

Visibility, Visual Awareness, and Philosophy

PAWEŁ BYTNIIEWSKI

Department of Aesthetics and Philosophy of Culture, Institute of Philosophy, University of Maria Curie-Skłodowska, 5 M. Curie-Skłodowskiej Square, 20-031 Lublin, Poland

Email: pawel.bytniewski@umcs.pl

The article aims to explore how the philosophical approach to problematising visibility interacts with its pre-philosophical meanings and cultural roles, revealing that the significance of this confrontation is evolving into a completely new perspective today. Currently, the discursive and non-discursive aspects of this confrontation are shaped by technological changes in visibility. The challenge that technology poses to visibility is twofold – it questions our philosophical beliefs and also disrupts everyday practices rooted in traditional culture. Therefore, technology is a difficult partner for both philosophy and daily life practices. It challenges philosophy by introducing questions and problems that are often unfamiliar or unrecognised, and it complicates the efforts of practitioners who still struggle to adapt technical tools to their nearly timeless routines.

Keywords: visibility, vision, visual awareness, *theoros*, *theoria*, technology

INTRODUCTION

Visibility is one of the most influential terms in philosophy, with hermeneutic and epistemological potential. From Plato to Husserl, philosophers continue to assign it a special role in describing and explaining the phenomenon of cognition – the human ability to penetrate the essence of being and reach the truth. The metaphor of visibility weaves through the entire history of philosophy, inheriting numerous layers of meaning that entangle thought in paradoxes. Since Pre-Socratic times, philosophers have sought to explain the meaning of what is visible, determining how what is seen becomes understandable and can hold truth. They have tended to favour either an intuitive, full grasp of this meaning beyond language or approaches that are fragmented, partial and metaphorical, referring to something outside discourse. Visibility, seen as a condition of uncovering or revealing, ἀλήθεια (*aletheia*), competes here with discursive notions of truth, which rely on the meaning conveyed through speech, as discussed by Aristotle concept. Thus, visibility is a borderline concept because its potential use pushes philosophical thought toward what may be the limit of our ability to apprehend and conceptually control it. Contemporary philosophers with very different orientations toward the tradition of philosophy have tried to address this issue. Wittgenstein, in the Picture Theory of Language (Thesis 2.1 of *Tractatus*: We make to ourselves pictures of facts.) In Husserl's *Ideas*, we find both the resistance of the visible attempts to grasp it intellectually, and the power of

attraction of this phenomenon. A common and almost archaic root of philosophical problematisation of the relationship between the visible and the intellectual is the pre-philosophical role played by *θεωρός* (*theoros*), a participant in the mission to the oracle and a witness to the transmission of authoritative statements of the deity (Nightingale 2004; Dillon 1997). Today, however, the challenge for the philosophy of visibility and the image is not so much the distant cultural role of *theoros*, but the technology that changes both the ways of participating in the culture of visibility, but also challenges the entire philosophical tradition of attempts to grasp what is intellectual in visibility. Technology, created by the intellect, shifts the perspective on the meaning of perception, especially as the instrument, particularly optical ones, offers new models for understanding what vision is, what it depends on, and how it allows the subject to access visibility. Since the 17th century (Kepler, Descartes and Galileo), the issue of visibility, seen this way and intertwined with technology, has become part of philosophical discourse.

WHAT IS VISUAL AWARENESS?

The French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty expressed an opinion that can be a guide for contemporary thinking about vision and theories of seeing. He states: 'It is true that the world is what we see, and that we must nevertheless learn to see it. First of all, in the sense that we must measure up to this seeing with knowledge, take possession of it, say what we are and what it is to see, thus act as if we knew nothing about it, as if we were about to learn everything [...]. This is the way things are and nobody can do anything about it. It is at the same time true that the world is what we see and that, nonetheless, we must learn to see it – first in the sense that we must match this vision with knowledge, take possession of it, say what we and what seeing are, act therefore as if we knew nothing about it, as if here we still had everything to learn' (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 4).

I think that Merleau-Ponty here clearly diverges from the concept of seeing found in Husserl, the notion of 'platonizing' vision. Merleau-Ponty struggles with the corporeality of vision, and therefore with the problem – maintaining the historical standard of comparison – that Kepler had already established. Husserl, on the other hand, expects the purity of seeing that the cognitive act, covered by the *epoché*, attains.

The thought quoted above is intriguing not only because it suggests that we must learn to see as if we were unable to see spontaneously and could not see before we learned all that we believe is learned knowledge. Merleau-Ponty argues that we must possess seeing as if we did not have it and as if we needed to master it, tame its spontaneity to understand it. Seeing is therefore incomprehensible, and according to Merleau-Ponty, it is necessary to make a kind of backward turn; it is essential to systematically and reflectively control vision to access its sources and regain its consciousness in an unspoiled and complete form. Can the theory of vision achieve this? What should the theory of vision that sets such a goal look like? Is the vision that is consciously theorised more complete and wiser than the spontaneous vision that governs us – such as when it intensifies during search or intense focus? Is not it true that by theoretically possessing and mastering vision, we risk contaminating it with reflection rather than elevating it to a higher level of consciousness?

There are two main answers to these questions from philosophers. The first (the Stoics, Husserl) emphasises seeing in its pure, intuitive form. The second, which emerged later and was influenced by scientific achievements (such as psychology, sociology, cultural science, and even medicine), recognises the 'impure' conditions of acts of vision, including the conditions

of the prior steps to intellectual acts. It is perhaps worth mentioning at this point the book by Ludwik Fleck, a doctor and philosopher from Lviv and Lublin, who introduced the concepts of a thought collective, cognitive mood, and a style of thought. According to Fleck, those ideas were meant to demonstrate the role of knowledge and social factors in shaping perception and its content. Many years after its publication, Fleck's book was discovered by Thomas Kuhn, who also contributed to the discussion of these issues in his own work (Fleck: 1979).

There is an obstacle in reflecting on the vision. It is as if seeing cannot be reflected upon, as if it disappears or becomes inauthentic when we think about it. We can only truly see when it happens in the present moment, when it overruns all other human activities, practical and mental, and when it brings forward what can be shown.

This or a similar understanding of vision has a very long and dominant history in Western intellectual culture. This tradition has a leading intention. This intention is the belief that seeing itself has two essential features. First, seeing is always aware of itself. Each αἴσθησις (experience) is simultaneously αἴσθησις αἰσθητός (*aisthesis aisthetos*), an experience of experience. Every perception involves both the thing perceived and the perceiver, without separating them. Therefore, in a particular act, the perceptions can sometimes obscure or even cancel each other out. Vision fulfills this condition. Second, seeing, once freed from distractions, is a communion with the highest truth; it is almost a divine act that enhances the being of the one who sees.

This can be shown by looking at seeing as a specific function of the Greek *theoros*. In ancient Greek culture, assuming the role of *theoros* meant suspending all activities except for seeing and witnessing, thereby participating in the divine rather than the human.

The modern word 'theory' in the dictionary of ancient Greek culture meant as much as a simple view or seeing, and in terms of meaning, it was opposed to participating, interpreting, or engaging in something. The meaning of θεωρία (*theoria*) derives from the specific cultural role that the *theoros* took on – an envoy of the polis, or a messenger on private initiative, to sacred places where it was possible to obtain knowledge, divine knowledge, that is, ultimately authoritative knowledge. This knowledge, due to its divinity, held a binding significance for the decision-making of either the community or the individual. The divinity of this knowledge lay in its participation in divine matters, not human affairs. Therefore, it required mediation and interpretation. 'The lord whose oracle is in Delphi neither speaks out nor conceals, but gives a sign', Heraclitus proclaims (Kirk et al. 2011: 209).

Those sacred places where the gods gave signs for people to interpret were oracles, with the most important being in Delphi and Olympia, the site of the Panhellenic games, where the gods decided who they had to distinguish with victory. *Theoros* literally meant 'one who sees [root -hor] vision [thea]'.

Theoros, when serving as an envoy to the oracle, observed the prophets' interpretation of the divine message. His role was to faithfully convey this interpretation without distortion. He was not permitted to reveal its content to anyone except the person who sent it. When *theoros* travelled to Olympia, his task was to communicate the results of the competition announced by the *prophetes*, the official judge. It was the gods who determined the winner. In both cases, *theoros*'s role involved witnessing and transmitting, with the transmission serving as a guarantee of correctness, though not of the truth. The προφήτης (*prophetes*), as interpreters of the divine message, bore the responsibility for the actual truth revealed through visions. The concept of theory here is nothing more than an impartial perspective. In an archaic sense, theory also implied two important aspects: detachment from one's own environment (atopy),

alienation, and entering into a realm where familiar rules no longer apply. At this point, *theoros* becomes an outsider in the social and human world, yet simultaneously enters the divine domain. The second aspect involves the hardships and dangers of the journey he undertakes, which for centuries has symbolised death. Thus, *theoros* was essentially someone who died temporarily to the worldly life in order to access divine truth.

In this respect, the *theoria* is contrasted with what the Athenians called *thusia* (*thusia*). According to a contemporary American researcher, Andrea Wilson Nightingale: 'The Athenian spectator during Dionysia or other local festivities was never referred to as "*theoros*"; it was "*theates*". Thucydides offers a useful explanation of this point: when a city celebrates a feast at home, it plays a role in the *thusia*, not *theoria*' (Nightingale 2004: 49).

Therefore, the most important theoretical moment of this view is disinterestedness and non-involvement, caring for what is revealed as truth understood as unconcealed (*aletheia*). Truth as unconcealment is a property of the things themselves, revealed in the vision. In vision, we reach a state in which divine truth becomes something manifest to us.

However, the theory understood in this way, as a disinterested perspective, originates from a common cultural source shared with another form of culture, which is ancient theatre. This is evidenced by the similarity of the words: *theoros* and θέατρον *theatron* [theatre] and θαῦμα (*thauma*) [wondering]. θαῦματα (*thaumata*) are things deserving of admiration. θαῦμα ἰδεῖσθαι (*thauma idesthai*) – for Pausanias, the author of the ancient guidebook – means 'worth seeing' (Prier: 1989).

There is, therefore, another way to understand what an unengaged view is: it acts as a spectacle, an object, and an act of amazement, holding a special power – the power to transform the person who gains certain knowledge, the power of truth, meaning uncovering – of revealing what is unknown in man to himself. This power is shown through κάθαρσις (*katharsis*) – the purification we experience during a theatrical performance.

There is, therefore, a certain paradox in the tradition of the philosophical attitude toward visibility. Philosophy, referencing the pre-philosophical tradition where the non-intellectual sense of visibility takes precedence, has been attempting from the very beginning to understand this sense within the scope of intellectual discourse, all the while preserving the pre-intellectual experience of direct, critical engagement with the world and living in it.

We can therefore cite Plato, the ancient skeptics, Robert Grosseteste's philosophy of light, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty to emphasise this paradoxical clash of vision and word, light and discourse.

PHILOSOPHY AND VISION

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle provides a definition of tragedy where catharsis, understood as purification through spectacle, is included. Tragedy is a spectacle which, by arousing pity and fear, leads to the 'purification' of these feelings. Catharsis – an originally medical term – helps us understand the function of viewing as a spectacle, an object of amazement. It serves as both a process of self-knowledge and transformation. We observe an action involving characters we can identify with, which then evokes fear. However, because we avoid suffering the same fate as the characters, we can only sympathise and pity them. Tragedy as a spectacle thus illustrates the separation of view and emotional involvement, highlighting the power and helplessness of thought, the importance of a detached perspective in understanding one's own fate, and the role of surprise in stimulating thought – elements from which Plato, as we know, drew the motivation for philosophy.

Aristotle, in his *Protrepticus*, writes: 'It is not a terrible thing at all, then, if it does not seem to be useful or beneficial; for we don't claim that it is beneficial but that it is in itself good, and it is appropriate to choose it for itself, not for the sake of some other thing. [18]19 For just as we travel abroad to Olympia for the sake of the spectacle itself, even if there is going to be nothing more to get from it (for the observing itself is superior to lots of money), and as we observe the Dionysia not in order to acquire anything from the actors (rather than actually spending), and as there are many other spectacles we would choose instead of lots of money, so too the observation of the universe should be honored above everything that is thought to be useful [53.26|54.1]. For surely one should not travel with great effort for the sake of beholding people imitating girls and slaves, or fighting and running, and not think one should behold the nature of existing things, i.e. the truth, for free' (Aristotle: 51).

The theory of vision demanded by Merleau-Ponty, etymologically speaking, is a pleonasm; it is simply seeing of seeing, the intuition of seeing. Here lies a certain difficulty and a paradox: how could such a meta-seeing, a meta-intuition built on top of seeing, be more authoritative than the immediate seeing of the thing itself? How are we to judge the possibilities of a reflective, double viewing, which would give visibility to vision itself, perhaps contradicting simple seeing – its immediacy, intuitiveness, intentionality, and truth?

The theory of seeing that Merleau-Ponty wants would be precisely the vision of seeing, the return of the intellect to, as he calls it, chiasm, that is, the entanglement of the intentionality of the act entangled in the *aisthesis aisthetos*.

'If it is true that as soon as philosophy declares itself to be reflection or coincidence it prejudices what it will find, then once again it must recommence everything, reject the instruments reflection and intuition had provided themselves, and install itself in a locus where they have not yet been distinguished, in experiences that have not yet been "worked over", that offer us all at once, pell-mell, both "subject" and "object", both existence and essence, and hence give philosophy resources to redefine them.[...]The visible about us seems to rest in itself. It is as though our vision were formed in the heart of the visible, or as though there were between it and us an intimacy as close as between the sea and the strand. And yet it is not possible that we blend into it, nor that it passes into us, for then the "vision" would vanish at the moment of formation, by disappearance of the seer or of the visible. What there is then are not things first identical with themselves, which would then offer themselves to the seer, nor is there a seer who is first empty and who, afterward, would open himself to them – but something to which we could not be closer than by palpating it with our look, things we could not dream of seeing "all naked" because the gaze itself envelops them, clothes them with its own flesh. Whence does it happen that in so doing it leaves them in their place, that the vision we acquire of them seems to us to come from them, and that to be seen is for them but a degradation of their eminent being?' (Merleau-Ponty: 1968: 130–131). The significance of a philosophical theory of vision, such as that sought by Merleau-Ponty, lies in its ability to test whether thought can reflexively control seeing. For philosophy, the means of reflexivity of thought, at least since Descartes, form its critical control over any object. Criticism of this kind arises from the distance from the object, which is necessary to understand it fully. But how do we determine the distance needed to establish the relationship to all objects, including seeing? The answer was first given by Plato, who pointed to atopy, the lack of a specific place needed for philosophical theory. Knowing ideas and seeing them presuppose such a position of the observer. In Plato, all philosophical knowledge and theory are achieved precisely from

this placelessness. Today, Edmund Husserl echoed Plato's approach, but in the style of Descartes. The universal distance sought guarantees *epoché* – the suspension of belief in the reality of the visible world – to understand how it reveals itself to consciousness.

Merleau-Ponty recognises the challenges that this kind of task presents. It turns out that the basic formulation of the task itself limits reflexivity and perception to the boundaries of their own meanings: the line between the subject and its object, the line between reflection and intuition, becomes blurred. Instead of removing uncertainty, we encounter philosophical doubts and questions about the accuracy of the task's formulation. In the following lectures, we will see how this formulation was transformed to remove philosophical doubts.

Why is this happening? Why does the philosophical theory of vision encounter such difficulties? In light of this, must we reject the entire tradition of understanding the task of the theory of vision, the tradition that begins with *theoros*' journey to Delphi?

The philosophical theory of vision relies on categories derived from all premises, which it considers uncertain. To these premises, as conditions of vision, it ascribes the meaning of the aperture, the obstacle that blocks effectiveness, and the effectiveness of understanding the relationship between seeing-theory and see-object. All these premises are eliminated to reach what Plato called atopy, the place of vision, which for Descartes was the target point of methodical doubt. The fact that human vision is binocular, that the image formed on the retina is inverted and diminished, or that vision occurs from a specific point in space, is irrelevant to Plato and Husserl – just as the fact that previously seen views can shape actual vision. It is also irrelevant to them that human activity includes producing objects whose only function is to represent a view, that they are images, or that the knowledge of seeing can influence the act of seeing itself.

I will not discuss in detail the weaknesses of philosophical theories and their advantages over other theories. However, I would like to point out that the examples above demonstrate a different path to the theory of vision than the one suggested by the philosophy of atopic reflection. There are other areas of human activity where seeing is present and rooted in the real world, and as objectified, it can become an object of cognition. Today, we can classify these factors influencing vision into two categories: one mainly falls within the objective realm of science, where understanding vision involves locating it within the boundaries of the human cognitive apparatus – its body and mind. In this view, the theory of vision relies on the premise that knowledge of vision involves understanding a specific finite apparatus that produces sight. Johannes Kepler was among the first to think this way, analysing human vision by comparing the eye's structure to that of the *camera obscura*. Optics, which partly explains this analogy, emerged here as a theory of vision. It is important to note not only that optics as the study of vision became a rational framework for understanding it but also that this rationalisation influenced the production of certain cultural objects – artifacts whose cultural function is solely to be seen. Cultural theories of vision therefore view this location as a context where human sight is shaped through interaction with the iconosphere – the field of artificially created visibility. They explore how cultural presentations influence our way of seeing. The cultural theory of seeing is driven by questions about how culture, as a sphere of action expressed through artifacts, shapes visibility and how it reflects ideas about what seeing really is. It also considers how our understanding of the conditions that enable vision influences what and how we perceive.

In this place, I have focused most of my attention on philosophy and its connection to the realm of visibility. Not only because it is the oldest and thus most influential intellectual

tradition related to seeing, but also because philosophy has used the concept of seeing to develop and address many important problems. However, today, the challenge for this philosophical tradition is the changes that technology has introduced and continues to bring into the cultural environment. Philosophy, as a part of intellectual culture, as well as the practices we engage in related to visible objects and shifts in visual consciousness, now face a space of metrics and qualities that are not yet fully recognised. Therefore, at this point, I will only highlight a few key issues.

TECHNOLOGY AND VISION: THE PHILOSOPHICAL CHALLENGE

Since the Scientific Revolution in the early 17th century, ideas about natural abilities and types of vision have changed significantly. Natural abilities and ways of seeing are influenced not only by art but also by science-related technology.

First of all, it is about how the ideas of science change within the field of science, influenced by the relationship between science and technology. The visible and the observable are distinguished, and these two aspects of visibility have different meanings. What remains visible is still what the unarmed eye can see in the world. Objects become observable through cognitive tools, allowing them to help explain the rules of the world in some way (Amsterdamski: 1992).

The vital role of technology in this process centres on four main issues:

The first point is that technology allows us to see things that were previously invisible. What we directly perceive visually loses its authority compared to scientific perception, which is mediated by observation, measurement, and experimentation tools. Vision is no longer solely a matter of the eye in science; it involves technology. Galileo, publishing *Il saggiatore* (*The Assayer*) (1623), contributed to this understanding of vision, which has a very long and dominant history in Western intellectual culture.

The second point is that the technique of vision, which embodies optical theory, not only intellectualises the act of perception but also objectifies vision, helping to make it an object of study. As a result, vision itself begins to be visible. Descartes, through the analogy of the eye and the *camera obscura*, recognises optics as a theory of vision. Its limitation is that it does not consider binocular vision, which is not used in a telescope or microscope. It is only when the optical model of monocular vision gives way to the physiological model of binocular vision that theories of vision start to account for the physical nature of vision in general. Philosophy only recognises this in the 20th century.

The third point is that technology shapes the mind as the focus of vision. This involves setting technological standards for perception. To see within the realm of science, you must adopt a method. Seeing then takes on an important function – it distinguishes what is essential from what is incidental, what is universal from what is specific, and what is revealing from what is already known. In the 18th and 19th centuries, this role was played by nature atlases, which provided models of objects visible to botanists or zoologists (Daston, Galison 2007).

The fourth issue concerns how technology influences theories of vision by introducing principles such as mediation and perspectivism into the entire process of seeing. Perspectivism becomes a significant element in 19th-century theories of cognition and analyses of painting (Panofsky 1991). Conversely, understanding seeing as mediation brings the theory of vision into the realm of semiotic analysis.

Philosophy investigates the boundaries of visibility and seeks to identify the subjective and objective conditions that shape its possibilities. Science, as the study of visibility and perception, can influence not only our understanding of vision but also how we create objects that serve cultural functions of visibility, such as images. In this sense, science and its theories have had a significant impact on broader cultural phenomena. Additionally, we must distinguish art – particularly the kind that uses visibility as a tool of artistic influence. Art has the potential to establish norms of seeing, challenge them, and deconstruct how we have learned to see. It teaches us a different way of seeing or a different attitude toward visibility than what we are used to (Bytniewski 2017).

How can philosophy explore the limits of visibility? How do understanding and knowledge of vision influence the creation of objects meant to be seen? And in turn, how does this creation alter our perception?

CONCLUSIONS

Visual awareness is a concept through which philosophy, from its origins, has tried to include visuality – the internally diverse, cognitively multifaceted, and ontically undefined realm of human experience with what can be seen – into its realm of inquiry. All these efforts, historically speaking, carry the characteristics of a paradox. A discourse aiming to encompass a vision of philosophy often misses much of it. The more thought seizes control of the vision, the more it slips away from thought. Instead, philosophy produces its intellectual *simulacra*. Today, this paradox is intensified by technology, which enables us to explore the 'vision–intellect' relationship in a completely new way, though not without paradoxes.

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PAWEŁ BYTNIEWSKI

Matomumas, vizualinis suvokimas ir filosofija

Santrauka

Straipsnio tikslas – ištirti, kaip filosofinis požiūris į vizualumo problematiką sąveikauja su jo ikifilosofinėmis reikšmėmis ir kultūriniais vaidmenimis, atskleidžiant, kad ši konfrontacija šiandien virsta visiškai nauja perspektyva. Šiuo metu diskursinius ir nediskursinius šios konfrontacijos aspektus formuoja technologiniai vizualumo pokyčiai. Technologijų vizualumui keliamas iššūkis yra dvejopas: jos kvestionuoja mūsų filosofinius įsitikinimus ir kartu sutrikdo kasdienės praktikas, iššaknijusias tradicinėje kultūroje. Todėl technologijos yra sudėtingas tiek filosofijos, tiek kasdienio gyvenimo praktikos dėmuo. Jos meta iššūkį filosofijai, iškeldamos dažnai nepažįstamus ar dar neatpažintus klausimus ir problemas, o praktikų lauką apsunkina tuo, kad techninius įrankius vis dar nelengva pritaikyti prie beveik nesikeičiančių kasdienės rutinos formų.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: matomumas, vizija, vizualinis patyrimas, *theoros*, *theoria*, technologija