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HOW VISUAL IS VISUAL CULTURE?

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Abstract: If we admit that, with the exception of language, human perception is predominantly visual, it is reasonable to think that all phenomena conveyed by the visual senses have something in common, but then visual semiotics/visual culture will comprehend much more than painting, sculpture, and architecture. The double coding hypotheses of cognitive psychology, as well as Lessing's classical opposition between language and painting, tell us something about this basic opposition. But to understand visual culture, we have to start from the varieties of the spectacular function, present in our everyday Lifeworld.

Keywords: visibility, spectacle, semiotic resources, theatre, urbanism

In recent years, a number of authors have claimed for themselves the amorphous field (or whatever they think it is) of "visual culture" or "visual studies", struggling in vain to determine what it is all about.¹ The case of "visual culture" is actually even more problematic than that of "visual semiotics", both because visual things only have in common being visual (which is true of most things we are aware of in the human Lifeworld), but "visual signs" are at least also signs; and because the scholars involved in the study of "visual culture" always seem to argue that it is about more than mere visual things. The most paradoxical case is that of Mieke Bal, who, directly after having pointed out some of the (most obvious) contradictions of the earlier authors, immediately goes on to accept the label.² It might be argued, however, that since the visual sense is predominant in the course of all human meaning making, practically all semiosis is visual, as well as all culture. This would make "visual culture" into a pleonasm. The exception, of course, as always, is language.

VISUALITY AS A HJELMSLEVEAN "FORM"

There certainly are precedents for this point of view within semiotics: Roman Jakobson has treated of the differences between visual and auditory signs, and Thomas Sebeok divided up semiotics according to the sense modalities. Indeed, this conception is at the heart of Lessing's seminal discussion of the differences between painting and literature. Kümmel is perhaps the real pioneer of this domain, but his book mostly reads as a catalogue of visually conveyed ("sichtbare") phenomena. Preziosi has conceived of architecture as being a kind of visual semiosis, which he then opposes to linguistic meanings, identified with auditory semiosis, and Saint-Martin has been very explicit in choosing visibility as her domain. The title of Groupe μ 's big book, *Traité du signe visuel*, and many of its headings and subheadings, suggest that it is concerned, not with pictures, but with something more general called visual semiosis, or visual meaning; in fact, however, it is almost only about pictures. Also Kress & van Leeuwen oppose "linguistic structures" to "visual" ones, but talks almost exclusively about pictures.³

On the other hand, from the point of view of "structuralist semiotics", whose main

¹ Cf. MIRZOEFF (1999); HOWLES (2003); BAL (2003)

² As both MIRZOEFF (2003) and BAL (2003) point out, the problem is compounded by the ambiguities of the notion of culture. But we do not have sufficient space here also to formulate the question "How cultural is visual culture?"

³ JAKOBSON (1964); SEBEOK (1976); KÜMMEL (1969); PREZIOSI (1983); SAINT-MARTIN (1987); GROUPE μ (1992); KRESS & VAN LEEUWEN (1996)

cultural hero is less Saussure than Hjelmslev, we would normally not expect *visuality*, being a mere “substance” or even “matter”, to determine any relevant categorisations of semiotic means. In their dictionary, Greimas & Courtés actually claim that sense modalities, identified with the expression *substance*, are not pertinent for semiotics, and this is no doubt the reason for *visuality* being one of the many layers between the unique picture and signification *per se* being left out of consideration in the picture analyses offered by Greimas’ disciple Floch.

As I have argued elsewhere this type of argument is based on a confusion of the terms “substance” and “matière”, as employed by Hjelmslev, and in their ordinary usage.⁴ In fact, the term “matière”, to Hjelmslev, simply means that which is unknowable, and, as a consequence, not susceptible of being analysed; that is, it is the residue of the analysis; and “substance”, which, in the earlier texts, is the term used for “matière” in the above-mentioned sense, stands, in the later works, for the combination of “matière” and “form”. Thus, “substance”, in the early works, and “matter” later, simply means “that which is not pertinent relative to the other plane of the sign”; it does not necessarily stand for matter in the sense of ordinary language, that is, the material of which something is made, or the sense modality. If the material or the sense modality turns out to be relevant in relation to the other plane of signification, it becomes form. From Hjelmslev’s standpoint, this is what happens in connotational language; indeed, Hjelmslev even argued that if there were differences which made a difference between spoken and written language, they would differ as to form, not only substance. In an early article, Groupe μ appear to be privy to this confusion, when making “allomateriality” into one of the possible characterising traits of the collage; but this analysis has more recently been partly rephrased as heterogeneity of textures, and although some residues of the earlier analysis linger on, this is not as disturbing as it once was, since the Hjelmslevean framework is now largely dispensed with.⁵

The psychology of perception certainly seems to suggest the existence of some common organisation that puts all or most visually conveyed meanings on *a par*. If, as we have argued, all signs must also be objects of perception, there is every reason to believe that the modality according to which they are perceived determine at least part of their nature. This is indeed the position taken by Groupe μ , who goes on to compare this conception to the one favoured by such linguists as Saussure, Martinet, and Bloomfield, according to which the vocal character of language is one of its defining characteristics. More to the point, they observe that the linearity of verbal language is a constraint imposed on linguistic form by the characteristics of the vocal channel by which it was once exclusively conveyed. That is, the qualities of the visual sense modality are of interest to semiotics, to the extent that they specify formal properties embodied in each system addressed to that particular sense. Hjelmslev does not reason differently when he posits different “forms” for written and spoken language. The example of linearity, adduced by Groupe μ , is interesting in its own right, however, for about the only thing Saussure has to say about pictures, or, to be precise, paintings, is that they are multi-dimensional semiotical systems (‘une sème multi-spatiale’), in opposition to verbal language, which has a unique spatial dimension, that of temporal extension, or linearity.⁶

To the extent that there is a legitimate domain of visual semiotics, it should undoubtedly comprehend much more than pictures, buildings, and sculptures, which are the only visual signs discussed by Saint-Martin and Groupe μ . Curiously, in spite of the

⁴ SONESSON (1988; 1989; 1993; 1995, 1996).

⁵ HJELMSLEV (1953); GROUPE μ (1979; 1992:331ff, 333ff);

⁶ GROUPE μ (1992:58f), SAUSSURE (1974:39)

promise made in the introduction to ignore received categories such as art, Groupe μ , just like Saint-Martin, would seem to be the victim of the sacred trinity of art history, painting (to which drawing, photography, and so on, are conveniently assimilated), sculpture, and architecture. As soon as we leave the traditional divisions of art history behind, this trichotomy turns out to have a very limited value. Instead, sculpture should be compared to semiotically similar objects like the tailor's dummy, and the like. At one point, Groupe μ actually mentions marionettes as being a kind of sculpture to which movement has been added. But why not also add the ballet dancer, whose art is certainly visual? There are also significations that are only partly visual, such as those of theatre communication. Others might be considered not to have an intrinsically visual organisation, such as writing, the conformation of which depends in part on spoken language. But all kinds of gestures and bodily postures, objects, dummies, logotypes, clothing, and many other phenomena must be counted as visual signs and significations. In fact, even visual perception per se supposes a pick-up of meaning of sorts. Not only should we therefore have to go through the arduous task of determining the ways in which the various kinds of visual semiosis, beyond those of pictures, architecture, and sculpture, differ, but it also remains to be shown that they all have sufficient properties in common to be considered "visual signs" (or at least "visual significations"), in the sense of this property being relevant to their "form".⁷

Saussure observes that, whereas language is unidimensional, painting depends on a semiotic system deployed in multiple dimensions. This does not appear to be something peculiar to pictures, however, for clothing certainly supposes at least two combinatory dimensions (or syntagmatic axes) the slots of which are defined by the body parts and the layers of closeness to the body, respectively; and, if suprasegmatic features are taken into account, even verbal language will have to be considered multi-dimensional (as claimed by Jakobson). The question is, therefore, to what extent multi-dimensionality is a relevant property of the pictorial expression plane, that is, a property of the pictorial "matter" which is also a property of the corresponding "form". It certainly does not define the order in which units are put together, according to rules of ordering (i.e. "syntagms"), as is the case with clothing and language. Closeness to the body and body part location do determine together the positional meaning of a piece of clothing: on the contrary, in a picture, in the core sense of a sign depicting a real-world scene, things are not basically defined by their horizontal and vertical position. It is true, of course, that horizontal and vertical position, just as position with respect to the "harmonic" or "disharmonic diagonal" and other spatial axes defined by Saint-Martin's analytical scheme, may add shades of meaning, and even essential building blocks, to pictorial signification, but they are not the defining characteristics of pictoriality, because they may distinguish many visual signs which are not pictures, not only in the sense of the core meaning, but even in an extended sense.⁸

THE RESOURCES OF VERBAL AND VISUAL SEMIOSIS

When comparing visual and verbal semiosis, it is still useful to start out from *Laokoon*, a book first published in 1766 by the German writer Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. Explicitly, of course, Lessing's observations involve "literature" and "painting" (i.e. pictures and, to some extent, other visual modes of mediation, such as sculpture), and he is concerned to show that in order to fulfil the destiny of art, they must each use iconic signs, which is to say that paintings should use signs the expressions of which are

⁷ GROUPE μ (1992:12ff); SAINT-MARTIN (1987); GROUPE μ (1992:405f).

⁸ SAUSSURE (1974:39); SONESSON (1988; 1992e; 1993); SAINT-MARTIN (1987)

shapes and colours in space, whereas literature must employ sounds in time. Contrary to contemporary semioticians, Lessing does not bother to separate questions of fact from normative issues. He stipulates, for example, that art must be iconic. But if Lessing's description of visual and verbal semiosis is correct, the former can only use iconic signs to signify objects in space and the latter only for signifying objects in time.⁹

To evaluate these claims, we need a more adequate terminology than the one used by Lessing. Wellbery has reformulated Lessing's analysis in terms taken over from Hjelmslev, unfortunately abusing the latter's terminology. Thus, while the terms content and expression are correctly employed, the use to which Wellbery puts terms such as "material", "substance" and "form" is quite foreign to Hjelmslev's intent, because the difference observed by Lessing has nothing to do with relevance. Instead we shall talk about "resources", "units", and "constraints". Resources are what are at hand, the possibilities that are opened up. Units are the principles of individuation, corresponding to actions in time, and to bodies in space. The constraints, finally, are rules, principles, and regularities of the respective semiotic resources.¹⁰

Since time is not well rendered in pictures, according to Lessing, visual art should ideally pick up one single moment, and, in a parallel fashion, literature, which is not very conversant with space, should be content to describe a unique attribute. Then, as Wellbury reads Lessing, an extension to the whole will take place in the imagination, spatially in language and temporally in pictures, that is, in the domain that the system cannot adequately render. The property that most easily allows such an extension to the whole of the (spatial) object is called the "sensate quality"; and the phase which best permits the anticipation of the complete temporal succession is called the "pregnant moment". In fact, however, the extension in time is the one most important to Lessing, as shown by his negative view of the possibilities of pictures.

If we are to believe in Lessing, visual art is not only able to describe the whole of space, but it cannot avoid doing so: pictures have to show "fully determinate entities". Taken literally, this must mean that pictures are unable to isolate "sensate qualities". Even if we limit this claim, as is no doubt intended, to sensate qualities in the visual modality (which it itself problematic, not only taking into account recent findings involving mirror neurons, but also Gibsonian affordances), this is certainly not true: as I have shown elsewhere, notably against Goodman, the "density" of pictures is only relative, and all kinds of abstraction are found in them. Simply put, "density" to Goodman means that, no matter how fine the analysis of something (e.g. a picture) into meaningful units, it will always be possible to posit another unit between each two of those already given, and so on indefinitely. This is certainly not true of the expression plane, in the case of more or less schematic pictures; nor does it apply to the content plane of some pictures the expression plane of which is fully "dense". Indeed, for all practical purposes, many pictures are not about a particular person in one or other disguise, but about more or less abstract roles in relatively generic situations. But, contrary to what happens in language, there is no fixed limit between what is relevant and what is not. Properties of some coloured patches which are irrelevant to determine the content "little girl", become relevant in the determination of the further meanings "girl in 17th century clothing", "Spanish Infanta", etc.¹¹

Lessing's and Goodman's views are reminiscent of the contemporary distinction within cognitive psychology between "iconic" and "verbal" codes. These "codes", to be sure, are not really signs, but rather units for the organization of memory and thinking.

⁹ LESSING (1766); TODOROV (1977, 169ff.).

¹⁰ WELLBERY (1984); SONESSON (1988).

¹¹ SONESSON (1989; 1994); GOODMAN (1968).

But “iconic codes” are said to be “specific”, “concrete” and “contextual”. Both in the case of “imagery”, to use the classical term, and pictures, it is probably sufficient to say that they take bigger chunks out of reality than does language, and that the parts continue to be intricately enmeshed into each other. This should be enough to explain that people can faster decide the size of objects from drawings than from words, and that irregular objects may be rotated in the mind to different degrees, where to accomplish the rotation will take longer time to the extent that it would do so in real perception (as in Shepard’s famous experiments, described, for instance, by Rubin). In this sense, pictures and imagery seems to be more iconic than language as far as segmentation is concerned. Indeed, Paivo, the principal advocate of the “dual-coding” approach sounds very much like Lessing when he claims that imagery is better for spatial processing (what is to the right, strait on, etc.) and language for sequential processing.¹²

Deriving his inspiration from Peirce, Bayer (1975; 1984) formulates Lessing’s problem differently: it concerns the relation between the schema of distribution for the expressions and the schema of extensions for the referents. Bodies are carriers of actions, which is to say that, without bodies serving as their background, actions cannot take place. Actions are continuous, but can only be rendered iconically as discrete states. The distribution schema of pictures does not allow for succession, only for actions rendered indirectly by means of bodies and collective actions where several persons act together. It will be noted that Bayer supposes all continuous objects to be temporal. But, clearly, space is also continuous from the point of view of our perception, so there should also be spatial continua. Pictures actually render certain spatial continua better than language – in fact, this is the other side of what was called “fully determinate objects” above. It is indeed the “spatiality”, as opposed to the “sequentiality”, of Paivo.¹³

However, since spatial objects are (potential) carriers of actions, all spatial details serve to suggest potential stories, in particular if they are sufficiently familiar to us to fit in with many action schemas. Thus, it seems to me that, everything else being equal, a picture containing more spatial details will evoke more virtual courses of action, i.e. it will suggest a greater number of possible continuations of that which is going on in the scene rendered by the picture. In terms of narratology, pictures actually contain a larger amount of “disnarrated elements”, that is, alternative courses of actions starting out from the given moment – and in this respect (though of course not in many others), they actually are better than verbal language at suggesting a story line. Thus, pictures and imagery also have a stake with sequentiality.¹⁴

The difficulty posed by narrativity in pictures, as Bayer reads Lessing, is that the picture is unable to abstract: Homer may show the gods drinking and discussing at the same time, but that is too much information to put into a single picture. Actually, it is not the amount of information that is crucial (the picture may easily carry more) but the possibility to organise it: verbal language has fixed means for conveying relative importance, newness, focus, etc. The picture, however, in the prototypical sense of the term, may possess some corresponding mechanisms which are not sufficiently known, but hardly any systematic and content-neutral means for organising such information: that is, in Halliday’s terms, there are no fixed devices for separating that which is given from that which is new, and that which is the theme (what we talk about) from the rheme (what is said about it). Indeed, although “background”, as applied to language, is

¹² RUBIN (1995, 55ff.; 42f); PAIVO (1986).

¹³ BAYER (1975; 1984).

¹⁴ PRINCE (1996); SONESSON (1997).

originally a visual metaphor, just as is “perspective”, that which the picture places in front is not always the most weighty element, with importance decreasing according to increasing apparent distance; nor is necessarily the central figure “semantically” the most prominent one.¹⁵ One of the principal difficulties is that, in the ordinary picture, the space of representation is, at the same time, a representation of the space of ordinary human perception, which impedes an organisation by other systems. In the history of art, these difficulties were at least partially overcome by Cubism, Matisse, as well as some forms of collages and synthetic pictures, and it has been even more radically modified by visual systems of information, logotypes, Blissymbolics, traffic signs, etc. Yet it remains true that pictorial representations lack systematic means for rendering what Halliday has termed “information structure”.¹⁶

Thus, although pictures do not render the world in the form of “fully determinate entities”, they have to divide up the world in bigger chunks in order to convey information about it than is the case with verbal language, and they lack any general means for imposing an internal structuring on these chunks, apart from the one given in perception. In terms of modern cognitive linguistics, the same two points might be driven home by saying that pictures cannot pick one image schema without also having to choose several others, and they are unable to organise these schemas in order of relative importance. The visual representations used, in particular, by Langacker and Talmy, suggest that image schemas are some abstract kinds of pictures corresponding to a single or a very limited number of objects or events. We could still differentiate language from pictures by claiming that, in the latter, no image schema can stand on its own.

VISUAL CULTURE FROM THE THEATRE TO THE BOULEVARD

Lessing’s claim, upheld by Bayer and Wellbery, and, no doubt independently, repeated by Paivo, that language is somehow more capable of rendering temporal continuity than pictures, depends on the idea that linguistic expression, unlike pictures, is itself an action (where of course oral expression is taken as the prototypical case). However, except for a small set of particular cases such as onomatopoeic words, performatives, pronouns and the like taking their meaning from the process of enunciation, quotations, and some cases of preferred word order, the action accomplished by the linguistic expression very rarely is the same as the one rendered by its content. Being actions, linguistic acts may be said to manifest the abstract quality of “actionness”; but it does not follow that this property is in any way connected by means of a sign function to the action described. In the semiotic sense, linguistic actions are normally not iconic of the actions they talk about. At some very high and abstract level, the words, sentences or at least the paragraphs used by the radio journalist describing a horse race at the same time as it occurs also uses linguistic actions iconically for the actions accomplished by the horses (e.g., describing the horse as crossing the finishing line at the same time as this occurs). But this is of course a fairly marginal case, even though it may be more common now than at Lessing’s time. In any case, this is secondary iconicity, because it can only be so interpreted given our knowledge about the direct transmission of horse races and the like. As we noted above, however, language can no doubt make use of its own continuity to distinguish different meanings (such as “He stood up and sang” and

¹⁵ KRESS & VAN LEEUWEN (1996) make a lot of unsubstantiated claims of this kind (also as applied to the left and right side). Curiously, although they declare Halliday to be one of their principal sources of inspiration, they do not even differentiate between given and new, on the one hand, and theme and rheme, on the other.

¹⁶ HALLIDAY (1967-1968); SONESSON (1988; 2004).

“He sang and stood up”). This means that, as a general case, language is no better at rendering temporal continuity than pictures are. Thus, language does not only have to isolate the “sensate” quality, but must also, just like pictures, pick up the “pregnant” moment, i.e. the phase when something significant happens.

On the other hand, theatre, as Lessing himself recognised, and film, as Bayer added, are able to render temporality in an iconic way: they are “moving pictures”. What makes pictures, in the central sense of static displays, not very apt at rendering sequence is precisely their static nature. As soon as sequence is added on the expression side, sequential content can be more iconically reproduced than in language. This also goes for visual imagery. Paivo emphasizes that imagery is especially well suited to transformational thinking, e.g. the rapid movement from one situation to another. Somewhat paradoxically, one of Lessing’s arguments for language being especially apt to render sequence really seems to show the opposite. When describing objects, such as the shield of Achilles, Homer chooses to tell the stories illustrated on the shield. But such a procedure is not typical of language, but of oral tradition, and students of oral tradition have pointed out that such feats of memory as represented by oral tradition are only possible thanks to visual imagery, precisely because of its higher contextualisation.¹⁷

If there is such a thing as visual culture, then film and theatre are certainly also a part of it. Umberto Eco’s has characterised the elementary theatrical situation using the following example: an alcoholic is sleeping on a bank over which the Salvation Army hangs a banderol about the dangers of drinking alcohol. More precisely, this situation can be described, in the words of Veltruský, as everyday behaviour being transformed into theatre when it becomes *distinct*, has its own *consistency* and is meant to be *perceived*. The banderol as such serves to demarcate the situation of the alcoholic on the bank, as does of course the slogan written on it. The situation of the drunkard is here not very different from the ready-made at the art exhibition and the happening or performance in front of an audience (whether there is a scene or not): they are all placed in a position where they are meant to be perceived, even if in everyday life they would not be considered worth-while perceiving. They thus become distinct from everyday reality, without however necessarily having any obvious kind of consistency.¹⁸

Olle Hildebrand has distinguished the sport event, the ritual and the theatre by means of a cross-classification employing the dichotomies *stage* versus *audience* and *expression* versus *content*, where the sport event realises the first dichotomy, the ritual the second and theatre both. The first opposition is derived from the Prague school model formulated by Mukar&ovský¹⁹, and the second from Saussure and, more specifically, Hjelmslev. Put in terms more congenial to the Prague school approach, we have to do with the *referential* and *spectacular* functions, respectively. As I have pointed out elsewhere, there are many problems with this analysis, but the principal one is what domain it is which can be divided into three parts by theatre, rite and sport. In other words, is there something that is common to these three types of meaning-endowed actions that they do not share with other types of actions? Why should we compare the theatre precisely to the rite and not, for example, to the circus act, the ballet (if these are not special cases of theatre), the concert, the public lecture, or even children’s play (i.e. Piaget’s “symbolic play”), social encounters, markets, “live action role play”, and indeed to “happening” and/or “performance”. Some of these cases may perhaps be rapidly discarded from the category of “spectacles” in the widest sense,

¹⁷ RUBIN (2005).

¹⁸ ECO (1975); VELTRUSKÝ (1984).

since their dominant channel of perception is not vision but sounds and, more specifically, language. But if we are going to believe Hildebrand, ritual is even less of a spectacle, because it is not even offered up to perception. This is misleading, however: ritual is really perceived, both by those who are acting it out, and those who are merely bystanders. There is no separation of scene and audience (or less of a distinction), because all are part of the audience, not of the scene.¹⁹

The notion of *spectacular function*, understood as an invitation to contemplate is too general, at least in two ways: in the first place, everything which is public (which is within the “public sphere”, in the sense of Habermas) is in some respects given to perception; and, secondly, all works of art are, in a more specific sense, created in order to be perceived. The public sphere is obviously conceived as something which invites to perception when, following Goffman, for example, social life is seen as being divided into a stage and its “backstage”, separated, for instance, by the revolving door between the kitchen and the restaurant, or when, following Sennett, one opposes the theatrical character of public life until the XVIIIth century to the sentimentality of our time (which offers the spectacle to an inward, rather than an outward, audience), or when, with the situationists, one identifies the capitalist world order (which is, at the moment, all the world order which remains) with a “société de spectacle”.²⁰

Without necessarily agreeing with any of these images of the world, we must nevertheless admit that many components of daily life exist in order to be perceived by others: this is true of all clothes and body decorations, not only different varieties of “piercing” and tattoos, which recently have become popular again, but also the more customary earrings and other adornments familiar in Western culture. To a greater degree, the medieval market stands out as a spectacle, even though Bakhtin was more interested in what was said than what was seen there; something similar can be said of the boulevards, the cafés and the passages in the capital of the XIXth century, as they were described by Baudelaire and Benjamin, just as in all latter-day capitals of Modernity, and it is valid already for the central square of the traditional village, and for popular festivals, both in the traditional sense of the term and as they have been reinvented during recent decades, in the form of tourist attractions promoted by the municipalities.

Nevertheless, these phenomena are not spectacles, in any deeper sense, among other reasons because the spectacular function, also when it appears, is not dominant, or the visual modality is not; or because the spectacular function is only *intermittently* present, or also because it is *symmetric*. As far as the lecturer or another participant in the “public sphere” is concerned, it can be said that the *visual modality* is not dominant (except when the lecturer is also a celebrity, as were for instance Lacan and Barthes). In many cases, the spectacular function is not dominant or only appears temporarily, which can be said in minor or greater degree of many parts of the daily life. However, the potential symmetry of many spectacular situations may be a more fundamental factor. As I have pointed out elsewhere, the *spectacular function* can be described as an operation resulting in a division applied to a group of people, and separating those which are subjects and objects, respectively, of the process of contemplation; but, in fact, the subjects and objects of contemplation are often the same, at least temporarily. In the market, on the square, the boulevard, etc., observation is (potentially) mutual, as well as intermittent, but this is not true of the official parade or the dismemberment of Damien, nor of the sport event or the theatre. In ritual, there is a difference between those who only observe, and those who, in addition to observing, are also observed. As

¹⁹ HILDEBRAND (1970); SONESSON (2001).

²⁰ SONESSON (2001; 2003, in press).

a contrast, on the boulevard, but also already in the town square, the spectacular function is *symmetric and continuously changing*. However, contrary to what happens in other parts of everyday life, it is certainly *dominant*, in the sense of the Prague school: it does not only retain the upper hand, but it uses everything else for its purpose.²¹

The boulevard, as it may still be experienced today in Paris, as well in many other (particularly Latin) big cities, is not predominantly a polyphony of voices, but a tangle of gazes. Indeed, the primary function of interpretation, telling us that another person is approaching for whom we must give way (as noted by Goffman), is overdetermined by a secondary function of interpretation, normally at a higher level of awareness, which is aesthetic, as least in the old sense of involving “pure contemplation”. As such it does not only pick up information but also gives it out: it conveys messages such as “I observe you” and “I find it worthwhile to observe you”. The hero of Eric Rohmer’s film *L’amour l’après-midi*, who spends his life on the boulevard, expresses this double function of the gaze very clearly, when he says life on the boulevard is basically a question of “trying oneself out on another”. The gaze, in this case, as in the boulevard stories of Baudelaire and Gogol, is exchanged between men and women. Frenchmen still unabashedly conceive this as a mutual interchange between the sexes. For Americans, on the other hand, this is something men do to women, and consequently, they talk about “visual rape”. The metaphor is adequate, at least in the sense that it describes the crossing of the visual barrier. In fact, the trajectories of the boulevard are peculiar, in that they do not only allow for movement, but create virtual access to looking, and no doubt also to smelling, touching, and, more rarely, speaking. At least this is what Rohmer’s hero hopes for.

On the boulevard, at the café table, on the market square – that is where visual culture comes of its own.

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