken here of factors shaping the artist). Kemp does not go into the implications of this difference here. Only later does it become clear what he might mean by it: the historical difference between artwork and today's viewer that is not discussed by Alpers or Baxandall, but is seriously addressed by Pächt. While in the studies of Alpers

15 Exemplified by the work of Nam June Paik, Dan Graham and Vito Acconci.

and Baxandall the historical context is identical for viewer and art (17th-century Holland and 15th-century Florence respectively) Pächt is interested in overcoming the hermeneutic divide between the historically unfamiliar and today's viewer – the art *historian*.

Kemp's motivation is hermeneutic: the artwork is to be interpreted. This contrasts significantly with Alpers and Baxandall, but not with Panofsky or Pächt.[16] One fundamental problem addressed by Kemp in connection with interpreting art is already familiar from our readings of Gombrich and Pächt: the conflict between a totalizing impetus and a limitation of the claim to validity of method and interpretation/cognition. Here, Kemp relates this problem only to method. He insists that reception theory makes no claim "to be able to interpret the artwork in all its referential complexity" (28) and in this he follows Hans Robert Jauss who described it as "a methodical reflection that is partial, extendable and dependent on collaboration".[17] In spite of this, Kemp seems reluctant to relinquish his method's claim to a broader competence: "*Admitting* the 'partiality' of an aesthetics of reception [my italics] does not free oneself from the task of maintaining an open view of the whole." One must thus examine "the extent to which reception aesthetics, *as a perspective* at least, represents the whole" – only this seems to ensure the hermeneutic value of the procedure. "Perspective" here refers to the interpretative horizon; it should not be too narrow, thus remaining immanent, as Kemp observes in formal analysis, and it should not be too broad, thus "losing itself in the non-aesthetic", as in the case of iconology. Instead, the "reception structure of the artwork brings a sufficiently immanent and a sufficiently externally defined category of the aesthetic into the focus of attention …: in the image of the

16 This feeds suspicions that precisely this motivation, regardless of which method is used, is specific to the German-speaking tradition in art history, and that it is so self-evident in that context that the notion that there might be other motivations for the discipline and for dealing with art is not even raised. By analogy with psychoanalysis, the need for meaning and interpretation could thus be situated on the level of the discipline's unconscious. In this light, it comes as no surprise that until 1992, when Oskar Bätschmann published his *Einführung in die kunstgeschichtliche Hermeneutik* (Introduction to Art-Historical Hermeneutics), a theoretical approach to hermeneutics was found in philosophy and literary criticism, but not in art history.

17 Hans Robert Jauss, "Racines und Goethes Iphigenie. Mit einem Nachwort über die Partialität der rezeptionsästhetischen Methode," in *Neue Hefte für Philologie* 4 (1973), 1ff., quoted from Kemp, *Anteil des Betrachters*, 28.

dialogue between viewer and work, we grasp the tense balance between art and society." (29)

It is interesting how Kemp tries here to overcome the problem of tension between "inside" (artwork) and "outside" (viewer): he uses the image of a dialogue in which the duality of work and viewer remains present, the two sides relating to one another. But this figure of relation does not seem to be enough: he needs a figure of unity – the picture as which this relation is grasped. In other words, when thinking of reception, we are always dealing with a relation – between the recipient and what is being received. So far, so simple. As with desire for meaning and interpretation, however, the desire for *unity* seems to belong to the unconscious of the practice of art history; in Freudian terms this desire produces considerable repressive energy when it comes to thinking in relational terms. If we now view meaning/interpretation and unity as mutually dependent figures of thought (meaning/interpretation must be true, which is why there can only be one, and it is true because it refers to a unity) then we soon arrive at claims to truth as a tradition of German idealism, which in turn "encodes" the claim to objectivity made by reception aesthetics. In methodological terms, this manifests itself, though not uniquely, in the need to establish a priority in the work/recipient relationship. "For centuries, the premise has been upheld that in the relationship between work and recipient, the work was the most influential, its intentions merely being fulfilled by the viewer. This was certainly wrong, but it would be just as wrong to assert the opposite by attributing all *authority* to the recipient." (my italics) Here Kemp now proposes the model of a dialogue as a solution, but this, too, is clearly not enough: "Furthermore, it seems not unreasonable to call for the initiator of an interaction – and this is and remains the work – to be granted a certain methodological precedence." In this model, too, then, the work retains its authority, as it is "recognizably involved in shaping the reception procedure". This argument brings to a close Kemp's explanation of "reception aesthetics applied to the artwork" (31).

My questions are: where in this model is it possible to situate seeing or visuality more broadly? How is it conceived of: as a process, as an activity, as a relationship? As his point of departure, Kemp borrows the figure of the "implied reader" from the literary theory of Wolfgang Iser, replacing the reader with a viewer but otherwise following Iser's definition word-for-word. This makes it possible to reintroduce the recipient into the work as "the way the work relates to the reader" (29): the implied viewer "embodies all those predispositions that a work offers to its potential viewers as conditions of reception.

The implied viewer is thus anchored not in an empirical outside reality, but in the structure of the work itself. … Assuming that works take on their reality by being seen, works must already contain certain conditions of actualization that will allow their meaning to be assembled in the responsive mind of the recipient. The concept of the implied viewer is therefore a structure within the work anticipating the presence of a recipient, and this holds true even when works deliberately appear to ignore their possible recipient or use strategies to actively exclude him."[18] The last sentence of this quotation can be directly linked back to Kemp's discussion of Diderot's notions of pictorial and theatrical dramaturgy. After all, it would be hard to imagine a better explanation of the viewer *implicit within the picture* than his/her exclusion from the events portrayed.

Kemp distinguishes a picture's immanent "response-inviting structures" from the external "conditions of access" (33), what is now usually referred to as context. Among the latter he names material conditions of access such as location, sociological factors such as ritual, liturgy and art contemplation, and human factors by which he means the viewer's "individual and social predispositions" (34). Kemp's interest, however, focuses not on this context but on the picture's immanent response-inviting structures, because "everything that 'happens' here [in the artwork] has meaning for a viewer, it also happens as a fulfilment of being viewed" (36). He quotes Gadamer: "The way the spectator belongs to it [art] makes it apparent why it is *meaningful* to figure art as play."[19] (my italics) In other words: the viewer is prefigured in the manifest form of the picture, which Kemp also calls presentation and which he sets apart from representation as its subject. The presentation "involves the viewer in the work by drawing him into a second communicative procedure in which he himself is not involved: representation" (35). Unlike the voyeur, then, who looks at events that are not performed for him, that do not reckon with him, the artwork reckons with its viewer. Art is always already there for the viewer.

The heuristic status of reception aesthetics is now clearer: it is a tool, a method of interpreting instances of meaningfulness. Its genesis can thus be traced back not only to Diderot (who was interested less in interpretation than in visual empathy in the form of imagined immersion in a scene),

18 Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading* (Baltimore 1978), 34, quoted here as rewritten by Kemp, *Anteil des Betrachters*, 32.

19 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (1965) (London, New York, 2013), 131.

but also, within more recent academic history, to hermeneutics in the spirit of Gadamer, to whom Jauss, too, refers. We are thus far removed from the Anglo-American positions of Baxandall and Alpers who stand for a pragmatic approach to visual culture oriented towards a history of experience, an approach that can be traced back, among others, to Gombrich's scientistic study of perception.

Let us return to the prefigured, implied viewer: In *Der Anteil des Betrachters* Kemp deals above all with perspective, frames and framing in 19th-century painting. In his final chapter on "Art Reception and Reception Art" he discusses the reasons for this choice, and it is the conditions of external reception of art in the 19th century that explain his focus on the work's internal conditions of reception: the pictures can no longer rely on a fixed place of reception as they could in churches or at court; artists must reckon with an unpredictable mobility of pictures and thus with unforeseeable visual exchanges between the actual viewers and the painting. At the annual Paris Salon, thousands of paintings were hung close together and with no logic in terms of format or composition. Kemp recounts Géricault's outrage over the hanging of his monumental *Raft of the Medusa* in the Salon of 1819. He successfully insisted on a rehang, but only once the picture had been moved did he realize that this solution made the reception situation worse still (104) – in other words, even the artist, having made the work himself, was not able to know where and how it should hang. The problem is that even "a painting measuring 4.90 x 7.16 metres … is conceived without a concrete notion of its future purpose" (106). The work becomes "placeless" (106), resulting in considerable uncertainty: "If a picture's first appearance, and thus its future existence, were unpredictable, then one could just as well paint to be viewed from close-up or far away, one could emphasize the foreground or treat it vaguely (which was then happening for the first time, in the work of Turner), one's composition could be closed or open." (111) Artists must devise their pictures for an unknown reception situation and this brings into play Diderot's call for a pictorial dramaturgy that seems to be independent of the viewer, which anticipates him without addressing him, behaving instead as if he didn't exist. The painting on which Kemp bases his theory of reception aesthetics thus features historically determined predispositions that support this theory: the autonomy of events within these pictures constitutes the implicit viewer.

In 1989, in the third edition of an introduction to art history,[20] Kemp was given the opportunity to add reception aesthetics to the discipline's canon of methods. In a section on the precepts for reception, he lists the principal "means of structuring" the "inner orientations" by which the viewer becomes "the function of the work": firstly, the connections between objects and people in the picture, their distribution in the pictorial space, "the position that they take toward one another and toward the beholder, their gestures and visual contact"; secondly, the so-called "personal perspective" by which he means those figures who orient the viewer towards the action in the picture; thirdly and fourthly the way the scene is framed, and perspective "in all of its manifestations";[21] and, fifthly, as a new addition, *blanks*, a term from literary theory coined by Wolfgang Iser.[22] Blanks are areas where the picture is incomplete, to be completed within the viewer. Such blanks are intentional, constituting a narrative strategy. By signalling "the absence of a connection"[23] they make space for the viewer's imagination to fill this absence and establish the connection. According to Iser, blanks are "an elementary matrix for the interaction between text and reader",[24] in this case between painting and viewer. In 1985, Kemp applied this model to the example of 19th-century painting.[25]

Let us take a brief look at this case study to see how the transfer works in practice. His approach here is based on the premise "that every work of art is left incomplete, in a precisely focused manner by its maker, in order that it might be brought to completion in and through the beholder." The emphasis here lies on the work's incompleteness being "precisely focused, programmatic or constructive" in character, for only when it is intentional can the blank acquire heuristic significance, meaning in turn that great importance is attached to artistic intention, assuming a causal connection between the

20 Hans Belting, Heinrich Dilly, Wolfgang Kemp, Willibald Sauerländer, Martin Warnke(eds.), *Kunstgeschichte. Eine Einführung* (1985), third revised and expanded edition (Berlin 1989).

21 Wolfgang Kemp, "Kunstwerk und Betrachter: Der rezeptionsästhetische Ansatz" in: ibid., 240-257: 246-247. Published in English as "The Work of Art and Its Beholder: The Methodology of the Aesthetic of Reception" in Mark A. Cheetham (ed.), *The Subjects of Art History: Historical Objects in Contemporary Perspectives* (Cambridge 1998), 180-196: 187-188.

22 See Iser, *Act of Reading*.

23 Ibid., 183.

24 Ibid.

25 Wolfgang Kemp: "Death at Work: A Case Study on Constitutive Blanks in Nineteenth-Century Painting", in *Representations* 10 (Spring 1985), 102-123.

understanding of artistic intention and the truth of interpretation resulting from the recipient's analysis of the blank. Kemp conducts such an analysis of a history painting that is extraordinarily untypical in character: *The Death of Marshall Ney* by Léon Gérôme from 1868. It shows a dead man in dark civilian clothing, lying on his stomach, his head turned towards the viewer, his top hat next to him on a street that runs diagonally from the foreground at the right into the background on the left, lined by a high wall. A group of soldiers is moving away to the left, the officer looks back towards the dead man; between the soldiers disappearing off towards the left-hand edge and the corpse in the foreground to the right lies an unusually wide empty space showing only the street and the raw surface of the wall with its crumbling plaster and graffiti – an area within the picture plane which, against the conventions of history painting at the time, contains no persons involved in the events depicted. The centre of the picture, then, usually the figurative focus of a pictorial narrative, remains empty. Kemp defines this area as a blank that signals the absence of a connection, as Iser defines it, thus obliging the viewer to make the link. In this way, the blank complicates the establishment of a narrative continuum in the picture, thus also making it harder to understand the scene as a whole. The empty area is the blank; from here, our gaze slides "into the picture's depth, or down to the prostrate dead man, and from him onward … into the perspectival depth of the composition, where a squad of uniformed soldiers is leaving the scene of the action and the picture. Our regard is not, however, pulled into the picture's depth and lost there. Instead it is halted and redirected by the figure of a backward-looking man clothed in black, presumably the adjutant in command of the execution."[26] After a first consideration of the painting, Kemp finds "a compositional schema consisting of three elements presented as ideal types: a blank [the wall]; a participant in the action, more accurately an object of the action [the dead man]; and an element helping to create the picture's perspective and that is the representative of the group of participants in the action [the man looking back]". In the German version of the essay, Kemp refers to the man looking back as a *Perspektivträger* (bearer of perspective), denoting his function of redirecting the viewer's gaze; the man looking back is "an aid to the reception of the picture that has taken the form of a person; he confirms and helps us to grasp the significance of two large blanks."[27] These blanks, the empty space of the wall in the picture and the

26 Kemp, "Death at Work", 110.

27 Ibid., 112.

space occupied by the viewer in front of the picture, are closely linked via the picture's diagonal axis.

Kemp analyses the construction of this pictorial narrative, whose blank paradoxically brings the action to a standstill. The above-mentioned elements of Gérôme's picture connect "space and time, the area before the picture and the area shown in the picture, the beholder and the depicted scene, blank and intelligible facts".[28] As a precondition for interpretation, Kemp's analysis, which I have only outlined here, follows the movements of the viewer's gaze that are unavoidably directed by aspects of the picture – blank, figures, perspective. These movements do not compare existing reality with the picture as in Gombrich, nor do they primarily register formal structures as in Pächt, and the focus is also not on sociocultural influences as in Baxandall. In Kemp's model, the movements of the viewer's gaze correspond to reading: as they scan the visual data in the painting, they make narrative links and establish plausibilities, just as reading generates coherent sentences and narrative logic.

The way Kemp looks at *The Death of Marshall Ney* is grounded in his visual experience with other contemporary painting; only in this way is he able to identify the peculiarities of this "case" and to decide how to classify the elements of the picture, such as defining the painted wall as a blank. He then uses these specific qualities to arrive at a more general qualification that sees this blank as a symptom of a historical process: for Kemp, the wall, rendered in great detail, is not just a blank in the sense of reception aesthetics, but also "a large fragment of pure painting".[29] It anticipates modernism: "The extensive and effective utilization of blanks by nineteenth-century realism can reach a point where these acquire an autonomy and can thus lead over into modernist art, which interrupts or misdirects communications both within and with the work."[30] This calls for more work than the kind of history painting that puts all of the narrative facts on the table without gaps; here the viewer must "bring together what is unconnected; endure the tensions; determine what is indeterminate".[31]

This added work is measured against the yardstick of a plausible narrative logic. As well as recalling the legacy of Diderot, this begs the question of

28 Ibid.
29 Ibid., 110.
30 Ibid., 116.
31 Ibid., 117.

whether the method of the implied viewer might be restricted in its application to precisely the kind of narrative painting on which its definition is based – a type of painting which, significantly, is already in crisis as a narrative genre. The blank as one of the models of immanent structuring of reception is a symptom of this crisis. One indication of this is the outlook with which Kemp concludes his analysis in 1988: moving away from painting, he finishes with the art that perpetuates the tradition of identificatory narrative in the twentieth century: cinema.

So much for the state of affairs in 1988. By 1994, the situation *in* art history had already changed. This is made clear by Kemp's review of John Shearman's *Only Connect: Art and the Spectator in the Italian Renaissance.*[32] Here, Kemp reacts to the shift from artwork to viewer widely seen in the practice of Anglo-American art history since the 1980s. The review focuses primarily on reception studies – both on Shearman's practice and on Kemp's own approach, which he aggressively tries to position within Anglo-American discourse via this critique.

What, for Kemp, had changed since 1983, 1985 or 1988? With the spread of viewer-oriented studies, the nature of the conflict had shifted. From formalism and iconography, the old rivals within German art history, the focus had switched to the figure of the viewer – in other words, the dispute was now taking place *within* reception studies as a methodologically differentiated sub-discipline. In his review, Kemp argues against Shearman's proposal of the viewer as *external* to the picture. Shearman's viewer is the "more engaged spectator", referring to a growing involvement of the Renaissance viewer with the picture's subject and narrative, and to the "complicity of the spectator in the very function of the work of art" on which the artist could count. This sounds

32 Wolfgang Kemp, "*Only Connect: Art and the Spectator in the Italian Renaissance* by John Shearman" in *The Art Bulletin* 76, no. 2 (1994), 364-367. Shearman offers a version of this practice that is applied pragmatically to a central field of the discipline, the art of the Italian Renaissance, clearly setting itself apart from the more recent influences from social history, feminism, psychoanalysis and semiotics, which Shearman refers to as "pseudo-iconography". This distinction is interesting insofar as it turns against the very influences that laid the ground within art history for a rapprochement with visual culture studies. Surprisingly these influences are associated with the discipline's "enemy within" against which Shearman's viewer focus is directed, i.e. iconography; this is interesting because visual culture studies, that was in the process of establishing itself as an academic discipline when the book was published, was by definition oriented towards visuality and against iconography as an outdated approach of art history.

like an extension of Baxandall's concept of visual skills shared by artist and viewer and which are considered as the medium of the picture. Shearman's aim is to particularize this viewer, leading to a clear shift within the reception situation (as modelled by Kemp) towards the external viewer and the subjective factors shaping her reception.

Kemp accuses Shearman of failing to distinguish between the two strands of reception theory, i.e. the implied viewer on the one hand and, on the other, the external viewer and the external conditions of reception within which artwork and viewer face each other (although it remains unclear whether this distinction is also valid in the Anglo-American context). Kemp makes it clear that for him, the problem lies in the shift to the external viewer. His reasoning is revelatory concerning the subsequent relationship between German art historians and visual culture studies: the external viewer is the "new" subject of art history. Or rather, the many new subjects of art history and above all of visual culture studies, as they had emerged from the critical and political discourses of difference in the 1970s and '80s.[33] Or, in Kemp's more polemical version: "… the recipient as woman, as man, as child, as native, as alien". With this last item on his list, he refers to the then high-profile "ethnically other" subjects, doing so discretely and with no racist implications; gay-lesbian subjects are also treated discretely, not being mentioned at all. Here, I cannot but voice my suspicion that, faced with the growing diversity of viewer subjects and subjectivities, Kemp pre-emptively advanced (or retreated, depending on one's position and viewpoint) into the picture, where the implied viewer is supposed to be at home and where his reception aesthetics, guided by the European Enlightenment model of Diderot, has its source.

In this way, Kemp also links the issue of the gender of the "more engaged spectator" back to the implied viewer, helped by the semiotic model of Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson who classify the relationship between viewer and

33 In the years 1994-1997, *The Art Bulletin* hosted a broad debate on the fundamentals of the discipline under the series title *A Range of Critical Perspectives*. These texts on the new subjects of art history included: Lowery Stokes Sims, "Subject/Subjectivity and Agency in the Art of African Americans" in *The Art Bulletin* 76, no. 4 (1994), 587-590, and Ikem Stanley Okoye, "Tribe and Art History" in *The Art Bulletin* 78, no. 4 (1996), 610-615. On this discussion, see also: Mark A. Cheetham, Michael Ann Holly, Keith Moxey (ed.), *The Subjects of Art History. Historical Objects in Contemporary Perspective* (Cambridge 1998).

work in terms of "degrees of access to codes"[34] – which can also be read as a version of the implied viewer, since the "codes" in question are found by the viewer in the work. Kemp deploys this model against the two conventional approaches commonly used in art-historical gender studies, both of which he considers inadequate: one seeks gender in the content (his example here: the female nude), the other in the addressee (his example here: a convent).

Kemp also criticizes Shearman's treatment of the external conditions of access to art as too undifferentiated, before finding a way of linking these, too, with the immanence of the artwork: works were conceived with a mind to these conditions. Ultimately, then, the work provides information about all external conditions of reception, both viewer and context, by, I would say, "incorporating" them. What Kemp doesn't mention here is what Bal and Bryson call the institutionalized "narratives"[35] of art history. These narratives also form the basis of Kemp's reception aesthetics: the insistence with which he repeatedly links the art/viewer relationship back to the artwork itself may avoid the fiction of an "ideal viewer", but it does lead to a figure that nonetheless ontologizes the artwork by incorporating the viewer into the work. This is made clear by another "symptom" in Kemp's model of the implied viewer, as mentioned above, namely its omission of the situatedness of the viewer herself. At this key point, then, the hermeneutic circle (and Kemp bases his approach not only on Diderot's model of the theatre but also on Gadamer's hermeneutics) is broken.

The way Kemp positions it, this reception aesthetics is part of (and sometimes the only instrument in) the toolkit of art history as interpretative apparatus.[36] Its roots in Diderot's aesthetics of narrative imagination and in the literary theory of narratology also point to a significant limitation of its field of application: fine art as narrative in the broadest sense. Anyone dealing with the art of the 20th century, on the other hand, will often find this toolkit unfit for use. And, as Svetlana Alpers has shown, the same is true of the art of the 17th century, whenever the focus is not on a picture's narrative structures. Finally, the implied reader/viewer remains a deictic function

34 Here Kemp quotes Mieke Bal, Norman Bryson, "Semiotics and Art History" in *The Art Bulletin* 73, no. 2 (1991), 174-208: 186; under the heading "Receivers", Bal and Bryson also devote a section to Kemp's reception aesthetics (184f.).

35 For example, the "totalized narrative of the-man-and-his-work", ibid., 182.

36 In *Der Anteil des Betrachters* (1983) and *Der Betrachter ist im Bild* (1985), Kemp systematically demonstrates its reach with a Hegelian totalising claim, while his own specific interests remain strangely unarticulated.

pointing to narrative and thus to the creation of a narrative continuum, but not to breaking/interrupting it, or to any of the other strategies of irony, montage or tautology encountered in the arts of the 20th century. Paradoxically, reception aesthetics emerged at the same time as these artistic practices, in fact only becoming possible as a result of their reflexive turn. But this art in particular, especially that of the 1960s and '70s, reflects its own reception, integrating it conceptually into its practice; and this is what leads to radical strategies of breaking with narrative continuum and of anti-narrative tautology. One can thus ask whether Kemp would still uphold his own verdict that the art of modernism interrupts communication in and with the work. For this verdict implies that communication is synonymous with narrative coherence within the object – a very narrow definition of communicability. In addition, it ignores the field of association within the viewer's imagination which is capable of linking each detail of perception with a story.

Part Two: Visual Culture Studies – Looking at the Visual

4. Visual Culture Studies – Concepts and Agendas

Culture, the political, and visual culture

Whereas art history is a discipline in the classical sense, with a history of its own, visual culture studies is the product of a series of "turns" (linguistic, cultural, visual, pictorial) since the 1960s. This makes itself felt in the way visual culture studies has taken over concepts from various disciplines and theoretical fields. The following chapter therefore draws a map of the main concepts involved in framing visual culture studies' ways of seeing: identity, culture, visuality, and visibility. These in turn are framed by a political agenda whose lines are also drawn into this map.

Visual culture studies is a child of the present, of a reflexive movement in academia where paradigm shifts are proclaimed and institutionalized almost as soon as they occur (instead of this happening retrospectively, with a historicizing distance, as is more usual). This reflexivity has not, however, produced consensus on a definition of the discipline's name: the field is diffuse, the implications limitless, and there are as many genealogies of visual culture studies as there have been attempts to canonize this "indiscipline" (Mitchell), mainly in the form of readers and introductions published since the 1990s. Each of these books has a specific focus, shaped by the respective "native" discipline of the authors, by their critique of that discipline and, in some cases, by their hopes for the new field of visual culture studies. 2006 even saw the publication of a first "meta-reader" which brought together the introductory texts from the most important visual culture studies readers.[1]

1 Morra, Smith, *Visual Culture*, Vol. I-IV. The first volume brings together introductions from other readers on visual culture studies, pre-faced with the editors' own version of a genealogy.

My approach to this sprawling situation is guided by the question of epistemic interests and their implications for the related *concepts of visuality*. My discussion of these concepts will trace two distinct developments, one academic and the other non-academic, the latter being, in my opinion, the fundamental one (in terms of both epistemic interests and models of visuality) and, chronologically speaking, predating the academic development by several years. The non-academic nexus joins politics and art, and my examination of it focuses mainly on Britain and the United States, beginning in the 1980s when the social and cultural tensions of the Reagan and Bush years culminated in the so-called "culture wars". Artists like Robert Mapplethorpe, Andres Serrano, Jenny Holzer or Barbara Kruger and activist groups of artists against AIDS, racism and sexism provoked the censors with their works, leading to withdrawals of public funding, in turn triggering fierce debates about artistic freedom and political activism in the struggle for social recognition of marginalized identities.[2] The paths of politics and art crossed here with unusual intensity, as the artistic strategies of the works deliberately involved images from non-art archives, subcultures and media, often using the methods of quotation and montage to highlight the social wounds of discrimination and a lack of recognition for specific ethnic and sexual identities.

After decades when political struggle and subversion had been associated with other things, above all equality before the law and access to education and economic resources (from class struggle to feminism to the independence struggles of former colonies) how did visual culture become a political battleground? This question of a concept of culture as a political resource brings us to the second development, beginning with the emergence of British cultural studies. In a 1990 essay, Stuart Hall, who founded Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in the 1970s and became one of the most important figures in the field, described how cultural studies formulated the concept of "culture as a social problem and a political task" against the background of a British class-dominated society plunged into profound crisis by the loss of empire.[3] "For me, cultural studies really begins with the debate about the nature of social and cultural change in post-war Britain." (12) The

2 For an in-depth account, see Brian Wallis, Marianne Weems, Philip Yenawine (eds.), *Art Matters. How the Culture Wars Changed America* (New York 1999).

3 Stuart Hall, "The Emergence of Cultural Studies and the Crisis of the Humanities", in *October* 53 (1990), 11-23.

hierarchical structure of British society was shaped by traditional class structures which were now being shaken up by the new forces of mass culture and consumerism. Previously, "culture" had been the highbrow culture of the elites, only being considered culture if it stayed away from politics. In this crisis, the representatives of highbrow culture reacted with pressure and a restrictive, conservative definition of culture. There was increased insistence on preserving canonical national cultural assets, and this extended to knowledge policy in the humanities. In response, the New Left launched a debate on a new concept of culture in which it was less a matter of definitions and more about opening culture up to politics and sociality. What was new here was precisely this linking of culture with socio-political structures and issues – "the dirty outside world", as Hall called it – an approach for which a theoretical basis had first to be created. "Contemporary cultural forms", he wrote, "did not constitute a serious object of contemplation in the academic world." (15) The Centre for Cultural Studies therefore developed a strategy of "raids" on other disciplines "in order to construct what we called cultural studies or cultural theory". (16) This was joined by reading matter "from traditions that had had no real presence in English intellectual life" (16): since the 1960s, Gramsci, Benjamin and the Frankfurt School had been translated into English, published and discussed in the context of the *New Left Review*.

The key to Hall's account is that this linking of the concept of culture with politics was new in Britain at the time, resulting from upheavals in society after 1945. A further decisive novelty was the appearance of new social subjects in the ossified hierarchies of British society with the start of postcolonial migration. This marked the beginning of the "postcolonial, posthegemonic crisis" (17) which, according to Hall, still marked the late Thatcher era. It is here that we must look for the basic factors influencing the question of how culture was able to replace the previous key concepts in the political struggle: access to legislative and economic power was replaced by cultural recognition. Culture thus became a central arena of political battles, and the political was understood as highly symbolic: following Levi-Strauss, culture was defined as "the categories and frameworks in thought and language through which different societies classified out their conditions of existence…"; the way these categories are produced and transformed was conceived of by analogy with language, as an operation of producing meaning, as "signifying practices".[4]

4 Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms", in *Media, Culture and Society* 2, no. 1 (1980), 57-72: 65. I do not deal here with the two paradigms discussed by Hall, the cul-

These concepts from the theories of structuralist linguistics and anthropology were to shape the interpretations of visual culture studies: here, too, the focus is on the production of "meaning" by "signifying" as a practice which forms both collective and individual identity constructions. Their medium consists of (visual) representations which now move into the centre of the struggle for political and societal recognition – and this not only and certainly not primarily in (academic) theory, but eminently in the political practice of activist groups since the late 1960s, including groups formed by artists. The best example of this paradigm shift towards strategies of *symbolic visibility* is probably the slogan of the Black Pride movement of the 1960s, "Black is beautiful".

In 2001, the success of this signifying practice was summed up by someone in the fashion scene as follows: "I absolutely think people are embracing the notion of 'Black is beautiful' – and I think we're better able to embrace it today than at any other time in this country. The '60s started the notion, but today I think we are truly living it."[5] Since racism operates with visual metaphors of colour, this paradigm shift which turns visibility into a resource for social presence is an especially fitting political strategy. At this point politics and visual culture become intensely interconnected. Three terms are central for a theoretical approach to this constellation of culture, visuality and politics: identity, signifying practice, and representation. Of fundamental importance to an in-depth understanding of concepts of visuality in visual culture studies is the concept of identity as it was discussed earlier in cultural studies.

turalist and the structuralist. In the Anglo-American world, the structuralist approach has dominated which, as Hall shows, helps to avoid the dangers of essentializing tendencies. In German-language *Bildwissenschaften*, on the other hand, especially in Hans Belting's *Bildanthropologie. Entwürfe für eine Bildwissenschaft* (Munich 2001), the consequences of culturalist essentialism are clear. See Hanne Loreck, "Bild-Andropologie? Kritik einer Theorie des Visuellen" in Susanne von Falkenhausen, Silke Förschler, Ingeborg Reichle, Bettina Uppenkamp (eds.), *Medien der Kunst*, 12-26, and von Falkenhausen, "Verzwickte Verwandschaftsverhältnisse".

5 Mikki Taylor, beauty director und cover editor of the magazine *Essence*, quoted in Kendra Hamilton, "Embracing 'BLACK IS BEAUTIFUL' – African American involvement in fashion industry, and consumer spending on apparel and beauty care products – Statistical Data Included", in *Black Issues in Higher Education* 17, no. 23 (2001).

Identity as a cultural and political concept

In 1986, Jacqueline Rose, whose book *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* combined feminist and psychoanalytical theory with visuality,[6] built a bridge between feminist approaches to identity as a political concept and psychoanalysis: "The question of identity – how it is constituted and maintained – is … the central issue through which psychoanalysis enters the political field. This is one reason why Lacanian psychoanalysis came into English intellectual life, via Althusser's concept of ideology, through the two paths of feminism and the analysis of film."[7] The same year, she took part in a symposium at the Commonwealth Institute in London that introduced a further difference/identity as a position within the field of seeing: *cultural identities.*[8] Theorists and filmmakers came together to talk about the possibilities for political avant-garde film. Cultural identity in the visual field was discussed in the context of tension between political activism and deconstruction. Films were shown by artists like Trinh T. Minh-ha, Chris Marker, Isaac Julien and by groups like the Black Audio Film Collective founded in 1982, that dealt with political and social aspects of postcolonial life under Thatcher: the position of immigrants from former British colonies and their hybrid identities as Black British citizens.[9]

The reader *Identity. Community, Culture, Difference*, edited by Jonathan Rutherford, was published in 1990; *Questions of Cultural Identity*, edited by Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay, appeared in 1996 with an introduction by Hall provocatively titled "Who needs 'Identity'?"[10] And in 2007, in his book *After Identity,* Rutherford noted: "By entangling identity in market transactions and

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6 See for example Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington 1984), the first book on the subject, and Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington 1988).

7 Jacqueline Rose, "Feminism and the Psychic", in *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (London 1986), 1-25: 5.

8 The papers and discussions from the conference were published in a special issue of the magazine *Undercut* (17/1988) and republished in Nina Danino, Michael Mazière (eds.), *The Undercut Reader: Critical Writings on Artists' Film and Video* (London 2003), 130-162.

9 I mention this here because reviews of the debates on race, class, sexual orientation, and gender mostly centre on discussions in America; however, as has already become clear concerning the genealogy of cultural studies, the postcolonial aspects of this debate were particularly acute in the former British Empire, recast as the commonwealth of sovereign states, in turn influencing debate in the United States.

10 Jonathan Rutherford (ed.), *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (London 1990); Stuart Hall, Paul du Gay (eds.), *Questions of Cultural Identity* (London 1996).

commodification, consumer culture has turned it against the individual."[11] This had already been stated in similar but far more political terms in 1992 by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who calls herself a "decolonized subcontinental". In *Acting Bits/Identity Talk*, she discusses the identity politics of the (de-)colonialized in terms of their complicity in current forms of imperialism, prompted by the Gulf War: "Our own complicity in our production [of identity] is another kind of translation of cultures, access to a 'museumized' identity, roots in aspic. … Identity as commodity."[12]

Another book with *After Identity* in the title, a reader in law and culture published in 1994, contains a passage which I find helpful in addressing the history of the emancipatory concept of 'identity': "In what could be considered the first stage of identity politics, individuals identified with general characteristics such as race, gender, or national origin to contend that discriminatory distinctions should not be made on the basis of those categories. The early civil rights and women's movements, for example, argued that African Americans and women were entitled to the same rights as white men. Asserting that there was no significant difference between blacks and whites or between women and men, these movements aimed to achieve a system by which skin color or sex did not determine one's place in society. Subsequent movements rejected this paradigm of liberal pluralism on the ground that its colorblind and sexblind mentality obscured real cultural and political (and some even argued biological) differences between the groups. Some individuals and groups in a proliferating list of movements based on identity began proudly to (re)assert, or perhaps reclaim, their identities – as African-American, Asian-American, Latino or Native American, as female, as gay or lesbian, as disabled, as working class and so forth."[13]

The concept of identity as a collective definition thus derived from a form of *negative* identification for the purposes of exclusion from rights such as the right to vote. The early emancipatory movements then fought to neutralize this negation before the law. From the outset (and this is overlooked in the

11 Jonathan Rutherford, *After Identity* (London 2007), 10. The same year, Georgia Warnke published *After Identity. Rethinking Race, Sex and Gender* (Cambridge 2007), with a pragmatic approach focused on multiple identities realized in the everyday life of an individual, and the consequences for normative processes in society.

12 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Acting Bits/Identity Talk" in *Critical Inquiry* 18 (1992), 770-803: 798.

13 Dan Danielsen, Karen Engle (ed.), *After Identity: A Reader in Law and Culture* (London, New York 1995), Introduction, xiv.

legal overview quoted above) it was clear that the definition of these identities – woman, "negro" – went far beyond the legal context, being culturally and socially re-/produced. The problem of exclusion, then, could not be dealt with by policies of equality alone. Researchers of stereotypes within women's and African-American studies since the 1970s were not the first to examine the functioning of such reproduction and the impact of such definitions via visual representation. As early as 1900, with his portrait albums *Types of American Negroes,* the black scholar and civil rights campaigner W.E.B. Dubois tried to counteract the negative image of African Americans. He did this not by taking the stereotypes and trying to give them a positive spin, as in the aesthetic of "black is beautiful" and "back to the roots" more than 60 years later, but by clothing the image of the "negro" in the dress codes of the white middle-class male.[14] The visual evidence of these "bourgeois" portraits was intended to show that the "American Negro" had a self-evident claim to equal citizenship.

In its theoretical ramifications, the debate on identity as a cultural and thus political concept since the 1970s has drawn above all on theories of difference and hybridity; I will focus here on the central problems that also make themselves felt in visual representations of identity by both artists and activist groups. The basic problem with deploying identity as the basis of a political strategy lies in its imposition from *outside,* from where the power lies. Identity thus involves defining difference from groups of others for the purpose of discrimination and exclusion based on criteria of race, class, sexual orientation and gender. Identity in this sense is understood as immutable being, mostly on a biological basis, to which social and cultural stereotypes accrue in the course of history – or conversely: the historically formed stereotypes and their exclusion have often been justified, since the end of the 19th century, in biological terms. And in the 1960s and early 1970s, when the black liberation and women's movements, but also the gay and lesbian movement, picked up these stereotypes and attempted to give them a positive value, using them as representations to fight for recognition, opposition to this strategy soon emerged within these movements. I remember from the women's movement of the mid-1970s being accused, as an intellectual, of having a "male" socialization.

14 See Shawn Michelle Smith, "Photographing the 'American Negro'. Nation, Race, and Photography at the Paris Exposition of 1900" in Lisa Bloom (ed.), *With Other Eyes. Looking at Race and Gender in Visual Culture* (Minneapolis, London 1999), 58-87, in particular 72-78.

Adopting the familiar stereotypes, even as an attempt to give them a positive turn, brought the associated exclusion into the groups concerned: those who didn't match the stereotype did not belong. Hall summarizes the problem in theoretical terms: "Precisely because identities are constructed within, not outside discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies. Moreover, they emerge within the play of specific modalities of power, and thus are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identical, naturally-constituted unity – an 'identity' in its traditional meaning (that is, an all-inclusive sameness, seamless, without internal differentiation). … it is only through the relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks, to what has been called its *constitutive outside* that the 'positive' meaning of any term – and thus its 'identity' – can be constructed. Throughout their careers, identities can function as points of identification and attachment only *because* of their capacity to exclude, to leave out, to render 'outside', abjected."[15] But belonging was the basic condition for political effectiveness; individuals came together in groups via a shared identity. How, then, were differences within groups to be dealt with?

Firstly, it was necessary to confront the normative power of the term, its so-called essentialism – identity as destiny in the sense of an immutable being, based, for example, on biology. This was achieved by examining identity in theoretical terms as a cultural and social *construction*. Identity as destiny that offered a feeling of unity and community was now faced with anti-essentialist positions that conceived of identity as a formative process. The essentialism, unity and continuity that characterized modern identities (including the hegemonic identities of nationality) were contrasted with the anti-essentialist figures of discontinuity, construction/constructedness/deconstruction, plurality, fluidity and hybridity. Behind these theoretical impulses stood Foucault's postmodern critique of the subject and Derrida's theory of difference.

For the liberation movements of the time, these theoretical developments brought a new dilemma: on the one hand, a theoretical revision of the enlightened humanist philosophy of emancipation, calling the concept of the bourgeois, sovereign, self-identical subject into question; on the other, those

15 Hall, "Who Needs Identity?", 4-5. He refers here to Jacques Derrida, *Positions* (Chicago 1981); Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (London 1990); and Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (London 1993).

groups to whom this status had to date been denied, also referred to in theoretical discourse as subaltern, campaigned to be recognized as "new" subjects of history and to have a "voice".[16] The conflict between these positions led to proposals like that of "strategic essentialism"[17] as a way of legitimizing the formation of identity-based groups and consciousness for a political practice of self-empowerment, even within the theoretical framework of radical deconstruction. However, such strategic essentialism demanded a constant awareness of the limitations and constructedness of the very identity that was supposed to be the driving force behind the cohesion and political activism of these groups – a psychodynamic balancing act both individual and collective. Looking back, it seems to me that the concept of identity never lost its fundamental stigma, its birth defect. Critiques of the concept of "identity politics" began to appear around 1991 (and this too is revealing in retrospect) around the time of the Gulf War that reinvigorated the debate on postcolonial imperialism, at a time when the discussion of multiculturalism was making waves in the United States.[18] The identity debate was thus a highly political one, as highlighted by a critical comment by Judith Butler from 1992: "I don't believe that gender, race, or sexuality have to be identities, I think that they're vectors of power."[19]

Back to visuality as a factor in identity-based strategies, and to the conflict that exists between the strategies of Dubois and the Black liberation movement. Although Dubois drew on a pseudoscientific discourse of race when he spoke of "types", his visual tactic produced positive evidence by trying to constitute these "types" via the cultural codes of clothing, thus arguing for culture, and specifically hegemonic culture, as a factor in identity: biologism crossed

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16 An important contribution to this discussion was Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Can the Subaltern speak?" in Cary Nelson, Lawrence Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana 1988), 272-313.

17 Spivak speaks of the "strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest" by subaltern subjects. As part of a "strategic interest in the self-alienating displacing move of and by a consciousness of collectivity, … self-determination and an unalienated self-consciousness can be broached." From "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography", in Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (London, New York 1988), 197-221: 205). Her "strategic essentialism" became a key concept of identity politics in the age of deconstruction.

18 See Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (New York 1992).

19 "The Body You Want: Liz Kotz interviews Judith Butler" in *Artforum* 31, no. 3 (1992), 82-89.

with cultural (hegemonic) identity as appropriation and process, which in turn points to another serious conflict within his strategy. "Black is beautiful," on the other hand, together with the "back to the roots" movement, with its insistence on, for example, the Afro as an appropriate, non-white hairstyle, constitutes visibility in the field of white hegemony via an image of Africanness for which Spivak's biting remark on "'museumized' identity, roots in aspic" is apt. Conversely, this image could also fit into the category of strategic essentialism, as developed by Spivak, as a group identity that supports solidarity and activist energy in what is referred to abstractly as "Otherness". Once again here, the basic problem of identity politics becomes clear: ultimately, there was no way out of the dilemma of the gap between negative definition from outside and positive definition from within which is always based on the original negative definition. This dilemma is not even resolved by a potentially endless multiplication of minority identities based on criteria of race, sexual orientation, and gender that would conflict with individual processes of attribution.[20] In the 1990s, a polemical version of such multiple identities circulated in the debate on political correctness in the form of the "black, Jewish, disabled lesbian".

Since 1990, when Judith Butler published *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity,*[21] queer theory has sought to respond to the normative structure of these processes of attribution with a variant of anti-essentialist critique based on performativity. In art, this was reflected in a heightening engagement with the social significance of *identity-based visibility* and its forms of visual representation.

Political visuality: visibility as a contested resource

"Hardly a week has passed in the last two years without public attention being drawn to yet another battle over identity and culture." This is how the

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20 In 1991, to address this problem, Kimberlé W. Crenshaw proposed the concept of intersectionality, which plays an important role in feminist and queer theory. See Kimberlé W. Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color", *Stanford Law Review* 53, no. 6 (1991), 1241-1299.

21 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London, New York 1990). For an introduction to queer theory, see Judith Butler, "Critically Queer", in Paul du Gay, Jessica Evans und Peter Redman (eds.), *Identity: A Reader* (London 2000), 108-117.

artist, activist and writer Coco Fusco began her text for the Whitney Biennial catalogue in 1993, and she offers some examples: *Who are we?* asks *Time* magazine. *Whose values?* asks *Newsweek. Whose museums and whose aesthetics?* ask the artists and curators. *Whose icons?* ask the multicultural theorists and activists. That sums up the situation quite well: the "ethnic makeup" of American society is changing colour, its basic tone becoming "increasingly non-white"[22] – a threat not only to the white right, but also to the liberal notion of a universally valid culture of values which, in the eyes of the "subaltern peoples", too often merely cements western-white power.

In Europe, Fusco continues, these ideological struggles usually have a geopolitical theme, whereas in the United States they focus on symbolic representation. Not only access to political power, she claims, but also the control of subaltern communities over their symbolic representation is restricted by the dominant culture. Systematic misrepresentation via stereotypes fuels their "disempowerment"; it offers the starting point for an understanding of "the racially inflected, voyeuristic impulses in Euro-American and other colonizing cultures". In the case of appropriation, for example, a buzzword of the postmodern art elite of the 1980s, this involved not just "disinterested pastiche or tracing one's creative bloodlines to Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol", but also, where non-western cultures and people were concerned, "forms of appropriation as symbolic violence". Fusco offers the following example: in 1992, Chicana actresses protested against Hollywood plans not to cast a Chicana actress in the role of Frida Kahlo in a film.[23]

This example shows why the battle for symbolic representation is fought not only, but primarily in the field of visibility. The defining and normative power of (visual) media in the United States seems to far outstrip anything yet seen in European societies. As a consequence, the activists of the gay and lesbian, feminist and African-American groups, including many artists, who in the 1980s fought for recognition (the feminist artists of the Guerrilla Girls, the black artists of the PESTS group) and against AIDS (ACT UP), were tactically correct to concentrate on culture and the media as their battleground. Their protest actions criticized the relations between culture, art practice, communities and public space; for Fusco, they are "some of the most interactive pub-

22 Coco Fusco, "Passionate Irreverence: The Cultural Politics of Identity" in Elisabeth Sussman et al. (eds.), *Whitney Biennial Exhibition* (New York 1993), 74-85, reprinted in Wallis, Weems, Yenawine (eds.), *Art Matters*, 63-73: 63.

23 Fusco, "Passionate Irreverence", 65-67.

lic engagements with the media and the arts that have emerged in the past decade. … merging activism with spectacle".[24]

For Fusco, the conflict over an essentialist concept of identity and its critique via a processual, open-ended concept of identity is a problem reflected strategically in a double objective: on the one hand, it is about the right to self-determination of one's "own" culture (this is especially true of ethnically defined groups in the diaspora) and on the other it is about a hybridization of these same cultures in the face of diverse, wandering influences and migration biographies. What is "one's own" must be kept open and constantly reshaped in order to integrate this hybridization – a balancing act of identity construction. Fusco herself, who migrated from Cuba to the United States as a child, tries to achieve this in her own work as an artist.

Looking back at the ACT UP protests, Mary Patten summed up as follows: "But perhaps we need to examine more closely and critically our notions of 'visibility', a key political buzzword used by the lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgendered (LGBT) communities. … 'Visibility' is posed as an inherent undifferentiated good – even necessity – whether we're debating our participation in the political process, examining images/representations of queers or homosexuality in the media and popular culture, or 'discovering' and 'reclaiming' literary or historic figures from the closets of the past. Only if we are collectively visible, the argument goes – … will we have power and be regarded as a force to be reckoned with in the larger culture." The success of this strategy has its price, however: "But we need to acknowledge that our heightened visibility – even on our 'own' rebellious, seemingly autonomous terms – has hastened the absorption of 'queered' representations into the mainstream." The hallmarks of queer identity, she writes, once "markers of rebellious subcultures" are now "individual identity ornaments promising the fulfilment of our desires".[25]

24 Ibid., 68.

25 Mary Patten, "the thrill is gone: an act up post-mortem (confessions of a former aids activist)", in Deborah Bright (ed.), *The Passionate Camera. Photography and the Bodies of Desire* (London 1998), 385-406: 398.

The academic discourse of visuality

One of the two genealogical keys to visual culture studies is public visibility of subaltern and subcultural identities, marked by symbolizations imposed from without or claimed from within, understood as a strategy of subversion and self-empowerment, and practised by artists and/or activists on the streets, in the media and in the venues of alternative and established culture. This agenda also entered the university as countless individual studies on visual culture indicate which already in the title refer to identity, be it regional and national or relating to race, class, sexual orientation and gender.[26] It is all the more surprising that in the academic discourse of visual culture studies, two texts from art history that I have already presented as classics are often mentioned in connection with the search for the "roots" of the discipline: Baxandall's *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* and Alpers' *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century*. In view of attempts by visual culture studies to distance itself from art history, this is as astonishing as it is understandable, as such distancing manoeuvres concern close neighbours. Other often-cited "founding figures" are Warburg, Kracauer and Benjamin for German-speaking cultural studies, Barthes for semiotics, British cultural studies in general and specifically the "material culture" approach developed at British polytechnics, where training in creative practice in the broadest sense has been interdisciplinary since the 1970s.[27]

More important for the academic positioning of the discipline was the debate about a revision of the western-rational model of seeing, mostly exemplified by the philosopher René Descartes. The historian of philosophy Martin Jay called this model "Cartesian perspectivism"; in 1988, he opened a conference on *Vision and Visuality* at the DIA Art Foundation in New York with a concentrated summary of the debate and its prehistory. The conference brought together five writers from philosophy, art theory and psychoanalysis; it was followed by a publication of the same title that Jay later named as the moment "when the visual turn … really showed signs of turning into the academic

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26 Of the veritable torrent of such publications, I will name just two examples here (more are listed in Dikovitskaya, *Visual Culture*): James M. McClurken, *The Way it Happened: A Visual Culture History of the Little Traverse Bay Bands of Odawa, East Lansing* (Michigan State University Museum 1991); Gen Doy, *Black Visual Culture – Modernity and Postmodernity* (London 2000).

27 Here I am following Morra, Smith, *Visual Culture*, Vol. 1, 12. See also Daniel Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (Oxford 1987).

juggernaut it was to become in the 1990s".[28] In retrospect, *Vision and Visuality* proves to be an exemplary "symptom" of the emergence of visual culture studies as an academic discipline.

By this time "Cartesian perspectivism" had already become a key negative metaphor in the poststructuralist critique of logocentrism. In psychoanalysis, philosophy, media studies, cultural studies and art history (with one example being Alpers' *Art of Description*), perspective as an early-modern model of seeing became the matrix of a western-rational, pseudo-humanist project of enlightenment that used reason as a practice of power. This 'project of modernity' was judged as failed, especially in view of the genocides of the 20th century. In his book entitled *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth Century Thought* Jay explains this critique and centres it within the history of French philosophy.[29]

The aim now was to break down the monolithic character of Cartesian perspectivism with the twin concepts of vision and visuality. On the one hand, *seeing* (vision) was no longer conceived of (only) as a mechanically-physically determined, predictable optical process, but (also) as socially and historically determined and hence subject to change. On the other hand, *visuality* brought a new concept into play, an umbrella term for *all relations* of seeing (and being seen) concerning the social as well as body and mind.

One-point perspective as a metaphor for rationalist cultures of power

What exactly are the accusations levelled at seeing as "the master sense of the modern era",[30] at one-point perspective as the practice corresponding to Cartesian perspectivism, at the theory on which it is based, and at the consequences of all three for visual practices and cultures? In oversimplified terms,

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28 Martin Jay, "Cultural Relativism and the Visual Turn" in *Journal of Visual Culture* 1, no. 3 (2002), 267-278: 267. On the conference, see Hal Foster (ed.), *Vision and Visuality* (Seattle 1988). Those involved were Martin Jay, Jonathan Crary, Rosalind Krauss, Norman Bryson and Jacqueline Rose.

29 Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth Century Thought* (Berkeley, Los Angeles 1993). I do not share Jay's position on French post-structuralism; it should be taken with a grain of salt, bearing in mind Jay's roots in critical theory.

30 Martin Jay, "Scopic Regimes of Modernity" in Foster, *Vision and Visuality*, 3-23: 3.

here are some of the charges (some of which have, in the ever-growing literature on modern visuality since the 1990s, certainly degenerated into prejudice): central perspective is a gaze that makes a clear distinction between its subject and its object; it is static and abstract, though pretending to be empirically "true"; it implies absolute control of the subject over what is seen; it is per se male (the usual example cited being Dürer's *Draughtsman Making a Perspective Drawing of a Reclining Woman*); it claims to give a consistent picture of the world and to be scientifically reliable; of what is seen, it implies "this is how it is", claiming an objective truth for its representation. In brief terms, it serves "metaphysical thought, empirical science, and capitalist logic all at once".[31]

The model of perspective as a way of viewing the world is seen as the foundation on which the western, white, male, autonomous subject is constructed: "Certainly the entire discussion draws on analyses of the subject and the image derived from poststructuralism and psychoanalysis; in fact, vision is investigated as a structure instrumental to the (dis)placement of both these terms."[32] The debate on identity also touched on critiques of the subject; and the two debates meet up in visual culture studies: a specific gaze becomes a metaphor for the hegemony of the modern, autonomous, white, male subject.

One strategy used by critics of Cartesian perspectivism is the search for alternatives: examples named in *Vision and Visuality* are the cartographic gaze in the Netherlands of the 17th century, the multi-perspective spatial order of the Baroque, and the subject-less aesthetic of Japanese art. But *Vision and Visuality* had already set itself the task of criticizing just such critiques of perspective: the search for alternatives, it argued, led to new fixed oppositions, obscuring the fact that in historical practice, the model being criticized was anything but consistent or ubiquitous. Divergent practices had always existed. This critique of the search for alternatives as a way out of the constraints of perspectivism, "whether these are to be located in the unconscious or the body, in the past (e.g., the baroque) or in the non-West (e.g., Japan)", aimed to avoid rendering these differences uniform again, keeping them open, "so that different visualities might be kept in play, and difference in vision might remain at work".[33]

Vision and Visuality, then, is about the deconstruction of unitary concepts of modern seeing, not the establishment of alternatives that fall victim to the

31 Hal Foster, "Preface" in Foster, *Vision and Visuality*, x.
32 Ibid., xiii.
33 Ibid., xiv.

very thing they claim to criticize: the claim to universal validity. This conflict recalls the above-mentioned dispute over the de-/construction of alternative identities in the field of visibility: consolidate and secure via exclusion and homogenization, or open up and expose to permanent precariousness? To this extent, the ideological and theoretical conditions for the two debates (on political identity and on perspective as hegemonic gaze) resemble one another. The debate touches on other areas such as the implications for the disciplines that deal with seeing. For Hal Foster, perspectivism is a concept on which the discipline of art history is founded; hence this debate "is also allied with a certain 'anti-foundational' critique, i.e. a critique of the historical concepts posited by a discipline (e.g., art history, for instance) *as its natural epistemological grounds* (my italics)." In other words, by engaging with the historical evolution of visuality, by introducing mental, sexual and gender-critical dimensions into its repertoire, and by developing a "semiological sensitivity to the visual as a field of signs produced in difference and riven by desire",[34] art history is touching on its epistemological foundations.

Jay is certainly right to see *Vision and Visuality* as a symptom of the academization of visual culture studies. But it is worth noting that the three art historians involved, Norman Bryson, Rosalind Krauss and Jonathan Crary, did not whole-heartedly defect to visual culture studies in the following decade like other representatives of their discipline. One reason for this may be their insistence on the special status of art as practice in contrast to the broad field of the visual – an insistence that manifested itself several years later in the much-quoted questionnaire on the relationship between art history and visual culture studies, and in a similarly much-quoted article by Rosalind Krauss polemicizing against the loss of art-historical skills (deskilling).[35] What was mainly at stake here, then, was the revision of art history as a discipline. The theoretical framework is, however, brought to the discipline from "outside": critiques of the subject from poststructuralism, psychoanalysis and semiotics, applied to vision and visuality, not only touch on the epistemological foundations of art history, but also produce new epistemes that visual culture studies seeks to incorporate. At the same time, the debates on vision and visuality really do feature many politically committed interests and positions pregnant with moral significance that were not previously at home in the

34 Ibid., xiii.

35 "Visual Culture Questionnaire" in *October* 77 (1996), 25-70; Krauss, "Tod der Fachkenntnisse".

field of traditional art history; the correspondingly interest-driven projections associated with this from the outset, as well as the critiques and deconstructions of these projections, are also revealing, especially concerning questions of seeing and visuality.

The first such projection is the generalization that defines perspective as the modern scopic regime *tout court*. This basic assumption feeds into other projections – that can also be referred to as interpretations. I use the term *projections* because they set up an ideal opponent against which to argue; critiques of these projections can then be understood as *deconstruction*. One example: the assumption of a single, immutable, fixed perspective sees itself confirmed in a model of seeing which takes not two eyes but one, abstract eye as the basis for its construction of space in two dimensions. This model is critically deconstructed by assuming and researching a historically changing diversity of models of seeing, that is via a historicization of visuality. In this debate, Panofsky's essay on perspective is thus considered a pioneering work.

Martin Jay's discourse-historical introduction to *Vision and Visuality* compresses the critique of perspective into two pages (whereby it remains unclear whether or not he recognizes its implications in terms of projection).[36] In his account, one-point perspective, described as a scopic regime, is the object of several such projections. Firstly, the gaze of perspective is abstract, disembodied[37] and therefore cold (an anti-rationalist assessment) – the result is the emotional withdrawal of the painter from the objects captured in this abstract and thus cold, geometrized space. (But how, one might ask, looking at a painting, are we supposed to know about this supposed withdrawal? This assumption is, in other words, a projection.) Secondly, the participatory involvement of previous "more absorptive visual modes" has been reduced, "if not entirely suppressed", because the gap between "spectator and spectacle" has grown. (But, one might ask again, which visual modes before the Renaissance are supposed to have been "more absorptive"? Medieval stained glass windows? They had to be impressive as a visual event as a whole, but their sequencing of tiny, highly encoded scenes can hardly have fostered participatory involvement in the sense of identification). And thirdly, within the scopic regime of

36 Jay, "Scopic Regimes of Modernity", especially 8-9. The writer Jay mainly refers to for these positions appears to be Norman Bryson, as well as Christian Metz, Rosalind E. Krauss, Sarah Kofman, Svetlana Alpers, Rodolphe Gasché, Christine Buci-Glucksmann, Irit Rogoff.

37 This criticism can essentially be traced back to Bryson's *Vision and Painting*.

one-point perspective the element of erotic desire in the gaze, as condemned, for example, by St. Augustine, is lost because the bodies of painter and viewer are eliminated from this regime in favour of an "allegedly disincarnated, absolute eye" (Jay's use of "allegedly" here is the only sign of his distancing himself from these projections). Where this kind of disembodied, male gaze falls on a desirable body, as in Dürer's *Draughtsman Making a Perspective Drawing of a Reclining Woman*, it objectifies this body and turns it to stone. Jay names exceptions: Titian's *Venus of Urbino* and Caravaggio's seductive boys avoid this fate because they look at the viewer, as does, much later, Manet's *Olympia*.

Here, if not earlier, confusion sets in. What does this looking out of the picture have to do with one-point perspective? Does it counteract it? No – it counteracts the projection of the divide between viewer and viewed allegedly created by perspective as a scopic regime. And it promotes a further projection: according to Jay, nudes that do not look out at the viewer radiate no erotic energy towards the viewer, meaning, conversely, that the figure's gaze at the viewer generates this energy. The opposite conclusion could also be drawn here: if the eyes of the (mostly) female nude are averted, although no dialogue ensues, the viewer absorbed in the act of seeing (if we follow Diderot's dramaturgy of empathy as discussed by Kemp) can give free reign to his erotic imagination. In any case, Jay equates perspective representation with de-eroticization. It wouldn't take much effort to turn these analyses on their heads: perspective aims to perfect mimesis, a goal produced by desire itself – a desire that can be traced from photography and film through to the latest achievements of imaging technology, always hand in hand with eroticism.

On to the next projection: the scopic regime of perspective is to blame not only for de-eroticization, but also for "de-narrativization or de-textualization". This is an astonishing conclusion,[38] as just a few years earlier, in *The Art of Describing*, Alpers had proposed a different polarization – associating text and narrative with the scopic regime of Italian one-point perspective which was created to tell stories with close textual links, whereas de-narrativization was associated with the empirically oriented multiple-point approaches of descriptive Dutch painting. From this charge, Jay then deduces that of formalism: the painter is more interested in reproducing "abstract, quantitatively conceptualized space" with the help of perspective construction than in the "qualitatively differentiated subjects painted within it" – three-dimensional

38 Whether Jay shares this view or whether he is merely reporting it is not always clear.

representation as an artistic end in itself. "Thus the abstraction of artistic form from any substantive content, which is part of the clichéd history of twentieth-century modernism, was already prepared by the perspectival revolution five centuries earlier."[39] The realism effect of perspective, he continues, also led to pictures being enriched with more and more information that had nothing to do with the story being told, designed only to showcase the artist's technical virtuosity.[40]

For critics of Cartesian perspective, mathematically structured space as reflected in perspective-based painting stands for the neutral researcher's scientifically dispassionate view of the world and for the "fundamentally bourgeois ethic of the modern world",[41] thus elevating the critique of perspective to the status of a political project – and this in vehement terms: perspective is to be equated not with Alberti's window, for example, but with a "safe let into a wall, a safe in which the visible has been deposited".[42] This raises the question of who knows the combination for the lock on this safe, the combination needed to free the visible from the strictures of perspective's scopic regime? Jay then mentions some of the 'emancipatory' alternatives, including that of the Baroque: anti-static, anti-classical, open, "soft-focused, multiple".[43] Jay refers here to Christine Buci-Glucksmann, who suggests the "explosive power of baroque vision … as the most significant alternative to the hegemonic visual style we have called Cartesian perspectivalism".[44] From an art-historical viewpoint, this is an astounding conclusion, since this alternative to the hegemonic visual style was in itself the expression of political hegemony: it was

39 Jay, "Scopic Regimes of Modernity", 8-9.

40 According to Jay, this idea, which surprisingly links the representational realism of perspective space with the charge of formalism levelled at the "content-free" abstraction of modern painting, comes from Bryson: Norman Bryson, *Word and Image: French Painting of the Ancien Régime* (Cambridge 1981), Ch. 1. Like the polarization between realism and formalism as contested during the 20th century, however, this anti-formalism has a peculiarly moralizing tone.

41 Jay, "Scopic Regimes of Modernity", 9.

42 Here, Jay, ibid., is quoting John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London 1972), 109.

43 Jay, "Scopic Regimes of Modernity", 16.

44 Ibid.. See Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *La raison baroque: de Baudelaire à Benjamin* (Paris 1984) and *La folie du voir: de esthétique baroque* (Paris 1986). However, Foster's abovementioned scepticism with regard to what I consider to be the highly projective search for alternatives shows that in the later 1980s, the discussion enters a new phase: from then on, it was impossible to attribute *specific* models with the desired liberating effect.

commissioned by absolutist monarchs and the counter-reformatory Catholic church.

If we give this range of negative attributions a positive turn, the agenda driving these projections becomes clearer. Two main trajectories can be noted: firstly, the *body* must be re-inscribed within the gaze – hence the accusations concerning both the abstraction of the viewing subject and de-eroticization; secondly, the *power structures* inherent in this gaze must be abolished – this also applies to the power structures of gender relations as analysed above all in feminist film theory and history of photography.[45] This is where the Lacanian model of the gaze enters the stage.

45 See, among others, Mulvey, Solomon-Godeau.

5. Visual Culture Studies' Foundational Concept
The Gaze – Looking and Power

The model of the gaze

The model of the gaze is perhaps the most important gift from French poststructuralism to those Anglo-American art historians who from the early 1980s were becoming increasingly discontented with the state of art history as a discipline. Their aim was to fundamentally revise the discipline, or, as Hal Foster put it in 1988, to critique perspectivism "as its natural epistemological grounds". According to Foster, the disembodied, abstract eye of art history needed to take on a "semiological sensitivity to the visual as a field of signs produced in difference and riven by desire."[1] And this is where the concept of the gaze came into play, introducing psychological, sexual and gender-critical dimensions into the apparatus of art history. And then the exact thing Foster had warned of in 1988 in *Vision and Visuality* happened:[2] a counter-model to one-point perspective was fielded and it became dominant from 1990, although less so in art history than in visual culture studies. The Lacanian concept, evolved from Sartre, provided the necessary theory. As well as involving the body and the unconscious in the act of seeing, it also addressed the relationship between seeing and signs. This concept, most usually reduced to the term "mirror stage", manifests itself primarily in

1 Hal Foster "Preface" in Foster (ed.), *Vision and Visuality*, xiii.

2 Foster, "Preface", xiv.

two texts: *The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience*[3] and *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*.[4]

Lacan's model has become something akin to a founding theorem of visual culture studies. It is responsible (and provides academic legitimacy) for the above-described political agenda of visibility as a strategy and badge of social recognition. This already points to what I will deal with in more detail later: as received within visual culture studies, Lacan's model of the gaze, which conceives of subjective identity as an *illusion*, becomes a model forming the basis for the recognition and hence the *affirmation* of the identity of the subject. I begin by offering a brief prehistory of this model.

Sartre: being-looked-at

The story begins with Sartre, but it could be traced back further to the early days of western philosophy, as Martin Jay does in his history of the denigration of vision in 20th-century French thought.[5] *Being and Nothingness* contains the famous scene in which Sartre explains his model using the example of the voyeur. While looking through a keyhole, he is caught by someone else's gaze: "I hear footsteps in the hall. Someone is looking at me!"[6] The result is shame and a sensation of being-as-object for the Other. More critically, he now sees himself *because* someone else sees *him*. The gaze of the other alienates him from himself and takes away his freedom. This gaze does not have to be an actual look; aware of being looked at, the subject becomes aware of itself – and alien to itself. Moreover, "the alienation of myself, which is the act of *being-looked-at*, involves at once the alienation of the world which I organize."[7] This gaze, then, is threatening to the subject precisely in its subject-founding quality; it cannot be returned, it must be repaid in kind so as to avoid becoming

3 Jacques Lacan, "*Le Stade du miroir comme formateur de la fonction du Je: telle qu'elle nous est révélée dans l'expérience psychanalytique*" in Revue française de psychanalyse 13, no. 4 (1949), 449-455. English translation in *Écrits*, Vol.1 (New York 2006), 75-80. On the complicated publication history, see Jane Gallop, "Lacan's Mirror Stage: Where to Begin" in *SubStance* 37+38 (1983), 118-128.

4 Jacques Lacan, *Seminar*, Vol XI (1964), in English, *The Seminar, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (New York 1998).

5 Jay, *Downcast Eyes*.

6 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (New York/London 2003), 284.

7 Ibid., 287.

an object oneself. A dialogical encounter of gazes between human individuals is impossible, replaced by a "hostile contest of wills between competing subjects".[8] This threatening feeling of being looked at resembles the always-already-looked-at subject in Lacan's *Four Fundamental Concepts* (discussed below under the heading "Gaze, Screen, Identity").

Lacan: the mirror stage

Sartre began work on *Being and Nothingness* in 1939, publishing it in 1943. Three years previously, Jacques Lacan had given his lecture on the mirror stage that was published in 1949 in reworked form under the title *The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience,* going on to make waves, decades later, first in film theory and then in visual culture studies. In the phase referred to by Lacan as the mirror stage, the child reacts to its own image in the mirror. Samuel Weber offers a concise outline: "The mirror stage described by Lacan can be briefly summarized as follows: between the ages of six and eighteen months a child displays a reaction to its mirror image that strikingly distinguishes it from other creatures such as chimpanzees. The chimpanzee loses interest in its mirror-image as soon as it recognizes it to be an *image*; a child, on the contrary, displays a jubilant reaction when it recognizes its own reflection. From this jubilant acknowledgement of one's mirror-image, Lacan does nothing less than to derive the constitution – and above all: the destiny – of the ego. At this point in time, the child is not yet in control of its body and finds itself in a state of total helplessness and dependency. This situation is an effect of the 'premature' birth peculiar to human beings, a consequence of which is that visual perception is much more highly developed than the motor function. A human being is thus able at a much earlier stage to *perceive* the unity of an image than it is to produce this unity in its own body. The look of another human being, be it the mother, nanny, or even one's own mirror-image, becomes the *matrix* of a sense of unity, identity and continuity which the child's bodily existence is incapable of providing. … The jubilant reaction of a child that has recognized its mirror image is a sign not of the recognition of the subject's identity but of its constitution."[9]

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8 Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 287.

9 Samuel Weber, *Return to Freud. Jacques Lacan's Dislocation of Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge 1991), 12-13. Originally published in German as *Rückkehr zu Freud* (Frankfurt 1978). Minor alterations made to published translation, NG.

According to Lacan, the child reacts "in a flutter of jubilant activity" because it wishes to "take in an instantaneous view of the image in order to fix it in his mind". This activity "reveals both a libidinal dynamism … and an ontological structure of the human world that fits in with my reflections on paranoiac knowledge. It suffices to understand the mirror stage in this context *as an identification,* in the full sense analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes [*assume*] an image. […] The jubilant assumption [*assomption*] of his specular image by the kind of being—still trapped in his motor impotence and nursling dependence—the little man is at the *infans* stage thus seems to me to manifest in an exemplary situation the symbolic matrix in which the *I* is precipitated into a primordial form, prior to being objectified in its function as subject. […] But the important point is that this form situates the agency known as the ego, prior to its social determination, in a fictional direction that will forever remain irreducible for any single individual or, rather, that will only asymptotically approach the subject's becoming, no matter how successful the dialectical syntheses by which he must resolve, as *I*, his discordance with his own reality."[10]

Reception of the mirror stage in film studies and later in visual culture studies centres on the mirror that shows the baby an image with which it identifies. The mirror becomes a metaphor for the relationship between subject and society, as well as being equated with the visual media under discussion, such as the film screen. In visual culture studies, this model came to be read as an affirmation of the subject: the mirror becomes a self-image to whose visibility within society the subject has a right. Not only does the subject feel him/herself to be represented by this image, this actually is the case. It is worth noting, however, that although the mirror offers the baby a jubilant self-image that glosses over its "motor impotence", the baby identifies with a *fiction*, resulting in a lifelong struggle with the discrepancy between this triumphant fiction and its actual reality, creating a feeling of inadequacy. This is the starting point for my critique of the identity model of affirmative representation on which the political agenda of visual culture studies is based – more on which later.

With the mirror stage, parallels between Lacan and Sartre are already apparent: both use visual metaphors to show that ego identity is an illusory representation. The proximity between Lacan's approach and Sartre's being-

10 Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I", 76.

looked-at becomes clearer still in Lacan's later model of a gaze that is often conflated with the mirror stage. Weber thus introduces the gaze of an other, "the mother, nanny, or even one's own mirror-image", that is not (yet) mentioned in *The Mirror Stage*, that becomes the "matrix" of the child's "sense of unity, identity and continuity". Here, then, a third party is involved – appearing in Lacan's text not as someone looking but only as a person or device (the French *trotte-bébé*) that supports and surrounds the infant that cannot yet walk or stand. Weber thus integrates the *gaze of the Other* into the mirror stage – something that takes a central position in Lacan's later model of the gaze from the 1960s. Here is the often-cited passage that incorporates the gaze of the other into the mirror stage: "For the Other where discourse is situated, which is always latent in the triangulation that consecrates this distance, is not latent as long as it extends all the way to the purest moment of the spectacular relation: to the gesture by which the child at the mirror turns toward the person who is carrying him and appeals with a look to this witness."[11] The fundamental fragility of the ego function achieved by looking in the mirror is underlined again when Weber makes the gaze of this other overlap with the gaze of "one's own mirror-image": Is the figure in the mirror I or an Other?

Gaze, screen, identity – Lacan in film studies and visual culture studies

The mirror stage is still relatively simple in structure;[12] and, according to Margaret Iversen and Stephen Melville, it was mainly to the mirror stage that models of the gaze in the film theory of the 1970s and '80s referred.[13] But two metaphors that were to be important for film studies and later visual culture studies come from the *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, a long, highly complex work published three decades later; Jacqueline Rose and

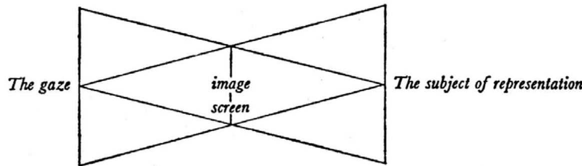
11 Jacques Lacan, "Remarque sur le rapport de Daniel Lagache: Psychoanalyse et structure de la personnalité" in Lacan, *Écrits* (Paris 1966), 647-684: 678. In English, "Remarks on Daniel Lagache's Presentation: Psychanalysis and personality Structure" in *Écrits*, 543-574: 568.

12 It was based on experiments conducted by the psychologist Henri Wallon to compare the reactions of animals and human infants to their image in the mirror. See Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 343.

13 Margaret Iversen, Stephen Melville, *Writing Art History. Disciplinary Departures* (Chicago 2010), 119. On film theory, see above all Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975), 6-18; Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier. Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (London, Bloomington, 1982).

Kaja Silverman in particular engaged intensively with the *Four Fundamental Concepts*.[14] The theoretical fabric woven by Lacan here is highly complicated and his use of meandering chains of association and metaphor to avoid clarity does not make things any easier. Interpretations of Lacan are marked by the temptations or projection traps laid by his metaphorical language. This is especially true of *gaze* and *screen*, two metaphors that seem to invite direct application to the concepts and media of the disciplines under discussion here – the extent to which this was a matter of projection will become clear below.

Lacan's famous diagram of interlocking triangles illustrates the relationship between "the gaze", "the subject of representation" and the "image/screen".[15]



The screen (*écran* in French) forms the vertical line that links the intersections of the two triangles. Each triangle's point bisects the other's base, labelled "the gaze" and "the subject of representation". This diagram shows the interlocking of seeing and being seen, thus displaying parallels with Sartre's model of being-looked-at.[16] But however simple this diagram may appear, the possible interpretations are unlimited. I associate the vertical line between the two points/layers of gaze and subject with the figure of a filter that sieves the information passing between these two points (gaze and subject), thus "formatting" it, to use a metaphor from the digital realm.

14 In *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (London 1986) Jacqueline Rose offers an immensely precise and intensive analysis of Lacan's models of the gaze in connection with film theory, especially in the book's second section under the heading "The Imaginary" (167-197). See also Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York, London 1992).

15 To be found in Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 106.

16 On these parallels, but also on Lacan's critique of Sartre's notion of an autonomy of the subject, see Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, especially chapter 6.

Now for the explanatory descriptions of the diagram's elements:[17] "Images are a result of projection. This is especially true of the images to which Lacan attributes a role in the genesis of the subject. These include the prototype of the Lacanian concept of the image, the mirror-image (l'image speculaire)"[18] with which the baby reassures itself of its own body in the mirror stage. According to Lacan, this "emerging subject" (that cannot yet speak) is subject to the "predominance of the visual".[19] In the diagram, image and screen lie on the same line, leading to many interpretations where they are equated with one another. "The image as screen frames the subject's perception. In a first approximation, it can be seen as the basis of cultural standards that allows individual experience to become understandable. [...] The screen points to the Other, allows access to the discourse of the Other, and thus to the unconscious."[20] For Lacan, image and screen are "sites of an immobilization" of memory, but the screen is also "the site of mediation [between subject and world]. It serves to overcome an innate solipsism by offering a path to intersubjectivity."[21] But like the image, the screen is subject to Lacan's anti-ocular verdict: "An image always blocks the truth."[22]

Beginning in the 1970s, it was film studies that received and transformed Lacan's models of the gaze in a way that significantly aided their transfer into visual culture studies, in particular in the form of apparatus theory that relates the setting of the cinema to Lacan's mirror stage and connects it with Althusser's concept of ideology. "During this period, the cinema appeared as *the* place to illustrate the ideological construction of the subject", as Marie-Luise Angerer remarks.[23] In *Fassbinder and Lacan: A Reconsideration of Gaze, Look, and Image*,[24] Kaja Silverman, whose analyses are a frequent point of reference in

17 I have based my brief outline of the theoretical network established by Lacan around the gaze on the remarks of the Lacanian psychoanalyst Ulrike Kadi: Ulrike Kadi: "'... Nicht so einen geordneten Blick'. Bild, Schirm und drittes Auge" in Claudia Blümle, Anne von der Heiden (ed.), *Blickzähmung und Augentäuschung. Zu Jacques Lacans Bildtheorie* (Berlin, Zurich 2005), 249-264.

18 Kadi, 253.

19 Ibid., 254.

20 Ibid., 256/257.

21 Ibid., 259.

22 "Une image bloque toujours la vérité." Jacques Lacan, "Yale University: Kanzer Seminar" in *Scilicet* 6+7 (1975), 7-37: 22.

23 Marie-Luise Angerer, *Desire After Affect* (London, New York, 2015), 5.

24 Kaja Silverman, "Fassbinder and Lacan: A Reconsideration of Gaze, Look, and Image," in Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York, London 1992), 125-156, slightly

the reception of Lacan in film studies, links the concept of *identity* (central to the agenda of visual culture studies) with the gaze in specifically filmic terms. In the *mirror stage*, she argues, Lacan highlights the significance of internalizing things external to the subject in the process of identity formation, first in the guise of a mirror image, then in the form of parental imagoes, and later still "in the shape of a whole range of cultural representations, the *moi* becoming over time more and more explicitly dependent upon that which might be said to be 'alien' or 'other'. What Lacan designates as the 'gaze' also manifests itself initially within a space external to the subject, first through the mother's look as it facilitates the 'join' of infant and mirror image [the same moment referred to by Weber in his account], and later through all of the many other actual looks with which it is confused. It is only at a second remove that the subject might be said to assume responsibility for 'operating' the gaze by 'seeing' itself being seen, even when no pair of eyes are trained upon it – by taking not so much the gaze as its effects within the self."[25]

Here, then, identity is the internalization of the external gaze, with the gaze taking on a relatively specific formulation as the gaze of the other. In Silverman's model, the screen is responsible for filtering the "whole range of cultural representations" with which the subject is confronted after its entry into language. This model of the screen is important for the reception of Lacan in visual culture studies.

By focusing on the *identity-fixing internalization* of the gaze in this way, Silverman obscures the flipside – the *destabilizing effect* of the gaze on this same identity. In *The Threshold of the Visible World* (1996), she goes further still in this positive recasting of the gaze in the context of what Mieke Bal calls her utopian project of an "ethics of vision" – utopian in its desire to find a dimension of love in the narcissistic constellation of Lacan's gaze, in order to postulate utopian potential for visual representations such as those of film

reworked version published in Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Holly, Keith Moxey (eds.), *Visual Culture – Images and Interpretations* (Hanover, London 1994), 273-301, on the Lacanian model of the gaze see in particular 286-294. I refer in the following to the 1994 version, as it appeared in the context of the debate on visual culture. In terms of cultural images of identities, Silverman's focus shares the horizon of visual culture studies to a different extent than the earlier texts by Rose that respond to the poststructuralist and feminist debates on film.

25 Silverman, "Fassbinder and Lacan". Here Silverman links Lacan's early *Mirror Stage* with his later *Four Fundamental Concepts*.

and photography.[26] This has consequences for Silverman's rewritings of the screen, which are now even more specifically linked to its analogy with the film projection screen. The screen renders culturally determined images and ideal images visible to the gaze, enabling the subject to read them, and in its media structure, film is "almost an embodiment – at least a metaphor – of the screen".[27] The film as screen is now the site for Silverman's utopia of the gaze. Bal welcomes this clarification of the screen as a utopian reworking of Lacan: "For a feminist film theory that wishes to move beyond the critique of what is damaging in dominant culture, that wishes to understand how film works and how effects other than the usual ones can be achieved, the screen is the workshop or arena or stadium in the middle of the visual field."[28] But this analogizing of the screen with the film projection screen, the founding trope of psychoanalytical film theory since Christian Metz's *Psychoanalysis and Cinema. The Imaginary Signifier*,[29] was also criticized, in particular by Anglo-American feminist film theorists, including Mary Ann Doane in 1980 and Joan Copjec in 1989.[30] Doane criticizes the analogizing of mirror stage and cinema in Metz: because the movie does not show a mirror image, Metz concludes that the spectator identifies with his own gaze and thus *with* the camera. Doane criticizes this notion of identification on the part of the spectator subject on the grounds that it implies a coherence of the gaze in the sense of a "guarantee of the untroubled centrality and unity of the subject".[31] But this, she points out, no longer corresponds with Lacanian theory. Copjec, too, criticizes film theory for analogizing the screen (in this case the cinema projection screen as well as the Lacanian *écran*) and the mirror of the mirror stage, thus founding its conception of the cinematic apparatus on a misunderstanding of Lacan. The critique levelled by Doane and Copjec basically concerns a tendency to take Lacan's metaphors of the gaze literally,[32] thus rendering them one-di-

26 Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World*. Cf. Mieke Bal, "Looking at Love. An Ethics of Vision" in *Diacritics* 27, no. 1 (1997), 59-72.

27 Bal, "Looking at Love", 65.

28 Ibid.

29 Originally published in Paris in 1977 as *Le signifiant imaginaire. Psychanalyse et cinéma*.

30 See Mary Ann Doane, "Misrecognition and Identity" in *cine-tracts* 3, no. 3 (1980), 25-32; Joan Copjec, "The Orthopsychic Subject: Film Theory and the Reception of Lacan" in *October* 49 (1989), 53-71.

31 Mary Ann Doane, "Misrecognition and Identity", 27-28.

32 The urge to over-clarify not only Lacan's linguistic metaphors but also his use of images and diagrams has also been remarked on by Claudia Blümle and Anne von der Heiden, who write that he seduces the reader "into wanting to understand him in strictly sys-

mensional. In contrast, Doane and Copjec wish to preserve the complexity and unsettling potential of Lacanian theory, in particular for film theory. Silverman goes beyond a critique and tries to rewrite Lacan's models of the gaze for her utopia of a positive identification of the subject.

To sum up, there are two contrary effects of the gaze on the "function of the I": on the one hand, the attempt to internalize the gaze to achieve "the agency known as the ego", and on the other a threatening quality, an awareness of lack. These contrary effects are given very different weightings in reception, especially with regard to visuality as a factor in identity. As will be seen later, the way visual culture studies have taken up the Lacanian model of the gaze is indebted to its one-dimensional reception by film studies in so far as it, too, tends to take Lacan's metaphors of the gaze literally. The reason for this may well be the political agenda of visual culture studies with regard to identity politics. Identities cannot be affirmed and reassured through an awareness of lack in the subject; on the contrary, the strategy of identity politics needs to reinforce the "agency known as the ego". The critique articulated by Doane and Copjec in the decade before visual culture studies was established could also be levelled against the new discipline's version of the gaze.

The threatened subject – Norman Bryson

One of the first to introduce Lacan's model into art history, mainly via his readings of film theory in the 1980s, was the literary theorist Norman Bryson, who was also involved in the academic establishment of visual culture studies at universities in the United States and who features in *Vision and Visuality* with his essay "The Gaze in the Expanded Field".[33] This and one other text by Bryson, his introduction to the anthology *Calligram. Essays in New Art History from France*,[34] deal with the model of the gaze, and they can also be read

tematic terms, but this is constantly thwarted by his discourse". Claudia Blümle, Anne von der Heiden (eds.), *Blickzähmung und Augentäuschung. Zu Jacques Lacans Bildtheorie* (Berlin, Zurich 2005), 10.

33 Norman Bryson, "The Gaze in the Expanded Field" in Foster, *Vision and Visuality*, 87-108.

34 Norman Bryson, "Introduction" in Norman Bryson (ed.), *Calligram. Essays in New Art History from France* (Cambridge, New York, Melbourne 1988), xiii-xxix. In this volume, Bryson published essays not by art historians but by French poststructuralist theorists like Julia Kristeva, Michel Serres, Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard and Michel Foucault, grouped under the label of "New Art History" with Louis Marin, Jean-Claude Leben-

as a deliberate effort to make this model appeal to his colleagues in art history. These texts are rhetorical feats designed irrefutably to show the heuristic benefit of the model for art history, a discipline Bryson claimed had grown tired; in terms of a history of discourse, I see them occupying a position at the interface of art history and visual culture studies.

A little detective work shows that in his first book, *Word and Image. French Painting of the Ancien Régime* (1981), the literary scholar Bryson referred to seeing as looking, discussing it in connection with gender.[35] Two years later, in *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze,*[36] he tried to bring seeing and sign together through his reception of Lacan's model of the gaze. His aim was to create a theoretical basis for the assumption of textual structures for the field of the visual, thus radically altering the foundations of art-historical interpretation. In his texts for *Vision and Visuality* and *Calligram*, both published in 1988, these positions were further radicalized and focused.

In *The Gaze in the Expanded Field,* Bryson's programmatic point of departure is the "radical decentering of the subject".[37] This leads logically to a dethroning of perspective as a model which constructs seeing from the position of a subject that forms the centre of the world. This "self as focus of its visual kingdom"[38] and one-point perspective belong together, and both must therefore be rethought. According to Bryson, Sartre and Lacan, too, were influenced by this model. A "residual centering upon the standpoint of the subject"[39] can be detected, he argues, in the way they conceived of seeing as being threatened,

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sztejn and Yves Bonnefois (who were art historians, but not exclusively) on the grounds that "recent innovation has taken place extra-territorially". (ibid., xii).

35 For Fragonard's *The Swing*, he (rather mechanically) borrows the feminist model from Laura Mulvey's famous essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975): "Within a 'heterosexual' optic where specialised functions are assigned to each sex, pleasure in looking is broken between active (male) and passive (female)." Bryson, *Word and Image*, 98. Cf. Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". In her model of the gaze, Mulvey refers to Freud's concept of scopophilia, combining it with Lacan's model of "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function"; she uses the term *looking; gaze* only appears as a generalizing noun ("the male gaze") corresponding to its character as a theoretical model that does not refer to the factual activity of individual seeing. Mulvey's essay broke new ground in two ways: it made seeing a matter of (patriarchal) power, and it offered a psychoanalytical model for this.

36 Bryson, *Vision and Painting*.

37 Bryson, "The Gaze", S. 87.

38 Ibid., 88.

39 Ibid.

even persecuted, at this centre (the site of the subject) by the gaze. Here we find a first vagueness in Bryson's formulation that renders seeing and the subject indistinct because what is under threat and what is decentred by the gaze of an (imagined) outside is primarily the subject. In *The Gaze in the Expanded Field*, Bryson proposes a radical alternative model. It is taken from the culture of Japan, from the religious philosophers of the Kyoto School who combined eastern concepts of the void and the non-ego with European existentialism.[40] And, compared to Lacan, it represents a "much more thoroughgoing displacement of the subject in the field of vision".[41] As a theoretical strategy, this approach is strange: Lacan's thinking (and that of other poststructuralist theorists like Foucault) did involve a critique of the humanist model of the subject, but in spite of this (or precisely because of this) there can be no question of the subject having the alternative of simply leaving its symbolic order and language. This seems to be Bryson's wish, however, when he replaces the western model with one from an entirely different culture, thus attempting to shake off the "paranoid" Lacanian construct of the gaze[42] and its threat to the ego.

Let us take a brief look at Bryson's account of Lacan's model of the gaze,[43] which he contrasts starkly in its threat to the I with the positive example of the Japanese model. According to Bryson, in Lacan – unlike in Sartre – it is not the gaze of the other that thwarts and threatens the autonomy of the subject in the visual field, but "the irruption, in the visual field, of the Signifier. When I look, what I see is not simply light but intelligible form: the *rays* of light are caught in a *rets*, a network of meanings."[44] As such, seeing is socialized: "For human beings collectively to orchestrate their visual experience together it is required that each submit his or her retinal experience to the socially agreed description(s) of an intelligible world." Deviations from this

40 See Bret W. Davis, "The Kyoto School", especially paragraph 3.7: "The 'Self that is not a Self' and the Nothingness of Radical Subjectivity" in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, first published Feb 27, 2006; substantive revision May 6, 2010 (http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kyoto-school/, accessed 26 Sept 2016).

41 Bryson, "The Gaze", 88.

42 See Jacqueline Rose's contribution to the discussion of his text, in which Rosalind Krauss, Martin Jay and Jonathan Crary also took part. In Foster (ed.), *Vision and Visuality*, 109-113.

43 Beyond Bryson's, one of the most accessible accounts of this confusing model is Kaja Silverman's essay "Fassbinder and Lacan".

44 Bryson, "The Gaze", 91.

"social construction of visual reality" can be measured and named as disruptions.[45] Here, a concept comes into play that was to take a central place in theoretical debates surrounding visual culture: visuality. "Between the subject and the world is inserted the entire sum of discourses which make up visuality, that cultural construct, and make visuality different from vision, the notion of unmediated visual experience." Bryson gives another description of this visuality in Lacanian terms, in particular the screen that stands between the subject/retina and the world: "Between retina and world is inserted a screen of signs, a screen consisting of all the multiple discourses on vision built into the social arena."[46] Hans Holbein's painting *The Ambassadors*[47] with the anamorphically distorted skull in the foreground becomes Bryson's example for the effect of this screen: the seeing subject (by which he means the viewer who cannot identify the skull as such from the usual position in front of the picture dictated by one-point perspective, but only by viewing the painting at an angle while standing to the right of the frame) is as little the centre of its visual experience as it is the centre of its speaking. This screen, a central concept in the film theory of those years, introduces the sign into the visual field, supplying the tool for semiological interpretations.[48] With this approach, which uses Lacan's linking of semiotics and psychoanalysis, thinking about seeing can now be freed from the inadequacies of perceptualist definitions that understand the image only as a perfect reproduction of the perception of a prior reality.

Bryson used this, for example, as the basis for his attack in *Vision and Painting* on Ernst Gombrich's "mimetic doctrine",[49] contrasting the view of painting as the replication of a perception of external reality, that takes place

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid., 92.

47 1533, National Gallery, London. See Jacques Lacan, "Anamorphosis" in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 79-90. Many writers have discussed Lacan's reference to Holbein for his model of situating the subject in the visual field; to mention just two from art history: Hubert Damisch, *L'origine de la perspective* (Paris 1987); Tom Conley, "The Wit of the Letter: Holbein's Lacan" in Teresa Brennan, Martin Jay (eds.), *Vision in Context. Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Sight* (New York 1996), 47-61.

48 Seminal books in the fields of film theory, semiotics and feminist theory have been written by the theorists Kaja Silverman (until 1988, especially: *The Subject of Semiotics*, 1983, and *The Acoustic Mirror*, 1988) and Teresa de Lauretis (until 1988, especially: *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction*, 1987, and *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*, 1984), neither of whom is mentioned by Bryson.

49 Bryson, *Vision and Painting*, 50.

independently of social and cultural contexts, with the character of the image as a sign. In other words: for Bryson, the entry of the social (and thus of meaning) into the picture and its interpretation is only possible via the assumption of the image as a sign.[50] Ultimately, Bryson equates the physical picture with the Lacanian screen. He takes Lacan's metaphor of the screen literally.[51] A strangely retrogressive consequence of this kind of transfer is that by equating it with the Lacanian screen, the picture/painting is fixed to the model of one-point perspective that imagines the picture as a section through this perspective – the model of painting as an Albertian window.[52] With this literal transfer, then, art is taken back to the very model of perception that Bryson criticizes so vehemently in *Vision and Painting*: Gombrich's perspectivism. More problematic, however, is another consequence of this position. The concrete object of interpretation disappears for the interpreting subject in the mirroring function of the screen. In this way, a strangely paradoxical effect occurs: the viewer/subject who in the Lacanian model is not autonomous (and this aspect is crucial to the critical force of this model) re-autonomizes itself from the outside world in a kind of narcissistic circular reasoning.

Before outlining the Japanese alternative, Bryson again summarizes the threatening consequences of the Lacanian model of the gaze: "the viewing subject does not stand at the center of a perceptual horizon, and cannot command the chains and series of signifiers passing across the visual domain. Vision unfolds to the side of, in tangent to, the field of the other. And to that form of seeing Lacan gives a name: seeing on the field of the other, seeing under the Gaze."[53] Under the gaze of the other as the social field (unlike in the model of one-point perspective, which in this theoretical context is also identified with the Cartesian "cogito ergo sum"), the subject is not the centre of its field of vision, fittingly referred to here as the "visual domain". At this

50 On its publication, the books was criticized, among other things, for over-simplifying Gombrich's position. See David Ebitz, "*Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* by Norman Bryson" in *The Art Bulletin* (69:1, 1987), 155-158; Alex Potts, "Difficult Meanings. *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* by Norman Bryson" in *The Burlington Magazine* (129:1006, 1987), 29-32.

51 This problem with the treatment of Lacan's theoretical language is familiar from the much-practised and much-criticized identification of Lacan's phallus-metaphor with the actual, physical penis.

52 Lacan himself reinforced this, however, since his example of anamorphosis in Holbein's *The Ambassadors* reads a *deviation* from this model as a symptom, thus confirming the normativity of one-point perspective *beyond* the historical evolution of scopic regimes.

53 Bryson, "The Gaze", 94.

point, Bryson's basic claim is that the Cartesian model implies and produces nothing but power and control of the subject over the world. What he doesn't even consider as a possibility is dialogue, as a relation of the subject to the outside world, or communication.

As a solution to the "Cartesian self-enclosure of the *cogito*,"[54] Bryson proposes the model of the Japanese philosopher Nishitani from the Kyoto School, whose aim is "to dismantle this anthropocentric subject" – and to do so more radically than Sartre and Lacan with their threatening scenarios. With reference to Buddhist teachings, this involves the concept of *shunyata*, translated as emptiness, radical impermanence, blankness, nihility,[55] which is intended to override the subject-object problem of western philosophy at a single stroke. On this basis, Bryson develops a model of the gaze that is more like a promise – and which remains without consequence in his own work and in the subsequent debate. But Bryson clearly sees in it a force that is more positive than the "negative or terrorizing gaze"[56] of Lacan. For him, precisely this "paranoid coloration given to the Gaze" is an indication that Lacan is still thinking from the position of a certain "intellectual enclosure",[57] by which he means the above-mentioned residual subject-centeredness.

Nonetheless, Bryson comes to a point where he needs Lacan's version of visuality precisely for its critical negativity, since it is capable of doing something the positive promise of the Buddhist model cannot, that is, offering a critique of previous models of the gaze and their political consequences. Among these he counts: for the 19th century, the "truth of vision" in the physiology of the eye and the neurology of the optical apparatus; in the art history of the 20th century, he argues, this truth of the retina gave rise to formalism, in art theory to the positions of Gombrich und Arnheim based on a psychology of perception, and in the exhibition policies of museums to the decontextualization of pictures to achieve direct communication between the viewer's eye and pure form. In short, art as a matter of pure perception, timeless, "sequestered from the social domain, universal".[58] This is the art history soon to be taken on by visual culture studies – or, to be more precise, a simplified and in many ways abbreviated version of that art history, especially with regard to the German practice oriented towards cultural history and to books like

54 Ibid.
55 Ibid., 97.
56 Ibid., 105.
57 Ibid., 104.
58 Ibid., 107.

Baxandall's *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* and Alpers' *The Art of Describing*.

As a key element for Bryson, Lacan's model brings culture into the field of visuality, or rather, it is culture that turns pure seeing into a visual field consisting not only of forms but of meanings "permeated by verbal and visual discourses, by signs". This also brings the dimensions of the social and of power into play: "What is at stake is the discovery of a politics of vision." In this way, Bryson gives Lacan's gaze a political turn that in a certain way disarms its "paranoid or terrorist coloration" by transporting the gaze away from the subject into the field of power: "it is a bit easier, since Lacan, to think of visuality as something built cooperatively, over time; that we are therefore responsible for it, ethically accountable."[59] As examples he cites the voyeuristic male gaze and the colonialist gaze, structured by power and powerlessness. Now, Bryson concludes, it is a matter of analysing how power uses the social construction of seeing and how it hides its manoeuvres in the field of visuality "in myths of pure form, pure perception, and culturally universal vision".[60]

What role does art history play here? This question takes us away from the gaze. Bryson's answer would probably be as follows: were it to radically revise its basic assumptions, art history could become a kind of auxiliary discipline for the analysis of social power relations to the extent that they are represented in visual culture. It could unmask what the image conceals – the exercise of power. This is strongly reminiscent of a vulgar Marxist notion of ideology as the masking of power relations, which is based on a concept of power as repression and which falls behind the concept of power proposed by Foucault as not only repressive but productive and as being active throughout the social body. Moreover, this notion is exceedingly hostile to images, casting them as lies that help to shape a visuality that also acts in the service of power. The lack that constitutes the Lacanian subject (and which, in a terminological shift, "threatens" the Brysonian) is thus wholly repositioned in a political outside. In Bryson's view, this outside in turn manifests itself in the art-historical myths of purity and universality of form and perception – a rather restricted understanding of the political that seems paradoxically linked to the notion of visual immanence. This relationship between the inside of a subject and its outside, less fraught than unclear, obscures another important tension within the triad of artist/work/viewer that is key to the status of seeing in art history

59 Ibid.
60 Ibid., 108.

and visual culture studies: that between subject, be it artist or recipient, and object. Will the object (here the object of art history) become another mirror of the subject? In Bryson's model, will it coincide indistinguishably with the screen of the network of signs (which he sees as a threat to the subject)? Is it ultimately a matter of contesting the myth of the autonomy of the object/artwork that results from the myth of purity? What importance does this "battle" against the concept of autonomous art still have at the end of the 1980s? For the time being, I only have a clear answer to the last of these questions. With the discourses and art practices of postmodernism, such as appropriation, and essentially already with the neo-avant-gardes of fluxus, land art, body and performance art or happenings in the 1960s and '70s, this battle was over (at least in the absolute, either/or terms of autonomy on the one hand and a dissolution of the object in its context on the other). This is also true within art history as a discipline, where the autonomy of art in relation to sociality and/or function is no longer the founding principle for a definition of art as the discipline's object.

In all fairness, it must be said that Bryson's main focus in *The Gaze in the Expanded Field* was not on art history but on a discussion of the gaze in connection with an expanded concept of the visual field. In his editor's introduction to the *Calligram* anthology, on the other hand, he positions his collection of (post)structuralist texts "from France" clearly against "official art history".[61] There is an attack on Gombrich's perceptualism[62] and a critique of so-called social art history that follows the Marxist distinction of base and superstructure, assigning art to the latter, unable to connect it with the former except as an illustration. To both, perspectivism and social art history, Bryson prescribes the insight that painting is an art of signs, as a cure for the isolation of art from the social.

What interests me about this text is the construction of the nexus between sign, historicization and interpretation that can be isolated within it – which bears on central issues of art-historical practice that also determine the status of seeing in the discipline (and vice versa). Bryson claims that: "Prevailing art history famously insists on limiting itself to 'what was possible in the period': its historicism demands a purity or puritanism of perspective in which

61 Bryson, "Introduction" in *Calligram*, xv-xvi.

62 An interesting comment on Bryson's restricted reception of Gombrich as exclusively perceptualist is to be found in Christopher S. Wood, "Art History Reviewed VI".

'leakage' from the present into the past is viewed with suspicion and alarm."[63] Although art history insists on the present of the artwork in question, it is not, Bryson argues, interested in its own present. Consequently, art history must adopt the theory of French (post)structuralism that has "a far more sophisticated understanding of the relations of signs to history". The question, he claims, is why "we, in England and America" choose to work within self-imposed theoretical limits when literary criticism has broadened its theoretical horizons, "so self-aware in methodology, so confident in its right to read from the present?"[64] I am interested in this idea of "confident in its right to read from the present". The implications are many and varied. Bryson's focus is clearly on the *right* to interpret from the present, and less on explaining the theoretical necessity of doing so. This is an interesting take on the postmodern critique of objectivism that highlighted the latency of position and thus the presence of the viewer in the act of interpretation. Bryson's take on this approach turns the negativity of critique into a positive right – the right of the viewer, that is, Bryson's right to read the work from his present. This is not just a critique of the supposed objectivity of art-historical fact-production – a critique I share; Bryson goes further, shifting the weight within the triad of artist/work/viewer in favour of the last in a way that largely abolishes not only the relation between viewer/present and work/past, but also the relational tension between all three poles. To my mind, this shift goes so far as to suggest that the author disempowered by poststructuralism has been replaced by (the power of) the interpreter.

How does Bryson connect this argument with the sign? Here, too, he opens up a polarizing battleground: art history "reacts to the image by seeking documentation" (he always refers to the object of art history as "the image"); to date it has not conceived of the image "in terms of signs", "as something to be interpreted".[65] The new art history he is presenting in *Calligram*, on the other hand, "reacts to the image as to any other work of signs. It is naturally hermeneutic, and it knows reading to be as complex and intricate a process as, for academic or Warburg iconology, it is the comparatively simple decoding of emblems and motifs."[66] This is a highly polemical view of iconology which Bryson claims is not a hermeneutic activity.

63 Bryson, "Introduction", *Calligram*, xvi.
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid.
66 Ibid., xvii.

Apart from the fact that using the word "naturally" in the context of post-structuralist theory feels strange, the problem with this attitude is the mix of general accusations and simplification, as reflected in the reviews of *Vision and Painting*.[67] Particularly annoying is the way Bryson's very simple view of art history seems to be guided by a tactical ignorance that aims to present the discipline of literary criticism, from which he comes, as a methodological role model so that it remains unclear, looking back, how much of his polemic is motivated by academic politics. So why do I take it seriously? Bryson is not the only literary critic/theorist who switched to art history, and he exerted a major influence on the academic context in which the first university course on visual culture was founded soon after. More interestingly, Bryson's formulations also seem to express a desire that was also crucial to the founding and the programs of visual culture studies: with the overly one-sided shift in emphasis to the viewer/interpreter within the triad of artist/work/viewer, the author, at least theoretically abolished by poststructuralism in favour of textual interdependence, is replaced by the viewer, who according to Bryson now has the right to interpret, independently of the historical unfamiliarity (and other unfamiliarities) of the object. But what is the nature of an interpretation that does not acknowledge its object as Other? Does this object then take on the function of a mirror for the viewer?

Another revealing choice of words, offering an insight into the role of the gaze, comes in Bryson's arguments against the "perceptualist account",[68] where he speaks of recognition (a word whose meanings range from cognition to identification, and to approval). To refute Gombrich's method of a perceptual comparison between a painting and reality outside the picture, Bryson examines picture-making from the position of the "viewer's gaze," using the example of a particularly realistic representation. In this case, he writes, it is possible for the viewer to re-experience "the original vision, retinal or imaginary, of its creator". But such matching, he argues, can hardly be a necessary criterion for the "recognition of a painting" since the viewer knows nothing of the original intention or vision of the painting. From this he concludes that the "act of perception in the viewing gaze cannot of itself provide criteria of recognition". The examples given for what he understands by recognition are the ability to comprehend mathematic formulae and a child's learning to

67 Especially Potts, Difficult Meanings.
68 Bryson, "Introduction", *Calligram*, xix.

read. His conclusion: not only mathematics and learning to read are "activities of the sign", but also painting. Recognition of a painting calls for skills in "social codes of recognition".[69] Here, then, perception is replaced by recognition as the term for the viewer's act of seeing. In this way, seeing as the form of perception specific to the sense of sight becomes the act of cognition via the recognition of social codes – an act that reads signs to derive meaning from them. Elsewhere, he takes this distinction one step further, describing purely perceptive seeing as an individually isolated act, contrasting it with the recognition of signs as social interaction: "It takes one person to experience a sensation; it takes (at least) two to recognize a sign."[70]

By basing his argument on an isolation of the act of seeing as (pure) perception in this way, he contradicts his own claim that no such thing as pure seeing exists. At the same time he asserts that the formal properties of the object that are perceived by "pure" seeing are not socially and historically coded, that is to say, they lie below the threshold of legibility or encoding (and thus of the social). These would be, for example, those elements grouped together by conventional art history under the heading of style, from ways of applying paint, to palettes, and to modes of composition. Studies exist, however, even for non-representational painting of the 20th century, which analyse these factors of painting – often labelled as "formalism" and treated with suspicion – as socially, culturally and historically structured. Dealing with such painting though involves using a descriptive vocabulary other than that found in conventional art-historical accounts of style.[71]

In brief, this is the package offered by Bryson: with the gaze, the sign enters art (interpretation), bringing with it power and the social; the social is identical with the screen, which in turn coincides with the image; the gaze becomes an act of reading, based on the social codes circulating in the present of the viewer/interpreter. What Bryson then fails to address, however, is the restricted authorial autonomy of the viewer/interpreter within the coding of his/her *own* present. He limits himself to deducing the right to interpretation. The latent desire that speaks through his text is, I propose, as follows: the interpreter takes on the position of the author/artist as criticized by poststructuralism, and the object of interpretation is reduced to an outside, present and ahistorical, whose existence does not go beyond its own interpretation.

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69 All quotations from Bryson, The Gaze, xix-xx.

70 Ibid., xxi.

71 For painting, see, for example, Yves-Alain Bois,*Painting as Model* (Boston 1993).

Similar to the mirror in Lacan's model of the mirror stage as formative of the function of the I, it serves to show the viewer/interpreter a self-image via whose recognition the plausibility of the viewer-ego/I is secured. Moreover this model collapses the tension, or relationship, between the elements involved in art-historical seeing (the triad of artist, object/work and viewer/interpreter) because the element artist no longer features, while object/work and viewer/interpreter collapse into the interpreter-I. When the viewer has no counterpart, all that remains is the viewer him/herself. Why is this? Four basic factors come together in Bryson's position: 1) the gaze is understood as a threat to the I; 2) for this reason it is pushed away from the I into an outside; 3) the Lacanian screen is literally equated with the art image; 4) the I, which in the Lacanian model can only deceive itself about its own wholeness, seems to be salvaged in an interpreting I whose irreparable lack is not open to debate. This is the effect of equating screen and viewer/interpreter in the act of interpreting.

The evil eye and a counter-model – Margaret Olin

"There is usually something negative about the gaze as used in art theory", writes Margaret Olin in her article "Gaze", included in *Critical Terms for Art History* (1996), a handbook on new concepts "in the late twentieth century"[72] including those borrowed from poststructuralist, feminist and psychoanalytical theory like sign, representation, simulacrum, fetish, gaze and gender.

Olin places the negative reading of the gaze at the centre of her text: "the notion of the pernicious power of the gaze. The gaze, it seems, destroys." In her view, there are historical antecedents, like the myth of Medusa or a belief in the power of the gaze as manifested in the "evil eye", but also cultural rules like asking someone before taking their picture. In 20th-century discourse, "the gaze has taken on new villainous qualities":[73] Hitler's "hypnotic" gaze could have played a part when Sartre was writing *Being and Nothingness* during the German occupation of France; Foucault linked the gaze with the apparatus of surveillance, and Guy Debord warned of the "dehumanizing aspect of being a spectator". The key point in Lacan, she remarks, is that the eye

72 Robert S. Nelson, "At the Place of a Foreword: Someone Looking, Reading, and Writing" in *Critical Terms*, ix.

73 Margaret Olin, "Gaze" in *Critical Terms*, 208-219: 214.

and the gaze, although separate, are parts of the same person because "the gaze is projected, imagined. It is not the gaze of a real person who wishes malevolently to deprive us of our independence as subjects, but the result of our own struggle for self-mastery."[74] Precisely this aspect of the function of the viewer/interpreter is what is lost in Bryson's approach, as the gaze, separated from the eye, that goes hand in hand with the "desire for self-completion through another",[75] is relocated within this very Other/outside.

Olin aptly sums up the dimension of power in the gaze: "There is a struggle over the gaze: one gets to look, to be master of the gaze; the other (or Other) is looked at."[76] This struggle involves a clash of gazes each based on the desire to complete the self. It goes beyond the struggle between the sexes; it concerns the relations between majority and minority, between the West and the so-called Global South, "whose inhabitants can be the object of the gaze because they are viewed as exotic … The subject-turned-object sees itself as the other sees it: it internalizes the gaze. Thus the poor self-image and limited sense of one's own possibilities that result when women see themselves as men see them, when minority groups see themselves as the majority sees them."[77]

This brings us back to the problem described above with reference to the identity politics of these minorities: how can this power relation and this gaze be altered? Can it be achieved by giving the cliché, the stereotype, resulting from such a gaze, a positive turn, continuing to relate it to oneself – a strategy that has been both used and contested by all minorities, both ethnic groups and women, gays and lesbians? Is it possible to exit this dynamic by creating a "new" self-image? This in turn recalls Bryson's manoeuvre of avoiding the gaze's threat to the self by adopting a model from a non-western culture based on a non-I – what Olin calls an attempt "to find an alternative to the notion of the subjugating look in other cultures".[78]

Olin herself has another proposal that departs from the "paranoid" Lacanian model. She suggests a positive rewriting of the gaze of the kind already conceived of in other theories. One example she gives is Martin Buber: in his thinking, she writes, there is an attempt to replace the I-it with an I-Thou relationship; something similar is to be found, she adds, in Mikhail Bakhtin's heteroglossia (multiple voices, equally weighted). What these models have in

74 Ibid., 215.
75 Ibid.
76 Ibid.
77 Ibid.
78 Ibid., 216.

common is that they take dialogue as the basis for thinking relations. The gaze that is returned in the dialogical model rescues the sense of self of the one being looked at. "If you can look back, you cannot be possessed by the gaze of the other. What is proposed is not a stare-down. It is a shared gaze. Rather than emphasizing the power of the gazing one to make the one gazed at into an object, this idea suggests responsibility toward the person looking back at one."[79] This model is ethically founded and as such highly volitional. It appears as optimistic regarding the possibilities of human communication as Lacan's model is pessimistic. What remains intact here is the relation between the looking subject and what is being looked at, be it artist and work or work and viewer/interpreter. With this model there is no need to deny the unfamiliarity of the other. In this it resembles Pächt's approach; but it describes more of an attitude than a method – an attitude that may colour both cognitive aim and methodology, just as a "paranoid" attitude does. In both models, the dialogical and the Lacanian, the emphasis is on recognition, but with one key difference: in the Lacanian model, it is (self-)recognition of the I, in Buber and Bakhtin the recognition of the Other. The Lacanian model has been adopted much more frequently than Buber's or Bakhtin's – which is hardly surprising; for with this model, it is possible to pose the question of power relations within the gaze that is not possible with the dialogical model, as it postulates a form of communication without a hierarchic divide.

Olin's article on the gaze has just a single illustration: Walker Evans' photographic portrait of Annie Mae Gudger, the wife of a tenant farmer. It shows the face of a white woman, her hair parted and pulled back, looking straight at the photographer, and thus the viewer, with a frown. Any further characterization of her gaze would be interpretation. Annie Mae Gudger and the picture look at the viewer – a picture that looks back, in the most obvious way imaginable: the person in the picture looks back, which means: "Our gaze does not hit the side of her face but the front" – an allusion to Barbara Kruger's work entitled *Your gaze hits the side of my face*.[80] "She looks at us and we meet her gaze directly."[81] This portrait could thus become a concrete example of the dialogical constellation of gazes proposed by Olin.

In western art since the Renaissance, figures looking out of the picture at the viewer have not been the rule, especially where female figures are con-

79 Ibid., 217.
80 Title of a photo collage by Barbara Kruger (1981).
81 Olin, "Gaze", 216.

cerned, which brings us to art history as a discipline and the way it has dealt with this problem. Famous exceptions include Tizian's *Venus of Urbino*, Goya's *Nude* and *Clothed Maja* and Manet's *Olympia*, all from the genre of the female nude. For this genre, the rule was that the nude does not look at the viewer, casting her eyes instead discretely and modestly to one side. And the *Majas* and *Olympia* were often the focus of scandalized outrage on account of their "obscene" character. In most cases, this was the effect of a naked woman looking at those looking at her – an unwelcome, disturbing dialogical exchange of gazes that startled the viewer out of his position of a gaze that controls its object. Elsewhere, another remarkable effect can be observed: some critics seem to forget that they are looking at a picture, speaking of the image of a female body looking at them as a subject: this Maja "is aware of power and her entirely unsentimental, even aggressive gaze definitively turns her into a subject, even as an unclad woman".[82] T.J. Clark is not the only one to see in the gaze of *Olympia* the self-determined desire "of the female subject herself".[83] This raises the question of how such a neutral, indifferent gaze becomes, in the eye of the (male) viewer, a signifier of self-determined female desire, and whether it is perhaps this gaze that causes the medium of representation, the painting, the canvas, the pictorial codes, to become invisible, allowing the woman portrayed to achieve a presence in the present and in the perceptive space of the viewer.[84]

According to Olin, the eyes of Anna Mae Gudger are "meant to urge us into a relation. … We are asked to be her partner, to offer her 'respect', which means literally a returned look. Her look is intended to empower her."[85] Unlike the above-quoted interpreters of the *Majas* and *Olympia*, Olin does not fall into the trap of presence. Instead, she understands the woman's gaze clearly

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82 Werner Busch, "Goyas 'Nackte und Bekleidete Maja'" in Claudia von Braunmühl (ed.), *Etablierte Wissenschaft und feministische Theorie im Dialog* (Berlin 2003), 113-124: 121.

83 Timothy J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers* (London 1984), 131. Besides Busch and Clark, it is also worth mentioning Charles Bernheimer, "Manets Olympia: Der Skandal auf der Leinwand" in Weissberg, *Weiblichkeit als Maskerade*, 148-176, especially 158.

84 See Susanne von Falkenhausen, "Maja und Olympia: Der Streit um den weiblichen Akt" in von Braunmühl(ed.), *Etablierte Wissenschaft und feministische Theorie*, 125-133. Foucault takes a different approach to viewer positions with regard to *Olympia*, see ibid., 130, and Michel Foucault, *Manet and the Object of Painting* (lecture originally delivered in 1971), 63-66.

85 Olin, "Gaze", 217.

as a strategy on the part of the photographer that is often seen in documentary photography with a social agenda. And she finds fitting words for this "perceptive phenomenon" of the tension between the presence of the person portrayed, occasioned or reinforced by his/her gaze out of the picture, and this representation in its quality as a media artefact: "Depiction of eyes looking out from the image is only one way to seek to achieve such a presence." For today's viewers, she continues, the powerful presence of the photographer might actually seem stronger than that of the woman – a remark that brings the artist back into play via the reality of the photograph, rendering the triad of artist/object/viewer complete again in its communication *through the picture*. In a nutshell: "It is the sense of a human presence who is alive to our own presence that constitutes the encounter theorized as the gaze."[86]

Olin's model of a dialogical exchange of looks draws on her study of Alois Riegl's concept of attentiveness, on which he founded his pictorial analyses above all in *The Group Portraiture of Holland* (1902/1931).[87] For Riegl, the attentiveness of the figures inside the picture towards one another, perceivable in the form of exchanged looks and facial expressions, generates an empathetic attentiveness in the viewer. This attentiveness is based on respect for the other – be it someone else portrayed in the same picture or the picture itself, or rather what is portrayed in the picture. In a broader sense, it is an ethically motivated concept for intersubjective communication. In any case, it is firmly rooted in the picture, making it reminiscent of Wolfgang Kemp's reception aesthetics that is not ethically founded but whose model of reception is also based on the object.[88] Another link to Riegl is found in Alpers when she describes the visual culture of the Netherlands in the 17th century as a culture of visual attentiveness. But there is one key difference: while Alpers identifies description as a structural characteristic of Dutch painting, in Riegl's model, as interpreted by Olin, attentiveness has a narrative structure.[89]

In conclusion, the positions of Bryson and Olin on the gaze can be differentiated on the basis of their respective weighting of the communication

86 Olin, "Gaze", 218.

87 Margaret Olin, "Forms of Respect: Alois Riegl's Concept of Attentiveness" in *The Art Bulletin* 71, no. 2 (1989), 285-299. She also embeds this concept in the intellectual currents of turn-of-the-century Vienna, examines its adoption by Bakhtin and Buber, and situates it within the modern discussion of the theatricality of art initiated by Michael Fried.

88 Kemp, too, refers to Riegl.

89 Olin, "Forms of Respect", here, for example, 287.

triangle artist/object/viewer: while Bryson centres this relational structure on the viewer, Olin seeks a dialogical structure that focuses on the object but connects it with artist and viewer. In this way, Olin also postulates a communication between producer and viewer via the object.

Bryson's model of the role of the viewer depends on the character of the picture as sign; as well as being the precondition for interpretation, this quality also turns the act of perception into an act of reading. For Olin, on the other hand, this act can be described as a dialogical exchange of looks with the object. This also permits a recognition of the object as Other, in turn allowing the historically unfamiliar to be integrated not into the interpreting subject but into relations within the communicative triangle. Bryson, by contrast, must deny this unfamiliarity as it cannot be integrated into the viewer.

A comparison between the two positions is more difficult on the question of the power of the gaze. Bryson situates it twice: in the gaze of the person who crosses one's own gaze and threatens the subject, and as an imbalance of power in the social field. These sites of power have two things in common: both endanger identities, that of the individual and that of the social group, and in both cases those endangered are the objects of the gaze. In this light, interpretation becomes something like a struggle for recognition of the self/group in the eyes of the other.

With her dialogical model, on the other hand, Olin offers an ethical solution to the problem of identity in confrontation with the Other. It calls for a conscious positioning of the viewer towards the Other and therefore implies the volitional agency of the viewer. The dialogical model demands the acknowledgement of the Other, but without demanding one's own recognition in the eyes of the Other – a model of nonviolent communication that recalls the ideals of Gandhi or Martin Luther King, but that seems hardly capable of doing justice either to the realities of a political struggle between identity-based forces, or to those of a paranoid subject.

Comparing these concepts of the gaze highlights the dynamic of political thinking associated with them. As we will see, however, the question of how this dynamic shapes the practices and methods of visual culture studies and art history is easier to answer for visual culture studies than it is for art history.

6. Visual Culture Studies' Operational Concept
Visuality – Seeing in the Cultural Field

Visuality must be considered the key concept in the theoretical and practical basis of visual culture studies. The word is not a poststructuralist neologism, nor is it precisely situated in theoretical terms. Therefore I can only describe its use in these texts: as a metaphor that is deployed in different ways and as an abstract concept with similarly diverse definitions. The first usage cited is from Thomas Carlyle, praising Dante for the intensity with which he works out not just the whole, but every detail "into truth, into clear visuality".[1] Here, visuality is that quality of a text whose intensity allows the reader to imagine something with the clarity of vision; at the same time, this "clear visuality" is equated with truth. For Carlyle, visuality is the essence of a historiography which, imagined from the elevated position of the hero, shows the grand heroic whole of history, like history painting, defying the revolutions since 1789 and the rise of positivism.[2] The key here, it seems to me, is that this visuality does not mean the actual seeing of a visual object or an exchange of glances between people, referring instead to what the text evokes in the reader's *imagination* while it is being read.

In order to trace the ways the term visuality is used in visual culture studies – however unclear this usage may be – there follow readings of texts by three writers: W.J.T. Mitchell, Nicholas Mirzoeff and Mieke Bal. If one wished to situate their positions between the poles of essentializing the visual on

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1 Thomas Carlyle: On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History, Lecture III. The Hero as Poet. Dante: Shakespeare (May 12, 1840): "Not the general whole only; every compartment of it is worked out, with intense earnestness, into truth, into clear visuality." http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/1091 (accessed 26 Sept 2016).

2 On Carlyle and visuality, see also Nicholas Mirzoeff, "On Visuality" in *Journal of Visual Culture* 5, no. 1 (2006), 53-79. Mirzoeff situates this visuality in the context of reactionary and anti-modern currents of the time.

the one hand and constructivism on the other, Mirzoeff would be on the side of essentializing, Mitchell would stand halfway between the two with his attempt to maintain the two extremes in a relationship of tension and paradox, and Bal would represent the constructivist-semiological pole.[3] In this light, the three positions I have chosen as examples cover the full breadth of the discussion.

What is visual culture? W.J.T. Mitchell

In 1995, when W.J.T. Mitchell published *What is Visual Culture?*,[4] the first courses in visual culture were just a few years old;[5] they were developed not on a common basis but according to the interests and disciplines of those involved and the existing structures at the institutions in question, giving each course its own genesis and its own focus.

In *What is Visual Culture?* Mitchell presented his version of visual culture studies, developed in 1993 with a corresponding syllabus as an internal memo for a working group on visual culture at The University of Chicago including colleagues from literary criticism, film studies and art history. As Mitchell writes, the group's members agreed that it could not just be about uniting humanities scholars around the problem of visual culture, but that social and natural sciences should also be involved, as well as non-western concepts and practices of the visual. This is followed by a long list of key questions for the "study of human visuality", including cultural otherness, the society of the spectacle, scientific research on vision and imaging, imaging technologies, and prosthetic "extensions" of the visible.[6] He thus formulates a comprehensive collection of themes for knowledge production on visuality, while avoiding any fixed definition of the term. His approach is characterized above all

3 In her 2003 essay "Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture", Bal accuses Mirzoeff of visual essentialism. See the section on Mieke Bal in this chapter.

4 W.J.T. Mitchell, "What is Visual Culture?" in Irving Lavin (ed.), *Meaning in the Visual Arts. Views from the Outside. A Centennial Commemoration of Erwin Panofsky* (Princeton 1995), 207-217.

5 In Cornell, Harvard, Rochester, Irvine, Santa Cruz and Chicago. See W.J.T. Mitchell, "Interdisciplinarity and Visual Culture" in *The Art Bulletin* 77, no. 4 (1995), 540-544: 541; see also Dikovitskaya, *Visual Culture*, chapter 2.

6 Mitchell, "What is Visual Culture?", 208.

by two further strategies: he avoids being pinned down on the basis of polarizations, and he juxtaposes approaches that seemed to be the subject of consensus with their opposites. As one example, he contrasts the consensus on the social and cultural construction of visuality with the question of the natural dimension of the visual: "What is the boundary between visual culture and visual nature?"[7] – a question rejected by Mieke Bal, who insists on the cultural construction of the visual.[8]

It is interesting to see the context in which Mitchell published this "failed attempt at a manifesto", as he calls it: *Meaning in the Visual Arts. Views from the Outside. A Centennial Commemoration of Erwin Panofsky* is an anthology edited by art historian Irving Lavin that examines Panofsky's art history, as the title claims, from outside the discipline. And indeed, of the scholars who came to visual culture studies from outside art history, Mitchell is the one who has declared and maintained the greatest affinity with the latter discipline. This is reflected in his adoption or "reconstruction"[9] of Panofsky's iconology. On another point, too, Mitchell appears as Panofsky's ethical heir: taking his example of the greeting (the "primal scene" for Panofsky's iconology in which he meets a man who greets him on the street and he recognizes his gesture as a greeting) he reinterprets it in the sense of a critical iconology.[10] Mitchell also refers to this scene in other texts; it is a very vivid, narrative-dramatic metaphor that makes a brief and striking appearance in *What is Visual Culture?*, where he states: Panofsky's "comparison of looking at painting to greeting other persons has deep resonances for the whole issue of visuality and alterity".[11] To greet means to recognize; extending this into greeting one another turns the scene into a dialogical situation that brings forth a recognition of the other. Because Mitchell does not state whether this other is an object in the sense of an artwork or another subject, the metaphor applies both to the act of interpreting an object and to communication between people. As well as allowing Mitchell to conceive of visuality as a social field, this allows me to refer back to Olin's dialogical concept of the gaze, which I contrasted

7 Ibid., 211.

8 See Bal, "Visual Essentialism".

9 See W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago 1986) and Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (Chicago 1994), especially chapter 1.

10 In Erwin Panofsky, "Iconography and Iconology: An Introduction to the Study of Renaissance Art", in Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts: Papers in and on Art History*, (Garden City, NY 1955), 26-54: 26.

11 Mitchell, "What is Visual Culture?", 211.

with the narcissist model of Lacan as interpreted by Bryson. Unlike Bryson, then, Mitchell takes a dialogical structure of seeing as the point of departure for both the social and the object-based dimension of visuality.

What is Visual Culture clearly reflects the aim of bringing together all of the various facets of a discussion on visual culture that had not, until then, been conducted systematically, though it can hardly be called systematic. Rather than any attempt to define key concepts, there is more of a quest to describe and redefine a field that is not (yet) a discipline and its central concerns. A first indication is given by a brief account of the genesis of visual culture: a revolution in literary theory, new philosophical approaches to representation and its connection with language, and new developments in art history (we are not told which) have, Mitchell argues, laid the foundations for thinking "visual realities (including everyday habits of visual perception) as cultural constructions, therefore interpretable or readable".[12] Neither film studies with its strong feminist theories[13] nor cultural studies, whose agenda in the 1980s was far more political than that of literary theory or art history, are mentioned at this point. This may be because for Mitchell, with his doctorate in literature, there is another central problem that now becomes critical again as the emphasis is placed on the visual: the difference between language and image[14] that is also reflected in the division of the humanities into "verbal" and "visual" camps. The new field of visual culture is associated with the promise of overcoming these divisions or at least loosening them in the sense of interdisciplinarity.[15] In view of the analysis of language by linguistics, the lack of a corresponding system for the image – or the visual[16] – is an unsettling flaw (and Mitchell is not the only one to address it). This applies in particular with respect to the institutionalization of the field as a discipline. Here, Mitchell is concerned above all with avoiding definitions and delimitations that might lead visual culture studies to ossify into a discipline in its earliest years; he repeatedly emphasizes the impossibility of separating language from the visual,

12 Ibid., 207.

13 See also chapter 5, *The model of the gaze*, on the reception of Lacan's model of the gaze in film studies.

14 This begins with his dissertation, *Blake's Composite Art* (Princeton 1977). Further titles include: *Iconology* (1986) and *Picture Theory* (1994).

15 On interdisciplinarity in relation to visual culture studies, see Mitchell, *Interdisciplinarity and Visual Culture*.

16 In my opinion, the line between the two, where it is deliberately discussed at all the debates surrounding visual culture studies, is extremely blurred.

highlighting their fields of interaction. For Mitchell, this implies a special mission for visual culture studies: "The emergence of visual culture is a challenge to traditional notions of reading and literacy as such; it is as much a revolution in verbal culture as it is in the study of the visual image proper."[17] Mitchell sees fit to address the challenge of renewal to literary studies and to art history in equal measure. Art history can no longer rely on the traditional concepts of beauty and aesthetic meaning to define its object, he claims. As examples of such concepts, however, he then names myths that have been subject to criticism in the practice of left-wing and feminist art history in both the English- and German-speaking worlds since the 1970s, if not before: aesthetic hierarchy, the discourse of mastery and genius. Like the other advocates of visual culture studies, Mitchell draws a narrow, reduced picture of art history as a discipline, constructing it as the other of visual culture studies. Finally there is a conciliatory turn in the form of a dialectical argument: juxtaposition with the productions of kitsch and mass culture, he claims, will actually reinforce the greatness of "authentic artistic achievements" – a conservative appeal to quality and authenticity that recent art history would hardly endorse.

With the transfer of theory from the "verbal" camp, then, "visual realities" become "legible" as social constructions. This gives us a first description of the visual. But what are these visual realities? Less abstract than "visuality", this description seems to point not to exchanges of looks between people, but to looks directed by the perceiving subject towards external reality. Although there are signs of approaches like the gaze or the visibility of the subject itself being involved, the main emphasis here is clearly the gaze that the subject fixes on external object-reality.

Soon after, Mitchell was to ask a question that seemed to reverse this direction: *What do pictures really want?* This essay, later followed by a book,[18] contains a sentence that may illustrate his attitude to visuality: "What pictures want from us, what we have failed to give them, is an *idea of visuality adequate to their ontology.*" (my italics) Just as pictures have an ontology, he claims, there should also be an ontology of visuality. This would certainly make Mitchell's opening up of cultural constructivism towards the "nature" of the visual (more) understandable. But the following passage marks a clearer distancing than previously from the semiotic model: "Contemporary discussions

17 Mitchell, "What is Visual Culture?", 209.

18 W.J.T. Mitchell, "What do pictures really want?" in *October* 77 (1996), 71-82, and *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago 2007).

of visual culture often seem distracted by a rhetoric of innovation and modernization. They want to update art history by playing catch-up with the text-based disciplines and with the study of film and mass culture. … They appeal to 'semiotic' or 'discursive' models of images that will reveal them as projections of ideology, technologies of domination to be resisted by clear-sighted critique." These words betray a certain anger directed, as I see it, against the instrumentalization of pictures (and the visual, terms Mitchell uses more or less interchangeably) and against the semiotic equating of language and image.[19] Once again, Panofsky's "greeting acquaintance" comes into play; here it supports Mitchell's appeal for a hermeneutics that does justice to pictures, one "that would return to the opening gesture of Panofsky's iconology".[20] But Mitchell cannot be simply tied down to an ontology of the visual beyond culture: "The most far-reaching shift signalled by the search for an adequate concept of visual culture is its emphasis on the social field of the visual, the everyday processes of looking at others and being looked at. This complex field of visual *reciprocity* [my italics] is not merely a by-product of social reality but actively constitutive of it. Vision is as important as language in mediating social relations, and it is not reducible to language, to the 'sign' or to discourse." In connection with Panofsky's metaphor of the encounter, "reciprocity" supports Mitchell's vehement defence of the picture as an Other.[21]

Let us return to Mitchell's promisingly titled *What is visual culture?* Here he brings us no closer to a definition of visuality. Instead, he makes it clear that visual culture studies in the mid-1990s is a very open field, so open that Mitchell hopes (in contrast to later statements) that the field could become a "coherent discipline". He backs up this hope with a clever paradox: precisely the "self-critical tendencies of its principal constituents" give grounds for such a hope, self-critique as a path to consolidating a discipline. Later, in 2002, with increasingly successful institutionalization, Mitchell feels obliged,

19 As a note informs us, this anger is directed against the introduction to the anthology *Visual Culture. Images and Interpretations* (London 1994) written by its editors Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Holly and Keith Moxey.

20 Mitchell, "What Do Pictures Really Want?", 82.

21 On certain basic points, I agree with Mitchell's vehement defence here; what I find problematic is that his list of interpretative approaches to be rejected includes discourse theory. The visual in its distinct way is part of discourse as is language. In Mitchell's version, situated beyond discursivity, the concept of visuality appears to end up in an ontology that is neither culturally or socially accessible. This is where Mitchell's desire of having it both ways comes up against its limits.

in *Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture*, to write against the creeping ossification of the discipline.[22]

Visuality as event – Nicholas Mirzoeff

In 1999, Nicholas Mirzoeff opened his *Introduction to Visual Culture* with the apodictic statement: "Modern life takes place onscreen."[23] For Mirzoeff, the screen, understood here as the television or computer screen, is *the* site of visual consumption. From this, he infers that visual culture is a modern and especially a postmodern phenomenon. It also marks a boundary between epochs: the period from 1650 to 1820 was dominated by the formal logic of the "*ancien régime* image", followed by the modern era (1820-1975).[24] The difference between the two periods is that until 1820, visuality was dominated by the logic of the image, whereas in modernity the visual stimulus, amplified to a "hyper-stimulus", is the stronger influence: "visual culture does not depend on pictures themselves but the modern tendency to picture or visualize existence"[25] – whether this is a fundamental structural difference or a quantitative one remains unclear. In postmodernity, he claims, the kind of visualization specific to modernity is further heightened: "it [visualizing] has now become all but compulsory".[26] For Mirzoeff, postmodernity as a so-called crisis of modernity is the consequence of modernity's inability to deal with the failure of its strategy of visualization: "in other words, it is the visual crisis of culture that creates postmodernity, not its textuality. While print culture is certainly not going to disappear, the fascination with the visual and its effects that marked modernism has engendered a postmodern culture that is most postmodern when it is visual."[27] These are strong words, and they make no effort to cultivate the interlocking of textuality and visuality favoured by

22 Mitchell, "Showing Seeing".

23 Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, 1. Moreover, Mirzoeff always speaks only of visual culture, regardless of whether he is talking about the discipline's subject matter or the discipline itself.

24 Ibid., 7-8.

25 Ibid., 5.

26 Ibid., 6.

27 Ibid., 3.

Mitchell. For Mirzoeff, visuality is *the* characteristic of post-/modernity, which is also why visual culture deals primarily with this period.[28]

"Visual culture is concerned with visual events in which information, meaning, or pleasure is sought by the consumer in an interface with visual technology. By visual technology I mean any form of apparatus designed either to be looked at or to enhance natural vision, from oil painting to television and the Internet."[29] This gives an indication that Mirzoeff conceives of visuality as a visual event that takes place at the "interface" of consumer and visual medium. The specific quality of this visuality, analogous to the "disjunctured and fragmented culture that we call postmodernism",[30] is that it must react ever more quickly to the ever-increasing numbers of different, fragmented, simultaneous stimuli – "the constant swirl of the global village"[31] – which also impacts on a perceptive apparatus that possesses a seemingly unlimited capacity to adapt to these growing demands; "The hyper-stimulus of modern visual culture from the nineteenth century to the present day", he asserts, "has been dedicated to trying to saturate the visual field, a process that continually fails as we learn to see and connect ever faster."[32]

There is a causal link between this hyper-stimulus and the circulation of images that are no longer indexically connected to realities, as was still the case with the analogue versions of film and photography, but that now produce virtual realities. As Mirzoeff wishes to focus his discussion of visual culture mainly on new media and their consumers, it is understandable that for him, unlike Mitchell or Bal, the concept of the simulacrum from the French postmodern theory of writers like Virilio, Baudrillard and Lyotard plays a major role. "The (post)modern destruction of reality is accomplished in everyday life, not in the studios of the avant-garde."[33] Mirzoeff links the notion of the simulacrum as reality substitute with the metaphor of the "visual event" that emphasizes the visual-sensory experience and supposed immediacy already implicit in "event". The relationship between the virtuality and constructedness of media/realities on the one hand and, on the other, the "immediacy" of visual experience, however, remains unexplained. With this metaphor of

28 Although Mirzoeff never states this explicitly, he would therefore find it hard to apply visual culture studies to older periods.
29 Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, 3.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid., 1.
32 Ibid., 5.
33 Ibid., 17.

the "visual event", Mirzoeff wishes to make it possible "to advance interpretive strategies beyond the now familiar use of semiotic terminology".[34] For him, then, the "sensual immediacy" of the visual constitutes the fundamental difference between image and text/language[35] (a point on which he has been accused of visual essentialism by critics including Mieke Bal, of which more later). Mirzoeff proposes a theoretical keyword for the experience of sensory immediacy that results from "intense and surprising visual power", prompting reactions of "admiration, awe, terror and desire": the sublime: "The sublime is the pleasurable experience in representation of that which would be painful or terrifying in reality, leading to a realization of the limits of the human and of the powers of nature."[36] For Mirzoeff the sublime becomes the central dimension of visual culture, "at the heart of all visual events".[37] An aesthetic concept originating in the eighteenth century, the sublime is taken up here to strengthen his description of the visual event as going beyond language, and thus to position visual culture studies against semiotics.

What this theoretical shortcut ignores or bypasses is the factor of mediality structuring the "interface" between picture and consumer. Although Mirzoeff is interested in experience with post-modern media, he has no concept of media. In Mirzoeff's view of the relationship between consumer and medium, the experience of consuming has far greater weight than that of the image/medium: "visual culture [does] prioritize the everyday experience of the visual, from the snapshot to the VCR and even the blockbuster art exhibition." Apparently, the ever-changing media landscape is sufficient reason to forego a conceptualization of mediality in favour of visual experience. As a result Mirzoeff emphasizes all the more the external conditions of this experience. More than in traditional locations such as museum or cinema, "most of our visual experience takes place aside from these formally structured moments of looking";[38] we watch movies in planes or at home, we see paintings on book covers or posters. For Mirzoeff, these conditions seem to have a more serious impact than media specificity on spectatorship, a term that goes beyond the process of perception itself to include all the accompanying factors

34 Ibid., 13.

35 These are the also the grounds given for his critique of the semiotic approach, ending with the verdict: "Structuralism was in the end unproductive." *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, 14-15.

36 Ibid, 16.

37 Ibid., 16.

38 Ibid., 7.

of time, space and setting, as well as the social and cultural practices of visual consumption.

"Visual culture is a tactic with which to study the genealogy, definition and functions of postmodern everyday life *from the point of view of the consumer*, [my italics] rather than the producer."[39] So what of the triad of producer/object/interpreter? In Mirzoeff's analysis the author or producer is no longer relevant to the visual culture of postmodernity. In this, he draws a logical conclusion (realistically, I would say) from the actual weakening of authorship that can no longer even be theoretically founded since it takes place in the copy-and-paste practice of the Internet. Images, on the other hand, come in Mirzoeff's argument to represent compulsory visualizing itself. Once again, then, the viewer stands at the centre, without a dialogical point of reference. In contrast to Bryson's model, however, the viewer here is not an interpreter but a consumer, the "key agent in postmodern capitalist society".[40] But there is one important parallel: Bryson seeks the recognition of this interpretative role, the empowerment of the viewer as author, while Mirzoeff seeks the empowerment of the consumer who is to be emancipated from the vortex of capitalist over-production with the help of the insights of visual culture studies. But Mirzoeff does not behave like the classically Marxist, anti-visual enemy of the culture industry (the negative example he gives being Frederic Jameson[41]). Mirzoeff's agenda takes the viewer's pleasure into account rather than damning it.

This brings me to the question of the political implications of Mirzoeff's version of visual culture studies. What, I would ask, is he writing against? In terms of academic politics, he is writing against the linguistic turn and the influence of structuralism on the study of visual culture. His argument links the view of a postmodern culture of simulacra based on visuality with the sensory "immediacy" evoked in the consumer by these simulacra, an immediacy surpassing the analytic power of semiotics. There are other villains, too, explicit and/or implied, including "spin doctors, pollsters and other demons of the contemporary imagination", against whose manipulative power to launch and spread discriminatory or politically hegemonic narratives "everyday visual experience" offers a reservoir of resistance that is beyond the reach of

39 Ibid., 3 (my italics).

40 Ibid., 27.

41 See ibid., 10f.; another anti-visualist he writes against here is Pierre Bourdieu.

the manipulators on account of its unpredictability.[42] According to Mirzoeff, then, visual culture has a special potential for political resistance: "Visual culture is new precisely because of its focus on the visual as a place where meanings are created and *contested*."[43] Western culture, Mirzoeff argues, has privileged the spoken word (and not the written word, which, according to Mitchell, inevitably also has visual aspects) as the highest form of intellectual practice, considering visual representations as "second-rate illustrations of ideas". Put this way, Mirzoeff's militant vindication of visual culture in the face of discrimination appears as a logical reflex.

The combative structure of this argument, fighting for the visual, popular culture of discriminated identities of race, class, sexual orientation and gender, seamlessly gives rise to a catchy metaphor describing visual culture studies: not a discipline, but, with deliberate reference to military parlance, a tactic: "A tactic is carried out in full view of the enemy, the society of control in which we live. … in the ongoing culture wars, tactics are necessary to avoid defeat."[44] Visual culture is "a fluid interpretive structure, centered on understanding the response to visual media of both individuals and groups. … Like the other approaches mentioned above, it hopes to reach beyond the traditional confines of the university to interact with people's everyday lives."[45]

This makes clear the extent to which Mirzoeff derives his motivation from the militant identity politics of the 1980s and '90s, and his desire to conduct politically engaged studies for "people's lives". Such a desire is often accompanied by a denial of the difference between theory and practice. Wanting to bridge this gap brings with it the risk of theoretical pitfalls such as failing to take into account a further difference – that between simulated reality and the medium of its simulation. Where the militant side of the genesis of visual culture studies in identity politics is concerned, Mirzoeff is certainly the most explicit of the three writers discussed in this chapter. He links the struggle with something I would call visual vitalism. This is localized in the recipient's fascination with visually simulated realities, leading ultimately to what Mieke Bal was to refer to several years later, in a text that triggered an intense debate, as "visual essentialism".[46]

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42 Ibid., 29. Here Mirzoeff refers to Appadurai and Rogoff.

43 Ibid., 6 (my italics).

44 Ibid., 8.

45 Ibid., 4-5.

46 See Bal, "Visual Essentialism". The debate on this text also took place in the *Journal of Visual Culture,* in the following issue (2:2, 2003), 229-268.

Seeing is reading[47] – Mieke Bal

Unlike Mirzoeff, Mieke Bal never figured as a proponent of visual culture studies in the narrow sense. But she was involved in founding the first visual culture program at the University of Rochester in 1989/90, together with Michael Ann Holly, Norman Bryson, Kaja Silverman and Craig Owens. And in the 1990s, together with Bryson, she pursued a project I propose to call the semioticization of art history.[48] Like Bryson and Mitchell, Bal's background is in literary criticism; like Mitchell, she is writing against a polarization of text and image, language and vision.

With her 2003 article *Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture* – a fundamental critique of visual culture studies – Bal launched a self-reflexive debate within visual culture studies that signals the end of the first phase of the academic establishment of the discipline. This debate had been heralded a year earlier by Mitchell's article *Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture*. Unlike Mitchell, however, Bal made direct attacks on several colleagues so that the *Journal of Visual Culture*, where both texts were published, devoted space in the following issue to responses from within the field (not only from those who felt attacked). I will be focussing here on Bal's concept of visuality, characterized by a radically *semiotic* approach which Mirzoeff rejects and which Mitchell tries to combine with the dimension of the visual.

In 1991, Bal caused a sensation and drew sharp criticism from art historians with *Reading "Rembrandt". Beyond the Word-Image Opposition*,[49] her first book on images and visuality. Later reflecting on this work, she wrote: "Throughout the book, I studied visuality in discourse and discursivity in images, relations between the two, and the cultural impact of events of encounter or struggle on vision and subjects. Instead of trying to define visuality per se, I explored aspects and effects, forms and meanings that

47 See Mieke Bal, *A Mieke Bal Reader* (Chicago 2006), 280. She notes that vision is a "semiotic activity of an inherently rhetorical kind".

48 See Bal, Bryson, "Semiotics and Art History".

49 Mieke Bal, *Reading "Rembrandt". Beyond the Word-Image Opposition* (Cambridge, New York 1991). The critical reactions included Michael Podro, "*Reading 'Rembrandt'. Beyond the Word-Image Opposition* by Mieke Bal" in *The Burlington Magazine* 135, no. 1987 (1993), 699-700, and Roger Seamon, "*Reading 'Rembrandt'. Beyond the Word-Image Opposition* by Mieke Bal" in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 54, no. 1 (1996), 82-84. An enthusiastic response came from Griselda Pollock, "*Reading 'Rembrandt'. Beyond the Word-Image Opposition* by Mieke Bal" in *The Art Bulletin* 75, no. 3 (1993), 529-535.

visuality possesses or makes possible. …, visuality gained the status of a discourse, not as subjected to language but as a kind of language with its own capacity of meaning production."[50] Without going into detail on this controversial book here, I will outline only those issues that relate to visuality. In the foreword, Bal explains what moved her, as a literary scholar, to work with images: "I could not remain blind to the fact that the overt emphasis on the word hardly conceals an overwhelmingly visual dimension in our culture, including both literature and the study of it. This prompted me to study systematically the interplay of visual and verbal elements."[51] On the one hand, Bal writes against the separation of writing/text and image, verbal and visual communication. On the other, she picks up on two strands of feminist theory and art history: firstly, the feminist revision of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis developed by Laura Mulvey, Kaja Silverman, Teresa de Lauretis and Jacqueline Rose in connection with questions of looking and the gaze; and secondly, a critique of the concept of male artistic authorship discussed in feminist art history since the early 1980s. The latter is the reason for the inverted commas around *Rembrandt* in the book's title, labelling the artist and his œuvre as constructions of traditional art-historical dating and attribution.

Bal's focus as a literary scholar is on narratology, and thus she draws an analogy between verbal and visual narrative strategies: "If we are to bring the verbal and the visual together, we must consider the relationship between the position of the focalizer in the verbal narrative and the viewer in the visual."[52] Here she takes the concept of the focalizer from Gérard Genette, who distinguishes between narrator (the person telling the story) and focalizer (the person who sees), and develops it further.[53] The focalizer is the figure through whose eyes and thoughts the story is seen; the reader follows and identifies with the viewpoint of this figure – with seeing used as a metaphor here for the function performed by the focalizer in the narrative text: "focalization be-

50 Mieke Bal, *Looking in: The Art of Viewing* (Introduction by Norman Bryson) (Amsterdam 2001), 266.

51 Bal, *Reading "Rembrandt"*, xiii.

52 Ibid., 141.

53 On focalization in narratology, see Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse* (New York, 1980). French: *Discours du récit* in *Figures III* (Paris 1972). On focalization in Bal, besides *Reading "Rembrandt"*, see also the chapter on "Dispersing the Gaze: Focalization" in *Looking In*, 41-64.

longs to the story; it is the layer between the linguistic text and the fabula",[54] fabula being the story that is read or seen. By creating this analogy between focalization in the text and seeing in the visual (text), Bal interconnects text and image – although she limits seeing to the function of producing meaning in the context of the narrative and its reception. The example she uses to illustrate this interconnection is Rembrandt's painting *Susanna and the Elders*, which is based on a written story: "I shall propose a visual reading of the biblical Susanna story and a narrative reading of the paintings."[55]

This process of seeing linking text/image and reader/viewer as the basis for interpretation, is expressed via a feminist terminology of "voyeurism, the glance, and the gaze".[56] Bal thus borrows narratology with its visual metaphor of focalization from literary theory and then transfers it back to its visual source, linking it with the feminist critique of the patriarchal scopic regime. This is based on a key assumption: that seeing, which Bal treats as both visual and verbal, is the semiotic activity. Seeing is thus not only responsible for collecting the information for an interpretation; the interpretation already takes place in the act of seeing. "In narrative discourse, focalization is the direct content of the linguistic signifiers. In visual art, it would thus be the direct content of visual signifiers, such as lines, dots, light and dark, and composition. In both cases, focalization is already an interpretation, or subjectivized content."[57] Those elements of a picture discussed in art history under categories of form, technique and style – the aesthetic and material constitution of the painted surface – are thus included here in the production of meaning and its interpretation as signifiers. Focalizers within the picture, such as eye contact, directed gazes or pointing gestures between figures, are just as important as similar focalizers linking the figures in the painting with the viewer.

The connections between narratology and reception aesthetics, as imported from German literary theory into art history by Wolfgang Kemp, are twofold: both are oriented towards reception, and both view pictures in terms of narrative. The meaning produced in the act of seeing is a narrative. As a basic assumption this is, I suggest, too narrow a view of what visual objects can evoke in the recipient and of what might count as meaning. If

54 Bal, *Looking In*, 47.
55 See Bal, *Reading "Rembrandt"*, chapter 4, 141.
56 Ibid.
57 Bal, *Looking In*, 54 (my italics).

one does not follow this assumption of narrative as the ultimate producer of meaning in the sense of an anthropological constant, one must ask whether focalization can only work for narrative pictures – like *Susanna and the Elders*, which can be classified within the genre of history painting due to being based on a biblical story.

Focalization and focalizer are metaphors for a model of communication between object/picture and viewer that functions via an identification of the viewer with the focalizing agent. The focalizing agent generates an "appeal to identification".[58] This basic assumption concerning the communication between text/image and reader/viewer is unthinkable without psychoanalytical theory. In film theory, for example, the psychoanalytical concept of identification formed the basis of Laura Mulvey's conception of the male gaze and visual pleasure. Mulvey identified an active (male) and a passive (female) pole of reception, tracing this back to the filmic structure of identification within the rigid setting of consuming Hollywood movies. And her proposed strategy of resistance to this power constellation of the gaze is also directed against the inner narrative structure of such movies: this structure should be destroyed by means of avant-garde filmmaking and with it the conditions for identification within the scopic regime of the gaze. Bal's assumptions concerning the conditions of communication between visual object (picture, film) and viewer differ from Mulvey's. Bal sees potential for resistance to the gaze in her reading-based strategy of focalization: "As I see it, at the heart of focalization, and hence, of both linguistic narrative and visual art, is a hub that shifts and destabilizes the gaze."[59] While Mulvey argues in terms of production (the film itself must change), Bal proposes a specific strategy for reception.

In his introduction to a collection of Bal's essays, Norman Bryson gives his analysis of the differences between the strategies marshalled by Mulvey and Bal against the gaze,[60] referring to Mulvey's theory of the gaze as optical and to Bal's as rhetorical or semiotic. Mulvey's stage for the gaze is the cinema: a darkened room, the audience fix their gaze on the screen, only the beam of light from the projector and the surface of the screen are visible. As a space, this setting, as I indicated earlier, resembles the Albertian construction of

58 Bal, *Reading "Rembrandt"*, 160.

59 Bal, *Looking In*, chapter on "Dispersing the Gaze: Focalization", 42.

60 Norman Bryson, "Introduction" in Bal, *Looking In*, 1-40. On Mulvey and Bal, see especially 6-12.

perspective with a fixed viewer position and the visual pyramid between projector and screen, into which the viewer inserts herself. "Mulvey's model recapitulates centuries of optical speculation in the West, faithfully retracing its perennial geometry: the retina, the lens, and the plane of representations."[61] Here it is again, that reprehensible western one-point perspective, which fixes the gaze within an order and knows only one direction of looking, only one focus.

Not so Bal's model. In her work, Bryson asserts: "sight is figured not as scenic but as semiotic. The first step is to postulate signs rather than scenes as the basic stuff of vision." He continues: "The space is that of discourse rather than projective geometry: of any human language where there are signs for *I, you, she, he* – and where there exist stories, *narratives* (perhaps the key term in all of Bal's work)."[62] In contrast to the "implacable dualism"[63] of active subject position and passive object position in Mulvey's model, Bal's is multifocal. Her transfer of focalization from literary theory into the visual realm opens up possibilities of seeing that are not subject to any polarization. It can be read as a kind of counter-model to one-point perspective and thus as an emancipation of the viewer position from perspective's fixedness: "Resistance is built into each point of the image's field: the narrator 'Rembrandt', Lucretia, the viewer. That each point possesses powers of resistance creates a far more complex and volatile arena of power in vision …: power not as a monolith, or pyramid (the 'visual pyramid'), …, but rather a set of relations or a 'swarm of points' (Foucault) such that the possibility of reversing the power relation is present at each node of the image's focalization."[64] But Bryson's characterization of Bal's approach, making her semioticization of seeing responsible for emancipating it from a fixed dualism, seems to me inherently indebted to the antivisualism of French poststructuralism as diagnosed by Martin Jay.[65]

In her Rembrandt book, Bal's use of the term *visuality* is correspondingly flexible. It covers more than the *gaze* or the *glance*. In specific cases, it may be about the visuality of a picture, as when Bal writes of the "self-evidential effect of the painting" that is attributed to the visuality of the picture.[66] This kind of visuality relates to reception (the effect) and is not conceived of

61 Ibid., 8.
62 Ibid.
63 Ibid., 9.
64 Ibid., 15.
65 See Jay, *Downcast Eyes*.
66 Bal, *Reading "Rembrandt"*, 270.

in ontological terms. But visuality is also the Other of discursivity, two poles that Bal is interested in interweaving not in the sense of an abolition of the difference between image and text, but by integrating discursivity "into the very center of visuality. Thus she approvingly notes of Alpers' and Steinberg's interpretations of Velasquez's *Las Meninas* that, rather than reading the picture with a "stable conception of the sign", they explain it as a "sign event" between image and interpreter, integrating the discourses about the picture into the interpretation.[67] The *sign event* in Bal corresponds to the *visual event* in Mirzoeff.

Bal's founding of visuality in psychoanalysis is theoretically pivotal, as it forms the basis for her other case studies. It is also here, however, that an anthropological constant creeps in of the kind that becomes inevitable as soon as psychoanalysis is deployed as a metatheory: Bal speaks in a Freudian sense of "primary visuality" as the experience that brings forth a fear of castration. Visuality is thus an experience that is both a fundamental and a gender-specific part of identity formation.[68] Another fundamental nexus between self and visuality in Bal is the psychoanalytical concept of narcissism, which is based on the motif of the mirror and in which the fraught relationship between self and other is read as a kind of visual allegory.[69] This motif runs through the Rembrandt book in various combinations; to borrow a metaphor from music theory it forms the dominant of Bal's thinking.

Finally, Bal's intellectual trains of thought and arguments seem to me to be based on metaphors of the visual. One might even say that visuality is the allegory of her theory and of her modus operandi. The result of this, as Michael Podro puts it in his review of the Rembrandt book, is "to make the picture an image of its criticism".[70] Looking back, she described her personal turn towards the visual: "I felt empowered by *visuality* and knew that … I had to explore this concept further."[71] It seems to me that Bal tries to *speak/write* visuality, or, conversely, to bring forth visuality in writing.

What of the relationship between artist/object/interpreter? In Podro's view, Bal's interpretative practice does not offer a dialogical relationship between interpreter and object because its self-reflexivity (which he sees as the core of her writing) ends up with the work reflecting her own process back at

67 Ibid., 277.
68 Ibid., 288.
69 See in particular Bal, *Reading "Rembrandt"*, 18 f., and chapters 7, 8 and 9.
70 Podro, "Beyond the Word-Image Opposition", 699.
71 Bal, *Looking In*, 265.

her. Bal's basic assumption that signs receive their meaning from the viewer, he claims, leads to the difference between the work and our "discourse upon it" being overwritten or suspended.[72] This is contrasted with his view that "if we recognize that utterances and depictions address and show themselves to a viewer and that this is a fact internal to their making, then we see that at the centre of our activity is the respect of painter for viewer and vice-versa". And he adds: "The reciprocity of conversation is a better model for the relation of viewer to work than interpreting our own dreams." To this reciprocity, he adds the distancing motif of historical imagination, because "otherwise we simply allow our own concerns and obsessions to feed on the works at which we look".

But is the dialogical model, characterized by Podro as an ethical one via his use of the word 'respect', even compatible with Lacan's narcissistic model of the gaze on which Bal's position is based? This question implies further problems for both art history and visual culture studies, such as that of the relationship between interpretative present and historical alterity, or unfamiliarity, of the object. Like Bryson, Bal argues for the present as the sole legitimate moment of interpretation, while the historicity of the object must be considered as inaccessible and any effort in this direction, out of a desire for objectivity, can only be "pseudo".

But quite apart from the fact that the very intensity of the recurring disputes over the relevance of history to the present speaks in favour of such a relevance, it is the material presence of the historical object in a context determined by contemporary culture that sets in motion the interpreter's confrontation with the object. What is most interesting here is the way this question of historicity, which plays an important role in the academic policing of the borders between art history and visual culture studies, acquires relevance precisely in connection with visuality. Bryson, Mirzoeff and Bal share a tendency towards a certain presentism. For Mirzoeff, it is the presence of the fascinated and manipulated consumer; for Bal and Bryson, that of the seeing, reading interpreter.

72 Podro, "Beyond the Word-Image Opposition", 700.

7. Seeing as a Political Resource in Visual Culture Studies

Visual culture studies has become a sprawling field. Every conceivable discipline is now making links to visual culture, from art history to art education, film, media and theatre studies, literary theory, and the other usual suspects, through to anthropology, history, sociology, jurisprudence, theology and even computer science, neurobiology, medicine, and other natural sciences. In 2006, Marquard Smith remarked: "the huge number of books [about visual culture] tells us that the phrase 'visual culture' is becoming ubiquitous, omnipresent, that it can and is being used to signify works or artefacts or spaces from *any* historical period, geographical location, thematic concern, or combination of methodological practices. Because of this, the phrase visual culture conveys little that is specific to our past or present visual culture per se. It seems that visual culture is everywhere, and thus nowhere, wholly overdetermined and almost meaningless simultaneously."[1] In the same spirit, visual culture was often included in the titles and introductions of publications to give conventional takes on subject matter from all manner of disciplines an aura of topicality.

Eleven years after being cited by Mitchell in 1995 as prospects, the themes, objects and methodologies listed by Smith give a picture of the field that is every bit as vague as Mitchell's attempt to characterize visual culture without restrictive definitions. The thematic framework of the publications may be historically synchronous or diachronic, regional or national; it may orient

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1 Marquard Smith, "Visual Culture Studies: Questions of History, Theory, and Practice" in Amelia Jones (ed.), *A Companion to Contemporary Art since 1945* (Oxford 2006), 471-489: 473. Over a few pages, Smith also offers a survey of the publishing history to date that tries to tackle the full breadth of applications, as well as his version of a possible genealogy for visual culture studies.

itself towards themes of race, class, gender and sexuality that emerged from the political agenda of recent decades and which shaped visual culture studies as a "political and ethical field of study".[2] Smith also notes that most of these books with "visual culture" in the title are readers and introductions for a student readership. He describes them as "methodological inquiries, cabinets of curiosity" that deal on the one hand with the production, circulation and consumption of pictures and the "changing nature of subjectivity" and, on the other, with gazes, visual practices and technologies. What they all have in common is that they identify the points where "images and objects and subjects and environments overlap, blur and converge with and mediate one another";[3] using a metaphor from digital culture, these points could also be referred to as interfaces.

To come to terms with this wealth of material beyond Smith's loose structuring, I will therefore examine three strategies used in studies of the gaze to deal with concepts of seeing in their specific application to visual objects. The main question here is that of how the concept of the gaze is linked with the problems inherent in the category of identity. As examples I have chosen two texts that represent opposite extremes. In both cases, it is a matter of how to deal with the discriminating gazes in such a way that the discriminated groups in question might transform their situation within this field of discriminatory visual practices and arrive at pictures of their "own" identity. These are: gay and lesbian in the case of Norman Bryson's "Todd Haynes's *Poison* and Queer Cinema", and Afro-American female in the case of bell hooks' "The Oppositional Gaze – Black Female Spectators". A third text by Martin A. Berger serves as an example of how evidence of a normative visuality is defined, based not on discriminatory stereotypes but on visual representations of the world, in this case the American West, seen once through the eyes of the conquering "white man" and once through those of the "native". For Bryson and hooks, the political agenda of visual culture studies is the driving force, claiming recognition for the identity of discriminated groups. Berger, on the other hand, links the academic perspective (with its critique of one-point perspective as a figure of power and logocentrism) with the political agenda.

2 Smith, "Visual Culture Studies", 472.

3 Ibid., 473.

The stigmatizing gaze – 'Integration and positive revaluation' – Norman Bryson

Norman Bryson's text *Todd Haynes's* Poison *and Queer Cinema* from 1999[4] exemplifies the transformation of the evil eye into the metaphor of the socially controlling and repressive gaze, as outlined not only by Martin Jay but also by Margaret Olin.[5] Based on his critique of gay and lesbian studies, Bryson combines the model of the gaze with the heteronormativity of society. In Bryson's view, gay and lesbian studies have a problem similar to that faced more than two decades previously by feminist art historians: it could not be merely a matter of healing the discrimination of women/lesbians/gays by discovering the forgotten heroes of these "minorities" and making them public. Around 1970, feminist art history began with the objective of expanding the conventional canon to include forgotten and repressed "female" artists, only to discover that this resulted in neither a critique nor a disempowerment of the patriarchy. And in the late 1980s, the art historical branch of the gay and lesbian movement, that wanted to canonize Leonardo, Michelangelo, David Hockney or Robert Mapplethorpe as gay artists, came to similar conclusions, accentuated by the political experience of being made responsible for the AIDS epidemic.

Bryson seeks to respond to this "minoritarian" strategy with a "majoritarian position"[6] along the lines of queer studies: the stigmatization of gay and lesbian people and their culture is not a local problem that could be dealt with via a politics of inclusion. Instead, it is linked to all of the various dimensions of cultural normativity. Which is why it cannot be a matter of adding gay and lesbian positions to the "normal" canon to gain access to "the club". Instead, one must study the structures of coercive heteronormativity which shape the cultural canon and its organization – while bearing in mind that this same coercive heteronormativity also permeates the visual field of the homosexual scene.

With this argument, Bryson achieves two things: he declares the "visual field" to be the central element of heteronormative coercion and culture, and

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4 Norman Bryson, "Todd Haynes's *Poison* and Queer Cinema" in *Invisible Culture. An Electronic Journal for Visual Studies*, 1999, http://www.rochester.edu/in_visible_culture/issue1/bryson (accessed 26 Sept 2016).

5 See chapter 5, *The evil eye and a counter-model – Margaret Olin*, in this book.

6 Bryson, "Todd Haynes's *Poison*", 2.

he makes it clear that the task of queer art history and visual culture studies consists in studying this visual field with its preordained structures for heteronormative inclusion and exclusion. This in turn has further consequences, since the assumption of a heteronormative structuring of society depends on the assumption of social and cultural constructivism. This implies a critique of the identity politics of "minorities" that is already familiar: "An acute problem within minoritarian cultural politics is the tendency to dramatize and to valorize authentic expressions of the minority in question: the minority is thought of as embodied in a particularly radical or foundational way,"[7] a position also known as essentialism that insists on authenticity of identity beyond the shaping influence of culture – identity in aspic, as Gayatri Spivak has called it.

For Bryson, then, it cannot be a question of looking for visual evidence of gay and lesbian "authenticity". Instead, it is about examining coercively heteronormative structures since it is they that produce not only the subjects included in heteronormativity but also those it excludes. For both, this process is crucially accompanied by desire and the denial of desire, as expressed, among others, in homophobia. At this point in Bryson's argument, the gaze comes into play, as homophobia is a "visual operation".[8] The precondition for this is the historical shift, described by Foucault, from the sodomite act to the homosexual *type* as the basic marker for homosexuality and its punishment.[9] Since the early 19th century, techniques of visual taxonomy such as photography made it possible to catalogue, archive and manage what was considered socially, ethnically, racially and sexually "abnormal" – from criminals, the insane and the ill, through to Jews, homosexuals, and so forth. Abnormality is thus produced in a form "that manifests it directly to the naked eye: deviance or degeneration as a *face*".[10] But the homosexual was a "notoriously elusive type"; the signs of homosexuality were "penumbral and deceptive"[11] and mostly only decipherable by members of the scene themselves. "Among the myriad forms of deviancy, it is homosexuality, in fact, that tests *the powers of the normalizing gaze* to its limits."[12]

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7 Ibid.

8 Ibid., 5.

9 See Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: The Will to Knowledge* (*Histoire de la sexualité, I: La volonté de savoir*, Paris 1976).

10 Bryson, "Todd Haynes's *Poison*", 7.

11 Ibid., 8.

12 Ibid., 9, (my italics).

The 'normalizing gaze', the 'homophobic gaze', the 'gaze of the stigmatizor', the 'diagnostic gaze' – with these variants, Bryson creates pointed metaphors in his description of the visualization strategies of heteronormative taxonomy. This gaze is not a simple look; it stares, bores, penetrates to the stigmatized body's most intimate places to shed light on the "penumbra" of the elusive homosexual "type" and render it visible. This "gaze seeks out its enemies"; the stigmatizor must get dangerously close to the deviant body in order to even find out whether/that it is indeed deviant. "From the stigmatizor's viewpoint the stigma is intended as a *brand*, an inscription of the sign of criminality; but at the same time the stigma is the very point closest to desire, where complicity becomes inescapable, and alien desire irrupts *into* the visual field of the stigmatizor."[13]

At this point, the stigmatizor is gripped by a visual panic, a "disruption of the visual field that lies at the foundation of heteronormative visuality". The diagnostic gaze is contradictory, it is a sadistic, invasive procedure likened to branding the deviant body, but at the moment of applying the hot iron "the whole visual field suddenly buckles and bends around".[14] In ever more metaphorically charged language, Bryson describes how a secretion oozes through stigmata from the deviant side to the "normal" side of the stigmatizor, "the secretion of a secret". The stigma, inflicted by the invasive gaze, becomes the membrane that overcomes, or at least jeopardizes, the division between deviance and normality. The "brand-become-infection" defines homophobic panic as a visual field.[15] This gaze is closely related to the evil eye. One key difference results from its link to the construction of identity – both "normal" identity as secured via a distinction based on visual evidence and "deviant" identity established by inflicting a mark by which such an 'identity' will be recognized.

Bryson turns the tables and asks how a reversal of this stigmatization might look. If we follow Bryson's version of the gaze, cast by the stigmatizor onto the deviant subject (it remains unclear whether the stigmatizor is meant as a subject or as a Foucauldian *dispositif*), then it must involve, I suggest, turning the gaze from the deviant back onto the stigmatizor. Bryson makes another proposal that adopts the strategies of the lesbian and gay subculture: those who have been socially nullified and rendered invisible by this stigma

13 All quotations in this paragraph, ibid, 9-10.
14 Ibid., 10.
15 Ibid., 11.

reclaim it, making it their own in erotic and critical terms. I suggest a description of this process as a libidinous reconfiguration. "The stigmatization could itself be treated as a modality of desire, whose origins lay ultimately in the brand, the mark, the seal."[16] In Bryson's model, the stigma becomes *the* site of queer desire.

Gay subculture in particular offers countless examples of this tactic. Bryson chooses Todd Haynes's film *Poison*. He is especially interested in the film's plot, whereas he devotes little attention to the way it is made in terms of the gaze, although such a focus would bring cinema itself as a visual apparatus and scopic regime into play, allowing the theoretical concept of the gaze to be adequately applied to the film (it is worth recalling that in her analysis of Fassbinder's film based on the same material by Genet, Kaja Silverman deals with the gaze entirely on this level.[17]) Instead, Bryson focuses on Haynes's stylistic use of parody and the artificiality which, he claims, produces a Brechtian alienation effect, preventing identification. In this way, *Poison* is reduced to the function of evidence for Bryson's proposal to recode the stigma into a marking of gay identity that is positively coded in terms of "deviant" desire – an identity that also has a supposedly critical quality (via alienation).[18] For my questions on the practice of visual culture studies, Bryson's remarks are interesting because they introduce the concept of the gaze into visual culture studies in connection with a specific identity politics. He does so via a rhetoric whose persuasive power derives from metaphors of the visual: visual panic, visual field, visual operation, homophobic, diagnostic, medico-juridical gaze.

In his discussion of *Poison* Bryson's gaze goes in one direction only. The stigmatizor looks, the person looked at does not look back, but appropriates the look and integrates it into the structure of his own desire. This gay tactic is the most radical manifestation of the issue raised by identity politics of visibility, whatever their strategic limitations: the appropriation of external images as self-images in groups whose internal structures of belonging are also determined via these images. This tactic is also radical in its narcissistic

16 Ibid., 12.

17 Silverman, "Fassbinder and Lacan". It is also surprising that Bryson doesn't even mention this fundamental text, in spite of its thematic and theoretical relevance, and in spite of the fact that it was published under his editorship.

18 In 1999, such a claim is more the re-enactment of an already established practice that can only be seen as politically urgent if one takes gay AIDS activism into account (which had been ongoing outside universities since the mid-1980s).

structure. Such attempts to force recognition of deviance within a normative framework by recognizing oneself in the image of this deviance may have the short-term success of shifting the borders of what is recognized, but the price is high: for one thing, these images will have to be internalized to a certain degree and, for another, the groups showing themselves in this way not only become visible, but their distinctive markings become consumable.

How can Bryson's view of the relationship between gaze and object be summed up? The gaze produces the stigma (it remains unclear whether this gaze is meant to stand for the social discourse of homophobia in general or a characterization of the homophobic activity of a perpetrator, the stigmatizor – probably both); the visual *representation* of the stigma becomes the thing that is sought out in the object (in this case the film). What can be considered or referred to as such a representation is a matter of interpretation. We could also say that the stigma is Bryson's main aim of inquiry, which in turn structures both his use of the gaze concept and his pinpointing of the stigma in specific iconographic and narrative elements of the film. The interpretative tools of his approach, then, are iconography/motifs and content/plot, rather than any focus on media-specific characteristics of film itself, shot and edited using specific technologies and procedures with regard to gazes both within the film and between film and viewer. The potential for such a dialogical approach to the film medium (an exchange of gazes between film and viewer forms the basis for interpretation) is demonstrated by Silverman's Fassbinder essay. For Bryson, the film is not a counterpart of the viewer/interpreter in the sense of dialogical seeing, but a reservoir of evidence (in the form of motifs and storylines) for the detection of a homophobic stigma and its inversion into homosexual desire.

For Bryson, at the time of its publication in 1999 at least, this text was programmatic – politically for the queer movement and academically for visual culture studies and art history. With regard to my examination of visual culture studies, I consider Bryson's text to be symptomatic and thus important. And my reading of it is guided not only by the questions I address to visual culture studies, but also by my own experience as a feminist activist and intellectual since the 1970s, when I was soon confronted with the pitfalls of identity politics. The text shows how an intensely identity-focused agenda based on visuality impacts on the process of interpretation. By 1999, the tactic of integrating discriminatory stereotypes into the self-image of discriminated groups, a tactic radically demonstrated by Bryson here, had already been the subject of critical discussion in political circles for years – highlighting the

way academic agendas tend to lag behind political activism. The essay is also symptomatic in what I see as its narcissistic tautologization of the exchange of glances between film and viewer. By this I mean a closed circuit established between the gaze of the viewer, in this case the interpreter and – that same viewer. The film itself is but the trigger for this tautology of the gaze. In what follows I will examine a position that responds to the discriminating gaze not with integration, but with opposition.

The discriminating and the oppositional gaze – bell hooks

On account of the word's double meaning ("degrading or excluding individuals or groups" but also "capable of making fine distinctions") a "discriminating" gaze may be about selecting nuances of colour for sofa cushions, but also about using socially constructed markers to make distinctions that play a crucial role in determining whether or not a person belongs to a discriminated group. Bryson's stigma is a metaphor for such markers, adding a subtext charged with Christian associations of suffering, sacrifice and desire. The gaze produces the stigma, seeks it out and finds it in a circular movement, as a productive and reproductive part of visual discourses. In Bryson's version, as in that of Laura Mulvey, for example, this gaze falls on a passive object that is ultimately the victim of this gaze and the discourses in which it partakes. Many texts in visual culture studies follow this pattern when they study the stereotypes with which discriminated groups are visualised. This research was and is important in order to render the history of such stereotyping visible and thus to underline the visual dimension of both manifest and, more especially, latent racism in all its manifold cultural symptoms. But it does also have its strategic pitfalls: when the concept of the gaze is used in this way, the gaze is identical with the images it has produced. Put another way: the images of racism give a transparent view of the discriminating gaze, of which they are also evidence. Such an approach to visual culture cannot escape a politics of the victim, since the possibility of looking back is not considered. The master-servant relationship is unambiguous. In methodological terms, the result of deploying the gaze in this way, in the study of racist, sexist, ethnic and other stereotypes, is closely related to art-historical iconography: pictures and their components are viewed as representations of something else. Unlike in art history, however, such gathering of visual evidence of social discrimination is

underpinned here by an openly articulated agenda that is highly dramatic in political terms.

In 1992, early in the history of visual culture studies (but 17 years after Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* claimed the impossibility of active looking for women in Hollywood movies), the African-American theorist, film critic and artist bell hooks made a counterproposal, opposing a strategy of resistance to the passivity of those touched by the gaze.[19] Her essay was titled "The Oppositional Gaze – Black Female Spectators". It came neither from art history nor from visual culture studies itself, but, once again, from film studies which, since Mulvey if not before, had been strongly shaped by feminist ideas and engaged intensively with questions of viewer positions and the gaze. In hooks' text, gaze, identity, agency, gender and race are dealt with together.

Like Bryson, hooks proposes countering the discriminating gaze. But there is a radical difference between their positions: rather than the discriminated appropriating the stereotypical image produced by this gaze and integrating it into their own desire (as with Bryson's stigma), her strategy involves staring back. Rather than establishing it as something that must first be established, hooks derives this "oppositional gaze" (that seems to be the exact opposite of the "stigmatizing gaze") from a way of looking already practised by slaves. The ban on looking to which they were subjected (looking back was punished) produced in them an overwhelming desire "to look, a rebellious desire, an oppositional gaze".[20] Even in situations of the worst oppression, the ability to manipulate one's own gaze in the face of structures of power that seek to restrict it opens up the possibility of agency, a key concept in the debate on poststructuralist critiques of the subject and their impact on thinking about the subject's scope for action in the political struggles since the 1970s. In the texts on gaze and visuality discussed above, this concept played no part; this may have to do with the passive-paranoid readings of the concepts of the gaze which (as the example of Bryson shows)

19 bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze – Black Female Spectators" in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston 1992), 115-131. I do not mean to suggest that there were no previous critical responses to Mulvey's text; other feminist film critics criticized Mulvey's gender-specific distinction between an active male position of visual pleasure and a passive female one of being looked at, the earliest such critique coming from Kaja Silverman, "Masochism and Subjectivity" in *Framework* 12 (1980). 2-9.

20 hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze", 116.

lead to a victimization of the subject by the gaze. It is this that hooks is writing against.

hooks wants to take a practice of looking that emerged in a situation of oppression and update it for use in resistance to power. She refers not to Lacan but to Foucault, according to whom the potential for resistance exists within all relations of power; critical thinkers must seek out the "margins, gaps and locations on and through the body where agency can be found".[21] For hooks, the gaze is one such location: "Subordinates in relations of power learn experientially that there is a critical gaze, one that 'looks' to document, one that is oppositional." African Americans, then, derive this specific gaze from the experience of slavery. For the current media situation this entails a special experience of looking: "To stare at television, or mainstream movies, to engage its images, was to engage its negation of black representation."[22] Resistance, she argues, thus takes the form of rejecting a certain identity-based representation in the narrative medium. The oppositional black gaze responded to this by developing independent black cinema; the progress of the political movements for racial equality could be gauged by the construction of new images of black identity.

hooks' construction of a "black female spectatorship"[23] that resists the white mainstream is framed by three concepts: agency, narration and representation. Quoting Manthia Diawara, she asserts that "every narration places the spectator in a position of agency," especially at moments of "rupture" when the viewer resists identification with the film's discourse.[24] Unlike Mulvey, however, hooks sees such "ruptures" not in the filmic mode itself, as when a plot is interrupted, fragmented or undermined, but in the narrative treatment of stereotypes of race and gender. In other words: not the formal structure,[25] but the plot, and especially the use of characterization (a typical example being the matronly black servant who can only stand in for the white children's mother because she is not allowed to have children herself), give rise to the kind of experience that brings forth the oppositional gaze: the negative or withheld representation of an identity that is both black and female, as hooks focuses on this double discrimination. The paradigm of representation as the

21 Ibid.
22 Ibid., 117.
23 Ibid., 118.
24 Ibid., 117.
25 Here I would refer again to Mulvey's call for an avant-garde aesthetic of fragmentation as a weapon against the identificatory pull of narrative Hollywood cinema.

key element of identity politics, on the other hand, is something hooks borrows from Stuart Hall.

So what does the oppositional gaze do? "Within my family's southern black working-class home, located in a racially segregated neighborhood, watching television was one way to develop critical spectatorship. Unless you went to work in the white world, across the tracks, you learned to look at white people by staring at them on the screen. … Before racial integration, black viewers of movies and television experienced visual pleasure in a context where looking was also about contestation and confrontation."[26] The oppositional gaze overcomes the pain of being confronted with humiliating portrayals of black female stereotypes in the film by learning how racism determines the visual construction of gender in cinema. While Mulvey, for example, situates female criticality in a position "outside that pleasure of looking", in hooks' model the black female viewers actively refuse to identify with the "imaginary subjects" of the film because "such identification was disenabling".[27] Mulvey's distinction between active/male and passive/female becomes irrelevant for the oppositional gaze of the black female viewers insofar as they refuse to identify with the film representation of white womanhood that forms the passive pole in Mulvey's model. "Black female spectators, who refused to identify with white womanhood, who would not take on the phallocentric gaze of desire and possession, created a critical space where the binary opposition Mulvey posits of 'woman as image, man as bearer of the look' was continually deconstructed."[28] hooks thus identifies specific differences between the viewer positions of black and white women that are the result of lived, historically determined experience with the sociocultural conditions and effects of racism. For Mulvey, the strategic goal is a feminist "disaffection" with Hollywood cinema, whereas for hooks resistance to the role models for black women presented in films is the "starting point for many black women approaching cinema within the lived harsh reality of racism".[29] This is also the starting point for hooks' critique of feminist film criticism's blindness to racism, as black women viewers identify with none of the postulated viewer positions – neither with the phallocentric gaze nor with the construction of white womanhood as a lack. Critical "black female

26 hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze", 117.
27 Ibid., 122.
28 Ibid., 122-123.
29 Ibid., 125.

spectators construct a theory of looking relations where cinematic visual delight is the pleasure of interrogation".[30] For hooks, this practice of critical questioning then gives rise to the discursive space that makes it possible for black women directors to formulate narratives with different representations of black womanhood; the aim is to find new transgressive possibilities for the formulation of identity and "new points of recognition", thus helping to construct a radical black female subjectivity. The examples given by hooks for such moments describe eye contact between black characters in films, a "shared gaze" that testifies to solidarity between women[31] and to their subjecthood.

hooks' use of the gaze is ambivalent – besides the oppositional gaze, there is also the repressive gaze that makes women the victims of looking and of male desire. hooks uses the terms gaze and look with no clear theoretical distinction, more on the basis of mood: the gaze is either discriminating, making victims, or it is actively turned against this dominant gaze by the victim, a gaze that stares back – in both cases, it implies a form of aggressiveness and a corresponding directedness; the look, on the other hand, comes into play when it is a question of the investigative, analytical, learning visual mode which, in hooks' view, characterizes the visual pleasure of black women in particular, including their enjoyment of Hollywood movies.[32] Seeing relates here on the one hand to a discursive, critical practice of watching and, on the other, to glances exchanged within the film narrative. Critical spectatorship in turn focuses on unmasking stereotypes, but also on recognizing and acknowledging counter-models of identity devised by the narratives in films by black women directors. In both cases, the narrative is the object of seeing.

For hooks, the pleasure of the critical gaze derives from the contrary movements of unmasking negative identity models and the construction and perception of new, positive identities. This pleasure arises not in individual, isolated seeing but in a political context of community, discussion and awareness. While this seeing itself can therefore not be described as dialogical with regard to its object (film), the context of this seeing is distinctly dialogical. This is also apparent in hooks' descriptions of specific, shared moments of such visual experience and the ways they are dealt with. What is actually

30 Ibid., 126.

31 Ibid., 129-130.

32 By contrast, Mulvey opposes Hollywood films with avant-garde strategies to aesthetically thwart all visual pleasure.

being looked at and discussed here are identity models as represented in film. These models become visible in the (film) narrative, in turn offering the spectator scope for agency. The aim is the construction of new, politically resistant identity models whose visibility is considered as a political resource. This follows the above-mentioned political agenda of visual culture studies, with a terminology drawn from cultural studies, especially that of Stuart Hall.

For all the differences between their positions, hooks and Bryson both take their evidence from the elements of narrative, of filmic plot. This is a common methodological consequence of the focus on identity politics within visual culture studies. The theoretical basis for this focus, formulated in the writings of Stuart Hall, is the equation of culture with the production of meaning and of visual objects as sites of representation of such meaning. This in turn leads to what might loosely be termed a "content-focused" position with regard to the objects under interpretation.

An attempt at integration from art history – Lisa Bloom

The stigmatizing and the oppositional gaze are each used to construct a different model of the *acting* political subject. The evil, dominating, heteronormative, racist gaze is one side of this construction; this is countered by strategies of the resisting gaze that are intended to foster and safeguard the agency of discriminated subjects. These gazes are both directed at identifying external images of stereotypes which, in a second step, evoke identity-based self-images. This second step takes different forms: while the stigmatizing gaze is integrated into the self-image of the political subject in a narcissistic loop, the model of the oppositional gaze describes the acting subject as one that looks back critically, deriving a newly constructed self-image from this interaction in opposition to the external image. These models show the extremes between which discriminatory stereotypes are mostly dealt with: integration and resistance, masochism and combativeness.

One of the early readers on visual culture studies, *With Other Eyes: Looking at Race and Gender in Visual Culture*, edited by Lisa Bloom and published in 1999,[33] can be used to explore briefly attempts to transfer such concepts into

33 Lisa Bloom (ed.), *With Other Eyes: Looking at Race and Gender in Visual Culture* (Minneapolis, London 1999).

art history, revealing parallels with the academic perspective of visual culture studies. The book's stated aim was to revitalize art history, which clings to an "idea of innocent vision as simple perception",[34] by using concepts of the gaze from visual culture studies. The texts, all written since the mid-1980s, bring together the main themes of the political agenda as it affects art history: feminist and antiracist criticism, expanding the discipline's brief to cover media and the products of popular culture, visual representations of discriminated and marginalized identities, critiques of nationalistic visual discourses. Bloom presents a rigid and ultimately clichéd version of "traditional" art history based on "innocent vision" as a negative foil for her aims. But art history certainly does not work on the basis of an innocent vision, in fact it could not even have come into existence on such grounds: a historically informed vision cannot be innocent. As Otto Pächt's treatise on art historical method has shown, it involves the situatedness of the object of investigation as well as the situatedness of the interpreter's gaze.[35] Bloom, however, uses "innocent vision" to describe the gaze of the male art historian as normative practice in the discipline. Of interest here is not only that Bloom uses this model of innocent vision to describe art history as a discipline in need of renewal,[36] but also what alternatives she brings into play – alternatives that blend metaphors of the gaze from the political and academic discourses of visual culture studies.[37]

Bloom speaks from the position of a feminist critique of the universalizing, objectifying male gaze that the "pure seeing" of traditional art history reveals itself to be. This gaze is prolonged and contemplative; it takes as long as it needs to coax the secrets from the artwork, since a great work of art "does not spontaneously lay itself open to us", as she quotes her chief witness Mark Roskill,[38] before laying her critical finger in the wound of this chauvinistic metaphor that draws its vividness from a patriarchal semantics of gender relationships. For Bloom, this seeing that is supposedly so pure is constructed "as an ordinary part of the development of a craft or skill in which an opposition between woman as image and man as bearer of the look is nat-

34 Lisa Bloom, "Introducing With Other Eyes" in: Lisa Bloom (ed.): *With Other Eyes*, 2-18: 2.

35 See chapter 3, first section, in this book.

36 She uses a model of "pure vision" that would be easy to refute, but that is not my point here.

37 As described in chapter 4 of this book.

38 Mark Roskill, *What is Art History?* (Amherst 1989), 9, quoted from Bloom, "Introducing With Other Eyes", 2.

uralized as part of an apprenticeship that leads to art historical mastery".[39] This echoes Mulvey's division of the gaze into active-male and passive-female, which Bloom, too, criticizes as overly monolithic. In Bloom's view, the feminist critique of this gaze as an art-historical practice that defines the discipline's "gendered process of investigation"[40] must be expanded to include a critique of racism, thus also thwarting monolithic identity constructions of the female.

As alternative practices of looking, Bloom offers two examples: one is bell hooks' oppositional gaze, that makes the gaze the site of resistance, while the other is based on imitation and parody, suggesting a process of seeing in which the meaning of race and ethnicity is not uniform, since race, ethnicity and sexuality vary between ethnic and social groups and within those groups themselves. With this position, Bloom also articulates criticism of identity-based essentializations within the groups. Her specific example of such a practice is from outside art history: the Jewish lesbian performer Sandra Bernhardt imitated black singers as a parody of her inability "to translate herself across racial boundaries".[41] For Bloom, this is the third possible position that corresponds neither to the universalizing gaze of art history, nor to the oppositional gaze of hooks that still runs the risk of fixing identities.

So much for the political agenda proposed by Bloom for traditional art history. It intersects with the academic agenda insofar as she relates the universalizing gaze of art history to a general critique of science as formulated by Donna Haraway. Science as hegemonic knowledge, she argues, is characterized by "disengagement" and "detachment", both of which imply a "gendered privilege of knowing no bodies"[42] via what Haraway calls a "conquering gaze from nowhere"[43] that has the power to see without being seen. In the critical discourse of academic visual culture against art history, this kind of gaze is epitomized by body-denying, predictable and static one-point perspective; proposed alternatives pin their hopes on the multi-perspectival art of the Baroque or the descriptive art of Dutch painting. For Bloom's political agenda, however, I assume that this would be too rooted in the conventional framework of the discipline; instead she refers to a demand made by Haraway:

39 Bloom, "Introducing With Other Eyes", 2.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid., 4.
42 Ibid., 5.
43 Haraway, "Situated Knowledges", 188, quoted from Bloom, "Introducing With Other Eyes", 5.

"feminists should work from their embodied perspectives in order to produce what she [Haraway] calls 'situated knowledges'".[44] These "embodied perspectives" form the basis for Bloom's project of changing art history in a way that makes it compatible with "feminist cultural studies but with an emphasis on the visual arts".[45]

Where does she locate this knowledge via embodied perspectives? Bloom speaks of an autobiographical turn; not as a return to authorship deconstructed by Barthes et al, but based on the assumption of a subject "as an embodied individual within the process of cultural interpretation".[46] And this subject – both artist and viewer – is situated within the categories of gender, race, class and sexual orientation. Bloom's own contribution to the reader, "Ghosts of Ethnicity: Rethinking Art Discourses of the 1940s and 1980s"[47] looks at the way "even the most formalist aesthetic positions are inescapably imbricated by the politics of identity".[48] Her approach, the discourse analysis she applies to the texts of art criticism, makes it clear that she uses the concept of perspective not in relation to seeing as a physical and mental act or socio-cultural practice, but as a metaphor for the position from which questions are formulated and discourses interpreted. This perspective, which in Bloom's writing corresponds to the political agenda of visual culture studies, is thus the place from which the epistemes of traditional art history (the questioning of which Foster had announced as early as 1988[49] on the basis of new problematizations of seeing) must be attacked and changed. What this might mean for the relationship between the interpretative act of seeing and its object remains unclear.

Evidence

Having looked at concepts of the gaze in the political agenda of visual culture studies and the impact of this agenda on the search for a revised art

44 Bloom, "Introducing With Other Eyes", 5. See Haraway, "Situated Knowledges".
45 Bloom, "Introducing With Other Eyes", 5.
46 Ibid., 6. However, Bloom's reception of Haraway's critique of science does not uphold the dialectic between the positioning of the scientist and the objectivity of her object of study, a dialectic on which Haraway insists, see chapter 8 in this book.
47 In Bloom (ed.), *With Other Eyes*.
48 Bloom, "Introducing With Other Eyes", 10.
49 In Foster, *Vision and Visuality*, see chapter 4 of this book.

history, I want to turn now to a problem that Bloom clearly did not ask herself: What is used as evidence? Which kinds of evidence can be found for questions concerning new political subjects and the visual representations of their identities? Where and how should such evidence be looked for?

The question of evidence can be asked independently of the object of visual culture studies – since, as we have seen, the question of the object of visual culture studies is an open one. For Mitchell, this undefined, open quality constitutes the pioneering character of visual culture studies as an "indiscipline". As Marquard Smith said, "whether we are discussing objects or subjects or media or environments or ways of seeing and practices of looking, the visual, or visuality, visual culture studies as an interdisciplinary field of inquiry has the potential *to create new objects of study*, and it does so specifically by *not determining them in advance*".[50] These "new objects of study" are taken almost word-for-word from a text on interdisciplinarity by Roland Barthes frequently quoted in theoretical texts seeking to underpin and legitimize visual culture studies,[51] a quotation that has clearly become so canonical as no longer to be labelled as a quotation or reference: "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."[52]

Whereas Barthes was interested in freeing interdisciplinary work from the constraints of institutionalized disciplines, his statement is used by Smith to give visual culture studies a unifying foundation – a paradoxical move that uses a statement of radical interdisciplinarity to found a discipline. As a result, visual culture studies inhabits the tension between its academic institutionalization and its claim to create something which, in terms of academic politics, "belongs to no one". This has consequences for the question of evidence. The use of evidence, as proof, is part of the register of scientific *ob-*

50 Smith, "Visual Culture Studies", 479.

51 As for example in the work of Bal and Mitchell.

52 Roland Barthes, "Research: The Young" in *The Rustle of Language* (Berkeley, Los Angeles 1989), 69-75: 72. Barthes continues: "The Text is, I believe, one such object." Original quote from "Jeunes Chercheurs" in *Communications* 19, no. 19 (1972), 1-5: 3: "L'interdisciplinaire, dont on parle beaucoup, ne consiste pas à confronter des disciplines déjà constituées (dont, en fait, aucune ne consent à s'abandonner). Pour faire de l'interdisciplinaire, il ne suffit pas de prendre un 'sujet' (un thème) et de convoquer autour deux ou trois sciences. L'interdisciplinaire consiste à créer un objet nouveau, qui n'appartienne à personne. Le Texte est, je crois, l'un de ces objets."

*ject*ivity; but how does such an object of investigation take shape when visual culture studies does not have a defined, concrete object (in the sense that the object of art history is art)? Or should visual culture studies itself, by analogy with Barthes's *Text* (capitalized in the original) be classified as an "object which belongs to no one"? But studies cannot be equated with their object of study. So could *visual culture* be analogous to Barthes's *Text* as the object of visual culture *studies*? Then visual culture would be to visual culture studies what text is to semiotics, an analogy that fails in my opinion because visual culture studies is not secured by a theoretical framework comparable to that possessed by the *Text* in Barthes. Visual culture was born as a combination of concepts (vision and culture) that are not capable (individually or together) of bringing forth a coherent theoretical framework, being shaped instead by a diversity of positions, interests and discourse histories. Conversely, this makes visual culture studies more flexible than semiotics as it has not only produced no coherent theory, but also no method. As a result, unlike semiotics as the study of text, visual culture studies cannot be criticized as a totalizing interpretative model. Visual culture studies lives as long as its theoretical and methodological eclecticism can react to historically evolving issues.

Evidence in visual culture studies, then, must relate not to a single object (as in the case of art history, which has art as its object of inquiry) but to many. Object and evidence alike result from the specific line of inquiry, and not vice versa. Neither is *objective* in the sense of pre-existing as things; they are extremely discourse-dependent and must be *constructed*. In view of the diversity of themes and approaches in visual culture studies, I will now read a text whose academic research comes from the political agenda of visual culture studies not only in terms of its position with regard to seeing, but also concerning its construction of visual evidence, which in turn follows the academic discourse of visual culture studies with its negative view of one-point perspective.

Evidence of the non-visible – Martin A. Berger

In *Sight Unseen. Whiteness and American Visual Culture* (2005), Martin A. Berger studies "the links between racial identification and vision".[53] His book re-

53 Martin A. Berger, *Sight Unseen. Whiteness and American Visual Culture* (Berkeley, Los Angeles 2005), 1.

sponds to problems resulting from research into the visual "politics of representation"[54] on race and racism in the United States. He gives a precise analysis of the dilemmas faced by white scholars wishing to work on race, the first and most difficult being that in their attempts to study visualizations of race, and in their desire to shed light on racist stereotypes, they risk not only consolidating such images of the "racially" Other, but also, in positive terms, sexualizing, idealizing and romanticizing them. "In critiquing the dominant construction of black, brown, or red identity, such studies have had an undeniable impact on the material conditions of nonwhite peoples. Yet in the light of the pernicious legacy of whites' taking both vicarious and physical pleasure in the bodies of nonwhites, it seems prudent to consider the investment of whites in producing even the most progressive analyses of nonwhite representations."[55] Berger doubts that well-meaning whites are capable of transcending "their race's investment in depictions of nonwhites".[56] From this he draws the logical conclusion: since even progressive whites are still white, those interested in "racial justice" should study the ways that *white* identity influenced the lives of white and non-white peoples. The first step would be for "European-American scholars"[57] to shift their primary evidence for race from black to white representations. Here he quotes bell hooks, who made this demand as early as 1995: it is time, she writes, for "righteous white people, to begin to fully explore the way white supremacy determines how we see the world, even as their actions are not informed by the type of racial prejudice that promotes overt discrimination and separation".[58] In connection with the visual conditions and effects of racism, the visual metaphor *how we see the world* (recalling but not identical with the concept of *worldview*) takes on a particular weight, as it highlights the dramatic importance of visual representations of race not only in the history of racism in the United States, but for American culture in the broadest sense. Visuality and race also have a special connection via racist metaphors of colour.

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54 Smith, "Visual Culture Studies", 476.

55 Berger, *Sight Unseen*, 2.

56 Ibid., 4.

57 Berger, ibid., introduces this category as a parallel to the way whites name non-white population groups in the United States (Afro-American, Asian American, Native American), labelling whites as one group among many, countering implicit racial hierarchies.

58 bell hooks, *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (New York 1995), 188, quoted from Berger, *Sight Unseen*, 4.

With regard to evidence, Berger draws a seemingly paradoxical conclusion. He selects his materials "for their conspicuous distance from the politics of race. This book not only shuns artworks containing obvious racial themes or tropes, but also avoids analyzing images that include nonwhites." His theory is that "a decidedly racialized perspective animated even those cultural products most removed from racial concerns".[59] The "unseen" in his book's title refers to his basic theory that the power and omnipresence of race conditions the meaning of American culture as a whole; his aim is to demonstrate this using those visual artefacts that do not visibly point to racism. In this way, he avoids not only the trap of an "insatiable white desire for racial others"[60] but also the risk of duplicating or even consolidating the obvious (racist stereotypes) in his interpretation, even if this is done with informative intent. But where does he see this unseen becoming visible? Which objects does he consult in his search for evidence? Since he assumes the cultural omnipresence of the racial paradigm, the question is not whether but only how the paradigm of race "hides" in the visual "texts" in which he will discover it.

Berger's strategy, then, consists on the one hand of shifting the focus of attention to "white" representations and on the other of selecting material in which the racial paradigm is not present as a theme or motif (unlike in the portrayal of stereotypes). What does he class as "white" representations? The answer to this question lies in his quotation from bell hooks: how we see the world, or in the corresponding metaphor of perspective. Berger finds his evidence in representations of how whites see the world – representations based on "racialized viewing practices of which European Americans were utterly unaware".[61] Berger describes his turning away from obviously racist themes as a radical shifting of the borders of what is considered "racial". Since changes in the representation of whites and non-whites neither cause nor heal racial inequalities, which are rooted in structural and discursive systems, he argues that it is of central importance to look beneath the narrative surface of images. He speaks of an "operational logic of race and its manner of guiding the interpretation of our visual world". He sees his task as "excavating" this logic, for only in this way can its power in American culture be understood and

59 Ibid., 2.
60 Ibid., 3.
61 Ibid., 8.

eliminated[62] – a strong programmatic statement with which he positions his methodological approach.

As an example of Berger's analysis, let us consider his chapter on "Landscape Photography and the White Gaze". He begins by explaining the theoretical basis for his choice of landscape photography as an object for racism research into "white" identity. Unlike landscape painting, landscape photographs from the American West show no human figures, thus ruling out the narrativity that characterizes history and genre painting. In spite of this, Berger argues, pure landscape photography is still involved in the racial politics of its time since the cultural values active within it are the same as those shaping the production and reception of narrative painting. He also rebuts objections that the contemporary audience of landscape photography around 1860 viewed photographs as faithful records of reality: photographs appear less real when the viewers perceive a discrepancy between their values and what the photograph shows. Conversely, they appear more real when the photograph reflects the ideologies of the viewers. From this, Berger concludes that photographs accepted as true by a society have a unique potential to reveal that society's values.[63] He also assumes that images do not shape discourse but affirm it. In other words, he constructs a chain of causality, with ideology/discourse (Berger treats the two terms as synonyms) as the cause and the image as the effect.[64]

Which characteristics of landscape photography does Berger cite as evidence of the white gaze? As specific examples he takes Carleton Watson's photographs of the Yosemite Valley taken during a surveying expedition in 1866. Berger names two kinds of photographic gaze: "tightly focused close-ups of monumental geological features and distant overview shots".[65] One such distant overview shot became famous under the title *The Yosemite Valley from the Best General View*.[66] For Berger, this "best general view" is evidence of the white way of looking at the nature of the American West. How does Berger construct this evidence? In a first step, he asks what it means to produce the best general view of an amorphous object like a rugged valley seven miles long and two miles wide. He argues that a belief in the best view of

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid., 44.

64 See ibid., 1. I see this very differently. For me, visual artefacts (not just pictures) are part of discourse history as both producers and effects.

65 Ibid., 46.

66 See illustration, ibid., 45.

the valley implies that its component parts can be quantified, and it is true that the photograph highlights a fixed number of landmarks that have become the standard repertoire of postcards and tourist guides on Yosemite. In this process, the detailed views of individual landmarks and the general view interlock: the individual images of rocks, mountains and waterfalls "provided the visual and ideological building blocks out of which the 'general' vistas were created".[67] The result is a "value system" that notes the valley's natural wonders in numbers that are talked up in tourist guides and integrated into the corresponding maps. Berger's description of this value system makes clear what he considers to be specifically white: quantification, control over nature via panoramic views, touristic exploitation by limitation to an unchanging set of attractions, cartographic measurement. Although these are characteristics commonly attributed to modern western culture, they do not yet specifically imply the category of whiteness: this is focused by Berger in a further step by introducing the "racially other"[68] of the "white man", the Native American, in the form of a comparison: "We can gain a sense of the visual and cultural bias of Watkins and his white contemporaries by considering how indigenous peoples viewed their environment." He then compares the "white" cartography of Yosemite with maps made by the region's indigenous population, of which only a few are documented. His example, drawn on birch bark, was found in 1841 by an officer of the Royal Engineers, fixed to stiff paper, copied and annotated, and is now in the British Library in London.[69] The map was fastened by two Native American travellers to a tree along their route to give those who came after them information about the route. Unlike "white" maps, it represents not a large section of the area but just a thin strip marking daily stages with no differentiation between types of terrain. The map thus shows only the traveller's immediate surroundings, it follows no cartographic scale and is not aligned with the compass. The size of natural phenomena is adapted to the shape of the medium on which they are marked (in this case the piece of bark).

It is not hard to imagine the conclusions Berger draws from the extreme differences between these two examples: while 'white' cartography fulfils the requirements of objectivizing western science, the other map shows no interest in scale; it adheres only to criteria that result from the "personal experi-

67 Ibid., 47.
68 Ibid., 67.
69 See illustration, ibid., 53.

ence"[70] of the travellers. A mountain was interesting because of its connection with the history of the community, to the spirits and ancestors, and to usable natural resources. Unsurprisingly, then, objectivity (however constructed the concept may be) was not a criterion for the Native Americans, and nor was a comprehensive, panoramic view of the region. Berger's argument has two strands: first, he shows that the objectivity of 'white' maps and of landscape photography is illusory, that the representational systems of cartography and photography help to shape the way society sees the world; second, he frames this gaze, beyond its categorization as western and rationalist, as white, by contrasting it with the gaze of the Native American as the 'racially other', less a view of the world than a view of his/her world. Furthermore, he situates the categories of gender and class in the hierarchy of the dominant 'white' system of representation: "In the symbolic system applied to Yosemite, race always trumped gender and class." He continues: "There are obvious social and political drawbacks inherent in any attempt to establish a hierarchy of suffering, but it remains important to appreciate how individuals who depart from religious, gendered, racial, sexual, political, or class norms pay unequal prices for their outsider status."[71] This passage highlights the huge difficulty of an argument that moves between the proliferating categories of marginalized or oppressed minorities within the political project of visual culture studies.

In this argument, for all its attempts at precision, and in particular its efforts to avoid essentializing the category of race, the category of 'white' remains unclear, which also has to do with the problematic fact that this category usually remains unnamed in the cultural system as the denomination of the dominant group with regard to racial others, just as other normative and hegemonic categories (masculinity, heterosexuality, etc.) remain unnamed with regard to the deviations from them. In the course of the argument, however, it becomes clear that Berger is speaking of the whites as the dominant group that shapes and imposes its worldview in accordance with its interests. This prompts him to conclude the following on different ways of seeing nature among whites: "if a white gaze might usefully be said to exist, it constitutes a common interest, stemming from often distinct ways of looking, rather than a shared view of – in this case – the landscape."[72] It is unclear, however, what can be meant by "racialized meanings of the images"

70 Ibid., 54.
71 Ibid., 58.
72 Ibid., 67.

other than a representation that corresponds to such interests (exploitation and protection of nature, for example). Or, conversely: "Landscapes advancing a white perspective promote the varied interests of whites rather than depict particular forms in regularized arrangements,"[73] by which he presumably means that, where the "white gaze" is concerned, the interests are more important than the form, and that therefore the forms have no determining role when it comes to diagnosing this white gaze on the basis of images. Berger formulates a layering of the constitution of meaning with regard to whiteness: in Watkins's photographs meanings are "circumscribed by the invisible discourse of whiteness (residing in viewers), then particularized by the visible discourse of nature (suggested by the subject matter of the works), and ultimately refined … by formal evidence".[74] The pictures, then, are sources of evidence (forms) for the invisible discourse of whiteness that must be separated out from the forms as a visible and thus assailable identity of whiteness with its various interests. *The Yosemite Valley from the Best General View*, which according to Berger was seen and produced through the lens of whiteness, thus offers him a model for the westward spread of European-American society into surroundings that the whites would alter irrevocably.

In Berger's terminology, gaze and perspective are used interchangeably as metaphors for the ideology, discourse and interests of the dominant group, and they are evidenced and thus made visible in the forms of image production. These forms presented by Berger as evidence (panoramic view and cartography as gazes of power and exploitation) are indebted to the academic discourse of visual culture studies (with its roots in critiques of one-point perspective as a rationalist-objectivizing gaze). In Berger's analysis, beyond their association with modern western culture, they now become representations of whiteness. At this point, the political and the academic discourses of visual culture studies intersect, combined in the figure of representation: rather than racist stereotypes, here it is ideologies, discourses and interests that are visually represented as self- or external image. In methodological terms, however, an aporia appears which originates in visual culture studies' academic discourse,[75] and whose ubiquity in visual culture studies tends to reduce it to the status of a prejudice: one-point perspective as the gaze of the powerful, objectified in the photographic apparatus.

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73 Ibid., 68.

74 Ibid.

75 See chapter 4, last section, of this book.

The utopian gaze and its failure – Nicholas Mirzoeff

In the texts from visual culture studies that we have examined so far, concepts of the gaze move between a critique of representations of the Others of the dominant norm on the one hand and, on the other, positive turns given to constructions of self from a position of alterity. The examples deal with gender, sex and race – to which other categories of alterity could be added. The following readings explore two concepts of the gaze that go beyond these positions, displaying a utopian character. They are closely linked with the claim to push visual culture studies beyond academia towards a political impact. The author of both concepts is Nicholas Mirzoeff whose definition of visual culture studies as a tactic in the political struggle against the "society of control" we have already encountered.[76] Rather than attempting any in-depth portrayal of the political agendas associated with these concepts, my reading concentrates on uncovering their methodological status.

The Multiple Viewpoint. *Diaspora and Visual Culture*

In 1998, Mirzoeff edited *The Visual Culture Reader*. The book contained his essay "The Multiple Viewpoint. Diaspora and Visual Culture" that he used the following year as the introduction to *Diaspora and Visual Culture: Representing Africans and Jews,* which he also edited.[77] In this text, he uses the concept of the diaspora and its representation as the focus of a program for visual culture studies that aims to point the way forward, captured metaphorically in the terms multiple viewpoint and intervisuality. Thirteen years later, in 2011, Mirzoeff published a new proposal for a general political criticality in visual culture studies under the title *The Right to Look. A Counterhistory of Visuality*.[78]

The Multiple Viewpoint is an attempt to transfer the theoretical approaches of post-colonialism with its concepts of hybridity and créolité, as developed by writers including Arjun Appadurai, Homi Bhabha, Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall,[79] to the field of visual culture. The concept of diaspora, that draws on

76 See chapter 6 of this book, the section on Nicholas Mirzoeff.

77 See Nicholas Mirzoeff, "The Multiple Viewpoint. Diaspora and Visual Culture" in Mirzoeff (ed.), *The Visual Culture Reader*, 204-213; and Mirzoeff (ed.), *Diaspora and Visual Culture: Representing Africans and Jews* (London, New York 1999), 1-13.

78 Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look. A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham, NC 2011).

79 See Patrick Williams, Laura Chrisman (eds.), *Colonial Discourse & Postcolonial Theory: A Reader* (New York 1994).

these approaches, is summarized by Hall as follows: "The diaspora experience as I intend it here is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference."[80] In contrast to more conventional notions of diaspora, as with regard to the Jews, rather than a culturally and ethnically fixed identity that is inclined to shield itself from external influence in the diaspora (or obliged to do so, as in the case of ghettos), the focus here is on a diasporic identity that is constantly changing as a result of diverse migratory movements in the course of globalization, a development that also breaks down the hierarchy between centre (the West) and periphery (all other parts of the world). For my reading, what is important is why and how Mirzoeff relates these ideas to seeing and its theoretical derivatives such as visuality and perspective. The why is best explained in terms of Mirzoeff's opponents, first and foremost the nation state, that he contrasts (in the same apodictic style he applied to his underpinning of visual culture: "Modern life takes place on screen."[81]) with the post-national world: whereas the diasporas of the 19th century "revealed interconnected nations, our current experience is of an increasingly interdependent planet".[82] This means that the culture that had been installed over centuries by (colonialist) western nation states and that was meant to prove their "superiority" is now obsolete, including, for example, national museums and national styles, as constructed by traditional art history to demonstrate an essentialist vision of national identity. The essence of these styles was "of course, race".[83] Mirzoeff thus frames the project of a history of "diaspora visual cultures"[84] as a critique of the now obsolete culture of dominance by western-colonialist nation states; and he sees art history as their accomplice. This also means integrating a notion of future into the "diaspora identity" which in the 19th-century model was still fixed on the search for roots. If it were possible to rethink diaspora today as "an

80 Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" in Williams, Chrisman (eds.), *Colonial Discourse & Postcolonial Theory*, 392-403: 401-402. Essay first published in Jonathan Rutherford (ed.), *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (London 1990), 222-237.

81 Mirzoeff, "An Introduction to Visual Culture", 1.

82 Mirzoeff, "The Multiple Viewpoint", 205.

83 Ibid., 206.

84 Ibid.

indeterminate future to come" then, according to Mirzoeff, this could result in "a significant reevaluation of diasporas past, present and future".[85]

In order properly to represent post-national diasporas, national culture, metaphorically linked by Mirzoeff to "one-point perspective",[86] must be countered by the titular "multiple viewpoint". Such a multiple viewpoint is important not only as a critique of national cultures with their implications of essentialist identities, but also as the condition for a dialogical relationship *between* diasporic groups that often inhabit the same geopolitical context but that often fight each other. Mirzoeff cites the example of conflicts between the Jewish and African diasporas in the United States in which backward-looking identity definitions based on origins (what he calls a one-point perspective) were used by each group to contest the status of diasporic chosenness. Mirzoeff thus uses visual metaphors to develop political arguments. One-point perspective as a scopic regime of western-rationalist power is contrasted with multiple perspective as both a critique and a vision for the future: "The multiple viewpoint moves beyond the one-point perspective of Cartesian rationalism in the search for a forward-looking, transcultural and transitive place from which to look and be seen."[87] In this model, looking and being seen correspond to the theoretical concepts of the gaze and spectatorship, which Mirzoeff argues could also benefit from this new viewpoint.

Here, once again, the theoretical foundations of visual culture studies give reason to investigate the discipline's position on seeing concrete objects. "To look and to be seen" refers exclusively to structures of the gaze between subjects in society; what remains unclear is how these concepts might be transferred to relationships with the visual artefacts that enter into this visual relationship as a third party. Do they feature in visual culture studies only as evidence of seeing and being seen? We have encountered this question several times already, mainly as the problem of a narcissistic-tautological relationship between the interpreting subject (viewer) and the object under interpretation. In most cases, the filter or medium of this relationship is representation, its result is meaning (the meaning of this representation), while this meaning in turn refers to the complex of identity constructions. But can or must this be the only way for the subjects practising visual culture studies to relate visually to the objects of the world?

85 Ibid., 207.
86 Ibid., 205.
87 Ibid., 208.

Which relationship with objects does Mirzoeff propose in the context of a visual culture studies diasporically renewed by the multiple viewpoint? He notes that the diaspora as he conceives of it generates a multiple viewpoint in every diasporic image. This viewpoint, he claims, incorporates both what Derrida called *différance* and "polycentric vision", as defined by Ella Shohat and Robert Stam in their essay in the same book (*The Visual Culture Reader* edited by Mirzoeff) where the visual is situated between individuals and communities in the process of dialogical interaction.[88] Mirzoeff then claims that "changing the way in which people see themselves is in all senses a critical activity".[89] As this once again makes clear, the focus here is on identity constructions that may lead to conflicts between communities. Mirzoeff's utopia thus appears to involve the possibility of positively influencing the process of negotiation between these communities by working on a new understanding of diasporic identities in their visual representation, understood as a critical activity. In methodological terms, this prompts him to propose transferring intertextuality as "a matter of interlocking texts" to the "interacting and interdependent modes of visuality that I shall call intervisuality".[90] Surprisingly, his concrete example for this comes not from the visual but from the auditory field: the yodelling of the Pygmies, "gateway to a multiple viewpoint on the African diaspora", points to Congolese music and the blues of the Mississippi Delta, from there to the whistling of steam trains and the migration of black former slaves from the south to the north of the United States.[91] The yodel becomes a *hyperquote* with multiple intertextual references. In the objects of visual culture, Mirzoeff looks for "polyvalent symbols"[92] as transcultural evidence for diasporic cultures. These symbols cannot be reduced to static constructions of identity, and in their hybridity they represent post-national diaspora as a now global condition of life. The polysemy of these symbols through historical and transcultural change is referred to by Mirzoeff as intervisual.

In this way, concepts like the gaze or visuality lose their specifically *visual* quality: the gaze loses itself in the symbol, and intervisuality has little to do with a gaze between individuals or communities, instead closely resembling the polysemia of the open artwork in the writings of Umberto Eco. Ultimately,

88 Ella Shohat, Robert Stam, "Narrativizing Visual Culture: Towards a Polycentric Aesthetics" in Mirzoeff (ed.), *The Visual Culture Reader*, 37-59.

89 Mirzoeff, "The Multiple Viewpoint", 208.

90 Ibid., 209.

91 Ibid., 209-210.

92 Ibid., 210.

where the relationship between visual culture studies and the object is concerned, Mirzoeff's focus is on finding iconographic elements in which the shifts of cultural meaning related to identities that mix and change via processes of migration become tangible. A political agenda that brings forth new subjects is allied here with an old method from art history, namely iconography. Paradoxically, however, the visual metaphors in which this alliance is clothed – viewpoint, intervisuality, "to look and to be seen" – refer neither to the visual object nor to the relationship between viewer/interpreter and object, but to the diasporic agenda.

Another link to traditional art history, on the other hand, is rigorously cut off by Mirzoeff for political reasons: as mentioned above, he places the category of style in the enemy camp, in the discourse of the national, and he further sharpens this verdict by describing style as visual evidence of this national character. Thus, while giving the legibility of pictures a figurative level by adopting iconography, which can in turn quite naturally be linked to an agenda-driven search for identity-based meaning, the category of style, which is essentially an aesthetic category calling for a way of seeing the object other than that practised by iconography, is accused of formalism. Mirzoeff's visuality already reflects the above-mentioned movement of visual culture studies away from the formalist tradition of American art history.[93]

It is the figurative iconography – foremost the human figure itself – that visual culture studies looks for because this iconography, far more readily than aesthetic qualities, facilitates a reading in terms of recognizably coded signs of identity. It is also the gateway to what I call the narcissistic circle of interpretation, where the figure (and its gaze) may serve as a mirror for interpretive projections (which results, as described above, from an affirmative transcription of the Lacanian model of the gaze).[94] Within visual culture studies, iconography's figurative relationship to the visual object thus facilitates a trend towards narcissistic, identity-based interpretations that could not be arrived at via the observation of formal properties.

93 See, among others, the introduction to this book.

94 For the reception of the Lacanian gaze see Chapter 5. For examples of narcissistic interpretations see also Chapter 7. For a critique of the narcissistic circle, see Chapter 8.

Counter visuality: *The Right to Look*

Between Mirzoeff's utopia of the diasporically multiplied gaze and his book *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (2011) came the September 11 attacks and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan – the first decade of the 21st century, marked by America's "global war on terror". This may explain why in this book Mirzoeff changes his strategy: he abandons the ideal of multiple viewpoints that he formulated as his conclusion from the debates on ethnic identities in the age of post-national migratory movements, and returns to the binarism of a friend-foe perspective. The conflict between postmodern capitalism and the consumer from Mirzoeff's introduction to *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (1999)[95] has given way to that between repression and rebellion. Mirzoeff tells the story of repression and rebellion, slavery and emancipation, as the history and genealogy of modernity, structured around the nucleus of the dialectic of colony/plantation and colonising empires/nations. This history is not hard to understand. Mirzoeff brings together an impressive quantity of research literature, mainly from colonial studies;[96] he is also a good storyteller. More difficult to understand, however, is how visuality is or should be the key to this story. As early reviews show,[97] the book raised hopes of a more systematic orientation within visual culture studies that was felt to be somewhat "every which way"[98] on account of its diffusion across disciplines and themes.

The cover of *The Right to Look* already signals its departure from the multiple viewpoint. The circles of the two Os of *Look* contain details from graphics[99] showing the heads of a white man with a late 18th-century hairstyle and of a Maori, both in side profile, their gazes fixed on each other. One white, one

95 Mirzoeff, "An Introduction to Visual Culture", see also chapter 6 in this book.

96 Here he seems to have drawn in particular on Catherine Hall, *Civilizing Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830-1867* (Chicago 2002), as in his contrasting of metropole and plantation and his discussion of the colonial imagination.

97 T.H. Milbrandt in *Surveillance & Society* 9, no. 4 (2012), 459-461, http://www.surveillance-and-society.org (accessed 26 Sept 2016); Jan Baetens in *Leonardo online*, http://leonardo.info/reviews/may2012/mirzoeff-baetens.php (accessed 26 Sept 2016); Terry Smith, "If Looks Could Kill Empires" (18 July 2012), www.publicbooks.org/nonfiction/if-looks-could-kill-empires (accessed 26 Sept 2016).

98 Smith, "If Looks Could Kill Empires". Terry Smith is Professor of Contemporary Art History and Theory at the University of Pittsburgh.

99 Detail of Maori from Anonymous, *Johnny Heke (I.E. Hone Heke)* (1856), reproduced in Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, Plate 1.

"indigenous" – it looks like a warlike clash, and that is what the book describes. Contrary to what the image suggests, however, this white man is not a coloniser but a revolutionary from the Jacobin phase of the French Revolution, when slavery was briefly abolished.[100] The glances exchanged by the two men thus stand not for a confrontation between colonizer and slave, but for an encounter between two political subjects who share a rebellion against those in power. The cover image uses the gaze to present a non-hierarchical relationship between the "native" and the white; and this also characterizes the right to look postulated by Mirzoeff in the title: "Because the right to look is a consenting exchange between two (or more) it is by definition non-hierarchical."[101]

Mirzoeff's "counter-history of visuality" is based on a notion of visuality that differs from that previously current within visual culture studies. Mirzoeff's 2006 article "On Visuality" forms the basis for his definition: in it, he attempts to redraw the genealogy of the concept, tracing its origins to Thomas Carlyle.[102] Reading the article, which already contains the book's concerns and concepts in embryonic form, gave me a better insight into the inner structures of a book often driven more by associations than by arguments. Firstly, then, a few words about "On Visuality".

Having named visuality as an epoch-specific phenomenon of postmodernity in 1999, Mirzoeff now notes that it is not a poststructuralist term, but one coined, along with other related concepts such as "visualize", by the Scottish historian Thomas Carlyle and later forgotten when Carlyle was branded anti-democratic and racist, vanishing from discussions of visual culture. As an opponent of all of the emancipatory movements that emerged from the French Revolution, Mirzoeff writes, Carlyle devised the visualized narrative of a moral imperialism led by "great men" that resonated both with his contemporaries and with later generations. But for "many key figures in the emancipatory movements of the period, Carlyle's vision of the hero had to be stood on its head, as Marx did to Hegel, in order to create a sense of possibility."

100 Detail from the pamphlet *La Chute en Masse* (Paris 1793) reproduced in Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, 43. Mirzoeff refers to the man as a sans-culotte.

101 From Nicholas Mirzoeff, "The Will to Justice", posted on 3 September 2012 as part of his blog about the Occupy movement: http://www.nicholasmirzoeff.com/O2012/2012/09/03/the-will-to-justice/ (accessed 26 Sept 2016).

102 Mirzoeff, "On Visuality" and Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, chapter 3, 123-146. Carlyle's version of visuality is briefly mentioned in chapter 4 of this book.

Mirzoeff sees this manoeuvre of "reverse appropriation" as part of the modern production of the "visual subject, a person who is both the agent of sight (regardless of biological ability to see) and the object of discourses of visuality".[103] Furthermore, he argues, Carlyle's discourse of visualized heroism was so central for Anglophone imperial culture that any claim to such a subject status had to be made in terms of such visuality – a theory with far-reaching theoretical implications. Basically, Mirzoeff is claiming that such a subject status is inconceivable without visuality. Or, to put it another way: the formation of the western-imperial subject in the 19th century (and thereafter) took place primarily through this visuality.

What does this visuality have to do with seeing, whether as a biological or a sociocultural practice? Little or nothing. In *The Right to Look,* Mirzoeff begins by noting: "The right to look is not about seeing."[104] He develops the concept "by thinking how it emerged into Western discourse at a specific and charged moment of modernity *as a conservative critique of Enlightenment and its emancipations*".[105] In a counter-movement, it was appropriated, inverted and disguised by subcultural practices as a strategy of emancipation – in *The Right to Look* he calls the result countervisuality.

To return now to Mirzoeff's reading of Carlyle, he borrows the highly metaphorical language of the period 1837-1841, as when he speaks of the "eye of history" as the embodiment of historiography, referring not to the objectivity of a source-based science of facts but to an "idea of the whole" that Carlyle sought to portray in a "succession of vivid pictures".[106] This in turn recalls the then highly appreciated large-format history paintings like those commissioned by Carlyle's hero Napoleon I for his imperial propaganda. If that were all, however, it would be no more than the description or justification of a pictorial narrative style in historiography. Carlyle, and with him Mirzoeff, goes far beyond this: the historian is a visionary, seeing history with his inner eye, as if from a "Mount of Vision", gaining an overview not accessible to historical figures themselves – although Carlyle named one exception: the hero. Only the hero was able to *see* history as it unfolded. The Mount of Vision, affording the hero a historical overview, invites a contemporary analogy: the military commander positioned on a piece of high ground as portrayed in

103 Mirzoeff, "On Visuality", 54.
104 Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, 1.
105 Mirzoeff, "On Visuality", 55, my italics.
106 For this abridged account of Carlyle, see Mirzoeff, "On Visuality", 55ff.

battle pictures of the period and in topographical portrayals of battles since the Baroque.

Carlyle wrote his history as a heroic story; he "imagined the eye of history sweeping across what he called 'clear visuality', 'visualizing' what could not be seen by the minor actors of history themselves. Visuality was, then, the clear picture of history available to the hero as it happens and to the historian in retrospect." The simple observations of simple people, on the other hand, "did not constitute visuality".[107] And what was expected of these simple people was not visuality but hero-worship, "a proper submission to the quasi-divine authority of the hero".[108]

At the end of the 18th century, Jeremy Bentham sought to reform prisons using the model of the panopticon; he also wrote a pamphlet against Britain's penal colonies in Australia. Carlyle rejected the model of the panopticon, and he also favoured the penal colonies because, as Mirzoeff deduces, "a world dominated by heroes required that its anti-heroes be treated with severity".[109] Mirzoeff now links Carlyle's heroic visuality with his rejection of Bentham's panoptic gaze (that was meant to replace the previous draconian measures used to control prisoners) and with his advocacy of deportation and penal colonies, thus making visuality a key category in the imperial structures of power and repression in the modern world. In *The Right to Look*, he extends this right up to the current imperial behaviour of the United States, allowing his narrative, that begins in the 17th century with references back to antiquity, to be read, in a reflexive movement, as a genealogy of America's current global policy.

In very general terms, therefore, this visuality has something to do with the actions of political subjects. The implications of this broad description are diverse and in some cases contradictory. One such contradiction concerns the concept of representation. At one point, Mirzoeff defines visuality as "a point of contestation in political and cultural discourse over the very meaning of representation". Is this political or symbolic representation? He continues by asking: "Was representation possible only through a heroic male body or could others represent? Must others be individuals or could there be a collective representation? How, then, might the subaltern and subcultural groups

107 Ibid., 57.
108 Ibid., 58.
109 See ibid., 59.

in the metropole and the colonies come to representation?"[110] The way these questions are formulated brings no real clarity; the reference to the "heroic male body" makes it probable that the focus is once more on visibility and the right to visibility, on the kind of symbolic-visual representation we know from the political agenda of visual culture studies. This is confirmed by another definition of visuality: "Visuality, far from being a postmodern solution predicated by contemporary visual culture to the problems of medium-based visual disciplines, is therefore a problem of the conceptual scheme of modernity and representation that underlies it."[111] In this way, he departs from the two definitions we have already encountered (visuality as a mode of technological postmodernity and as a diasporic, multiperspectival gaze), ending up with the confrontation between ruling subjects and the representations that legitimize them, and subaltern subjects to whom representation is denied. This, too, is already familiar; the stigmatizing and the oppositional gaze also draw on this struggle for recognition via visibility. Which is why, for Mirzoeff, visuality has "very much to do with picturing and nothing to do with vision, if by vision we understand how an individual person registers visual sensory impressions".[112] In this light, his apodictic claim that "the right to look is not about seeing" is easier to understand: he is rejecting seeing as a sensory activity. But this draws a clear line between the two factors of the visual that Mitchell, for example, does not want to separate: the nature and culture of seeing. It also raises the question of how this negation of the act of seeing influences the treatment of the objects of analysis (e.g. their form and mediality) through which Mirzoeff intends to study the genealogy of modernity: "For contemporary critics, then, visuality has a complex and challenging genealogy. Rather than lead us into the complexities and redundancies of 19th- and early 20th-century optical sciences, visuality implies an engagement with the politics of representation in transnational and transcultural form."[113]

This program, formulated in 2006, is surely what gave rise to Mirzoeff's broad-based counterhistory of visuality, *The Right to Look,* in 2011. Having taken Carlyle's concept of visuality as his point of departure for a politicization of the term as an imperial practice of power and authorization in "On Visuality", here Mirzoeff writes the decolonial genealogy of this visuality. In doing

110 Ibid., 65f.
111 Ibid., 67.
112 Ibid.
113 Ibid., 76.

so, he assumes that the current policy of global counterinsurgency (George W. Bush's "post 9/11 war on terrorism" that was ongoing under Obama) is being implemented with practices of "post-panoptical" visuality that can be traced back to the oppressive practices of slavery in the 17th and 18th centuries and to the colonial politics of imperialism in the 19th and 20th centuries. These practices include control, surveillance and classification as well as killing in the name of freedom and democracy, the most striking example of this being visual technologies for remote-controlled killing with no risk to the killer (drone warfare).

Visuality is contrasted here with countervisuality. This is Mirzoeff's term for resistance against this visuality by subalterns (slaves, workers, the populations of colonized countries). It manifests itself in practices of self-empowerment that are developed in the places where visuality is deployed against those slaves and workers: on the plantations in the colonies, on the streets of the metropoles. The history of visuality and countervisuality since the 17th century as a history of western dominance and resistance to that dominance is subdivided by Mirzoeff into three phases: the 'plantation complex' (1660-1860), the 'imperial complex' (1860-1945) and the 'military-industrial complex' (1945 onwards), with 'complex' referring both to the production of structures of social organization that shape a specific complex like the 'plantation complex', and to the mental economy of individuals, like the Oedipus complex. "The resulting imbrication of mentality and organization produces a visualized deployment of bodies and a training of minds, organized so as to sustain both physical segregation between rulers and ruled, and mental compliance with those arrangements."[114]

Here, Mirzoeff describes technologies of power as discussed by Foucault in his lectures of 1975/76: "in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, we saw the emergence of techniques of power that were essentially centred on the body, on the individual body. They included all devices that were used to ensure the spatial distribution of individual bodies (their separation, their alignment, their serialization, and their surveillance) and the organization, around those individuals, of a whole field of visibility. They were also techniques that could be used to take control over bodies. Attempts were made to increase their productive force through exercise, drill, and so on. They were also techniques for rationalizing and strictly economizing on a power that had

114 Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, 5.

to be used in the least costly way possible, thanks to a whole system of surveillance, hierarchies, inspections, bookkeeping, and reports: all this technology can be described as the disciplinary technology of labour. It was established at the end of the seventeenth century, and in the course of the eighteenth."[115] As the primal scene for these technologies, Mirzoeff sees the organization of the slave plantation. And, unlike Foucault, he places the entire genealogy of modernity under the paradigm of Carlyle's visuality. This creates a peculiar tension between Bentham's panoptic gaze that served Foucault as an example and metaphor for the mechanisms of control in the late 18th century, and Carlyle's visuality. Bentham was among the reformers of the late Enlightenment, while Carlyle, as described above, vehemently resisted the Enlightenment's emancipatory consequences. This tension between an enlightened and a reactionary gaze, both of which are described as technologies of power (by Foucault and Mirzoeff respectively) repeatedly frustrates Mirzoeff's attempts to describe an order of visuality and countervisuality with the corresponding practices of dominance and revolution.[116]

Let us return now to the three complexes and the practices and agents of their visuality: The *plantation complex* is represented by the forms of classification, segregation, legislation, control and organized labour, especially on the British and French slave plantations of the Caribbean. All of these factors are underpinned by visuality. First, the 'slave' is classified as a species on the basis of 'natural history' before being separated from 'free' space by means of cartography. The slaves' work was monitored by the overseer and misconduct was punished with violence. Special laws declared all of this legal and, in Mirzoeff's argument, thus 'aestheticized' it. The key figure in these practices and their visuality was the overseer who – not unlike Carlyle's example of a hero of history, the military commander – has an overview of what is happening from a piece of higher ground. This order was confronted via slave rebellions and the struggle for freedom, which Mirzoeff classifies under the heading countervisuality. According to Mirzoeff, this organization of the plantations on the basis of visuality exerted a key influence on the use of visuality and visual technologies in western societies.[117]

115 Michel Foucault, *"Society Must Be Defended". Lectures at the Collège de France (1975-76)* (New York 2003), 242.

116 This remark is made in passing only, since it is not my aim here to mine Mirzoeff's wealth of sometimes associative and metaphor-laden arguments for potential internal incoherencies in his theoretical references.

117 See Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, 48-49.

"In a sense, all visuality was and is imperial visuality, the shaping of modernity from the point of view of the imperial powers." This definition of visuality opens the chapter on the 'imperial complex', dated between 1860 and 1945, which covers the strategies of dominance of the colonial powers at home and in the colonies. Having shown how western empires shaped their technologies of power outside their 'own' countries, the focus here is on the blending of colonial plantation and home city as sites of orders of bio-power where colonizing authority is crossed with the "hierarchy of the 'civilized' and the 'primitive'".[118] The slaves on the plantations corresponded to the workers in the cities, except that the latter were not pseudo-scientifically classified as a separate species. Thus, although the dividing line between rulers and proletariat was not drawn by a racially implemented hierarchy, workers and slaves shared a lack of rights, as reflected, for example, in the practice of deportation. For Mirzoeff, missionaries were the key figures or agents of the spread of western modernity to non-western societies, as well as being "products of its [modernity's] emerging hegemony".[119] As an example, Mirzoeff names the missionaries in the British crown colony of New Zealand, whose activities he contrasts with the resistance of the Maori that led to an "indigenous countervisuality".[120] Immediately after this he discusses proletarian countervisuality in the cities of England and France, by which he means primarily the forms of self-organization in the workers' movement of the 19th and early 20th centuries and their symbolic representation, as expressed in the general strike and the May Day festivities. For Mirzoeff, the general strike is a "counterpoint to the hierarchy of imperial visuality", "a tactic for visualizing the contemporary by creating a general image of the social". This chapter clearly presented considerable structural problems, as the imperial visuality he postulates is conceived of in historical and territorial terms that are very broad. The history of discourse, decades of theory, and historical research are woven together to construct exemplary moments of countervisuality. The examples for the 20th century are the former colonies' struggle for liberation, illustrated by visual evidence such as the 1955 *Paris Match* cover photograph portraying a young black soldier saluting as a French

118 Both quotes, ibid., 196.

119 Ibid., 198. Here he is quoting Ryan Dunch, "Beyond Cultural Imperialism" in *History and Theory* 41 (2002), 301-325: 318.

120 Ibid., 199.

patriot (an image made famous by Roland Barthes's analysis[121]) and the film *The Battle of Algiers*.

In his chapter on the period since 1945, Mirzoeff refers to Dwight Eisenhower's famous warning about the total influence – "economic, political, even spiritual" – of the constellations of power that brought forth the Cold War arms race and which he called the 'military-industrial complex'.[122] Mirzoeff describes the technology of this period as "aerial visualization", which has grown since 1989, and especially since 9/11, into a "post-panoptic visuality" that brings together electronic and digital technologies in the global war on terror. This post-panoptic visuality is based on the assumption that "anywhere may be the site for an insurgency, so everywhere needs to be watched from multiple locations".[123] The 'military-industrial complex' is marked by a "global counterinsurgency as the hegemonic complex of Western visuality".[124] Mirzoeff's main examples here are the Algerian War and the War on Terrorism.

Here, in post-panoptic visuality, the parallels between the concept of visuality and the visual technologies of power that are actually used are obvious: closed-circuit television surveillance, satellite images, infrared and other technologies render visible what was previously unseen. They are joined by military technologies like armed drones that can be operated from locations far away from the theatre of war. Mirzoeff also combines these effects with Carlyle's visuality as a producer of authority: "The post-panoptic visuality of global counterinsurgency produces a visualized authority whose location not only cannot be determined from the visual technologies being used but may itself be invisible."[125] For the current situation, Mirzoeff uses the term 'neovisuality': "Neovisuality is a doctrine for the preservation of authority by means of permanent surveillance of all realms of life, a *Gesamtkunstwerk* of necropolitics."[126]

In the face of such conditions, it is hard to define a corresponding countervisuality of resistance. According to Mirzoeff, the counterinsurgency's striving for a "totalizing vision" has the effect that "no countervisualization can damage its claim to totality".[127] Furthermore, the objective upheld by the ter-

121 See Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York 2012), 225ff. French: *Mythologies* (Paris 1957).
122 Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, 19.
123 Ibid.
124 Ibid., 18.
125 Ibid., 20.
126 Ibid., 34.
127 Ibid., 296.

ror against which this neovisuality is directed is hardly the kind of power-free society dreamed of by Mirzoeff with his metaphor of the "right to look". On the contrary, both sides, insurgency and counterinsurgency, continually rearm their respective "necropolitics", meaning they are inseparably intertwined. But, Mirzoeff hopes, precisely this intensifying of visuality will lead to its crisis. For him, the Arab Spring – unfolding as he was finishing his book – is a sign of this; and one year later, he supported the Occupy movement with a daily blog on his website.

What does Mirzoeff's concept of visuality involve? Two poles can be named to which this visuality obviously refers: firstly, representation (of power, of the hero, of history) for the purpose of legitimating power, and secondly the kind of practices, technologies and cultures of power discussed by Foucault under the heading of bio-power (surveillance, violence, segregation, legislation, classification). Countervisuality responds to the representation of those in power with strategies of self-empowerment via representations that may also appropriate the patterns used by those in power. One example of this is the hero of the Haitian revolution, Toussaint L'Ouverture, represented as a military commander on horseback modelled after Jacques-Louis David's equestrian portrait of Napoleon.[128] Mirzoeff also sees the responses of resistance to practices of power that constitute countervisuality (general strike, May Day, forms of self-organization, liberation struggle) as forms of representation in the sense of visibility. But if visibility is ultimately equated with the political in the broadest sense, then (in the light of the all-explaining claim of Mirzoeff's project) this begs the question of whether and why the concept of visuality is supposed to be able to deliver this, and whether we might not be dealing, conversely, with a piece of sophistry or circular reasoning (the visual is always political, ergo the political is always visual) that reduces the political to the visual.

Mirzoeff's approach to visual objects also manifests his fixation on representation in a double sense: of portrayal and of political representation. The former is most obvious in the "Visual Guide" that opens the book and that is intended to promote a systematic overview. It contains examples of the categories and practices of visuality and countervisuality. An engraving from the 17th century shows the layout of a plantation with the work routines and the overseer at his raised post; he represents surveillance and a commanding position. A battle plan from Waterloo shows the central role of visuality

128 See illustration in ibid., 42.

for warfare in the form of cartography and overview; a panoramic bird's eye view as an example of imperial visuality shows a battle zone region during the American Civil War; military-industrial visuality is represented by a technical diagram on the production of aerial photographs and their use in the preparation of aerial warfare; and a photograph of soldiers sitting in front of screens like videogame players, steering surveillance drones on the US-Mexico border, stands for post-panoptic visuality. The examples of countervisuality show the revolutionary hero: the Haitian revolutionary leader on horseback and a pamphlet with a sans-culotte toppling despots; a photograph of slaves gathering stands for the general strike against slavery in South Carolina; Emilio Longoni's painting *L'Oratore dello Sciopero* from 1891, that shows a speaker stirring up demonstrating workers, stands for general strikes in major cities.

This image material does not go beyond the function of evidence, being essentially self-explanatory. Mirzoeff writes: "I have used images – or sometimes even the knowledge that there were images which have been lost – as a form of evidence." He thus deals with images as a historian would; they are sources that he takes from the "visual archive".[129] And he treats them indiscriminately; the important thing is what they show, regardless of medium or genre, regardless of whether or not they are art. They are summoned as witnesses who Mirzoeff, like an attorney, presents as part of his case. In methodological terms, this hardly matches up to a conventional political iconography.

When, in his call for a "right to look", Mirzoeff says that "my right to look depends on your recognition of me, and vice versa",[130] one might think that his political agenda would be a good match for the ethics of a dialogical seeing formulated by Margaret Olin with regard to art history. But Mirzoeff formulates it as an appeal against a ban on seeing, imposed by visuality and manifested by the policeman who sends us on our way: "Move on, there's nothing to see here."[131] This seeing is a metaphor for another right – "the right to the real" – in an "attempt to shape an autonomous realism that is not only outside authority's process but antagonistic to it". This right to perceive the real is meant to prevent the dominant authority from legitimizing and naturalizing its interpretation of the world via visuality. It thus has less to do with dialogical-communicative seeing and more with recognizing the reality of power which, in Marxist terminology (not used by Mirzoeff), is veiled by ideology –

129 Ibid., XV.
130 Ibid., 25.
131 Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, 1.

a realization on the part of those being ruled that is meant to be prevented by the visuality of those in power. The question of the relationship between object and interpreter/viewer plays no part here. And nor does the question of the Ones recognizing the discriminated identities of the Others that was (and still is?) central to visual culture studies, because for Mirzoeff the Ones are the abstraction of power (of the imperial or military-industrial complex). They are not able to recognize those they rule over without losing this very power. It is thus a matter of struggle, not dialogue. Representations are tools in this struggle – instruments of power or rebellion.

Mirzoeff's is a radical departure from the political theories of the 1990s that espoused the approach of a dialogical seeing by discussing societal processes of negotiating difference as part of the conflict between universalism and particularism – I am thinking above all of Ernesto Laclau.[132] Ultimately, he revives the binary structure of class struggle, clad in the terminologies of Foucault, Rancière and Negri/Hardt, in updated, decolonial guise. For him, today's revolutions are the Arab Spring and the Occupy movement. In his attempt to draw up a genealogy of modernity, Mirzoeff has taken the current eminence of visual media in the dissemination of the political as his benchmark, and projected this back onto the last three centuries. But he does so, and I see this as another "birth defect" of his model, through the lens (to stick with the optical metaphors) of the visuality of Carlyle, a 19th-century antirevolutionary racist. In this way, Carlyle's friend/foe dynamic structures the genealogical model. Or, put differently: not only is the view of the past determined by today (a basic theoretical assumption now taken for granted in historiography) but a conservative perspective from the 19th century determines the view of today. Mirzoeff elevates Carlyle's visuality to the status of an episteme of modernity, then writes against it with a 'Counterhistory of Visuality'.

For Terry Smith, Mirzoeff's book marks "a coming of age that has brought cultural studies past the variability and the enchantments of its postmodern moment. It highlights the need for responsibility toward actual pasts, and the actual demand of contemporary realities."[133] I do not share this view. To me, invoking political responsibility as a rejection of postmodern arbitrariness seems too heavily indebted to a theoretical cluelessness in the face of the

132 See for example Ernesto Laclau, "Universalism, Particularism, and the Question of Identity" in *October* 61 (1992), 83-90.

133 Smith, "If Looks Could Kill Empires".

ideological rearmament of the West in the wake of 9/11, resulting in a hasty retreat to an interpretative framework of the present that is no less totalizing than Hegel's vision of history. The result is an actual dedifferentiation in the sense of a loss of difference. One example is the way Mirzoeff deals with fascism: "The work of genocide was to make the Other permanently invisible."[134] Visuality in this account becomes *the* key to understanding – even to understanding the Shoah. What new knowledge does this bring? To me it seems too rash, too reductive, too in love with its own model. As a result, antifascism is no more than an antifascist countervisuality that demands a place "from which there is a right to look, not just behold the leader".[135] And that, to my European-German ears at least, sounds naïve. For me, the idea that such a one-dimensional model should be able to capture historical and political reality at the same time as formulating the utopia of a non-hegemonic space (that of the right to look) does not add up.

I have no answer to the question of what the benefits of such an extensive definition of visuality might be. Overstretching the concept in this way does not strike me as a valid strategy against the postmodern "every which way" of visual culture studies; on the contrary, it looks like a symptom of a crisis in the field rather than a remedy. This totalization of visuality can also be read as a symptom of a paradox that seems to have accompanied seeing from the outset: the belief in the visual as an anthropologically founding force, and its opposite, demonization: "The evil eye emerged from the realm of superstition to become the ruling metaphor of social control and political oppression at its most insidious."[136]

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134 Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, 231. See also 229f.

135 Ibid., 232.

136 Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 378. This sentence of Jay's pointedly sums up the critique of "occularcentrism" by Lacan, Foucault and Debord.

Part Three: Towards an Ethics for the Act of Seeing

8. Questions of Ethics
Seeing as an Act of Scholarly Research

The central task resulting from my readings was to inquire into the ethical dimensions of seeing that can be negotiated between the fields of art history and visual culture studies. In other words, my focus on seeing led not to a confrontation along the lines of "who does it better" in terms of method, scope and object, but to an attempt to link the question of the relevance of each discipline with the fundamentals of its engagement with its object. These fundamentals, which I read as each discipline's immanent scopic regime, emerged quite clearly from my readings, with their various advantages and pitfalls.

The ethics I am referring to here might also be called stance or responsibility – responsibility for the Other of one's research activity, or one's seeing as researcher. My readings made me more keenly aware that the seeing of art historians, with regard to discrete objects, is often hidden behind the classifying procedures of art-historical objectification. These procedures mask the reputation of seeing as unpredictable, unquantifiable and subjective, and thus reputedly unscientific. Art history clearly has surprisingly little confidence in the objective reliability of its key form of data collection; either that or it wishes to avoid being infected with this reputation. Art history pursues an ethics of objectivity; what this overlooks is seeing's subjective side, which is also authorial: the subjectivity of the interpreting viewer.

For visual culture studies, the opposite applies. The discipline's scholarly activity centres not on the object but on the subject – a subject that must fight for recognition, in turn measured in terms of the subject's visibility in a society and its visual culture. The ethical dimension here is rooted in the political

agenda that determines the relevance of the discipline.[1] The presupposition of visual culture studies that modernity is visual, making visibility a key precondition for the representation of identity, alters the dynamic of the three-way relationship between visual object, producer and viewer, with consequences that only became clear to me in the course of my readings. My interest in engaging with visual culture studies grew out of my critique of hegemonic and pseudo-objective discourses in art history. I saw in it a chance both to find approaches allowing the viewpoints of "Others" to be introduced into art history and to reflect on the discrepancy between the questionable objectivity and the masked subjectivity of the art-historical viewer position. I was all the more surprised, then, by what my readings revealed: the "Other", the recognition of which is supposedly the focus of visual culture studies, surreptitiously became a huge I (the I of the interpreting viewer) in an interpretative manoeuvre I refer to as the narcissistic circle. The slippery surface on which this circular movement takes place is the model of the gaze after Sartre and Lacan: out of the model of a scopic regime that highlights the fragility of ego constructions, and which was thus also a critique of the illusory quality of identities per se, visual culture studies made a strategy affirming positively framed identities.

Of central methodological importance here, I propose, is the question of the relationship between historicity, alterity and models of seeing in art history and visual culture studies. This question necessarily arises from the double critique of objectivist seeing in art history and of narcissistic seeing in visual culture studies. Historicity and alterity have one thing in common: they constitute the unfamiliarity of the object and Other in the eyes of the viewing, interpreting subject. They show this subject its limits, the ultimately uncrossable threshold that lies between the I and what lies outside it. In many respects, how this threshold is negotiated is the biggest problem between art history, with its focus on objects, and visual culture studies, which has been dedicated from the outset to rendering the subject visible. It is the approach to this threshold that I call a stance in the sense of an ethics of scholarly research; it is of importance to both art history and visual culture studies.

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1 See Mieke Bal, "The Commitment to Look" in *Journal of Visual Culture*, 4 (2005), 145-162, who speaks in this context of an ethics of seeing. She also comments on the conflicts between art history and visual culture studies from the viewpoint of the latter.

Historical unfamiliarity in art historical seeing

Let us briefly recap on approaches to the unfamiliarity of the art historical object (which I refer to, by analogy with cultural alterity, as historical alterity), with respect to the gazes exchanged between the viewing, interpreting subject and its object. The readings in this book have shown two basic forms, both of which implicitly aim to overcome this unfamiliarity of the object. Firstly, an objectification of the subjective factor in interpretative acts via analytical categories, trying to neutralize the subjective dimension of dealing with the object with the aim of attaining verifiability or something approaching a supposed historical truth. And secondly, an approach involving the hermeneutic circle. Panofsky and Gombrich stand for the first position, Wolfgang Kemp for the second. All three more or less ignore the seeing of the interpreting viewer, going to great lengths to develop approaches and procedures that integrate this seeing back into the object.

Gombrich tries to achieve this by framing perception as an activity that compares pictures with reality on a trial and error basis, placing it on a verifiable basis that is only marginally impacted by historical change and that applies to producer and viewer in equal measure. Panofsky does it by assuming that historical periods have distinct underlying intellectual dispositions that are expressed in the symbolic form of perspective as a necessary concretion of worldview. His characterization of perspective as a model of seeing that is distancing and objectifying, but also distance-denying, also prompts him to make a political critique that I will now apply to those models of seeing that centre on the position of the viewer. To the distance-denying model of perspective, Panofsky attributes aims he finds politically suspect and which today would be referred to as narcissistic – the striving for power and an expansion of the sphere of the I. What would a dialogue between Panofsky and Bryson or Bal on the relationship of viewer and object look like? It is likely that Panofsky would firmly reject Bryson's and Bal's appeal for the viewer's right to interpret the object from his/her own subjective viewpoint, dissolving the historical and cultural unfamiliarity and thus the tension between viewer and object, in favour of the interpreting subject. I, too, do not see this form of power over object and interpretation, that finally puts the interpreter in the place of the author stripped of power by poststructuralism, as a viable alter-

native to the objectification of the interpreting subject in analytical categories or holistic concepts of truth (a charge levelled at Panofsky).[2]

Kemp, on the other hand, short circuits the hermeneutic circle of understanding by locating the viewer as an implied viewer within the picture. He works with the paradox of not locating reception with the recipient but putting it back into the picture, whose internal structure always already determines the viewer's perception. In this way, the picture retains its autonomy with regard to interpretations imposed from outside. The interpreting viewer has no *place*. One could go so far as to say that this model allows no interpretation whatsoever in the sense of a subjectively motivated difference between the picture and its reading. Here, good interpretation consists in the ability to identify and read the picture's narratological cues. This could be called the extreme opposite of Bryson's model of the dominance of the interpreting viewer – and this even though Kemp's focus is on the reception of the artwork. In this constellation, what becomes of the unfamiliarity or alterity of the object? It dissolves, so to speak, as the viewer follows the reception-guiding prompts of the artwork; the viewer is "obedient", submitting to the authority of the work, in turn meaning that his/her subjectivity is not taken into account, necessarily remaining latent. While Bryson and Bal make a radical appeal for the recognition of the viewer's interpretation, thus negating the picture's alterity, in Kemp's model the act of interpretation is reduced to following instructions communicated by the picture.

Baxandall, Pächt and Alpers pursue different strategies with regard to the historicity of their object. They want to understand the historical unfamiliarity of the picture, thus facilitating something for which one might use the metaphor of empathy (of the interpreting viewer with the object in its alterity). In different ways, all three put seeing centre stage. Baxandall goes in search of the "period eye" of the 15th century by reconstructing the knowledge of a typical Florentine businessman derived from the practice of everyday seeing. He is interested not in the seeing of the interpreting viewer but in the mode of seeing that was common to both artists and their clients, forming the basis for the formal qualities of their pictures. Within the bounds of what is pragmatically feasible, Baxandall wishes to overcome the alterity of visual experience at the time the pictures were painted. In relation to the historicism of art history, this is the most radical position because it tries to neutralize the subjective input of the interpreting viewer. Consequently, one might speak

2 Especially by Christopher Wood, see chapter 1 of this book.

here more of reconstruction than of interpretation, not so much of art but, through art, of the historical culture from which the art emerged – artworks understood as "lenses bearing on their own circumstances".[3]

Alpers, too, has a historicizing position. Her focus is on the visual activity of a time and place in which obtaining knowledge via observation had great cultural importance – the Netherlands in the 17th-century. She embeds her interest in observation as a historically specific cultural practice in art history by studying art that shows this practice in action. In this way, she too takes art as a cue to reconstruct something else – in this case 17th-century Dutch visual culture. She thus interprets art as evidence, similar to the way historians interpret sources. In *The Art of Describing,* art provides evidence of the visual culture of observation that was held in high esteem within society as a practice of knowledge acquisition.

Pächt is the only one to focus attention on the seeing of the interpreting viewer, treating it as a problem of art-historical method in the face of the historical alterity of the discipline's object. For Pächt, art historical practice must be based on "getting one's eye in" with artworks.[4] This includes the visual habits of the period in question, which he says can be accessed via extensive experience of looking at artworks from that period. Although Pächt is aiming for verifiability, it should be derived from this seeing, which he conceives of as a relation between the unfamiliar object and the viewing art historian, a relation in which the tension between the viewer's background and visual habits and the unfamiliarity of the object are not neutralized in holistic or objectifying basic assumptions. While "getting their eye in", Pächt calls on viewers to begin by suppressing their own wishes, such as the search for iconographic meaning, in favour of a mode of looking geared towards describing the artwork's material and formal structure. Such precise observation is intended to weaken the dominant normative aesthetic that influences the way art historians see, achieving openness with regard to aspects of the work that may be unfamiliar to the interpreting viewer. While Pächt's call to maintain an awareness of the difference between the seeing of the viewer and the historical artwork in the process of art-historical analysis accepts the situatedness of the interpreting viewer, it also looks towards methods of overcoming this situatedness. For Pächt, obtaining verifiable insights depends on the visual,

3 Baxandall, *The Limewood Sculptors*, vii. Cf. chapter one, 5.

4 Pächt, *The Practice of Art History*, foreword.

dialogical interplay between the interpreting viewer and the object in its material and formal qualities.

All of these positions share a focus on the historicity of their object. One might conclude from this that historical alterity necessarily implies a greater orientation towards the object than towards the interpreting subject, accompanied by models for objectifying the resulting historical knowledge. One might add that this object does not always have to be an artwork: for Baxandall and Alpers, the gaze leads through the artwork to its context as the primary focus of interest – and their positions are also the ones with the greatest affinity to visual culture studies.

Cultural unfamiliarity – the "Other" in the gaze of visual culture studies

Unlike in art history, in visual culture studies the Other is a key concept both politically and in terms of legitimizing the discipline – the Other here always being a person, it should be noted, rather than an object. Attention is focused on the recognition of such Others in their identity *as* Others; in other words, the object of visual culture studies is not the art object, as in art history, but subjects. In visual culture studies, objects usually feature as evidence of the representation of negatively or positively shaped and connoted identities of such Others, or of power constellations within the socially dominant scopic regime in which both the "Ones" and "Others" have their place. The range of objects examined by visual culture studies goes beyond that usually classified as art.

However much this political agenda seems to imply a dialogical approach (between the Ones and the Others), the theoretical model of visuality on which the relationship between One and Other is based surprisingly leads, as my readings of what can now be called "classic" texts from visual culture studies have shown, to processes of mirroring that I have described as narcissistic.

I am not claiming that art history practises the dialogical gaze while visual culture studies remains locked in a narcissistic loop. My readings of texts from art history have shown that the dialogical gaze leads a marginal existence in the methodological thinking of the discipline (Riegl, Pächt, Olin). For visual culture studies, on the other hand, my readings show the problematic reception of the Lacanian model of the gaze. Whereas the Lacanian gaze demonstrates the illusionary character of self-identity, visual culture stud-

ies basically turns it into its opposite, the theoretical affirmation of identity-politics.

The narcissistic circle – a critique

This rewriting of Lacan is a central conclusion from my readings, and it is certainly not something I was expecting when I began work on this book. Originally I was seeking to understand the way visual culture studies succeeded in introducing new, political subjects and subject-matter into the investigation of visual culture. My intention was similar to Stuart Hall's: a "raid"[5] on another discipline in order to widen the possibilities of art history.

Driven by its political agenda, visual culture studies extracts positive-affirmative identities from the critical negativity[6] of the Lacanian approach – making it possible to transform the interpretative act of seeing into a narcissist circle. Unlike language, seeing has always been considered as intrinsically narcissistic, beginning with the myth from which narcissism takes its name. In 1859, Baudelaire linked portrait photography with the myth of Narcissus, equating it with the mirror.[7] Not only psychoanalysis connects seeing and narcissism, but also the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty when he states that "there is a fundamental narcissism of all vision", a statement for which he in turn drew on psychoanalysis.[8]

The reception of Lacanian models of the gaze by visual culture studies has methodological consequences for its interpretative practice. In the model of the mirror stage, it is only the transition to language that enables the narcissism of the infant mirror stage to give way to an I capable of dialogue. The use of this model within visual culture studies as a model of visuality means that the interpreting viewer is assumed, in the act of seeing, to be caught in the infant stage. This in turn means that language/speech and seeing as activities

5 Stuart Hall, "The Emergence of Cultural Studies and the Crisis of the Humanities", in *October* 53 (1990), 16. See also chapter 4, first section, in this book.

6 A concept from critical theory that can be applied here.

7 "À partir de ce moment, la société immonde se rua, comme un seul Narcisse, pour contempler sa triviale image sur le métal." Charles Baudelaire, "Le Salon de 1859" in Baudelaire, *Curiosités esthétiques*, (Paris 1890).

8 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston 1968), 139. Original French: "il y a un narcissisme fondamental de toute vision", in *Le visible et l'invisible* (Paris 1964), 183.

of the subject, with their consequences for the I, are assumed to be separate and unconnected – a problematic assumption.

A strange paradox arises here: when the Lacanian model of the gaze is used to analyse visuality, and when this analysis sticks to and generalizes the pre-linguistic infant model of the mirror stage, then language, of all things, is omitted from the construction of the seeing and interpreting subject – as if the subject automatically regressed to infancy in the act of seeing. This theoretical separation of seeing and speaking reflects something that could be described, in the term used by Bal, as visual essentialism:[9] the isolation of visuality from language and from the other senses. In the specific focus of this reading, infant narcissism becomes a necessary aspect of seeing. According to another reading, only the child's entry into *language* makes "mutual recognition beyond personal narcissism" possible.[10] This would mean that seeing and speaking, which I discuss here as *media* between the subject and the world, structure this relationship in fundamentally different ways: seeing as solipsistic, speaking as dialogical – a conclusion that is contradicted, for example, by Olin's dialogical model of seeing. For art history and visual culture studies, it should be noted at this point that increased attention and self-reflection needs to be devoted to the relationship between interpretative seeing and its articulation as or transformation into language and text.

The discourse of visual culture studies also adopted Lacan's later model of the gaze. This deals with looking on a metaphorical level; the gaze here is a metaphor or parable, a simile for the being-in-the-world-and-always-already-looked-at of the Lacanian subject. Whereas the mirror phase describes a typical experience of actual children, for which Lacan provides evidence, I see his model of the gaze with the diagram of the gaze and the screen as being more figurative in character, meaning it cannot be transferred literally to real pictures and situations of visual reception. And here lies another fundamental problem in the reception of the Lacanian model within visual culture studies.

Due to their metaphorical links with seeing itself and with the visual material focused on by visual culture studies, such a literal application of Lacan's models of the gaze within the discipline strikes me as dangerous: language as symbolic takes second place to the imaginary, which in turn is duplicated or linguistically mirrored in metaphors of the visual, and then transferred back

9 See Bal, "Visual Essentialism".

10 Gerda Pagel, *Lacan zur Einführung* (Hamburg 1989), 34.

into a language that revolves around recognition of the self that must set itself apart against the threat emanating from the gaze of the Other. When the Lacanian models are adopted like this as a metatheory of visuality, interpretation becomes a narcissistic "event" in its own right.

There is another paradox here: such oversimplification reduces the psychoanalytical theory in question to seeing, which is used by Lacan himself, with its implications of optics and scopic regimes, as a metaphor, a figure of speech and/or simile for structures of the unconscious and the "illusion of consciousness".[11] As a result, those who interpret visual objects fall once more into the "presence trap" of this "medium", and the subjects of their interpretation (including, specifically, themselves) run the risk of being reduced to infant narcissism. The only theoretical way out of this trap is to construct seeing as reading; otherwise, seeing rather than reading would be the central heuristic concept for the cultural production of meaning. In cultural studies, as in visual culture studies (for which it prepared the ground), the production of meaning is the activity that defines culture.[12] As yet, however, no models exist for how meaning is produced via seeing/the image/the visual that might match the abstract rigor of the models put forth for language by semiotics and linguistics. Finally, seeing is not merely an activity of decoding.[13]

Other questions are also raised. If, following Bal, meaning is understood as the production of narrative in the act of reception, then applied to art it would mean that much of what has been addressed by art history, such as style, and other questions of the aesthetic qualities of the object, would fall outside the realm of reception. Conversely the residue in the object that cannot be subsumed within a narrative could be defined as the remit of its aesthetic properties – drawing a line between narrative and aesthetics in theoretical discussions of reception. In such a model, then, the production of meaning is conceived of as distinct from the aesthetic dimension; elements

11 Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 83. See also Georg Christoph Tholen, "Auge, Blick und Bild. Zur Intermedialität der Blickregime" in Bohrer, Sieber, Tholen, *Blickregime und Dispositive*, 19-30.

12 "To put it simply: Culture is about 'shared meanings'." Stuart Hall, "Introduction" in Stuart Hall (ed.), *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices* (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi 1997), 1.

13 The same applies, I suspect, to the act of reading, but this comment is only a weak articulation of my scepticism towards the gesture of controllability on the part of linguistics.

of form and materiality can then be registered only as non-aesthetic. According to this logic, these elements can only be perceived within a narratological straightjacket, as is the case with Bal's reading of Rembrandt.[14]

Attention and recognition

In this light, the classificatory approach of classical art history takes on a different relevance: it has brought forth an attention to and observation of those elements (commonly referred to in art history as style, facture, etc.) that are not subject to such a constraint. But are they not subject, instead, to other constraints, such as those imposed by the museum and other administrative institutions? Yes, they are. However, if one is to believe the arguments used by visual culture studies to set itself apart from and legitimate itself in the face of its Other, art history, this also happens, if one assumes the autonomy of art or, to put it another way, if one assumes an aesthetics of art that cannot be functionalized. The attention of art history is thus not limited to those elements that can be used to construct a narrative which derives its coherence from the perspective of the interpreting subject. Art historical practices of seeing, then, insofar as they are not geared exclusively towards the reading/construction of meaning and narrative, are more broad-based.

At this point one must ask how, in methodological terms, might it be possible to conceive of and practise an ethics of seeing that can lead to the recognition of the visually Other – a recognition of what may be historically or culturally 'other' that is not focused on an interpretative identification with the mirror image? Could this attentiveness as a practice of dialogical seeing beyond the limited cognitive objectives of classifying art history (as outlined, for example, in my reading of Otto Pächt) be of significance to such an ethics? And what might be the contribution of visual culture studies to this project? After all, the discipline pursues a social and political agenda. In contrast to art history, ethics seems to be inscribed in the project of visual culture studies from the outset, as part of its program. As I see it, the problem of ethics as it poses itself here lies in the methodological consequences of this program and thus in the position of the interpreting subject with respect to what is being looked at.

14 See chapter 6 of this book.

Visual spaces of the subject: Narration and observation

In the course of my readings two main focuses of interpretative activity have emerged: the search for a narrative and observation. In the former, what the interpreting viewer does with the object is usually referred to as reading; drawing on literary criticism, this approach is referred to as narratology. Mieke Bal and Wolfgang Kemp explicitly base their models on this approach, and it is also implied in the work of other authors discussed. In most cases, it manifests itself in focussing more attention on content (or, in film studies, plot) than on the conditions/media of production or the forms of the object. In this, it resembles the method of iconography: narratology largely ignores the aesthetic specificity of the object, focussing instead on its representation of content, as well as analysing its formal elements in terms of this criterion. This interpretative technique has a major subjective component, which is rarely acknowledged or highlighted. The second focus, observation, is commonly understood as a procedure of distancing the subject from the object, but it can slip into the opposite, a state referred to by Michael Fried as absorption – as I have pointed out above in my reading of Alpers.

Both of these positions, which I describe as stances towards the object, make possible, by categorizing the corresponding procedures as a method, the objectification of the subject, thus rendering it invisible, so to speak. In extreme cases, both also facilitate narcissistic coupling of the object to the interpreting viewer, projections of a narratological interpretation (as we have seen in the case of Bryson), and absorption in the object. This absorption depends on the aesthetic quality that consists in the viewer becoming drawn into the act of perception, "forgetting" him/herself, which is also a type of narcissistic circle, less in the form of incorporating the Other and more of expanding the I to include the Other via an experience of merging.[15]

In art history, on the other hand, observation as a rule is linked to a non-identificatory distance with regard to the object that permits no such experience of merging – since it is a practice of acquiring knowledge *about* the object

15 This absorptive experience is the benchmark of quality required of art by Michael Fried; it cannot be identified in any of the positions under discussion here, however, because it cannot be pinned down in scientific terms. It is not a theoretical position but a subjective experience of perception that depends on the aesthetic autonomy of the artwork and that seeks neither representations nor narratological coherence. See Fried, "Art and Objecthood".

(Pächt) or its surrounding historical culture (Alpers). In visual culture studies, such distancing has a bad reputation that is articulated via metaphors of seeing: seeing as an objectifying and distancing sense that claims to provide evidence of truths it constructs itself, as epitomized by one-point perspective. Against this backdrop, I thought it important, in my reading of Panofsky's essay on perspective, to highlight the political implications of distance and closeness that he identifies in this symbolic form.

From what we have said so far, one might deduce an irreconcilable opposition between two interpretative procedures: narratology and observation. It is tempting to assign them to the extreme poles of the relationship between interpreting subject and object – distance and closeness. Within the discursive framework of this polarity, distance belongs with objectivity and the masking of subjective elements in interpretation, while closeness is coupled with presentism, immersion and subjectivity through to the narcissistic circle. But narratology and observation cannot be clearly assigned to these poles. Kemp's version of narratology, for example, is ultimately an objectifying procedure from art history like any other. In the approaches of Bal and Bryson, however, it is accompanied by an empowerment of the interpreting viewer over the object, coupled with anti-historical presentism and a high degree of narcissistic projection. Observation, on the other hand, cannot be simply associated with objectifying distance, as shown by absorption as its most extreme case. But I do think that in visual culture studies, there is a predominance of narratology, or of a desire for narrative and for a form of realism in the sense of a narrative continuum in the representation of the world. And I identify the reason for this in the political agenda of visual culture studies: the desire for narrative is fed by the desire for identity, for a wholeness of the subject, be it an individual or a collective. In narratology, narrative is viewed as a social and cultural practice that supports identity-formation; narratives are considered, in the sense of an anthropological constant, as "distinct bearers of meaning, cognitive tools in the formation of meaning and identity".[16] Mieke Bal has rendered structuralist narratology "productive for the analysis of cultural phenomena",[17] especially with her work on the concept of focaliza-

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16 Ansgar Nünning, "Wie Erzählungen Kulturen erzeugen: Prämissen, Konzepte und Perspektiven für eine kulturwissenschaftliche Narratologie" in Alexandra Strohmaier(ed.), *Kultur – Wissen – Narration. Perspektiven transdisziplinärer Erzählforschung für die Kulturwissenschaften* (Bielefeld 2013), 15-33: 18.

17 See ibid., 25.

tion. Narrative, then, offers a sphere of action for the subject, not just for the narrating subject but also for the interpreting subject, as both are driven by a desire for meaning and identity. And when the desire of the subject determines his/her view of the object to the point where it only reflects this desire back, then we have the narcissistic circle.

How can such a position deal with objects that do not narrate, that do not use narrative to produce meaning and thus identity? In art, we know such objects from the avant-garde of the 20th century. As Pächt's example of the illuminations from the Admont Bible show, pictures whose meaning is unfamiliar to the viewer, too, can fall out of the narrative into the abstract mode – the forms of an intended but no longer comprehensible narrative elude the construction of meaning. Conversely, forms that refuse a realistic mode of representation (or, in more general terms, that do not match the viewer's mimetic standards) but that still tell a story, may also be perceived as abstract – this, too, is seen in the case of the Admont Bible. This denial of obvious meaning, however, is what calls for precise *observation* of the object. What does this mean? Is an observing, attentive focus on an object only possible when narrative is not possible? Abstract, non-figurative art would then be opaque in more ways than one: it would be neither a window onto reality, nor onto a narrative, nor, in the sense of a mirror, onto the viewing subject. But for all this autonomy, for all this hermetic quality, it remains an Other for observation and dialogue – a thought that prompts me to make an appeal for an approach to objects beyond the control of narcissistic desire.

"Self-identity is a bad visual system. Fusion is a bad strategy of positioning."[18]

Visuality and art, the founding concepts of visual culture studies and art history respectively, can both be conceived of in essentialist terms. For an ethics of seeing with genuine methodological consequences, however, I would argue that it is necessary, in both fields, to conceive of these founding concepts as categories that have been agreed on, and not as anthropological constants. This is also the basis for thinking about the perennial problem of how to structure the relationship between the object of research and the researching subject now that claims to objectivity in this relationship have been debunked as

18 Haraway, "Situated Knowledges".

myths and historical constructions by poststructuralist and feminist critiques of science. In the context of her feminist critique of the "objective" natural sciences, Donna Haraway's concept of "situated knowledge" proposed a solution that became very influential, although it made little impact on either art history or visual culture studies. The title of this section is a quotation taken from her essay *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*, first published in 1988.

Haraway offers a drastic description of the situation in which feminist criticism found itself at the time, faced with a radical constructivism that was "conjugated with semiology and narratology": "We unmasked the doctrines of objectivity because they threatened our budding sense of collective historical subjectivity and agency and our 'embodied' accounts of truth, and we ended up with one more excuse for not learning any post-Newtonian physics and one more reason to drop the old feminist self-help practices of repairing our cars. They're just texts anyway, so let the boys have them back."[19] It was a matter of finding out "how to have *simultaneously* an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects, … and a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a 'real' world".[20] She does not see this divide as unbridgeable. As her linking metaphor, she chooses "a much maligned sensory system in feminist discourse: vision. Vision can be good to avoid binary oppositions".[21]

This brings together the two factors that interest me as scholarly positions with regard to the object: a critique of the concept of objectivity, as it applies in one form or another to art historical positions, and the use of seeing as the founding metaphor for the positions of visual culture studies. How does Haraway use seeing as a metaphor? And what does she need it for?

She begins with the discursive figure of the "disembodied gaze" that we know in its symbolic form as one-point perspective: a gaze that promises objective, hegemonic knowledge about the world without disclosing its standpoint: "The eyes have been used to signify a perverse capacity – honed to perfection in the history of science tied to militarism, capitalism, colonialism, and male supremacy – to distance the knowing subject from everybody and everything in the interests of unfettered power." This is a good summary of the feminist critique at the time, to which the discourse of visual culture studies

19 Ibid., 186-187.
20 Ibid., 187.
21 Ibid., 188.

also refers, right through to Mirzoeff's *Right to Look* in 2011. Haraway counters this gaze with the "particularity and embodiment of all vision" as the prerequisite for a "doctrine of embodied objectivity".[22] In this way, she does not separate seeing from objectivity in order to claim it for what she sees as the obviously partisan feminist critique; but neither does she equate it exclusively with subjectivity. Instead, she seeks to connect embodied seeing with objectivity. This seeing is embodied because "all eyes, including our own organic ones, are active perceptual systems, building in translations and specific *ways* of seeing, that is, ways of life."[23] The eye functions as a medium that translates the world for and within its specific context/body. Translation is to be understood here as a metaphor for the fact that seeing can never be immediate, only mediated. In Haraway's view, this is just as true of technical optical systems as it is of natural ones. In her view, this situatedness of embodied seeing must be linked with the demands of an objectivity based on a viewpoint that is partial rather than total, because "only partial perspective promises objective vision. This is an objective vision that initiates, rather than closes off, the problem of responsibility for the generativity of all visual practices."[24]

This responsibility for the generativity of visual practices is an important cue for an ethics of seeing. And it is only logical that Haraway demands the same responsibility for feminist theory, criticizing a modus operandi that adopts the viewpoint of the repressed in a manner that is uncritical and romanticizing. Haraway has no time for "innocent 'identity' politics … as strategies for seeing from the standpoints of the subjugated in order to see well. One cannot 'be' either a cell or molecule – or a woman, colonized person, labourer, and so on – if one intends to see and see from these positions critically."[25] Just as it is impossible to identify with the repressed person in order to adopt their viewpoint, it is impossible to be immediately present unto oneself: "Self-identity is a bad visual system. Fusion is a bad strategy of positioning."[26] Haraway insists that identity, including I-identity, does not produce science, but that "critical positioning does, that is, objectivity".[27]

Haraway's critique of identity positions as perspectives for a knowledge of the world was first published in 1988, shortly before the founding phase

22 Ibid.
23 Ibid., 190.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid., 192.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid., 193.

of visual culture studies around 1990. To my knowledge, it met with little response during that phase. Clearly, her critique resonated more strongly with those (natural) sciences that were sure of their store of objective facts and knowledge. I, too, will deal with just a selection from her thought, as I am interested in the way she links a critique of identity with visual metaphors in relation to the problem of the relationship between interpreting viewer and object.

The reasons for this lack of interest in Haraway are clear: in theoretical terms, visual culture studies moves between Foucault's discourse analysis, Lacan's concepts of the gaze, and a more general basic assumption of the social and cultural constructedness of knowledge, and hence within the framework of poststructuralist and postmodern theory that Haraway in turn recommends to the natural sciences as a way of reflecting critically on their own constructedness. The critical acuity of this theoretical framework is endangered, however, by the way visual culture studies deals with the concept of identity. Two specific variants are important here: the political version of positive amplification of identity often leads to what Haraway describes and criticizes as identification with the perspective of the "subjugated"; the other version is the radical subjectivization of interpretation, legitimized via what I consider to be a literalist misunderstanding of Lacanian models of the gaze, leading to a radically narcissistic self-empowerment of the interpreting viewer/subject. For Haraway this results in "self-identity", which she considers to be a bad visual system because it allows no distancing, either between the interpreting self (that is unable to situate itself) and the world, or between the viewer and the object, which is only seen insofar as it can be integrated into the viewer's self-image without threatening it. This object is then, as Haraway puts it, "a resource for appropriation" to which "any status as *agent* in the productions of knowledge" must be denied.[28]

Haraway's model of situated knowledge uses metaphors of seeing and perspective in a way that suggests a link with a model of dialogue between object and interpreting subject as developed by Margaret Olin with reference to art-historical precursors like Riegl and as hinted at in Pächt's thoughts on interpretative practice. Haraway's characterization of the object as an "agent" corresponds with the role played in art history and visual culture studies by the historical and cultural alterity of the object. This alterity is not something

28 Ibid., 198.

whose resistance to being incorporated into the construction of the interpreting subject must be overcome (be it via objectification or identification) but the element that turns the relationship between interpreting viewer and object into a dialogical one. And this relationship gives rise to situated knowledge insofar as the object recognized in its unfamiliarity is able to call the world-view and perspective of the interpreting viewer into question. This constitutes the action of the object understood as agent.

Seeing the Other

While art history focuses its gaze all too rigidly on discrete objects, forgetting or denying that this gaze is shaped by subjective factors, visual culture studies does focus its gaze on the "Other", but what it sees there is above all that which can be reconciled, for whatever reason, with the interpreting I. This gaze is a look in the mirror. The element of the unfamiliar that identifies the Other as other in the gaze of the One becomes or remains hidden, because it threatens the identity of the interpreting viewer. The methodological and theoretical ramifications of these two specific scopic regimes unfold in the concrete situations where they are applied, where the exchange of looks within the triad of object, producer and viewer are subjected to a variety of challenges. They also raise the question of the viewer's relationship to past and present: the art-historical interpreting I operates on the assumption that it is capable of objectivity in dealing with history; and while the interpreting I of visual culture studies, in its radical form at least, engages with theoretical critiques of objectivity, the conclusion it draws is that its own subjectivity, and thus its own present, must form the sole basis for interpretation. In ethical terms, this form of seeing means a denial of or failure to recognize the Other, be it a discrete object or a subject. This can only be overcome in the form of a dialogical seeing that recognizes the unfamiliarity of the Other: such seeing is aware of its desire to rewrite this unfamiliarity and to reduce it to what can be integrated into its own identity construction, whereas dialogue keeps the tension between identity and alterity open.

This position is not identical, however, with the well-known calls for "self-critique and relativization of one's own supposedly sovereign and certainly western, historically determined ethnological way of looking at different, for-

eign cultures",[29] as formulated especially in the context of postcolonial critiques of science. As a consequence, the discipline of ethnology developed the method of participant observation[30] in order to remove or at least reduce the imbalance of power between field researchers and those under study. However, alterity does not begin with the exoticism of other cultures; the reception of Lacan's model of the gaze has brought a more radical position into play here, based on the subject's being-other-unto-itself in the gaze of the Other and the (vain) attempts to resolve this into a narcissistic gaze. By reading it as a positive affirmation of identity, visual culture studies deprive the Lacanian model of the gaze of its critical potential. Instead, the emphasis should be on enduring the unfamiliarity of the Other, be it object or subject, and on keeping it alive.

Outlook: The digital world and its consequences

Not so long ago, art history focused entirely on historical alterity, with contemporary art considered the remit of art criticism. In recent decades, this has changed fundamentally, as the discipline deals with objects right up to the immediate present. This has gone so far that teaching staff are increasingly complaining that their students are losing their awareness of history. They prefer studying the present, it is claimed, in order to avoid the unfamiliarity of historical objects and the attendant need to acquire specialist knowledge. Such complaints are often accompanied by a broader verdict on the times: the politics and practices of knowledge displayed by the media, especially the Internet, are geared towards simultaneous retrievability of information regardless of its historical situatedness; attention spans are shorter; the status of information is arbitrary and it can be combined at random. Historical alterity is broken down into individual information units, making it possible to absorb the past into a puzzlingly structured, ever-changing, ever-present data network in which the active subject no longer features.[31]

29 Martin Schulz, *Ordnungen der Bilder. Eine Einführung in die Bildwissenschaft* (Munich 2005), 121.

30 See James Clifford, "On Ethnographic Authority", in *Representations* 1, no. 2 (1983), 118-146.

31 Superficially (and cynically) speaking, it seems as if this diffusion of the subject into information networks has now realized on a technical level what poststructuralist cri-

The texts read in this book do not address this technological change, a development that will force art history and visual culture studies to re-examine their approaches. The fundamentally altered conditions of access to and use of knowledge brought about by information technology and the culture of the world wide web have consequences for the categories on which the practice of visual culture studies and art history are based. They also affect my thinking about an ethics of seeing in these two fields: for visual culture studies this category is visibility as the visual representation of identity; for art history, art as object. Both are exposed to huge forces of change by the conditions of the digital world, the consequences of which I will in these concluding words sketch in.

It is questionable, for example, whether the political agenda of visual culture studies, framed as a matter of visibility within society, which involves intervening in the struggle for the right to identity-based representation of the "subjugated" (Haraway) or "subalterns" (Gayatry Spivak), is still sustainable in the face of ever-louder criticism of the endless, uncontrollable circulation of representations in the media, from television to surveillance cameras to social media and mobile phone cameras. For media artist and theorist Hito Steyerl, the fascination with and mimetic desire for attractive self-images has become a threat: "As we register at cash tills, ATMs, and other checkpoints – as our cellphones reveal our slightest movements and our snapshots are tagged with GPS coordinates – we end up not exactly amused to death but represented to pieces."[32] She notes a growing tendency towards withdrawal from representation: "… people have started to actively, and passively, refuse constantly being monitored, recorded, identified, photographed, scanned, and taped. Within a fully immersive media landscape, pictorial representation – which was seen as a prerogative and a political privilege for a long time – feels more like a threat."[33] Within these structures of image exploitation, the right to symbolic representation and visual presence in the cultural field has become a danger, the political resource of visibility has become a further instrument of control and marketization of both individuals and social groups. The consumer, for whose rights Mirzoeff was still campaigning in 1999, is now entangled in

tiques of the subject were calling for. But this would imply that this effect was a critical activity, and not something that must itself be criticized.

32 Hito Steyerl, "The Spam of the Earth: Withdrawal from Representation" in *e-flux journal* (eds.: Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, Anton Vidokle), #32 (02/2012), http://www.e-flux.com/journal/the-spam-of-the-earth/ (accessed 26 Sept 2016).

33 Ibid.

a regime of "(mutual) self-control and visual self-disciplining, which is even harder to dislocate than earlier regimes of representation".[34]

Under these conditions, visual representation can no longer be a political resource. The hope that symbolic representation of subaltern identities might lead to enhanced political and economic equality is in crisis; ultimately, hard-won visual presence based on fixed identities resulted in a situation where minority groups are now seen, recognized and addressed in precisely these formats of fixed diversity – as consumers. Instead of political participation, this regime of representation delivers "gossip, surveillance, evidence, serial narcissism, as well as occasional uprisings".[35]

It is a common theme in the debate surrounding the status of images in the world of digital media that as signs these images have neither an author nor a referent. If images in the digital world no longer have a referent, then visual representations of identity, the currency of visual culture studies, also have no referent (i.e. no subject). It follows that these representations put identities into circulation that have no referent. At the very least, these identities have detached themselves from the subjects who provide the images/data to look at, in order to float "freely" and uncontrollably in the network where, reduced to information, they can also just as uncontrollably be "harvested". In such a subject-less visual regime, the Lacanian models of the gaze adapted by visual culture studies are no longer effective, since representation has been suspended.

As well as the subject, what is also diffused in the world wide web is alterity, the unfamiliarity of the Other that can only come into play as the Other of a subject. Steyerl's "serial narcissism" comes to mind: in the world wide web, technology has led to an effect that can be conceived of by analogy with the narcissistic circle triggered in the interpretative practice of visual culture studies by Lacan's models of the gaze, working against the alterity/unfamiliarity of this Other in an attempt to smooth it over or mirror it into the self of the interpreting viewer – accompanied by a denial of objectifying distance.

Here, the object as an Other, as something in dialogue with the subject, comes back into play – for example the object of art history, the individual work of art. In the age of Google, the artwork, too, has altered its character and status, writes David Joselit in *After Art*.[36] To grasp this development in

34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
36 David Joselit, *After Art* (Princeton, Oxford 2012).

theoretical terms, he borrows metaphors from the financial markets and the Internet – from those fields, then, in which the aggressive capitalism of recent decades culminates. He does this not from a position of critical negativity, but because he wishes to refute what he considers to be the underestimated status of today's art. In his view, art needs this support. Against the idealization of the artwork as a unique auratic object – based on simplified readings of Benjamin[37] – Joselit upholds the circulation of digital images, which he applies to art. He pursues a strategy of positively revaluating something that seems to be in need of help – an approach that is familiar from visual culture studies. Joselit tries to rethink the current status of art by dressing its system of values, its forms of production and its manifestations, in the dynamics of finance and the Internet. The new values of art in the age of its digitally enhanced reproduction are based on the concepts of 'circulation' and 'currency'; the concept of media is replaced by that of format, the concepts of form and content by information. The image is "a visual byte", a form of information,[38] whose power Joselit sees not in its ontology but in "a current or currency" that is activated on contact with the viewer.[39] The more points of contact are established, the greater the power – a metaphor that links the (monetary) currency of images with the currents and networks of electricity. In Joselit's view, there has been a shift from the individual artwork to "populations of images", leading to "changing formats of contemporary art".[40] Today, it is saturation via mass circulation – "the status of being everywhere at once rather than belonging to a single place" – that creates value for and through images.[41] He thus contrasts two main aspects with the conventional status of the artwork: the shift away from individual picture to a "swarm of images" that produce a "buzz" rather than a Benjaminian aura,[42] and uninterrupted global circulation, reproduction and combination in digital media. Here, however, the digital image does not take the place of the artwork; instead, Joselit sees an

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37 For Benjamin's theory of the loss of aura, associated with art's mechanical reproduction, is still being used in art discourse as evidence of art's loss of value, while prices on the art market have soared. This limited reception turns Benjamin into a nostalgic figure yearning for the fixed, auratic artwork of old and forgets the political expectations that he associated with art's mechanical reproducibility and with this loss.

38 Joselit, *After Art*, XV.

39 Ibid. XVI.

40 Ibid., 15.

41 Ibid., 16.

42 Ibid.

obligation for art to respond to this development. He claims to have observed that contemporary art is moving away from individual or serial art objects towards "the disruption or manipulation of populations of images through various methods of selecting and reframing existing content". The *what* becomes less important than the relationship between the "discrete images and their framing network".[43] In his view, art criticism must adjust to a shift from an object-based aesthetics towards a "network aesthetics of images premised on the emergence of form from populations of images".[44] Form and medium are subsumed under the concept of 'format', superseding the individual artwork as a discrete object: "Formats are dynamic mechanisms for aggregating content."[45] The economies of this "overproduction of images" can only be understood and processed via an "epistemology of search", because they function via "connectivity".[46]

Joselit sees his political project exemplified in *Fairytale,* Ai Weiwei's contribution to Documenta 12 in 2007, for which the artist brought 1001 Chinese to Kassel: rather than criticizing the power of images, he argues, Ai used the power of art – in this case its (or rather his) prestige and economic power – to transport people and objects both in space and in the imagination. "This is our political horizon, after art."[47] In Ai's elaborate operation he sees proof that connectivity produces power. "One need not exit the art world or denigrate its capacities. Instead we must recognize and exploit its potential power in newly creative and progressive ways. Our real work begins *after art*, in the networks it formats."[48] This closing sentence highlights another of Joselit's concerns: he is clearly of the opinion that as a *part* of aggressive globalized capitalism, art is in the process of losing its legitimacy as a critical force, especially in the eyes of radical opponents of capitalism. He thus attempts a difficult volte-face: precisely this integration into the networks of turbo-capitalism, he argues, gives art a power that must be exploited. Which raises the well-known question: Is there such a thing as a critique of capitalism from inside? This question might also be asked the other way round: is there such a thing as a critique from outside the system? Joselit's essay provoked a range of

43 Ibid., 34.
44 Ibid., 43.
45 Ibid., 55.
46 Ibid., 56.
47 Ibid., 94.
48 Ibid., 96.

responses.[49] What interests me here is something else, namely Joselit's view that art should set more store by networks than objects. The examples he gives include discrete objects, like the photographs of Sherrie Levine, Ai's chair installation at the 2008 Venice Biennale, or Wang Guangyi's painting *Coca Cola* (2004). There are also the usual formats of contemporary art: videos, performances, sculptures, social interventions like those of Rirkrit Tiravanija and Santiago Sierra, as well as references to the art strategies which since the 1960s replaced high modernism à la Greenberg. His examples thus come essentially from the western canon of neo-avant-garde, conceptual art and post-avant-garde, i.e. those currents that have an inbuilt reflexive element, be it with regard to their own art practice or to the art system with its institutions and dynamics of exploitation, extended to include formats that are explicitly critical of capitalism such as Tania Bruguera's *Generic Capitalism* (2009). The departure of the discrete object from art production, then, is a topic that already has a history and a discourse. Joselit now describes it as an integrative moment of digitally accelerated capitalism; its critical thrust must come from its success *within* the system. This may also be the reason why, surprisingly, he does not address Internet art, since it is not (yet) integrated into the existing value creation chains of the art market.[50]

In their analyses, both Steyerl and Joselit presuppose the power of total media immersion as a fact of conditions today. For Steyerl, however, this does not immediately lead to a Baudrillardian merging of the real world with media simulacra; instead, she contrasts the identity simulacra of the world wide web with the resistance of real people/subjects – their withdrawal from representation. Joselit's position is necessarily less clearly defined because a separation of network images from reality would go against his argument; in his model, the dividing lines between the discrete objects of art and the image

49 For critical reactions to Joselit's political repositioning of art, see, for example, Todd Cronan, "Neoliberal Art History" in *Radical Philo-sophy* 180 (Jul/Aug 2013), 50-53, http://nonsite.org/review/neoliberal-art-history (accessed 16 Sept 2016).

50 Value creation chains that are (still) strongly shaped by criteria which Internet art does not (yet) offer or actively seeks to undermine: authorship, object character and the institutions of display. It should be noted here that this art system has learned to exploit even such art forms as do not produce objects in the strict sense, like performances and site-specific actions. In terms of exploitation, Bruguera's action or Santiago Sierra's *Hiring and Arrangement of 30 Workers in Relation to Their Skin Colour* (shown in 2002 at Kunsthalle Wien) could be said to be objects in this sense, even if Joselit describes them as formats. See Joselit, *After Art*, 66f.

clusters of digital circulation are fluid; the materiality of the art object does not feature in his argument.

Media technologies, their economies and their usage change so fast as to make it impossible to propose definitions and recommend paths of action for the long term on the basis of today's situation. And there is certainly no question of formulating strategies on the basis of one-sided descriptions of the current state of affairs. Many such analyses and declarations of paradigm shifts have been absolutizing, putting them at odds with the ambivalences of real developments; one need only think of the "end of history", the "end of art", or "globalization" that was soon joined by its opposite, an insistence on the local, leading to the portmanteau concept of the "glocal". Absolutizing talk of total media immersion also shows a dubious one-sidedness, regardless of whether it is due to unfettered techno-optimism, a media critique, or a more general critique of culture, often with a moralizing character.

I would argue in favour of insisting that art, in the broadest imaginable sense and in ways that constantly reflect changing conditions, contests the power of the factual.[51] For today, this would also mean contesting the power of "total" media immersion, even and above all when this power is (merely) imagined, because such imaginings, too, play a part in the transformation of the factual, as does a critique that speaks of the media, of images, of the Internet as an overwhelming flood to which people are helplessly exposed. The fact, for example, that Joselit does not elaborate on possible differences between art and media circulation at least suggests that art is indeed involved in the corresponding processes of change. Or to put it differently: art's autonomy can no longer be the basis for its ability to critique or contest; art is involved and distanced at the same time – as discussed above with regard to Haraway's "situated knowledge".

The ties between art and visual culture are closer today than ever before. And in contrast to what was implied by the distancing rhetoric of visual culture studies in the 1990s about art history being an elitist, bourgeois practice, this does not mean that art no longer has any critical legitimacy. On the contrary, its critical, contesting voice is necessary – and not so much in the visual forms of political agitation, as they are known from bygone eras of clearly drawn political battle lines. These new ties can also act as a meeting ground between art history and visual culture studies. Art history might profitably depart from its structural fixation on a discrete object – for although art

51 For this succinct formulation I am grateful to Bettina Uppenkamp.

itself has not abandoned the discrete object, its strategies are more open in their connective mobility. Art history should also open its heuristic categories, categories that belong to an episteme of objectivity, to thinking in relational terms, and here it can profit from the dialogue with visual culture studies. Thinking its main activity of seeing as being embedded in the relational could then also be described in correlation with what Joselit calls connectivity. In very simple terms, one might say: connectivity is to today's mobile art what context is to the art of discrete objects.

The growing resistance to digitally inflated presentations of identity diagnosed by Steyerl, on the other hand, will have very real consequences for the basic assumptions of visual culture studies, since public visibility now manifests itself as a kind of crazy hall of mirrors. It can be assumed that the strategy of visibility as a political resource in the struggle for recognition of subaltern identities is coming to an end, and with it the fixation on identities that had, in their affirmative function, long become prisons, especially in times of increased transcultural circulation. This can be beneficial in several respects: freedom from narcissism as the driving force behind visibility in identity politics, accompanied by the possibility for visual culture studies to focus its gaze beyond an identity-based framework more strongly on its object, visuality – visual phenomena of cultural production in the broadest sense, exchanges of gazes and scopic regimes in which relationships between subjects and media situations manifest themselves, their social and cultural interplay, their technologies, their social and economic effects, their accompanying cultural practices. And art has a special function in this field: to contest the power of the factual, be it visual or not, it bundles (in concentrated and, ideally, surprising form) aesthetic and critical-analytical forces of a kind that are not to be found in any other cultural production.

I imagine the respective objects of art history and visual culture studies as being positioned between the relational factors of visuality and the discrete objects of art. They relate to each other not in the sense of a hierarchy where art history features as a special case of visual culture studies, but in the interplay outlined above that situates art as a condensation and contestation of those conditions examined by visual culture studies. This is territory where art history and visual culture studies can meet, with attentiveness, in a seeing that orients itself towards the outside of the subject while remaining aware of its subjective genesis.

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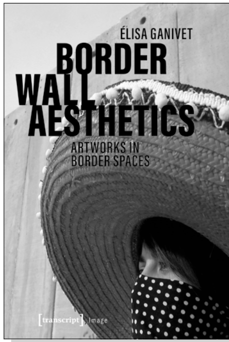

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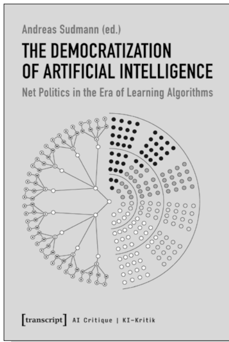

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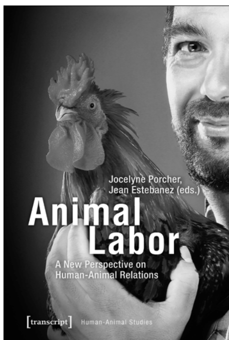

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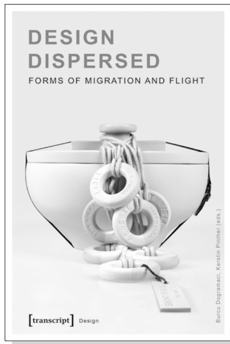

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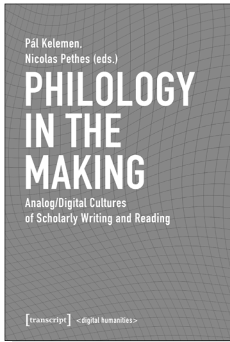

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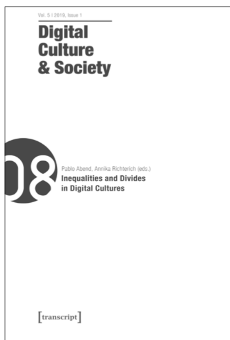

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