Visibility

A Category for the Social Sciences

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abstract: Can visibility be counted as a general category for the social sciences? The attempt to provide an answer to this question entails both describing actual phenomena of visibility, and defining the characteristics of visibility as a workable, unified category. This article analyses the relational, strategic and processual aspects of visibility as constituting a single field. The importance of this field is rooted in the deep epistemology of seeing present in our society, as well as in its ratio vis-a-vis the other human sensory dimensions and extensions. At the substantive level, the article addresses the question of the ambivalences of visibility and its effects, according to social places and subjects. Recognition and control are understood and explained as two opposing outcomes of visibility. It is argued that empowerment does not rest univocally either with visibility (as it is assumed by the tradition of recognition) or with invisibility (as it is assumed by the *arcana imperii* tradition).

keywords: media ✦ recognition ✦ sociological categories ✦ surveillance ✦ visibility

> Ineluctable modality of the visible: at least that if no more, thought through my eyes. Signature of all things I am here to read, seaspawn and seawrack, the nearing tide, that rusty boot. Snotgreen, bluesilver, rust: coloured signs. Limits of the diaphane. But he adds: in bodies. Then he was aware of them bodies before of them coloured. How? By knocking his sconce against them, sure. Go easy. Bald he was and a millionaire, *maestro di color che sanno*. Limit of the diaphane in. Why in? Diaphane, adiaphane. If you can put your five fingers through it it is a gate, if not a door. Shut your eyes and see. (James Joyce, Ulysses)

The Visible and the Symbolic

When it comes to enumerating 'basic' sociological categories, there is no basic agreement. But there is at least a bunch of words most sociologists

will admit it is hard to do without – or, for some, to escape from. These include things like (social) action, fact, structure, status, class, power, group, ritual, representation and, of course – whatever it means – society. Quite a few brilliant and leading theorists struggled throughout their lives in order to set up one such word, i.e. to get some 'field' or 'system', some 'subject' or 'network' added to the list. Since not many people would put their efforts into campaigning for visibility – and surprisingly, given the number of sociological theories and researches that are bound to deal with this concept, and despite the huge literature on visual arts and visual language – I would like to assign myself the task of developing the argument that visibility can be counted as a fully entitled sociological category. I am not saying 'basic' category: I am not that ambitious, and rather sceptical about paradigms.

Admittedly, the visual is a notable aspect of our culture. Indeed, this has been so in many other times and places around the world. However, we know from anthropology that the very number of perceptual senses and the fault-lines for their demarcation are culturally bound (Classen, 1993, 1997). Likewise, hierarchical relationships among the various senses (which is the most 'noble' one, the most epistemologically reliable) and the likeliness of synaesthetic effects (the legitimacy of the fusion of different senses) are culturally dependent and evolve in time. Misrecognition of the variety of sensory experience is due to the predominance of one sense over the others. In the Modern Age, the distance senses of sight and hearing have marginalized the proximity senses of smell, touch and taste (Howes, 1991, 2003). These observations confirm that the domain of physical perception is inextricably intermixed with cognition. Perception entails a theoretical dimension, as the epistemological debate since the 1960s, and particularly the scholarship of Kuhn, Lakatos and Feyerabend, pointed out. For instance, in Feyerabend's (1978) account, Galileo, with his telescope experiments, created a new, initially counterintuitive way of seeing that was functional to support his astronomical theory. In short, sensorial experience and theory go hand in hand.

What we are specifically interested in is not the visual dimension per se, but the more complex phenomenon of the field of visibility. Visibility lies at the intersection of the two domains of aesthetics (relations of *perception*) and politics (relations of *power*). When these two terms are understood in a sufficiently broad meaning, it makes sense to say that the medium between the two domains of aesthetics and politics is the *symbolic*. A symbol is aesthetically impressive and semiotically relevant in social relations. Just think of the powerful and ambivalent position of the *light* in western culture, its indelibly metaphysical *residuum*: light is the obsession of physics as well as of religion, it marks the field of the sacred and that of the secular. It is not simply visible. It constitutes a form of visibility.

The symbolic dimension of the visible is central in media technologies. Here, of course, the names of Marshall McLuhan and Walter Ong come to mind. Their fundamental contribution demonstrated how communicative technologies work as extensions of corporeal senses. These extensions are hardly neutral. They contribute to selectively enhance a certain type of sensory perception and establish a 'ratio' among the senses, a hierarchical ranking. The supremacy of vision, McLuhan (1964) and Ong (1977) argued, is contextually linked to the alphabet technology, particularly in its typographic period.

The theoretical stake for social scientists in interpreting visibility is not finding one way to meaningfully talk about figurative images, paintings, films, landscapes and the like. Rather, I think, here we have a problem that points towards a more comprehensive task of imagining a general category that enables us to think about a wider range of phenomena and mechanisms. *Ça va sans dire*, images, their production and their consumption, are among these. But many other phenomena that are usually interpreted through classic sociological categories could turn out to be within the jurisdiction of visibility. Visibility is a metaphor of knowledge, but it is not simply an image: it is a real social process in itself.

There are several areas in sociological literature where the issue of visibility appears, from gender to minority studies, from communication studies to the theories of power. Most of these studies deem visibility to be an important factor. However, each of them tends to treat visibility in its own terms, as a local concept. Consequently, these studies do not seem to be engaged within a single conversation. On the contrary, the argument developed here is meant to show that the issue of visibility can be treated as a single field, and that there would be much to be gained by taking such a new viewpoint.

The Field of Visibility

To begin with, there are at least a few key features of visibility we must account for: relationship, strategy, field and process. The relational quality of visibility is linked to the basic fact that, when the activity of watching occurs among living creatures, seeing and being seen are intimately connected. This aspect was acutely noticed by Georg Simmel (1969). In his excursus on the sociology of the senses, Simmel investigated the 'uniquely sociological function' of the eye, and especially of reciprocal eye-to-eye contact. The symmetrical directness of the eye-to-eye, of reciprocal visibility that exists only insofar as it is unmediated (by words or other images), is for Simmel the most fundamental type of human interaction. It is so because it leads to an understanding of the other that is not filtered by general categories, but is truly individual and singular. What we may at

first be tempted to dismiss as 'superficial impression' is in fact the most basic presentational form of sociability at large, and it is grounded in the visibility of each other's countenance.

In an ideal natural setting, the rule is that if I can see you, you can see me. But things are not that simple: the relation of visibility is often asymmetric; the concept of intervisibility, of reciprocity of vision, is always imperfect and limited. In military strategy, it is well known that when I am on the peaks of a mountain and you are down in the valley, I can easily track your movements for hundreds of metres around, but you can track my movements only in a much more limited way. Complex and less complex technological devices, from curtains to stone walls, from video cameras to satellites, enhance visibility asymmetries according to planned arrangements, liberating it from the spatial–temporal properties of the here and now (see Thompson, 2005). The relational aspect of visibility points precisely to the fact that asymmetries and distortions of visibility are the norm, vis-a-vis the exception of perfect intervisibility.

Asymmetries transform visibility into a site of strategy. As a matter of strategy, visibility exists in *cones* and *truncated cones*: seeing and being seen are always exercised in the form of 'from/to few/many'. In 'Normal Appearances', Goffman (1971) explored this problem in a penetrating way, with a central concern towards relations of visibility as they overlap and intersect with perceptions of danger. Goffman showed that normalcy represents in fact a state of invisibility of the environment. In the lack of alarm messages, the environment is 'transparent' to the observer. Building on Goffman's difference between being at ease and being alarmed, one can appreciate the characteristics of the normal as those of the invisible: the normal is unmarked, unnoticed, unthematized, untheorized. As Sudnow (1972) also argued, seeing-at-a-glance marks the *timing* of interpersonal action. Glances are interactive phenomena for co-producing normal contexts. However, while Goffman and Sudnow took an egocentric point of view on such physical visible environments where human beings interact – the *Umwelt* – I would suggest looking at visibility from an impersonal, purely relational, point of view, in other words to consider it as a *field*.

Goffman and Sudnow explored visibility cones whose vertex consisted essentially in an individual, and where visibility information flowed from the environment to the individual. But we should explain all the other different cone-like families of flows. When a transformation in reciprocal visibilities occurs, i.e. when something becomes more visible or less visible than before, we should ask ourselves who is acting on and reacting to the properties of the field, and which specific relationships are being shaped. The field of visibility is distinct from all singular visibility flows. It is endowed with its own *thresholds* of relevance and its multiple ensembles of cones. The

point may be clarified this way: while visibility is a non-egocentric field, there is no such thing as an impersonal 'visible'.

Shaping and managing visibility is a huge work that human beings do tirelessly. As communication technologies enlarge the field of the socially visible, visibility becomes a supply and demand market. At any enlargement of the field, the question arises of what is worth being seen at which price – along with the normative question of what should and what should not be seen. These questions are never simply a technical matter: they are inherently practical and political.

The problem of what to show, and with what consequences, is persistent in science, too. In his study on the representation of illness in modern medicine, Sander Gilman (1995: 33) stressed the peculiar status of visibility regimes, due to the 'simultaneous, multiple, and often contradictory meanings inherent in all images' – a point that has been made recently also by Susan Sontag (2003) in her study on the representation of pain. Medical theory and practice, as well as the circulation of medical knowledge in popular culture, set up a visual normative model based on the opposition of health and illness, beauty and ugliness, which could be strategically deployed in the attempt to control anxiety about illness. Likewise, Foucault (1973) placed a visibility mechanism at the genesis of what he called the *regard médicale*. The medical gaze was understood by Foucault not as a personal, but as an impersonal, disciplinary gaze. Modern medicine has its main ground in the 'triumph of vision' that can be reached in the autopsy – literally, 'to see with your own eyes' – of the corpse. The individual living body, on the contrary, presents itself as *invisible*, both because of its organic depth, its impenetrability to sight, and because of the intricate interweavings of symptoms it exhibits. Accordingly, the task of modern medicine became that of bringing the invisible back to visibility.

The Epistemology of Seeing

There is a deep *epistemology of seeing* in western thought. We can gain an insightful idea of this by reading Joyce's poetic mocking of a scholarly philosophic argument at the beginning of the third chapter of *Ulysses* – and which Adorno sarcastically stigmatized as 'peephole metaphysics'. It has often been observed that the epistemology of modern science and modern philosophy at large do attribute a fundamental role to the sense of sight, in the forms of vision and evidence. Vision is an alias for intellectual apprehension. This would not have been possible without a complementary operation carried out by Descartes, who dignified vision but only insofar as it was understood as an operation of *thought*, rather than of the eyes. In fact, it was the opposite of the linguistic shift from the

Greek word *theorin*, which means to see, to the word 'theory'. A constant tension between the identity of vision and knowledge, on the one hand, and the opposition of knowledge and vision, on the other hand, is a constant of modern philosophy. Criticism of vision as a valid source of knowledge was at the core of most sceptical arguments deployed by rationalist philosophers against the empiricists.

In 20th-century philosophy, vision knows two antonyms: the first is *language*, especially the logical and a-sensorial interpretations of language heralded by Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* and Heidegger in *Sein und Zeit*. The second is *distorted vision*, the decoupling of vision and reason, which came along as a rejection of the Cartesian visual model. In this latter case, there is a fascination for *le côté obscure de la vision*, the dark, irrational, non-analytical aspects of vision, the flipside of the coin of *les idées claires et distinctes* (Descartes' famous recipe). In a monumental book, Martin Jay (1993) grouped these two forms of reaction to vision under the label of 'antiocularcentrism', which he diagnosed and analysed in detail in the French intellectual tradition. Jay reconstructs the wide stream of antiocularcentrism ranging from avant-garde movements influenced by psychoanalysis to critical philosophers who denigrated classical conceptions of vision. Upon a closer scrutiny of his work, we realize that what most of antiocularcentric authors criticized was not vision per se, but the idea of a single, absolute, hegemonic, static, theological-rational eye. Theirs was not a mere dismissal, but an in-depth critical engagement. Through these authors, sight undergoes a profound loss of innocence. The hypostasis of vision as power was unmasked. Indeed, power is the evil most of the authors discussed by Jay were concerned with, and vision was a matter of worry for them insofar as it was a means, a tool or a weapon of power.

Indisputably, vision is a sense of power, or better, a sense which confers a sense of power. Everything *I see* is, at least potentially, within the reach of the *I can*. What is not seen is not thematized as an object in the domain of action. The invisible, wrote Merleau-Ponty (1968) in his beautiful 1960 work notes, is not simply something visible that happens to be contingently away from sight. Rather, the invisible is what is *here without being an object*. The invisible is *intrinsic* to the visible, is what makes it possible. The *punctum caecum* of the eye, what the eye will never be able to see, is what makes it possible for the eye to see all the rest of the world. The blind point, the invisible, is what connects physically the subject-observer to the object-observed.

Do we perceive unarticulated wholes, or is perception part of the process of articulation? Foucault (1972) distinguished the *visible* (what can be seen), which he identified with the regime of the non-discursive, and the *articulable* (what can be said in a given cultural universe), which he associated with the discursive. The distinction was meant to maintain the

priority of the discursive, although Foucault also acknowledged that the visible can never be fully and successfully reduced to the articulable (Deleuze, 1988; Fóti, 2003). But is there really incommensurability between the two? Are they separate entities, like water and oil, that do not mix?

Against the radical separation of the visible and the articulable, one can advance the argument that, as we try to imagine a pure visible or a pure articulable as severed from one another, we quickly fall into a paradox. The *aesthetic* (and, specifically, the visually aesthetic) arrives earlier to us, almost instantly, but in fact it is because the *political* (Foucault's articulable) is always already there. True, the two domains speak different languages, but the one carries the other onwards. It is not that they are occasionally mixed together: they are always together. There is no visible without *ways of seeing*, which are socially and interactionally crafted (Goodwin, 1996), and even the pure abstract articulation that makes these ways possible can be conceived as an invisible (in Merleau-Ponty's sense), rather than a distinct, unrelated regime. The visible may occasionally look obscure, but words can be obscure, too – as in Borges's library of Babel. The articulable may occasionally look abstract, but images can be abstract, too – as in Kandinsky's theory of painting. Visibility is precisely the complex field where the visible and the articulable coexist, rather than excluding each other. This also helps understand why, alongside an epistemology of seeing, there urgently arises the issue of the im/morality of seeing.

Recognition

Visibility is closely associated to *recognition*. A *significant other* (Mead, 1959) 'tests' and 'testifies' our existence by looking at us. Visibility has to do with subjectification and objectification, with the onto-epistemological constitution of objects and subjects. The point was clearly made by Hegel (1977: §353 ff.) in his master–servant dialectic. There is a whole thread of thought in contemporary political philosophy that has made the Hegelian concept of 'recognition' a central question. Charles Taylor (1989) understands recognition as a basic category of human identity, whose origin can be traced back to the Judeo-Christian and the secular Enlightenment projects of 'life in common'. In every plural polity, there are Hegelian 'struggles for recognition' and there is a whole 'politics of recognition' (Taylor, 1992). Recognition is a form of social visibility, with crucial consequences on the relation between minority groups and the mainstream. Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* (1947) makes the point more effectively than much later sociological research. For racial and sexual minorities, being invisible means being deprived of recognition.

However, visibility is not linked to recognition in a linear, straightforward way. Thresholds of visibility come into play here: there is a minimum

and a maximum of what we may call 'fair visibility' – regardless of the fairness criteria we want to adopt. Below the lower threshold, you are socially excluded. Stephen Frears' *Dirty Pretty Things* (2002) paints so vividly the daily – and, above all nightly – life of the illegal migrant as the life of an invisible subject. The illegal migrant is a socially invisible, yet symbolically crucial, *homo sacer* (Agamben, 1998; Rajaram and Grundy-Warr, 2004). Likewise, advanced neoliberalism leads to the rise of new and invisible forms of poverty, discursively constructed as the *underclass*, *le peuple sans visage* who inhabit the slums of the world. These people are the unseen, the excluded.

On the other hand, as you push yourself – or are pushed – over the upper threshold of fair visibility, you enter a zone of supra-visibility, or super-visibility, where everything you do becomes gigantic to the point that it paralyses you. It is a condition of paradoxical double bind that forbids you to do what you are simultaneously required to do by the whole ensemble of social constraints. Media representations of migrants as criminals are supra-visible, as are many other forms of moral panic selectively focused onto actors deemed to be representative of moral minorities. Clearly, one's positioning behind or beyond the thresholds of fair visibility raises the problem of the management of one's social image in one's own terms. Therefore, when philosophers and political activists support the claims for recognition put forward by minority groups, one should be aware that the very social relationship producing recognition can produce denial of recognition, too. Distortions *in* visibility lead to distortions in social representations, distortions *through* visibility.

It is no mystery that the asymmetry between seeing and being seen is a deeply gendered one – often, a sexualized one. In modern western society, typically, the male is the one who looks, while the female is the one who is looked at. A form of domination and oppression, and a good measure of masculine hypocrisy, is clearly present here. The dominant visual representation of women wants them to be always conscious of their being seen, and the impersonal gaze of the beholder is in fact a male gaze (Mulvey, 1975). Seduction is something that takes place in this sexualized dimension of visibility. Sight is a sense that can be violently close to lust. Relations of visibility are often embedded in voyeurism. Jameson (1993) radicalizes this thought in the statement that the whole visible is 'essentially pornographic'. Visual culture, from art history to publicity, is full of examples of visual sexual attraction (Berger et al., 1972). More poetically, in the *Recherche* Proust described the impression of a beautiful unknown we quickly glance at in the city: 'the Gods from the Olympus have come down in the streets'. This is one of the highest celebrations of the modern, impersonal, seduction. Nor is this necessarily a strictly western feeling: in Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950) the bandit remembers the beautiful samurai's

lady he will eventually rape with these words: 'A glimpse and she was gone. I thought she was a goddess.'

Concerns for dignity and equality apart, we should not be misled into believing that being watched is a passive behaviour. Because the glance is always, to a certain extent, a two-way process, seeing and being seen simultaneously affect the observed and the beholder. I would venture to say that not only is there a form of *seeing*, but also a form of *being seen*. If seeing is an articulated activity, being seen is no less so. In this sense, I think, the naturalist Adolf Portmann (1952) described patterns on animals' plumage as *organs for being seen*. Often, the relationship of visibility is controlled not by the one who looks, but by the one who is looked at. With Merleau-Ponty, I know that I am watched by others even without watching back, because and insofar as I perceive my body as the address of glances from others.

Once we see social recognition as embedded in a visibility field, new ways of framing old problems open up. The long-standing humanist moral principle requires that we hold a strong distinction between human beings on the one hand, and animals and things on the other. But within the domain of the visible this is not quite easy. Phenomena of objectification of subjects (pornography) and subjectification of objects (fetishism) are pervasive, so that enhanced visibility regimes are deeply challenging for moral systems based on *well-ordered* ontologies. When the distinction between things and human beings cannot be sharply determined, well-ordered ontologies undergo a crisis, as recent debates on actor-network theory and the contested boundaries of the human show (for a critical take, see Vandenberghe, 2002). At times, the problem of ontological heterogeneity within the social field has been articulated in a critical mood. For instance, Debord's (1967) concept of the spectacle – not a set of imagines, but a social relation mediated by images – is a *détournement* of Marx's definition of capital, which, in turn, is grounded in the Hegelian master–servant dialectic of subjectification and alienation. The mixing of visible and invisible human relations is thus an important dimension for assessing what happens when well-ordered ontologies are in crisis or collapse.

Sites, Subjects and Effects

As a quality, visibility can be predicated of sites, subjects and effects. Some sites and some subjects are more visible than others. Because sites and subjects interact relationally, social effects of visibility depend on who is more visible in which site. Effects *of* one's visibility feed back from and to effects *in* one's visibility.

One of the main distinctions in modern western sociopolitical culture is the dichotomy between the public space, associated with visibility, and

the private space, associated with invisibility. Once we zoom into more circumscribed objects and situations, however, the distinction becomes puzzling. Today, the identification of the public with the visible domain is problematic. Private spaces (e.g. media and shopping malls) become largely more visible than public ones, while traditionally visible public spaces recede into invisibility (e.g. boring parliamentary debates). In a sense, this is what the whole anti-capitalist movement's struggle for a new model of society is all about: to bring back the visibility (as political control) of the public sphere.

The city, and specifically the modern European capital, is a site of visibility of which Baudelaire and Benjamin gave wonderful descriptions. The *flâneur* is engaged in a peculiar visual enjoyment of the city, and the *passages* offer a complex articulation of visibilities to him, as they blur the separation of outside and inside, day-time and night-time, street and home – before the split between safe, warm *communal* space versus dangerous, cold *urban* space (Sennett, 1978: §13) grew dramatically. As urban planning designs the field of urban visibility, planners often find themselves in the game of creating new vistas, scenarios and panoramas – not by chance, all terms that derive from the Italian modern history of arts. Changes in urban visibility are due to the most diverse reasons. Chiefly, these are not simply aesthetic reasons: both 19th-century Haussmann boulevards in Paris and 20th-century Via dei Fori Imperiali in Rome are examples of urban visibility enhancement, caused by a mix of public order functions, need for better traffic circulation and the desire to create appropriate scenographies and settings for *pompa magna* celebrations and military parades. Richard Sennett (1994: §8) explored the birth of the bodily metaphor of the modern city as a site of *circulation*, which emerged in parallel to Harvey's medical discovery of blood circulation. Since then, rapid transit and vehicular traffic generated a new type of urban vision (on the political implications of visual *speed*, see Virilio, 1986).

Mass media are high-visibility places endowed with the quality of conferring visibility to the people who join them. As a process, visibility works instantly but extends in time. When you say to a friend who is enjoying his 15-minute celebrity of the Warhol age 'I saw you on TV yesterday', this and other similar communications are part of what we mean by visibility. We may say that visibility has a *flash* and a *halo*: it is both instant and it has a duration. The flash is pointed on a person in a given place, but at the same time it weakens, or even removes, the perception of the context. Sometimes, social actors deliberately seek this kind of separated experience, such as tourists, whose travel and visual enjoyment are designed to be a temporary break from their ordinary, daily settings (Urry, 2002). Touristic places exhibit a media-type visibility. They are consumed in the halo of spectacularism

generated by practices of anticipatory representations of enjoyment and mediatic flashes through which they are introduced. The critique of separatedness of images from life was the main aim of the critical concept of spectacle (Debord, 1967). While blaming the spectacle has become a commonplace, it has been often overviewed that separation is precisely what enables the emotional synchronization of all viewers. Recently, Mathiesen (1997) has analysed the viewer society in terms of visibility cones. He calls 'synopticism' the device where the many watch the few. The few who are watched as 'the spectacle' are in any case mediated by representations.

Visibility curdles into representations. In the absence of dissonant messages, representations tend to settle down and stabilize themselves. That is why the issue of access to the places of visibility is a central political question. To access these places is the precondition for having a voice in the production of representations. More precisely, it is not simply 'access' that matters, but rather the styles and modes of access. It is not simply true that if I am disempowered or a society's outsider, then I am invisible. Rather, what happens is that I access visibility places in ways that are largely or completely out of my control (Champagne, 1993). Just think of representations, narratives and images of starving people and criminals: the type of feelings they usually arouse in the beholders (mercy, hate and so on) are completely detached from the feelings of the represented people, because the latter are just seen and represented, but have no say on their own image.

Visibility breeds identification and makes it possible. In this respect, we should account for at least two different types of identification: identification by social category, and identification by individual features. Surveillance is, of course, an activity that goes through a procedure of individual identification – it is important to get the right person – but then, in fact, it is aimed at social classification of people, and, more precisely, a type of classification that is essentially grounded in the *summa divisio* between safe and dangerous subjects. Consequently, in the activities of surveillance and control, individual identification is instrumental to a further stage of identification by social category. Individual identification, on the contrary, is the end-point of other kinds of processes, such as that of recognizing a VIP or a media person – which often activates a specific 'celebrity sighting' interaction frame (Ferris, 2004).

Advertisement is an activity that consists in producing high-visibility objects. Advertisement can thus be understood as a strategy directly aimed not so much at making you buy something, but rather at having you looking at certain things rather than others. The point is enhancing the visibility of certain objects – real or fancied as such, i.e. not necessarily products, but also lifestyles, feelings, etc. – vis-a-vis others. What counts is the recognition of given objects. This is a *Gestalt* mission. In order to work, advertisement

must be able to produce immediate *individual* identification of a figure on a background: 'the publicity belongs to the moment' (Berger et al., 1972: 129), and its object belongs to the flash-and-halo present.

A *model* can be defined as something or someone who is endowed with visibility. For a model to exist, it has to be before everybody's eyes. Simultaneously, the model also tends to be defined in moral terms. It inspires behaviour and attitude. It is an example to follow. But the two aspects can easily be at odds with each other. The cult of the visible personality, the celebrity, shows a model at work. Not only is a celebrity visible, but she or he can also lend part of that visibility to others. The model is hard to ignore. It is before everybody's eyes. But at the same time, the idea of *imitatio*, when referred to a specific model, may create uneasiness, anxiety or, worse, strong, vehement feelings. Visibility attracts adoration and hatred, sometimes fatefully combined. Consider the morbid relationship between the fan and the star. In some particular psychologically unstable but highly spectacular situations, a fan – precisely because she or he is a 'fanatic' – may end up killing her or his most precious object of adoration, to subtract it from visibility, or to project it into a *higher* visibility. In fact, it is not only the model who is endowed with visibility. The *monster* is, too – and almost by definition: *monstrum*, showed. Both the model and the monster are visible, marked, out of the ordinary. Although their presence is numerically irrelevant, visibility confers on them a central symbolic function everybody is – explicitly or implicitly – aware of. Media models follow a peculiar timing. The quick rise and fall of 15-minute 'fill-in' celebrities can be explained as the result of a trade-off between two contradictory visibility forces: the necessity of a renewal in the hall of fame, on the one hand, and the fact that attention of the public is a scarce resource, which focuses only on a bunch of visually easily recognizable media persons, on the other hand. The outcome of this tension is the definition of a field with a nucleus of core, long-standing celebrities, surrounded by a belt of more or less episodic VIPs.

Thus, visibility is a property that can be used to divide marked and unmarked persons. Once a way of marking and dividing people is set up, thanks to a few very clear, exceptional cases, the resulting *classification* is a tool that can be applied to every case. Whereas the model and the monster are few in number, although pervasive in visibility, classifications work routinely with big numbers as they tend to become invisible. Racism, and especially institutionalized racism, creates a politics of treatment for visible differences. For racism to work, differences need first of all to be made visible, which may not be that simple. This is achieved through classificatory tools. Once set up, these tools work best when they become *naturalized* (Bowker and Star, 1999; for an ethnographic account

see Farough, 2006), invisible to those who employ them: the instrument that creates visibility has to be made or itself kept invisible.

Deviance and Control

If we accept that deviance is a relational moral quality (Durkheim, 1982), a deviant action exists only if it is framed on a visible threshold of moral difference. Visible and invisible social action depends on which subjects act in which places. Deviance, policing and social control help to illustrate the point. Police stoppings and arrests of people have been criticized as *unchecked power* (Stribopoulos, 2003), in the sense that the power of arrest and the criteria and classifications that supervise its practice form an invisible power. This sub-power is located below the lower threshold of visibility (for a visualist ethnomethodological account of this activity, see Sacks, 1972). It finds its natural target in deviant behaviours, i.e. behaviours that are marked vis-a-vis a norm (the normal, the unmarked). At the same time, police are themselves highly visible subjects: not only do they look at people in their search for deviant behaviours; they are also looked at by people (see, for example, Paperman, 2003). Visibility of action is connected to some sort of *exemplarity*, positive or negative as may be. Every single move police make, or better, their behaviour as a whole, is connected to exemplarity, or lack thereof. In liberal democracies, police brutality comes as shocking when it is documented in singular, specific cases, so far as the presumption holds that it is neither widespread nor ordinary. But when the issue of the policing methods disappears from the visible public debate, when the maintenance of order is commissioned to police under a no-matter-what clause, the exemplarity of violence preludes an entirely new kind of regime.

Visibility is a double-edged sword: it can be empowering as well as disempowering. One example of the perverse effects of media visibility is offered by the political scandal (Thompson, 2000). The scandal is a mechanism whereby some actions, behaviours or state of affairs that were assumed to remain invisible are suddenly revealed to a wide public. Besides, the more visible it becomes that the revealed state of affairs was originally meant or arranged to remain invisible – i.e. the more evident that there is an attempt to hide something – the bigger the impact revelations will have. During political scandals, we have a kind of *maddened* visibility, whereby people who are quite accustomed to being visible, and indeed, people who have built their career and fortune on being visible, find themselves suddenly haunted by visibility, with sometimes tragicomic, if not grotesque effects. What made their strength is now their most implacable enemy: concentrations of visibility-as-power always attract their highly visible nemesis of downgrading and 'fall'.

This type of ambivalence shows up in different contexts. While the search for visibility is in many cases a search for social recognition – visibility as empowerment – Foucault's thesis of the insurgence of the disciplinary society tells quite a different story. For critical theorists, visibility of publicity objects and media people is the flip side of discipline and control. A thread of antiocularcentrism, Jay reminds us, has focused on the disempowering effects of visibility. Recent researches on surveillance and the technologies of control, too, explore this kind of effect (Lyon, 2001). Tracing the origin of the word 'surveillance' in clinical language, the disciplinary thesis reveals a completely different meaning of being seen and watched: no longer recognition, but subjugation, imposition of conducts, means of control. In the disciplinary society, visibility means disempowerment. Namely, 'visibility is a trap' (Foucault, 1977). The mere fact of being aware of one's own visibility status – and not the fact of being under actual control – effectively influences one's behaviour.

Bentham's Panopticon, as analysed by Foucault, is a mechanism of visibility. But what is most important for its effective functioning is not only the *first-order asymmetry* of vision between the guard and the inmate. It is the whole mechanism of control that must remain invisible. That is why Deleuze (1988) remarked that the Panopticon is in fact a logical diagram of power rather than a mere physical visual setting. What Deleuze downsized, however, is the fact that the diagram itself exhibits – precisely because of its invisibility – a mechanism of visibility. Indeed, the diagram consists in a *second-order asymmetry* of visibility, between those who are aware of the existence of the diagram and those who are unaware of it.

Recent research on surveillance has built on Foucault's analysis of the capillarity of power, but it has also somehow transformed its starting point. Granted that surveillance can be described as a specific management of relative visibilities of people, it has been argued that contemporary society is characterized by the fact that surveillance becomes methodical, systematic and automatic (Staples, 2000; Virilio, 1994), rather than 'discontinuous', as was the case of the disciplinary method. No longer *virtual* control, but *actual* control, made possible by new technologies. Closed-circuit televisions and video cameras – these small, mortal dreams of omniscience – have always fascinated the imagination of scholars. And not only scholars. I personally remember more than one anticapitalist demonstration where one of the culminating points was someone climbing up to a bank's CCTV installed well above the street level in order to put a thick black plastic bag around it – in a kind of postmodern version of the blinding of Cyclops.

The pervasiveness of visual surveillance raises the matter of visibility at a meta-level: which data among the many collected are to be made visible? CCTV filmed several terrorists before their actions, but sadly these

data became visible, distinguishable among the many, only *ex post factum*. What is also striking about video surveillance is that its non-reciprocal gaze leads to a qualitatively different way of seeing. This is the reason why surveyed people, insofar as they cannot look back and they cannot establish any eye-to-eye contact, always look suspect to a certain extent, if not culpable, for the very fact of being looked at one-way in a mode of surveillance. More radically, following Simmel's insight on the reciprocity of the eye-to-eye relation, they are not even fully human. Inherent in the one-way gaze is a kind of dehumanization of the observed – and possibly, although indirectly, of the beholder, too.

Visibility is not simply about video cameras and the technologies of image transmission. For Lyon (2004), contemporary surveillance is a complex activity focused on the tracking of information: relying on advanced technologies, surveillance becomes more and more abstract, apparently unrelated to human beings and their biological eyes. Tracking flows is now the crucial point. Deleuze (1990) first spoke of a transition from the disciplinary society to the 'society of control', a new scenario where enclosed institutions and their logic are superseded by new formations: the corporation has replaced the factory; the individual is substituted by a new being called the *dividual*; and finally, the *password*, rather than the old slogan, becomes the central tool of control. Surveillance is no longer interested in watching people as it is in tracking movements (not just of people, but of money, choices, customs – briefly, of information) in a way that enables surveillance agencies to differentially regulate access and denial of access to specific spaces for specific subjects. The whole process shifts from being focused on persons to being focused on *codes*. Borrowing from Deleuze and Guattari (1987), Haggerty and Ericson (2000) have recently proposed calling this new type of mixed network-like control the 'surveillant assemblage'. The assemblage has a composite central-and-polycentric character. It functions from above as well as from below. At the same time an 'actuarial gaze', a structural visual regime of threat perception which crosscuts politics, public safety concerns, urban planning and media, emerges (Feldman 2005).

The view from above remains, however, the dominant image of control. James C. Scott (1998) has critically analysed the development of a 'gaze of the State' in modern countries. In the domain of governance, a way of seeing prepares a way of acting and actively intervening upon reality. The centralist gaze of the State, Scott argues, is an impoverished one, which filters the multiplicity of social life. It cuts down lived experience to its own Procrustean bed, in order to enhance legibility in the interpretation of phenomena. Social engineering, supported by 'high modernist' ideology, has carried out an expropriation of local, grounded experience. According to Scott, the sight of central executive power is narrowed down

to functional manipulation and the imposition of uniformity upon the population. Thus, legibility of social phenomena is often achieved at the expense of the recognition of their richness, so that one single gaze, analogous to a 'view from nowhere', hides the multiplicity of real gazes.

The disciplinary diagram, practices of contemporary control and the gaze of the State belong to a much older tradition, that of the *arcana imperii*, where power is strictly associated with invisibility (Bobbio, 1999; Canetti, 1973). In the elitist tradition of the *arcana*, what really counts is the obscure nucleus where things are disposed, the unknown chamber where the programmer is drawing the algorithm. Whereas media-type visibility, as well as the whole visibility-as-recognition, are grounded in the idea that visibility bestows power, the *arcana imperii* tradition starts from the opposite premise that invisibility strengthens power. The idea of a linkage between power and invisibility lies at the basis of every conspiracy theory, too. Interestingly, whereas conspiracy thinking used to be traditionally dismissed by academic scholars as merely pathological, recent literature has been revaluing its rationality (see Pratt, 2003). The realists, in particular, claim that conspiracy theories mirror a sense of powerlessness and that, if people nowadays feel powerless, it is because, ultimately, they actually are. While the police are visible, we also know – or maybe just presume to know – that the most important investigative works are carried on undercover (on secret police, see Stove, 2003). The most puzzling cases are therefore intelligence communications – e.g. about terrorism – made available for the masses. What are we to make of them? Does it mean that after all in democratic regimes even intelligence cannot be thoroughly secret, or are they the perfect instance of the supreme *imperium*'s joke?

'Secrecy lies at the heart of power' (Canetti, 1973: 253). Thus, power can be conceived as a form of external visibility (visibility of effects) associated with internal invisibility (invisibility of identification): the effects of power are visible to everyone, but what power is in its essence, where it is really located, will not be disclosed. Asymmetries in visibility are asymmetries of power in a further meaning besides that of surveillance. The powerful is at the vertex of a one-way cone of visibility: he or she watches but cannot be watched by normal eyes. He or she also differs from Bentham's guardian insofar as he or she is not even interested in watching the others, who are meaningless and uninteresting in his or her eyes. In the ending scene of Lars von Trier's *Dogville* (2003), the boss gets the curtains of his car opened, just after he has ordered the slaughter of the whole village. He will be visible now, but there will no longer be anyone there to see him.

Nonetheless, secrecy lies not only at the core of power, but also at the core of the possibility of escaping and opposing it. Consider, just to mention a few very heterogeneous examples, the secrecy of votes, the flight from

prison, counter-cultural underground resistance and the forms of hidden resistance so well described by Scott (1990). All these practices develop within invisibility, which they absolutely need in order to be effective to their purposes. In short, we have to admit that power does not rest univocally with seeing or with being seen. Rather, it is the style in which seeing and being seen take place that carries the most important consequences. The exercise of power is always an exercise in activating selective in/visibilities. In the case of capital executions, a series of careful measures are put in place to make the human being that is being executed invisible as human being. The very execution is an invisible, almost secret event in many countries and states where the death penalty still exists. It is carefully kept away from sight. This is a paradoxical byproduct of Norbert Elias's *civilizing process*. Paradoxical because civilization implies a reduction of violence rather than its hidden continuation, its 'continuation with other means'. But let us reverse the perspective: if this kind of invisibility is sinister, visibility might not be less appalling. Would people go to watch executions if they were made public today? More importantly, *how many* would? What does the majority accept, what does it wish to see? If you think this world is horrible, it may actually be because you haven't seen the others . . .

Conclusion

My argument for adopting visibility as a fully entitled sociological category has been based on an exploration of some exemplary cases in the wide range of social phenomena whose understanding can be nuanced, and enhanced, when we frame them within the proposed category. Its specific articulations may be useful to undertake future research. In this article, the relational, strategic and processual features of visibility have been identified and described in their intersections. Taken together, they seem to invite us to explore visibility as a field. This is an impersonal, social field where subjects and sites of visibility play their role and contribute to determine effects in/of reciprocal visibility.

At the substantive level, there are at least three different types of visibility-scheme. The social-type is a fundamentally enabling resource, linked to recognition, at least when it fits within some thresholds of fair visibility, beyond which distortion effects appear. The media-type, although it may intersect with the first type, tends to work according to a flash-halo mechanism, whereby subjects are isolated from their original context and projected into a different one endowed with its own logic and rules. Finally, the control-type transforms visibility into a strategic resource for regulation (as in Foucault's surveillance model) or selectivity and stratification (as in Deleuze's society of control model), or both (as in Haggerty and Ericson's surveillant assemblage).

Accordingly, the relationship between power and visibility is complex: power does not rest univocally either with visibility or with invisibility. In the moral domain, a fundamental tension between recognition and control has emerged. Both practices are connected to visibility. In other words, visibility is not correlated in any straightforward way to recognition and control, or to any specific moral value. As such, it does not constitute anything inherently liberating, nor, conversely, does it necessarily imply oppression. But, in the end, isn't this open range of possibilities what we expect from a sufficiently general descriptive and interpretive social scientific category?

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