

Freedom and collectivity of look

Iwona Kurz
Institute of Polish Culture
University of Warsaw

In his latest book Nicholas Mirzoeff is speaking up for the right to look¹. His argument is of fundamental nature, referring to the foundations organising our social life, however the author illustrates it with evident and simple situations when this right has been or used to be limited. The historical, legal (!) ban of staring at white women by black men. The police dispersing crowd under the slogan: „There is nothing to look at”. Past restrictions regarding looking at rulers. This approach ascribes arrogance and impertinence to look, apparently judging it as potentially dangerous or even deadly – look is forbidden and therefore needs to be freed. At the other end of the spectrum a reverse process is taking place, we are witnessing a struggle to be seen, social presence rests on one’s visibility – as demonstrated by such actions as the Campaign Against Homophobia „Let us be seen”.

Visual dimension of the social and political order seems to be self-evident. Probably that’s why it is so inconspicuous. Still, it involves parents, who starting from the earliest moments instruct their children: „Don’t look there” and „Look at yourself!” It involves entertainment, where stories are told with a camera – with a language which is not so much universal itself, but which makes emotion-packed narrations, gestures and poses seem universal and thus ensures their constant reduplication. It involves the space where we live, our daily efforts to skip certain types of communication with our glance and spy for the others, as we have learnt that there are more and less important sights. It is about how we show ourselves to the world and how it – and its inhabitants – present itself to us. We work with our eyes really hard; the question is how to turn this work into a meaningful effort.

The contemporary culture is sometimes called a visual culture. It is not a telling description, if we limit it to the excess of pictures in the modern world. Their number and availability, commonness of applying them in various contexts and functions are indisputable dimensions of the modern experience. A man in front of a computer connected to the net or a man with a Smartphone in the street are two complementary figures of today. The former in his or her private sphere but communicating with the world, the latter in the public sphere but immersed in the network of his private contacts, both someplace else than their physical whereabouts. With that said, let us not forget that being connected to a computer, let alone owning a Smartphone are not that common, possessing these commodities and the skills to use them are still a privilege.

However, orienting oneself in the world by sight and the visual construction of the world are not modern inventions. On the other hand, culture is not merely and simply visual. Therefore, by offering the notion „visual culture”, we are proposing a certain profiling, thinking about the world with look as the analysis framework, an attempt to describe everything by reference to looking: who is looking, who sees and what, how is he/she looking (there are various ways of looking), what is the effect of his/her gaze, what

¹ Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look. A Counterhistory of Visuality*, Duke University Press, Durham – London 2011. A fragment of the preface to the book entitled *The Right to Look*, translated by Magda Szcześniak and Łukasz Zaremba (the Polish title: *Prawo do patrzenia*), was published in the publication: *Antropologia kultury wizualnej. Zagadnienia i wybór tekstów*, red. I. Kurz, P. Kwiatkowska, Ł. Zaremba, Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Warszawa 2012.

are the meanings ascribed to what is seen and what is communicated, how does he/she construct his/her world and the world of others, what construction he/she is subject to, etc, etc. Three premises of more general nature would be crucial for the sake of explaining the notion of visual culture.

The first thesis, after W.T.J. Mitchell², points out at the cultural character of all kinds of visual constructs (pictures and the ways of looking) and which is less obvious, at the visual character of all social constructs. Hierarchies, meanings, self-reference and reference to others and the reality, gestures and communications are devised and implemented because man is a seeing creature. From traffic lights to marking military ranks, from green crosses above pharmacies to crosses topping church towers, from reading to theatre and cinema. Seeing is a part or a dimension of almost all human practices, including those regarded as not for display.

The second thought, coined by Susan Sontag, elaborates on the first one. The essayist wrote that photography defines the grammar and the ethics of seeing³. Extending this diagnosis over other visual media, in each case we are obliged to ask how the code of a particular medium (i.e. the language of photography, cinema, visual arts) affects our perception of the world. Sontag quotes a scene from *Les Carabiniers* by Jean-Luc Godard (1963), in which the characters come back from the war with a suitcase full of booty. Their loot are postcards portraying the whole visible world split by various categories: vehicles, nature, buildings. Camera mediated reality manifests itself in pieces, is fragmented and deprived of readable time and space references – everything is in hand or at hand, irrespective of the distance, of the history and topography.

For Sontag, the ethical perspective concerns mainly the case of photos presenting suffering of others. She devoted her second book to this theme and attempted to draw attention to this problem, also directly via its title – *Regarding the Pain of Others*⁴. Pictures documenting different kinds of dramatic events, natural disasters and social upheavals, destructive force of elements and effects of political violence can, - or at least are expected to be able to – spur viewers to take ethical stance, affect their convictions and encourage potential engagement in the affairs of those in pain. Sontag emphasises the importance of being seen, quoting opinions of the inhabitants of Sarajevo, who during the siege of their city wanted that “the world” at least saw their situation.

The ethical aspect of the problem however goes beyond the context of similar uses of photography. The process of learning and conquering the world (nay, even appropriating it, as metaphorically demonstrated in *Les Carabiniers*) is carried out with the use of various visual tools, therefore the manner how a camera or a still camera is pointed at the Other is the key thing. The distance resulting from using varied recording devices is beneficial when we are in need of an external look; it can be however dangerous when it enhances and underlines the difference from others. This is particularly harmful in animation projects, which quite often provide their participants with „looking devices”. On one hand, it undoubtedly reinforces the right to look, on the other it increases the risk to differentiate the world with the use of the camera, whereas the right itself will not be executed effectively unless one acknowledges defining and excluding potential of the manners of looking applied in the social life (overlooking the embarrassing e.g. beggars, overlooking the inconvenient in media pictures, e.g. television series).

In this context – the context of the grammar and the ethics of looking – the problem of media functioning manifests itself fully. Every instrument which makes it possible to expand or modify perception and

² W.J.T. Mitchell, *Showing seeing*, trans. Ł. Zaremba (the Polish title: *Pokazać widzenie*), in: *Antropologia kultury wizualnej...*, s. 57–67. Original text: W.J.T. Mitchell, *Showing Seeing: a critique of visual culture*, *Journal of Visual Culture*, Aug 2002, Vol. 1 Issue 2, p.165-181 (<http://vcu.sagepub.com/content/1/2/165.full.pdf+html>).

³ Susan Sontag, *On photography*, trans. S. Magala, (the Polish title: *O fotografii*) *Karakter*, Kraków 2009, in particular the chapter: „The Image World”.

⁴ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, trans. S. Magala, (*Widok cudzego cierpienia*) the Polish title: *Karakter*, Kraków 2010.

cognition capabilities inherent in human body, meaning everything that enables seeing, hearing, touching and feeling more, deeper, forward and backward is a medium in the strictest sense⁵. We learn to use such tools – in the case of sight: from glasses through telescope to photography – but regardless of their application manner they change naturally the basic dimensions of the reality inhabited by man. They alter the view of the world, a sense of distance, they disrupt hierarchies and construct new ones, they make us transform the way of thinking, perception of time, space and body. Acknowledging this fact should be the basis of critical reflection on the media, which should be additionally accompanied by criticism of how mass and electronic media (so called new media) describe the world, inform about it, what narrations they use for these purposes. Making a movie clip and uploading it to You.Tube is easy but not necessarily it has a meaningful, other than purely technical relevance to visual education. It is not enough to distribute photo cameras. If it supposed to be animation, emancipation work – ethical in its core – it has to entail recognising the needs of the subject and how they are commonly defined in media applications. Only then the clip may have the chance to become „mine”.

Third significant problem refers to the fact that seeing does not happen isolated and there are no purely visual media. Each instance of less or more conscious use of the sight engages the whole body in a variety of ways; sometimes it is merely a vehicle of experience, but in principle man is unable to isolate one sense without engaging the other. Thus what needs to be considered is for example what camera has been used to take particular photos, where a film is being watched, whether watching takes place openly and publicly or maybe from hiding, etc., etc. Contact with visual messages similarly engages us in a complex, multisensual way.

The task of visual education would consist most of all in raising awareness of these processes – teaching to look critically – and subsequently in developing visual skills and competencies necessary for living and for creating, inspiring individual work and practices⁶. Their key importance to the functioning of the society must be reiterated: they should not be perceived as the instruments to operate effectively in professional or social contexts. What is visual maps out the fundamental framework for our being in the world and for practising the reality (it refers also to the blind people – in their case necessary visual messages are translated into sound or tactile stimuli that accompany the picture).

Articles on visual education often invoke the metaphor of reading⁷. It helps to illustrate, by analogy, the essence of visual skills. Skimming a text, we are reading it simultaneously at several levels: unaware of the process we are piecing together letters into words and sentences, and what is more important figuring out their meaning, often not so much decoding it precisely, but rather grasping it, sort of guessing. Then there is the level of deep understanding of the text, where all its subtleties, nuances, style-based meanings are revealed. Still we know that we have learnt all this and we know the alphabet. Just like we have learnt to read, now we should be able to look at pictures – and at the world, taking into consideration all the differences arising from their diverse constructions.

Finally what is also at stake is the ability to share one's own visual experience and to practice it together. Only then will social and political freedom to look be possible.

Translated by Karolina Giedrys-Majkut

⁵ Marshall McLuhan lists as media (means of communication) not only the radio, telephone, cinema, television, photography, but also money, a tomahawk, different kinds of dance, a plane. Compare his *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, trans. N. Szczucka, (the Polish title: *Zrozumieć media: Przedłużenia człowieka*) Wyd. Naukowo-Techniczne, Warszawa 2007.

⁶ Or tactics as Michel de Certeau would say. Tactics is the level of individual practices, “the art of combination [...] sort of »obscurity line «. [...]Must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into opportunities”. It is opposed to strategy, designating the scope of relations and regulations set by the authorities”. Compare Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. K. Thiel-Jańczuk (the Polish title: *Wynaleźć codzienność*), Wyd. Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2008, s. XXXIX–XLIII.

⁷ Compare e.g. Tony Schirato, Jen Webb, *Reading the Visual*, Allen & Unwin, Crow Nest 2004.