

# Bodies and Gazes

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## 1. *Ideal* images

Social media stars have hundreds of thousands of followers who hypnotically enjoy images of *ideal* bodies, those enticing appearances that spark intense dynamics of identification. These keen admirers are drawn in by a deluge of representations in which carefully planned-out photoshoots (posed and set up meticulously, to accentuate every single detail of the image, each aspect of the hairstyle, each fashion accessory) appear alongside apparently spontaneous snapshots from some ordinary moment of the day (the assumption being that absolutely every part of a celebrity's life is important).

The search for *authenticity* is seen today in images that are subjected to Instagram filters or more profound transformations on Photoshop. This is not the era, however, of simulations, but rather of *true* appearances. Vanity and banality have become *authenticity*. These times can probably be defined by the *excessive* presence of images, in which, by adoring them, we can easily be overwhelmed by the visual specifications of the supposed ideal forms of femininity

and masculinity. In turn, these forms are validated by the hundreds of thousands of 'likes' and flattering comments that fly in from all over the planet. Those who follow the it-girls and boys<sup>1</sup> of the Internet are bombarded, on the screens of their connective devices, with enticing lifestyles in which millions of individuals cannot help but project themselves in a picture-perfect, ideal form. It seems that, today, we only know how to authentically assert our freedom from within the walls of this prison of ideal set-ups.

Being photogenic and charismatic, key traits for any social media star, are just as important as being self-confident – this is crucial for the sought-after magnetism necessary to draw people in. There must also be a hint of non-conformism (albeit perfectly adapted to the consumer culture), which always comes across as inspiring, creating thus the effect of the coveted sense of being free, of being able to be oneself. This is a spectacularised selfhood which is always dependent on being highly versatile in the arts of enjoyment, and it is invariably enchanting.

Idealisation occurs when an image assumes the condition of a mirror, when we yearn to see ourselves in it, when it becomes the pristine surface on which we so crave to glimpse our own reflection. Everything that you could ever hope for in life appears in images shot through with glamour, luxury, fun and freedom. Life is no longer the invention of *oneself*; it has become the struggle for it to look like somebody else's. Celebrities, who devote their time to showing us their lives, act as inspiration, as influencers, and they take advantage thus of our own identity-based shortcomings and desires.

Fame has gradually turned into one of the most highly-esteemed elements in our culture, to the same or an even greater extent than wealth. In any case, we tend to think of the two as inseparable. Following famous people on social media, trying to be an extra-special fan, posting comments under their photos or showing admiration with emojis and 'likes', is all a way of compensating for

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<sup>1</sup> This term dates back to 1926, popularised by Elinor Glyn's novel *It*.

our desire to be close to those whose lives we would like (totally, or partially) for ourselves.

The idealised image often features a combination of the most celebrated bodily values, based on highly specific physical parameters which almost always match the normative forms, or certain lifestyles that are assumed to be enviable. Such an image works like a reflective surface upon which, more than anything, subjects try to find themselves.

The issue of idealisation cannot be analysed, though, without first considering the inherent complexity of mirror logics. In truth, looking at another human being always entails seeing ourselves reflected in the other. This is the only way to explain, for example, the gesture of looking away that Silverman (1996) acknowledges: "I always studiously avoid looking at the homeless people, whom, with ruthless arbitrariness, I either help or don't help" (p. 26). What she describes here is the symptom of a very specific mirrored panic: "If homeless, I would precisely no longer be "myself." And rather than acceding to this politically imperative self-estrangement, I automatically avert my eyes" (ibid.).

Racism, xenophobia and aporophobia might therefore be considered symptoms of a visual pathology related to these kinds of reflexive projection mechanisms. We tend to reject that which does not replicate what we want to be, we avert our eyes from those who have an appearance that we do not want - looking at them would be, above all, not wanting to *see ourselves* in the same way.

We have heard countless times how idealisation cannot be understood without what Lacan called the 'mirror stage', the moment that marks, forever, our alienation in the imaginary. The mirror is a mysterious object, so often defined as a threshold-phenomenon, demarcating the limits between the imaginary and the symbolic (Eco, 1986). And there might be many demonstrable similarities between the individual's reaction to the range of ideal images that reach them through the mirror-screen of their computer, and the child's reaction to seeing their own reflected image, as described by

Lacan: anticipated, insufficient, assuming the armour of an alienating identity – an “orthopaedic” image of their totality (1949/2006, p. 78).

We are what we are, according to Eco (1986), precisely because we are also catoptric animals – we have developed the dual ability to look at ourselves and others “in both our and their perceptive reality and catoptric virtuality” (p. 207). But we must recognise that we always have a pathological relationship with our reflection in the mirror – it tells the truth, but perhaps too honestly, and even, therefore, “to an inhuman extent” (p. 208).

It is not merely incidental that Eco himself conjectured there might be a ‘photograph stage’, another possible phase in the subject’s ontogenesis. The *heteromateriality* of the photographic plate, which he called a kind of ‘freezing mirror’ (p. 222), an imprint or a trace, would nevertheless explain why this supposed ‘photograph stage’ comes much later than the ‘mirror stage’: “A baby has no problems in recognizing his image reflected in a mirror, whereas a child up to five years of age finds it very difficult (and requires some sort of training) to identify photographed objects” (p. 223). In any case, the implications of this supposed ‘photograph stage’, in terms of the development of subjectivity, still need to be studied in depth.

But let us return to the workings of idealisation, and our attempts at bridging the gap between ourselves and those ideal images, as well as how we try to identify with the visual *imago* and become, for others, what these images are for us. That way, perhaps we might try to *enslave* them, as ideal images have enslaved us.

Reaching the ideal is an endless task, one which is never completely achievable. The hundreds of near-identical selfies on many users’ accounts might be proof of these continuous attempts to get closer to the ideal image, to try and see one’s own reflection in this ideal. It is often a trial-and-error approach (photographic self-representation today tends to come, invariably, in a series), which creates some moments of happiness (perhaps the same type of *joie* that the child feels in front of the Lacanian mirror), like when somebody feels that they resemble, or are at least approaching, somehow, the ideal *imago*.

This satisfaction comes from a sense of ‘completeness’ and ‘unity’, caused by this approximation, this resemblance. These moments of pleasure, though, can only ever be sporadic: the sensation of getting closer to the ideal image never quite quenches the thirst, and instead it tends to provoke a distressing feeling of insufficiency.

Kundera (1988/1991) said that “a person may conceal himself behind his image, he can disappear forever behind his image, he can be completely separated from his image: a person can never be his image” (p. 315). This is perhaps especially evident in those cases that have revealed, somewhat upsettingly, what is actually hiding behind these ideal images.<sup>2</sup> Adam Curtis (2017) was right when he noted that “things like Instagram are the socialist realism of our times because they represent the image of happy people. To a certain extent it’s true, or so they believe, but the complex difficulty behind it is hidden”.

Many of the photographs shared by the most ‘followed’ celebrities are, despite their seeming spontaneity, the result of meticulous preparation and manipulation, following a selection process in which images that are too ‘real’ are not shared (these celebrities are terrorised by the fear that posting such an image might lead to a drop in followers).<sup>3</sup> We are all fetishists, to a greater or lesser extent, who bow down to the logics of the new forms of the spectacle through

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<sup>2</sup> We should remember, for example, the case of Essena O’Neill, who had hundreds of thousands of followers on Instagram and YouTube, before she decided to quit social media in November 2015. She said she felt lost, “with serious problems so beautifully hidden”. As cited by Elle Hunt, ‘Instagram star Essena O’Neill: “The way it all turned so negative just numbed me”’. *The Guardian*, 5<sup>th</sup> January 2016. [<https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/jan/05/instagram-star-essena-oneill-the-way-it-all-turned-so-negative-just-numbed-me>].

<sup>3</sup> See Heather Saul, ‘Stina Sanders’ Instagram lost thousands of followers after she shared realistic images for a week’. *The Independent*, 20<sup>th</sup> November 2015 [<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/model-stina-sanders-loses-thousands-of-instagram-followers-after-sharing-unrealistic-images-for-a-a6742806.html>]. In fact, the assertion that “it’s not real life” was part of the model and blogger Stina Sanders’ justification

our smartphone screens. On these screens, the substitution described by Debord (1967/2014) still applies, i.e. the replacing of the tangible world by images that go on top of it, supplanting it, and they appear, at the same time, “as the perceptible par excellence” (p. 14). These forms of *augmented survival* are just superficially new, associated with what only *seem* to be lived experiences, and with seductively simplified lives. This alienation, in relation to the contemplated object, has a very specific consequence, also highlighted by Debord in the late 1970s: the more we accept that we recognise ourselves in the dominant images, the less able we are to understand our existence, our *own* desire.

We have no way of knowing whether, on social media, our pictures are forcing us to be more like actors (in these images, we play a certain role in which we always show ourselves to be happy, free, fun-loving, etc., but under the assumption that everybody knows that not everything is quite so rosy), or more like hypocrites (by trying to show ourselves in a way that is unlike who we actually are or how we actually live, attempting thus to cover up the fact there is some degree of performance or posing).<sup>4</sup> Whichever it is, the fact that there have been some bizarre cases of social media users making their own near-identical versions of other people’s photographs<sup>5</sup> seems to prove that imitation really is the “sincerest form of flattery” (Bullen, 2016).

According to a significant part of psychoanalytic theory, acknowledging one’s distance from the ideal, perceiving the idealised image’s ‘otherness’, and being unable to maintain the satisfaction that

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for quitting Instagram, after having been the star of successful campaigns for brands such as L’Oréal and Nike.

<sup>4</sup> I base this on the distinction suggested by Harry Berger in *Fictions of the Pose: Rembrandt Against the Italian Renaissance*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. 2000, p. 18.

<sup>5</sup> A particularly strange case (which some insist was a hoax) was that of the photographs shared on Instagram by Diana Alexa, in which she imitated, almost exactly, the travel photos taken by the successful Instagrammers Lauren Bullen (*gypsea\_lust*) and Jack Morris (*doyoutravel*).

arises when closing, momentarily, the gap between the body and its ideal image, would almost inevitably be followed by the spectres of certain forms of physical disintegration (which, for Lacan, would be linked to an essentially fragmentable image of the body). The best example to explain this phenomenon would be the mythical figure of Narcissus (and it is no coincidence that, today, he is the most frequently cited myth when characterising contemporary technological individualism).

Robert Castel (1965/2003) noted that “Narcissus, leaning over his own image, is in mortal danger. Just one look from Orpheus is enough to banish Eurydice to the underworld. These myths express the possibility of being in danger within and because of the image itself” (p. 343). Even so, it is worth remembering that Narcissus did not seem to be aware that the image was that of his own reflected face. In any case, the most important thing for our argument here is that this mythical figure could not seize his own reflection in the water without his image being distorted, without the subsequent and inevitable disintegration of his reflection/body. As such, idealisation is always implicated in any given process which starts off with the aspiration for perfection and ends up in physical breakdown and aggression, the shift “from self-idealization to self-disgust” (Silverman, 1996, p. 68) - we can never avoid the ambivalent relationship between self-love and self-loathing.

*L'amour-propre*, the love of oneself, upon which Rousseau reflected so insightfully, is usually over-reliant on other people's opinions, forcing us to constantly try to appear attractive to others. This situation is intensified today to extreme levels, and it becomes increasingly arduous to stand by what we like, if what we like is not really appreciated by others.

Our desire to eliminate the distance that separates us from the ideal seems to be eternal. Thus, to compensate for this, we are forced to carry out constant exercises in self-promotion (ultimately, all narcissistic behaviour is about trying to capture other people's attention).

We can never match up to the ideal in a way that is sufficiently satisfactory, and so the chasm that separates us from it is full of anguish, and any attempts to *alleviate* this pain are often channelled into consumerist practices (it has even been claimed that some social networks target their advertising more aggressively at those who are detected as being in a state of distress or depression), or into the kind of therapy focused on self-control and getting to know oneself. These are always driven by logics that seek to convince us that we are ultimately responsible for everything that happens to us.

## 2. We Are Looked-at Beings

In this age of the selfie, of the endless proliferation of visual self-representations, it is again decidedly important to consider the issue of the gaze, what it means to look and be looked at, to *display ourselves*, this staging of 'the self' - and all of its inherent risks and murkiness.

Traditionally, we have been told that all gazes, all looks, are objectifying, that they exert power, that they turn the observed into an object, subjugating it. Today, however, it might also work the other way round, which is perhaps becoming more and more prevalent: it seems, within the Internet space, that one becomes an object when looking, and looking at all those enticing, perfect individuals who present themselves as being so free and admirable is what ends up turning us, their followers, into objects.

Vandier (1944) noted that in Ancient Egyptian mythology, the origin of humanity came down to a simple play on words between 'tears' (having fallen from the eye of the master of the universe) and 'men': "The eye sheds tears (*rémyt*), from which men are born (*rémet*)" (p. 40). Giorgio de Chirico (1918/1968) also insisted on a vision-based genealogy of all beings, reminding us that "even the fetus of a man, a fish, a chicken, a snake in its first stage is exactly an eye", encouraging us thus, in a very Hegelian way, to "find the



eye in every thing” (p. 447). But inevitably, in the end, a principle of interaction always comes into play, as clearly alluded to in a well-known assertion by Scheler: “I see not only the eyes of an other, I see also that he looks at me” (as cited in Derrida, 1967/1978, p. 98). Similarly, Sartre (1943/1953) stated that “it is never when eyes are looking at you that you can find them beautiful or ugly, that you can remark on their color. The Other’s look hides his eyes; he seems to go in front of them” (p. 258).

There are, of course, a great many reasons why Sartre’s phenomenology of looking, developed in *Being and Nothingness* (1943/1953), should be revisited today, again and again. He reiterates that ‘to be’ is ‘to be seen’, ever subject to *le regard*, the gaze or the look, in which the experience of the human condition is to be “thrown in the arena beneath millions of looks” (p. 281). We therefore need external mediation to be who we are; we are looked-at in a world which is looked-at. The gaze could thus only be understood by the subject as “the upsurge of an ekstastic relation of being” (p. 260). This position, we must not forget, would end up being adopted almost in its entirety by Lacan (1975/1988), for whom the “human object” is also, above all, “an object which is looking at me” (p. 215).

Sartre explained the consciousness of the looked-at being, in vision, by describing a figure furtively looking through a keyhole, engrossed in the act of seeing. But when this figure hears footsteps approaching, he is forced to become conscious of himself as a *spectacle*, to realise that he exists for the other, that he is in their field of vision. This scene is useful for Sartre to show how each one of us is always a “being-in-the-midst-of-the-world-for-others” (1943/1953, p. 266). It strikes me that the associations we could make between that eye in the keyhole<sup>6</sup> and our connected digital devices’ screens could be, metaphorically speaking, very fruitful.

The fact is that, as opposed to the Cartesian *cogito* and all that entails, Sartre (1943/1953) emphasised a certain being-for-others, that we exist *for others*: “Being-for-others is a constant fact of my human

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<sup>6</sup> For the *keyhole analogy*, see Sartre (1943/1953), p. 259.

reality, and I grasp it with its factual necessity in every thought, however slight, which I form concerning myself" (p. 280). Therefore, having consciousness would require a kind of externalisation, inasmuch that we become an object for the other: "I am for myself only as I am a pure reference to the Other" (p. 260). The gaze is thus established as a necessary condition for our objectivity, since our fellow being, the onlooking other, is who *shows* us what we are: "I see myself because somebody sees me" (p. 260).

But the phenomenon of the gaze should not exclusively be understood in terms of an interaction between eyes and bodies. As Lacan (1975/1988) noted: "The gaze is not necessarily the face of our fellow being, it could just as easily be the window behind which we assume he is lying in wait for us" (p. 220). This is evident, since we can also feel watched by someone whose eyes we cannot see - it is almost impossible to imagine ourselves not under constant observation, and we assume that there is always somebody watching us, or at least able to watch us. This is the conversion of the gaze into a *probable gaze* (Sartre, 1943/1953), which explains why the individual believes they are constantly being looked at. That is, being looked at is not necessarily linked with an external body, and this leads us to a key statement for understanding Sartre's theory on the gaze: "[. . .] it is never eyes which look at us; it is the Other-as-subject" (p. 277).

The result of all this is that we accept an imaginary omnipresence of the onlooking other, and so we have to constantly *experience* our being-for-others. The gaze of our fellow beings becomes a kind of *pure* subject (in the sense that it can see without being seen) and which, in reality, we are unable to know, because we cannot 'situate' it as an object (as Sartre noted, this pure subject is "always there out of reach and without distance" p. 270).

The ideas put forward in *Being and Nothingness* move away from a notion of the gaze as a moment of a specific experience, bringing together all human presence (that is, the different modes of existence of the human being in the world) under this one concept of the *pure* or infinite subject. Extrapolating, it was almost inevitable that this

would culminate (as seen in the book) in the idea of an omnipresent and infinite subject, i.e. in the idea of an all-seeing God. This is very different, however, to Lacan's approach to this issue, for whom such a gaze does not come from a *pure* subject, rejecting thus Sartre's anthropomorphism, and instead proposing a direct link between the gaze and light. Therefore, he does not use the metaphors of God or a master, but rather that of the photographic camera.

Beyond these nuances and subtle differences, which are nevertheless greatly significant, Sartre's phenomenology ultimately situates us under the effect of a gaze or an 'illumination' which we could call *cultural*, an omnipresent, all-seeing gaze, which does not come about exclusively in plural form, and nor as a single unit, but which always identifies us as beings who are 'for the other'. Even if we are not always being looked at by others, we would always be under the effects of this situation. And though it would be interesting to compare this gaze with that of the mother or father holding onto their baby, while the baby, in turn, contemplates their own reflection, as in Lacan's description of the mirror stage,<sup>7</sup> this gaze, however, cannot be singularised: it "definitely does not belong to the world", Sartre claimed (1943/1953, p. 272).

There is always a convergence between cultural values and the ideal *Ich* (the ego, the self), and this is the basis of the hegemonic and normative representations that most of the many millions of self-representations shared online every day are trying to emulate.

Throughout our lives, a repertoire of images, of *ideal* representational coordinates that inhabit our minds just like language itself, have been embedded within us. The forms of

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<sup>7</sup> As Kaja Silverman (1996) notes, "when we attempt to understand the mirror stage we so often imagine the mother present, not merely holding the child up to its reflection, but facilitating the imaginary alignment of the child with the reflection. In such an elaboration of this specular drama, the mother's look stands in for what no look can actually approximate: the gaze. It superimposes the structuring reflection upon the child, and so makes possible the child's identification with what it can never 'be'" (p. 18).

looking that are brought about by this cumulation of images, forms which we could call the 'cultural gaze', are a key element in all identification processes. We feel strongly conditioned by how such a gaze perceives us. This gaze comes before the subject, just like language, and it equips us with the necessary tools for assigning meaning and making assessments, so crucial for our successful socialisation, and it endorses, or not, our identifications. Our ever-precarious approximation to the ideal, our own adoption of some of its images, is motivated and must be approved by this cultural gaze. Our identity depends, therefore, on culturally-constructed forms, on forms which have become hegemonic. They are normative ideals that come from symbolic matrices, and whose values we generally adapt to without fuss. Today, we see them affirmed, again and again, in the millions of 'likes' and adulatory comments garnered by the images of the biggest Internet celebrities.

The dominant gaze corroborates the image-version of ourselves, and the critique of these forms of corroboration has been manifested in many different ways. Feminist theory, for example, highlights the fact that the weight of this cultural gaze, and its effects, always falls most heavily upon women, who are subjected to the condition of the *image-being* far more intensely than men ever are.

This cultural gaze is hard to pin down. However, its effects are today ever more clear and quantifiable in the way it manifests as an expression of value on social media - it has the power to endorse or reject us, depending on whether we feel satisfactorily *seen* by it. It could be described, metaphorically, as a screen (in the Lacanian sense) but perhaps also as a projection system. We could imagine it as a spotlight, a complex construct that emits great bursts of stereotypical images. It is fuelled by the force of the whole set of representations that the culture has generated and pushed to the fore throughout our lives, a set which gives a visual form to differences in race, gender, etc. A projection system that modifies how we see reality, ensuring that certain bodies, by shining the spotlight onto them, are feted as the ideal norm, designated thus as objects to be

appreciated, while other bodies are excluded from this norm - they are hidden away or distorted, in accordance with certain identifying elements. This is how the cultural gaze becomes embedded within a given social context, as the space of projected light and shade, or of deforming, superimposed images.

The cultural gaze is not, thus, a passive or simply exemplifying gaze. Instead, it can project itself upon us, superimposing its light and images onto bodies, gestures and attitudes, highlighting some of them while casting others into darkness. It projects, onto the *stage* of our lives, the conditions that dictate who or what is welcome there, and the corresponding forms of hierarchy and exclusion.

The power of this cultural gaze can be largely ascribed to our destructive tendency to identify ourselves heteropathically, a tendency which, to a greater or lesser extent, seems to exist inside all of us. Even though the image superimposed on us by the dominant gaze can be harmful, the individual seems to have an innate propensity to participate, enthusiastically, in the interests of something which actually works against them, identifying with those images that make up the cultural ideal that so often despises us, and through which we end up reaffirming, sometimes passionately, the dominant values. In fact, marginalised people often share the same idealising opinions as those in power - we have a strong proclivity to put ourselves in the position of the dominating gaze, that point where (and following Lacan's proposed similarity between the cultural gaze and the camera) it 'photographs' us, or rather, as we would say, it *illuminates* us.

### **3. Reacting to the Gaze**

The effects of the gaze on the person being looked at, and the phenomenology of the other's perception, all comprise another key aspect of Sartre's theorisation of the gaze. This aspect would in fact be highlighted by Lacan in his reading of the second part of Sartre's

*Being and Nothingness*, and he claimed to have found in this text “the entire phenomenology of shame, of modesty, of prestige, of the specific fear engendered by the gaze” (Lacan, 1975/1988, p. 215). For Sartre, essentially, shame, fear and pride are the primary reactions of anybody who is being looked at.

To be offered up to our fellow beings for their evaluation, to become the object of possible praise or contempt, is what defines being looked at. This being-in-vision, under somebody’s gaze, also comes with the feeling that we have no control over the ‘situation’ (which leads to that sense of shame). It is the acknowledgment that we are *that thing* which is to be judged by the other, and, in some way, that we find ourselves in a certain state of *slavery* in this scenario, being the object of appraisals that qualify us, but, more than anything, degrade us.

The issue of shame here, as an initial reaction to the gaze of others, is crucially important, since it situates the objectivity of the self not in the comforting territory of knowledge, but rather in the state of unease caused by the being-for-others operated by the gaze.

In fact, the best way of understanding our ‘being-looked-at’ is the Sartrean idea of shame and the resulting anguish. Shame is a fundamental emotion, that of having our being *externalised*, ever dependent on the other, requiring other people’s intervention so that we can be what we are. The gaze turns us into objects, it leaves us defenceless; we feel shame when we are forced to be for others, when we feel criticised, judged, insufficient.

In our times, however, our exposure to the gaze of others has been amplified in the virtual sphere, when we display ourselves to others, out of vanity, in the thousands of images that we ourselves carefully take and select. Thus, it would seem that this kind of shame has evaporated away amid the heat of immodesty and arrogance about being a certain way in others’ eyes. But let us not get carried away: shame and vanity are by no means opposite feelings, since they are closely-linked reactions to the gaze of others, and they are always associated with forms of compliance, submission, and conforming

subordination. In fact, we can find, in *Being and Nothingness*, a revealing association between pride, on the one hand, and a certain kind of resignation: “in order to be proud of *being that*, I must of necessity first resign myself to *being only that*” (Sartre, 1943/1953, p. 290).

#### 4. Can the dominant gaze be changed?

It has often been said that our ideas envelope our perceptions,<sup>8</sup> that we perceive things according to what we already know about them. Certainly, perception is fundamentally contextual and linguistic, and vision is not only a question of optical-chemical processes - language, images and theories also play a role. We could mention, for example, Norwood R. Hanson's questioning of the apparent distinction between theory and observation, as seen in his claim that even scientific observation is theoretically loaded<sup>9</sup> and from which it can be inferred that interpretation is *already* within vision, or even that interpretation *is* vision. Whatever it is that we see, Wittgenstein would say, this 'something' could be different to what it actually is. Seeing is not a passive, purely receptive act - instead, it is always the organisation of what is within its scope, and upon which complex forms of ordering are always operating.

The way we see, and are seen, depends on multiple factors, and so it can also be transformed in different ways. The dominant working modes of a given culture's scopic system can be altered; it is possible to come up with other ways of looking, different to those imposed by the hegemonic gaze, and unlike its usual forms of idealness, which simplify and reify.

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<sup>8</sup> See William Whewell, 'The Philosophy of the Inductive Sciences', *The Historical and Philosophical Works of William Whewell*, vol. VI. London, Frank Cass & Co., 1967, p. 36.

<sup>9</sup> See Matthew D. Lund, *Norwood R. Hanson, Observation, Discovery and Scientific Change*. New York: Humanity Books. 2010, p. 195.

The expectations and level of acceptance of what is put *on display* are profoundly internalised within us, and this greatly conditions what we really see. Seeing is, in most cases, searching the world for those images which most easily adapt to this gaze. And yet, it is also a case of squeezing reality into predetermined visual moulds, like when tourists seek out the typical monument-photo that they have seen copied again and again, only this time they actually want to be in it.

The possibility of changing the aforementioned projecting-illuminating device, i.e. the cultural, hegemonic gaze, all depends on our ability to alter the set of normative representations and images with which the discriminatory forms of difference are inscribed.

Liberating our gaze from the culturally imposed one (which tries to force everything into the limits of its own projection, made up of the predominant representations and values), and fleeing from its designations and determinations, essentially means creating, inventing ways to be free.

The question has been put forward, on several occasions, of whether it would be possible, as a strategy for political action, to reject all forms of idealisation. However, most psychoanalytical schools of thought have defended idealisation as a necessary psychic function that we cannot be without. But if it is not possible to live without idealisation, then we need, at least, to learn how to idealise in a different way. This approach has in fact been boosted today amid the spread of social networking, enacted by thousands of people who form online communities based around certain affinities, interests and life practices, and who generate, by sharing images, brand new forms of idealness which are very different to (and even challenge) the reductive, dominant forms. The uninhibited, joyous display, on the Internet, of bodies and ways of being and living that do not match the norm, is one such counter-strategy of idealisation. The celebration of diversity, and its being communicated in images brimming with positivity, confidence and enjoyment, might be the only way to make others learn how to *embrace* diversity, instead of just tolerating it.



The traditional forms of idealisation, based on the dominant imaginaries, seem to operate under the motto of 'you could be like that' – however, in reality, they just promote the constricting imperatives of 'you should be like that'. To resist this, it is essential to try out new identifications, ever open and adaptable, that never impose limits. This approach, it must not be forgotten, has been, since at least the early 1970s, one of the key methods used in the work of many artists who engage with the issue of identity itself, those who explore new forms of idealisation that go against the impositions of the cultural gaze. In fact, the potential role of artistic practice in this endeavour, providing illuminating poeticisations about seeing and been seen, always offers relevant lessons as to how this gaze could be modified.

As I mentioned above, this cultural gaze, whose power of projection led us to compare it, a few pages back, with a lighting device, has also been described metaphorically as a screen between the retina and the world: "a screen of signs, a screen consisting of all the multiple discourses on vision built into the social arena" (Bryson, 1988, p. 92). And if, this time, we start with the Lacanian figure of a blocking and distorting element, what we should expect from the most ambitious and non-conforming visual manifestations would be for them to design strategies that seek to turn off certain parts of this screen's lighting, while intensifying others, somehow changing the density of this screen's imaginary weft/warp structure with which it filters out and discards. Ultimately, the aim would be to drain the overpowering force from its forms of idealness and the corresponding processes of identification. The phenomenon of identification can never be separated from the processes of idealisation, agents of the *transformation* that is produced when the subject assumes an image, when the instance of the self is placed within a fictional narrative. In the identifying process, there is always mimesis, heteromorphic projection, derealisation.

When we idealise something, this is because there has been a previous process of identification with that something. As such,

all ideal forms of the image are, to some extent, linked with the mirrored image.<sup>10</sup> And this is crucial when trying to understand, for example, the phenomenon of certain influencers having millions of followers on social media.

And if the industries of subjectivity usually operate by means of identification, as an ideological apparatus, it would seem reasonable that a favourable approach for critical action is to think how best to break with certain processes of identification, how to try and inhibit them or, at least, hinder them.

In terms of artistic work, one of the most laudable attempts to critically investigate these identity-based processes was that carried out by Brecht, with his aim to create theatre outside of the *imaginary*. It was the first of many subsequent attempts to suspend the usual games of identification that lie at the heart of artistic manifestations. This would include refusing to allow the spectator to identify with the character, or the actor with the role (the actor would instead become more like an observer of the character they are playing), as well as trying out distinctly anti-illusionist techniques, located not within fiction, but within the consciousness of an ever-conflictive reality (and which we have seen in some so-called 'happenings', artistic actions, performances, 'relational' approaches or an infinite number of markedly 'artist' proposals). It is as if critically thinking or poeticising is, ultimately, the exact opposite of letting oneself get caught up in the mechanisms of identification.

The relevance of Brecht's proposal explains why, ever since, there has been such a vast proliferation of attempts to keep at a distance the dissolving point of reality that is located in the sphere of representation. This works under the widespread assumption that representation should always be subjected to a kind of constant

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<sup>10</sup> Freud notes this, very clearly: "What he projects before him as his ideal is the substitute for the lost narcissism of his childhood in which he was his own ideal". 'On Narcissism: An Introduction' [1914]. In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Volume XIV (1914-1916): On the History of the Psycho Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology, and Other Works*. London: Hogarth Press. 1964, p. 93.

parabasis, and so this approach is an antidote to the processes of identification.

Even so, if identification is always a necessary process for the formation of subjectivity, it might perhaps be useful not to focus on how to prevent it, but rather on how to explore its potential for change, both in its strictly psychic dimension, and its social side, the hypothesis being that there is no reason why identification should always have to buckle to the demands of the dominant forms of the gaze. In this sense, the proliferation of the aforementioned alternative forms on social media, which go against the ideal ones, and which are brimming with positivity and satisfaction, even pleasure, could help modify the parameters of what kinds of bodies and lifestyles are deemed desirable by most, allowing thus for more flexibility. These proposals, in short, would defend the central role of the imaginary register in all aspects of life, as well as the pointless attempts at reducing it all to the field of rationality and consciousness.

But let us now try to point out a second line of thought with regards to the determinations imposed by the cultural gaze. And let us do so, precisely, by using, as a metaphor, a fundamental image in the history of art, one used by Lacan as the basis for the argument he sets out in the text 'Anamorphosis' (1964): *The Ambassadors*, painted by Holbein in 1533.

In his discussion of this painting, Lacan associated the expression "geometral point" with the point of view of the central, conical perspective, where the eye is situated, and in relation to which all the elements in the scene are ordered in terms of space, as if what is seen is somehow *projected* or subjected by the observer's eye. This is the central point of view, and also the basic vanishing point, which coincides with what was determined by the principles of Cartesian subjectivity. This point serves, furthermore, as the perfect metaphor for vision as a device for control, as the place for the cultural gaze, governing the given-to-be-seen, the displayed.

The anamorphically-painted skull at the bottom of the painting indicates, however, a 'blind' spot, forcing us to shift ourselves, to

move away from that ever-comfortable, all-encompassing and always satisfying geometral point, to be able to see something *different*.

Anybody who has seen this painting in the National Gallery, in London, knows that in order for the image of this skull to be reconstructed before our eyes, we must move towards the edge of the painting – we have to abandon the central gaze, and place ourselves at a different viewpoint, a lateral one, almost in line with the surface of the painting, very much *diverted* away from the geometral point. Drastically reducing our field of vision in this way, as demanded by the blind spot created by this strange object, forces us to leave the centre of the field of vision, to uptake a radical change in perspective. But the moment we place ourselves there, it turns out that we become entities looked at by others, by those who are still using the *normal* gaze, in front of the painting, there in the room where the painting hangs. We could use Holbein's skull as an example of the fact that, before being the *owners* of a viewpoint, of a place of vision, we find ourselves subjected to the cultural gaze (represented here by the spectators situated in front of the painting), and that our displacement in front of the painting, driven by our desire to see it *all*, correlates with us moving *into view*, being positioned within the 'frame', forming part of that scene dominated by the *hegemonic* gaze. And this place, this position there on the corner, watched over by the gazes of others, suspended in our insatiable hunger to see *more*, is essentially the place that we occupy in our lives.

The importance of placing ourselves under the gaze of others, as the payoff for our desperation to see, is reflected in the infinite number of thematisations and allegories of this situation throughout the history of contemporary art. This was achieved particularly successfully in Duchamp's *Étant donnés* (1946 – 1966), the paradigmatic example of putting oneself *in the scene* by the very act of looking. This work focuses on a situation similar to that of the voyeur as described by Sartre, i.e. somebody who suddenly realises they are being watched, right when, as Krauss (1993) would note, the

libidinal, desiring gaze gains awareness of itself due to the presence of the overbearing, judgmental *cultural gaze*.

It must not be forgotten, however, that some of the psychoanalytical readings of visual interaction, as suggested by Sartre and thematised here by Duchamp, such as that of René Held in his *Psychopathologie du regard* (1952), would note a certain castration anxiety in all of this, even masochistic fantasies not unlike “the magical theory behind the primitive belief in the evil eye” (Jay, 1993, p. 277). But aside from these controversies, and Duchamp, the thematisation of looking whilst at the same time being *under* the gaze has become an important line of action in contemporary art, based on strategies of masquerading. This is particularly important within the feminist critique of the dominant forms of looking and being looked at, and their role in the construction of ‘ideal’ femininity. These creative approaches play around with the awareness of being seen, ironically subjecting oneself to the hegemonic gaze, obeying what is expected to be displayed, accepting in a hyper-conformist way or pre-empting the configuration that this gaze tries to project. Some recent performances on social media that are based on first-person fiction (by Amalia Ulman, Laís Pontes, etc.), for example, take this approach, to great success. It is an ever-ironic and generally humorous strategy, which, by means of a kind of self-gazing but based on the formalisation imposed by others’ eyes, implies seeing the one who sees, as well as *seeing oneself being seen*, which is always a reference, ultimately, to the *dominant gaze*.

On social media, the spectre of an absolute, all-seeing being, which sees us without being seen, becomes something completely literal. To meet its gaze would mean, in a certain sense, to ‘foresee’ it, to anticipate it, to pose in expectation, to stick far too closely to the projections that we are expected to comply with, to deliberately display ourselves as a non-self, a conscious fiction which is, therefore, rebellious. This kind of ironic objectification, this hyper-conformist reductionism under the watchful eye of the objectifying gaze, allowing ourselves to be *produced*, far too easily, by the cultural

gaze, plays around with the idea of ironically acknowledging our being an object-for-the-gaze as something more real than our being an object-for-ourselves. But also, ultimately, it would mean exposing the dominating gaze itself, that kind of absolute subject which is hard to keep under wraps amid this kind of *fatal* ironic behaviour.

Let us return to Holbein's painting, as mentioned above, to put forward a specific reading of it (distancing ourselves, again, from Lacan's comments on it). We can also use this enigmatic painting to offer a different perspective in terms of the games of looking that it seems to invite us to play. At the most basic level, Holbein demands, of us, two kinds of gaze when contemplating this painting: a 'normal' one, from the geometrical point, and another anamorphic, active one, which refers to an object of vision that resists or opposes the former one. The latter corresponds to seeing in *another* way, a *different* gaze which, in reality, can reveal images hidden upon something far more important than what appears to be a double portrait. In fact, the image hidden by anamorphosis here is not an image of something dead, of something in particular, but rather something universal, i.e. mortality itself. A representation that is not immediately *obvious*, but rather, as with ideas, resists, given its anamorphic disposition, being simplified as a mere image. Perhaps this 'cut' can be understood as a need for otherness, as a breakdown in the codification itself of the gaze imposed by the dominant gaze. This one, the central gaze, sees *hardly anything*, it is pure codification: the authentic truth is hidden in an image that requires a *different* point of view, a *different* gaze (which, furthermore, not only *sees* or receives the image, but also reconstructs it, as happens in all perspectives like this when the eye is placed in the right spot).

All of this might back up our claim that, precisely, this is one of the fundamental missions of art and one of the more critical manifestations within the field of the visual: that of demanding the gaze to be displaced, diverted, a gaze which sees more, and which uncovers, a gaze that is active, image-making and not simply image-receiving, and which is reluctant or simply unable to endorse the

established visual orders and codes that dictate what we ourselves should be as an image. Ultimately, this is a concept of art not so much in the sense of showing something *different*, but rather, above all, the demand for a *different* kind of looking.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, I would like to mention, albeit briefly and as a way of rounding up this section, what might be considered another possible line of reflection regarding all the aspects dealt with here – I refer, fundamentally, to the camera itself as an image-making device.

I mentioned above that, in Lacan, the cultural gaze was not materialised in the form of a metaphor for God or the master, but

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<sup>11</sup> We must mention here the proposal defended by Kaja Silverman, who starts by considering the two looks, or gazes, as noted by Barthes with relation to observing photography: the *studium* and the *punctum*. In this approach, *studium* corresponds to the codified gaze which is linked to normative representation, the position indicated by the geometral point in Lacan's first diagram, i.e. what is given-to-be-seen (Kaja Silverman, 1996, pp. 181-182). Meanwhile, the *punctum* is, for Silverman, the more unruly gaze which challenges the established forms of seeing, associated with "the movement of the desiring look beyond the 'frame' or 'picture' of the given-to-be-seen, toward what lies 'outside.'" This "wound" or "prick" which destabilises the standardised gaze would thus be the creation of an unexpected point of view, in which marginal elements might acquire huge importance in relation to those which are supposedly more important. But the most interesting (and perhaps questionable) aspect of Silverman's interpretation is that this transformative capacity of vision depends on memory. That is, the ability of artistic practices to shift us in relation to the form of seeing imposed by what Silverman calls the "dominant fiction", to invite us to see in a *different* way. This is linked to the supposed ability to "implant" synthetic memories in the observer, memories which she describes as "libidinally saturated associative clusters which act like those mnemonic elements which, as a result of a psychic working over, have been made the vehicles for the expression of unconscious wishes" (p. 185). Therefore, art's transformative capacity is based on its power to operate with "forms of mental activity in which the pleasure principle predominates, and in which desire is given lavish expression" (ibid.), making use of more "primarized" forms of mental activity than those which we tend to use, thanks to the inherent diversity and richness of metaphor.

rather in the figure of the camera, as well as in a certain form of 'illumination'. The relation between the photographic camera and the defining features of the cultural gaze are, in fact, manifold, and the history of their mutual coincidence and influence are of great interest. Photography and the dominant forms of seeing have, over time, been constructed and deconstructed mutually.

The camera's abilities, as an optical instrument for changing and revitalising our worn-out, routine perception of things, are immense. Anybody can become a photographer now, which in turn opens up, every day, infinite possibilities for new forms of seeing the world and the many thousands of things that have barely been seen within it. Despite this, we must recognise that devices for visual documenting, in their widespread, habitual use in the context of social media, tend to help standardise the gaze, more intensely, as opposed to diversifying it. The massive proliferation of these devices is generally geared towards repeating and imitating those forms of representation that are typical of professional image creation and, more specifically, of the agents who produce the usual or predominant visual formalisations of the consumer culture. What almost everybody aims for is a kind of photography that is in keeping with what has already been seen and admired, to stuff their reality into certain visual moulds that they know will be worthy of applause, and so are ideal to be used for their *online* social presence. The ubiquitous photographic devices help us display ourselves, feeding our constant need for recognition and approval.

But, as noted above, it would be ridiculous not to acknowledge the huge critical potential inherent to photography in terms of its capacity for generating diversity when displaying individuals and things. We should not forget that each photographic act today is, almost always, one of identifying what has been photographed, i.e. declaring to the world: 'it's like this', 'I'm like this'.

When the first cameras appeared, the fine arts were quick to distance themselves from this new device's perfectly-executed forms of representing the world. Painters desperately sought to escape



from the camera's objectifying formalisations, resolutely defending the physical qualities of painting, or its more imaginative modes of expression, and defending the forms of idealisation and transformation which were not to be found in the detailed objectivity of the camera. In short, the practice of painting was forced to act against that which could be executed better by photographic technology.

Before long, however, the camera was shown to be an instrument that let things be seen in a way they had never been seen before. And we owe a debt to Benjamin (1935/1998) in this regard, for his theories on how the new image-making devices might expand our perception, bringing to the fore certain aspects of things that only a lens can see, generating images "which escape natural vision" (p. 283).

As a "mechanical eye", Vertov stated, the cinematic camera could show us the world in a way that only cameras can see it, opening up, for us, the path towards "the creation of a new perception of the world" (as cited in Barnouw, 1993, p. 58) making it possible for a hitherto-unknown universe to be revealed. This has to be a constant endeavour - exploring how the new devices that capture and process images might offer us new ways to visually experience our surroundings, and broaden out our skills of perception, should never end. Ultimately, this could be interpreted as questioning the rigid ways in which we understand 'reality' in its adjustment to the hegemonic gaze, by opening them up and diversifying them. These ways are almost always based on the standardisation in the modes of perception and the patterns of repetition and imitation as seen in certain *styles* or habits of looking.

The camera, as Flusser claimed, is like Lacan's screen: it makes us see things through a visor, which not only freezes things, but also puts them in order, according to a program. However, the camera can also be a medium that actively deconstructs the cultural gaze's most impoverishing and limiting ways and modes of fixation, and therefore it can deconstruct this gaze's supremacy too. The camera is very good at shaking up the gaze that is most dependent on the hegemonic standards of idealness.

This debate, in any case, rages on: it lies at the centre of the discussion around the possibility, or otherwise, of continuing to defend the positivity that ran through Benjamin's texts, in terms of the new visual technologies, or whether these developments, beyond just expanding our senses, might instead lead us to a form of 'anaesthesia' (Buck-Morss, 1992). In fact, the scene in Farocki's *Bilder der Welt* (1988), in which we see an aerial bombardment of a city, is still highly revealing with regards to the ambivalent character of the camera as a technical eye, most notably when the voiceover states: "The preserving photograph, the destroying bomb - these two now press together" (as cited in Silverman, 1996, p. 151).

## 5. Placing ourselves in front of the camera

Bourdieu (1965/1990) wrote that "striking a pose means respecting oneself and demanding respect" (p. 80). Today, however, not only is everything photographed all the time, but also the photographic act happens in any given way, in any given circumstances, and so the old rituals of preparing for a photo are reduced to a minimum, as defined by the instantaneity of the digital *snapshot*. Our new image-making devices tend not to give us time 'for' the photograph - the idea is that we hardly prepare our bodies for a shot. The photographic act continuously interrupts our daily lives with no prior warning, which makes us respond with our bodies, almost automatically, via gestures and expressions that, having been practiced a thousand times, and with nowhere near the level of respect that being in front of the camera used to require, we use as a way of showing ourselves ever in a good mood, beaming with joy.

Posing is part of the history of 'postural coercions', the ways in which the body has been educated and indoctrinated in relation to the gaze. In other words, the history of how the body is to be prepared for other people, how it should be configured when presented to others. All of this is very much connected to the political anatomy

noted by Foucault, and he gave the example of the peasant who would become a soldier, reminding us that, since the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, the military orders<sup>12</sup> would demand that future soldiers had to get used to “holding their heads high and erect; to standing upright, without bending the back, to sticking out the belly, throwing out the chest and throwing back the shoulders” (as cited in Foucault, 1975/1995, p. 135). Furthermore, this ordinance added that “a calculated constraint runs slowly through each part of the body, mastering it, making it pliable, ready at all times, turning silently into the automatism of habit; in short, one has ‘got rid of the peasant’ and given him ‘the air of a soldier’” (ibid.).

The history of this kind of postural modelling is a long and fascinating one. A key text in this regard is *Il Cortegiano* by Baltasar Castiglione, a genuine treaty on how to *present oneself* to others, who in turn always look on in a rigorously judgmental and censorial way. Faces and bodies should become “signs of the perfect mental and psychic grace” (Berger, 2000, p. 102) which, for Castiglione (1528/1901) would make one “at first sight pleasing and agreeable to all who see him” (p. 23).

But the history of posing is what interests us most here, i.e. what to do with ourselves so we are ready to be represented. This is a history, above all, of a critique of posing itself, and, ultimately, a history of the conflict between artifice and spontaneity. We can refer, for example, to what Diderot said in 1766, regarding the years spent on life drawing in the Academy, a time in which, in his opinion, artists acquired a certain *mannerism* in their drawing:

all these academic positions, affected, constrained, artificial, as they are; all these actions coldly and awkwardly expressed by some poor devil, and always the same poor devil, hired to come three times a week, to undress himself, and to play the puppet in the hands of the professor—what have these in common with the positions and actions of nature? (Diderot, as cited by Morley, 1905, p. 74)

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<sup>12</sup> Ordinance of 20<sup>th</sup> March 1764.

For Diderot, the truthfulness of nature was what formed the basis of art's credibility. Even so, it is worth highlighting, to avoid misunderstandings, that the opposite of forced and artificial, of the affected stillness typical of the mannequin's pose, is not an entirely fleeting pose either: "A portrait may appear sad, somber, melancholic, and serene since these are permanent states; however a portrait which laughs lacks nobility, characterless, perhaps even false and consequently a joke" (Diderot, 1766/2011, p. 103). He continues: "The laugh is fleeting. One laughs on occasion; but one is not in a state of laughter" (ibid.). It is somewhat striking that Diderot concurs with Lessing in this regard, who, in his *Laocoon*, published in the same year, stated that "art [. . .] must not express anything, of which we can only think as transitory" (Lessing, 1766/1853, p. 17), using the example of a portrait of Julien Offray de La Mettrie (1709-1751), who had allowed himself to be painted while laughing, but whose face "laughs only the first time we look at him" (p. 18).

Much later, there was another interesting chapter in this critique of the forced formalisation of the pose. I refer to the observations put forward by Proudhon in his text *On the Principle of Art and Its Social Purpose*: "See all our paintings of mythology, of religion, of history, of battles, of genre: not a single natural figure; they are all contorted, disrupted, or dressed like charlatans" (1865/1989, p. 296). Furthermore, and of greater relevance to us here, he would apply this same critique to the practice of photography: "Even in their photographs, our contemporary celebrities pose. The same attitudes have become typical. Regardless of their clothes, we could recognise, from their gestures, their facial expressions, the warrior, the tribune, the priest, the magistrate, the worker" (p. 296). Indeed, looking at some *cartes de visite*, one of the most widely-used photographic formats after Disdéri patented it in 1854, shows the extreme standardisation in the poses of those depicted. Generally, these cards made use of props that resembled those of the painted portraits of royalty and aristocrats, with little variation among them. In the *carte de visite*, the subjects would often be standing, next to a column or

some kind of fabric, or, if seated, they would pretend to be reading or writing. This photographic format saw the start of the trend (which continues to flood social media today) in which celebrity photographs became collectable. Essentially, in the Second French Empire, it became fashionable to collect photos of politicians, actors, actresses, etc., people who, in many cases, had never before been seen by the collector. This market was developed by Disdéri in the 1850s and 60s, when he would sell each *Galerie des contemporains* in volumes of twenty-five pictures.

This imitating, in photographic studios, of the conventions of aristocratic portrait painting, led to many ironic commentaries about the incongruence between the subjects' own social standing and the representational conventions borrowed from aristocratic painting, since underprivileged people would be photographed with sumptuous backdrops and props (Wynter, 1862). But this was the transformative magic and the success of the photographic act: by only using refined, bourgeois poses, anybody could turn into a distinguished personality via photography, and studio photography would always seek to exploit and profit from this idealisation.

Nevertheless, and as opposed to the connection frequently made between posing and the artificiality of the image, striking a pose when we know that we are to be photographed, being able to face the camera in a way that we choose, and preparing ourselves to be gazed at by the mechanical eye, should all be understood as a defensive act, as an action that resists complete submission to the camera, as a way of preparing for our encounter with it (since posing always implies agreeing to be photographed in a particular way).

The fact that Barthes said he didn't like being photographed is not merely trivial. In his opinion, photography turns people into an image, an object. Photography meant, for him, "the advent of myself as other: a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity" (Barthes, 1980/1982, p. 12) which would only be resolved by generating the following, dramatic situation: "In front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am,

the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art [...] a subject who feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a micro-version of death (of parenthesis): I am truly becoming a specter” (p. 13-14). There has always been a link between the photographic act and death, at least since Arthur Onslow’s comments in 1858 regarding the indigenous people at King George Sound, Western Australia, who, he claimed, were afraid that being photographed would kill them.<sup>13</sup> A deadly effect of photography, paralysing, statuesque, as initiated just when striking a pose. As Owens (1992) noted, to pose is to freeze oneself to anticipate or mimic the stillness of the photograph that is to be taken.

It is said that Paul Strand used a fake camera to distract people whilst photographing them with a hidden camera.<sup>14</sup> Walker Evans also took many photographs hiding the camera from the subjects. The hidden camera would go on to be a resource used many years later with notable results, for example, by Philip-Lorca diCorcia, in his series *Heads* (2000-01).

Moving the camera out of sight of whoever is about to be photographed, so that the subject does not feel the pressure always exerted on us by the lens, is the simplest technique for those who want to capture a spontaneous representation, a less ‘artificial’ appearance. However, some reject the notion that posing is a denaturing formalisation of the represented individual: there are many photographers who believe that posing might be a means of reaching a greater ‘truth’. Susan Sontag’s anecdotes about the photographic work of Diane Arbus are good examples of this:

Like Brassai, Arbus wanted her subjects to be as fully conscious as possible, aware of the act in which they were participating. Instead

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<sup>13</sup> See the entry ‘Australia’, written by Warwick Reeder, in John Hannavy (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Nineteenth-Century Photography*. New York: Routledge. 2008, p. 98.

<sup>14</sup> See Ellen Gamberman, ‘The Fine Art of Spying’. *Wall Street Journal*, 12<sup>th</sup> September 2013.

of trying to coax her subjects into a natural or typical position, they are encouraged to be awkward—that is, to pose. [. . .] Standing or sitting stiffly makes them seem like images of themselves (Sontag, 1973/2005, p. 29)

For Arbus, it is not the spontaneous snapshot, but rather the constructed pose that captures the subject most authentically. The subject's revealing expression in fact shows what is strange, unusual or fake about the normal bodily posture. Using the pose as an artifact, as something constructed, but also as something chosen and which goes against the randomness of the instant snapshot, might be the best way of bringing about a higher degree of authenticity.<sup>15</sup>

Today, social media has given rise to a whole new repertoire of poses and gestures for the camera. Frowning and pouting at the same time (the so-called 'duckface'), subtly looking to the ground, or casually tilting the head, are some of the great many gestures that are repeated every day in thousands of selfies. However, apart from this control of our own gestures that these auto-photos allow, we are permanently subjected to being photographed multiple times, be it in family gatherings or get-togethers with friends. This is the issue of our co-existing with the omnipresent image-making devices, which demand that we are constantly on alert, ready to react to their invasive and continual gaze. It is still surprising to see just how fast people strike a pose, following plenty of daily practice, when they are summoned to be photographed – they can immediately adopt, without hesitation, the right posture and expression that they know

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<sup>15</sup> Philippe Dubois claims, in relation to the photographic work of Diane Arbus, the following: "Instead of the hunted image, Arbus favours the convened, constructed image. Instead of spontaneity, posing. Instead of chance, willingness and choice. By means of the 'plastic' image of themselves that they hope to get across, and that the artist helps them produce, the 'truth' and 'authenticity' of Arbus's characters are revealed." [Translated from the Spanish: *El acto fotográfico*. Barcelona: Paidós. 1983, p. 40].

will best contribute to this memory, which must always be shared, of a joyous moment of fun.

How we display ourselves in front of the camera will continue to be a key question, as is how we react to these devices, and how they condition us. This is a central concern in current artistic creation, i.e. the question of posing, how we confront, with our bodies, our being visually documented. It continues a long line of exploration by countless artists who have looked into the boundaries between posing and acting. We should remember, for example, Valie Export's work on the act of posing and presenting oneself to the camera as a transgressive gesture, Cindy Sherman's playing around with simulated poses, Rineke Dijkstra's subtle use of posing as almost the sole rhetorical element in her work, among others.

Today, in a context of 'social' games online, of constant visual identification, many young artists channel these investigations into a wide range of online interventions, exploring, again, the possibilities offered by acting, pretending, farce, pantomime. This reactivates the idea of the self as a game between the actor and the script, in which photographic acts document a kind of performance. The mask is certainly used as a key element in many of these works, in this time when celebrities themselves construct their followers' aspirations by means of masks.

Perhaps, however, there still needs to be further work on new critical poetics about the issue of the 'great art' of the pose, at this time when social media influencers attract thousands of followers not so much for what they have done, but rather because they exist *beautifully*. Because today the 'truth', again, seems to be turning into a question of style, a new crisis of the subject similar to that which occurred in the late Victorian era, constructing identity, as Wilde would have it, upon ever-secondary signs that belong to the sphere of pure aestheticism based on personal image.



## 6. Between the cyber-*flâneur* and the digital *badaud*

The modern cliché of the city as *writing*, as a book read by those who walk its streets, walkers whose gaze is an act of *reading*, takes on new dimensions today in the recurring metaphor of the Internet as a digital city. It seems that what was said of 19<sup>th</sup>-century London can be applied to the Internet today: “a place of sudden events, unidentified people, bizarre coincidences, and unexpected intimacies” (Nord, 1995, p. 42). Similarly, the notions of the bazaar-city, the jungle-city, the organism-city and the machine-city, applied so often to the interpretation of the modern city (Langer, 1984) would also, in many possible senses, be applied to the Internet, understood as a city to be traversed and navigated.

The social networks are as fascinating to us as the window displays at London’s Burlington Arcade were to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century walkers. So much so, this location was once justifiably dubbed, in a play on words, ‘Burlington Arcadia.’<sup>16</sup> The walkers, the passers-by, would stand and gawp, just as we do now when facing the digital window displays that are the ‘news feeds’ on our social media, where vying for our attention and gaze, as in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century displays, are a thousand miscellaneous things, and we “never tire by their monotony” (Smith, 1848, p. 5). Wandering around social networks, or losing oneself in the bustling crowds while walking the streets, is always pleasant and entertaining: “Any man [. . .] who is bored in the midst of the crowd, is a fool! A fool! and I despise him!”, said Guys, in Baudelaire (1863/1972, p. 400).

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<sup>16</sup> As Charles Larcom Graves notes, Punch offered a detailed explanation of Burlington Arcade’s attractions in 1842, under the heading ‘The Haunts of the Regent Street Idler’: “The covered passage through which the overland journey from Burlington Gardens to Piccadilly is generally performed [. . .] becomes a perfect Burlington Arcadia.” *Mr. Punch’s History of Modern England*. London, New York, Toronto and Melbourne: Cassell and Company. 1921, pp. 156-7.

It is tempting to use the descriptions of the experience of the modern city as a way of talking about the Internet user in this new 'Arcadia' of connectivity. As a way of seeing the network-city as the place where living in a state of anxiety has taken hold most intensely, and this, for Simmel, first came about in the constant barrage of images and impressions. Fortuitous and transitory interactions, ever fleeting, and perceptual shocks, all define this tumultuous power of the stimuli that come to us through the screen-city.

There are also many similarities that we could note between the window and the computer screen, the latter understood as that space where the world passes before our eyes, like the new window of the 'indoor *flâneur*' (Cuvardic, 2012, p. 30). But it also applies the other way round, as the window that opens onto the Internet-street, exposing us thus to other people's gazes, turning our home into one with no walls or façade.<sup>17</sup>

As with the fragmentary experience so typical of the modern city, the immense visual stimulation that we get from the screens of our tech devices often seems to have a certain anaesthetising, dulling effect (a form of self-protection, perhaps?). It is the new version of the *blasé* attitude, that kind of heady weariness in which everything ends up looking the same, in which nothing seems of greater worth than anything else. We are victims of the new digital melancholy, of the tedium caused by visual overstimulation, often accompanied by those foibles of wanting to be special, as noted by Simmel (and which inundate social networks today), expressed in wanting to stand out, wanting to be seen as different.

Every day we feel the pleasure of navigating around the network-city, that territory teeming with new things. It is reminiscent of the keenness to wander the streets, which Dickens loved to write about, or the 'willing nomadism' as lauded by Balzac, for whom to look around was to live. The issue of 'how we walk around' is

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<sup>17</sup> It is particularly worth noting here the short text 'Windows' by Charles Baudelaire. English translation available in the collection *Paris Blues: The Poems in Prose* (2012). London: Anvil Press Poetry.

reconfigured, having now become something closer to 'how we navigate' or browse the Internet.

As is logical, there have been many attempts to take the older terms for those who would amble around the city, as used within mid-19<sup>th</sup> century *Costumbrismo*, and apply them to today's Internet users: the *flâneur*, the walker, the passer-by, the prowler, the snooper, the voyeur. An updating of these terms that perhaps takes us to a funny new version of *The Natural History of the Idler Upon Town* (Albert Smith's 1948 text), but now, of course, necessarily focused on the virtual city. There were countless different types, starting with the one suggested in the definition of *flâneur* (without an accent) that appeared in an 1808 dictionary: "a lazybones, a loafer, a man of insufferable idleness, who doesn't know where to carry his trouble and boredom" (as cited in Ferguson, 2015, p. 24) while a different definition suggested such a figure was "a thinking being" (Loubier, 2001, p. 165). In other words, and paraphrasing Huart, this is unlike the working man (who would look without seeing) or the man of leisure (who would see without looking): the *flâneur* was somebody who could look and see at the same time (Huart, 1841).

In the end, the 19<sup>th</sup>-century *flâneur* was identified more as a lover of movement, variety and the multitude, who could extract many valuable things from the act of observation, things which went unnoticed by everybody else. Thus, it has been said that the *flâneur* was a kind of *unwitting* philosopher, who was able to analyse, in depth, what was going on in the street. Paradoxically, sometimes just a quick glance (albeit full of intuition) was enough to do this. The *flâneur's* gaze was interpretive, defamiliarising, actively exploratory, unlike the 'touristic' gaze, which is predetermined and subject to preconceptions of what has to be seen. This leads us to the old maxim of *flânerie*: "In our standardized and uniform world, it is right here, deep below the surface, that we must go. Estrangement and surprise, the most thrilling exoticism, are all close by" (Halévy, as cited by Benjamin, 1999, p. 444).

To think about the figure of the cyber-*flâneur* or the data-*flâneur* would mean having to combine Baudelaire's *flâneur* with that of the digital ethnographer, who has sharp observational skills, and for whom everything has at least some point of interest. Their gaze interprets at a certain distance, aware of the commodification of everything that passes before their eyes, even their own relationships with other people, being able as they are to interpret that which is, for others, everyday life or mere noise.

A gaze that is curious, inquisitive, oriented towards social investigation, always uncovering, was that of the earliest *flâneur*, as noted so beautifully by Fournel in *Ce qu'on voit dans les rues de Paris* (1867). As opposed to the hurried passer-by who has no time to be entertained by what they see, the 19<sup>th</sup>-century *flâneur* was devoted to the act of seeing. Similarly, the cyber-*flâneur* must be able to discern how fake the behaviour is and how fabricated the identities are in this age of digital hyper-exposure. They always aspire to decipher something, to gain uncommon knowledge of the digital city they are navigating, and so their movement should also be, more than anything, and as it was in the past, a source of creativity in itself.

When 'post-Internet' artists<sup>18</sup> today speak of art created under the effects of hours of online browsing, we are almost bound to be reminded of certain slogans, such as that of Degas: "Walk, then work."<sup>19</sup> Many of these new digital artists try, as did many artists in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, to document this moving vision, based on the effect of hundreds of hours of navigating their way among the multitude, a multitude which is now 'connected'. Artists who work with digital remixing, and in particular the members of the so-called Internet surfing clubs, are the best examples, in the digital sphere, of such accumulators of impressions and strange objects,

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<sup>18</sup> See '¿Arte «post-Internet?»', in Juan Martín Prada, *Prácticas artísticas e Internet en la época de las redes sociales*. Madrid: Akal [2nd edition], 2015 (in Spanish).

<sup>19</sup> This is his famous expression "*Ambulare, postea laborare*." See Marcel Guérin (ed.), *Lettres de Degas*. Paris: Éditions Bernard Grasset, 1931, p. 52.

'scavengers' or 'semionauts' who collect signs as they wander through the network city.

The media poet or artist, the digital ethnographer or micro-sociologist, and the digital *flâneur*, just like the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Parisian, all become spectators in an 'improvised theatre', gathering up visual impressions that can be interpreted in thousands of ways. They are figures who do not seek online 'spectacles' per se, but rather they prefer to see (and above all *display*) the Internet as a 'spectacle' in its own right. Cyber-*flânerie* would be, therefore, the attitude represented today, as it was in the past, by a certain challenging of what is imposed by the consumer culture, but specifically now, insomuch that this culture finds itself being articulated by digital connectivity. Their aim is to distance themselves from the merely seduced, sleepwalking, automatic and manipulated gaze of the average Internet user.

21<sup>st</sup>-century *flânerie* kicked off a new position for the gaze: it went from being panoramic, dominating from above, to being street-level, horizontal, mobile, from within the crowd, just like the Internet user's immersed state. The cyber-*flâneur* would thus have a multifaceted identity: they flit between being the audience, the spectator, the reader, the interpreter, the evaluator, the protagonist, but always the navigator, the stationary wanderer, a traveller for whom the world is what moves, passing before their eyes.

Not participating in what was going on was one of the typical features of early *flânerie*. On the Internet, however, we are always impelled, tempted, to leave a comment, an opinion, some kind of impression. In this age of 'dataveillance', it is perhaps no longer possible to go completely unnoticed among the online multitude; an anonymous immersion in the crowd, a completely private *flânerie*, is perhaps not completely feasible anymore.

And if moving freely was so fundamental to the old *flâneur*, that is, their wandering the city with no set aims, then today, in these new streets that are the social network interfaces, maybe we prefer to adopt the role of that other great figure in the modern city, the

so-called 'sandwichman', i.e. the human advert, wearing a sandwich board. This figure tries, more than anything, to "call attention to himself, to be seen and read" (Hayes, 2002, p. 459) and just like him, we are resigned to being stuck in the mere handful of places where we can 'advertise ourselves'.

However, those who seem to have the biggest online presence today are somewhat like an updated version of the figure of the *badaud*, one who gapes, always walking around the modern city submerged in a state of acritical distraction, with a compulsive and consuming gaze, gobsmacked by the infinite number of visual stimuli in which they sought entertainment, ever in desperate need of something new. Compared to the *cyber-flâneur*, who would try to keep a certain reflective and critical distance, the new digital *badaud* is only really interested in relieving their own boredom, desperate to see what's going viral, needing to be constantly visually stimulated, and always interacting with others *like them* (and always on their same terms).

## 7. Bodies on screens

Looking at a photograph gives us information about a point of view, the location of an eye within space, the position from which the shot was taken, all of which we assume coincides with that of one of the photographer's pupils (we tend to forget that, with few exceptions, a photograph is the result of a one-eyed vision). However, with the digital image, which is often completely synthetic, this idea of positioning the eye when producing an image becomes almost totally diminished. This contrasts with the analogue photographic act which, as well as capturing the object by recording it on film, actually indicates the position of the photographer and their eye in relation to it. Thus, we would accept Tomas's observation that "there is no longer a point of view, but visual context" (1988, p. 66).

Also, the limits of the image, as well as the boundary between the image and the space where the observer is situated, soon fell into

crisis. In the new media, both of these are invariably annulled – this is achieved via the absolute changeability of image scales and sizes as offered by digital editing programmes, or via immersive practices (e.g. in virtual reality installations), or as a result of the practices for simultaneous ubiquity that the Internet makes possible.

Though the screens of our computers and phones display interactive images, they are also highly absorbent. Our solitude, in front of the screen, is related to a certain *incorporation* into it. This would explain the previous reluctance of some writers, namely those who were used to the typewriter, to embrace the ‘stylographic calculator’ (the computer) when it was first launched. Baudrillard noted, in the mid-1990s, that one has to be “inside” the screen, “on the other side of it” to be able to work on a text (Baudrillard, 1996). With the typewriter, there was still a degree of distance between the writer and text, but this seemed to vanish with the computer screen – this distance was eliminated by the effects of interaction as articulated by the device, meaning the observer-user is always part of the system itself.

The state of solitude, as alluded to above, and which, generally speaking, typifies the user in front of the screen, is another point of similarity with the 19<sup>th</sup>-century *flâneur*. The *flâneur*, according to Huart in 1841, “walks alone”, because “it is impossible to *flâneur* in the company of others” (p. 115).

Meanwhile, the user’s solitude within the vast, multitudinous space of the social networks, reminds us, again, of the many people who listen to the radio on their own, whom Benjamin described so subtly, as well as the old issue of the ‘community of vision’ that, almost paradoxically, would affect cinema. Although the cinema is a place for people to congregate, Derrida claimed that there was, even so, a fundamental disengagement: “in the movie theater, each viewer is alone” (2001/2015 p. 29).

We could, of course, draw certain parallels between the Internet user and the spectator in the cinema, for whom Derrida did not deem it convenient to use (due to their excessive solitude, perhaps) the word ‘community’, nor ‘individuality’, instead opting for ‘singularity’. Only

this word seems to reflect the “extraordinary conjunction between the masses— [cinema is] an art of the masses, which addresses the collectivity and receives collective representations—and the singular. This mass is dissociated, disconnected, neutralized” (Derrida, 2001/2015, p. 29). As we see it, how to *operate*, in the new media, with anything that strays from this singularity/solitude still appears to be a key question today.

But let us establish here another reference point. While the cinema is a public place where we feel alone, the television offers a “depersonalising, solitary pleasure”, a claim which Debray followed up with an enlightening metaphor, based on movement, to distinguish between cinema and television: “a TV addict is a controllable, sedentary person; a cinephile is an uncontrolled nomad. Good television reflects its audience, good cinema smashes the mirror” (Debray, 1991/1993, p. 262). Navigating the Internet surely offers us both possibilities, in the aforementioned duality between the digital *badaud* and the cyber-*flâneur*.

With regards to mobility and movement, we cannot deny, however, that the whole history of the technological image has also been, until relatively recently, a history of the motionlessness of seeing bodies. As an initial example we suggest the figurative imprisonment of the artist within the gridded, perspectival window, made for drawing,<sup>20</sup> or their confinement within the camera obscura (inseparable, as Crary put it, from “a certain metaphysic of interiority” (1992, p. 39), *cut off* from the outside world). This retention and lack of movement would continue into the early days of photography, when long exposure times required fixed, motionless poses. In fact, in the cinema, the spectator is subjected to a softer kind of ‘confinement’, or at the very least an immobilisation in the dark. Perhaps this is why it is so tricky to display works of moving images in galleries and museums, where it is hard, without ‘confining’ them to a specific room, to stop the spectators from moving around the space. This is because of the

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<sup>20</sup> See Lev Manovich, ‘An Archeology of a Computer Screen’, *Kunstforum International*, 132, autumn 1995. 124-35.



usual, dynamic rhythm that is customary when contemplating static images in exhibition rooms. It is tremendously difficult to change spectators' habits of *walking*, in which they barely pause in front of images and objects.

The old aspiration to be wrapped up in the image would reach a milestone with the introduction of the panorama, explicitly realised as a virtual experience. This could only be achieved by surrounding the spectator, who was *enclosed* within the image itself. This restraint was pushed to the limit in the line of research initiated by Ivan Sutherland's Head Mounted Display, the dawns of a technology in which the screen would take on the condition of prosthesis, a helmet for enclosing the gaze, an encircling image.

It is no exaggeration to state, furthermore, that the technical image has almost always been linked to a certain motor 'disability' in the observer. The calmness of the cinemagoer, or the paralysis of the TV viewer holding the remote control, would lead to immobility being a prerequisite for the screens of the first portable laptop computers, which demanded an almost perfect positioning of the user in front of them, for if they moved, they would fall into a 'blind spot' or a 'negative' area of the image.

Up until the age of the mobile connected devices, we navigated on desktop computer screens without moving, enjoying ourselves as stationary travellers. Only the Internet user's hand would move, when clicking on the links that make up, among other elements, the Internet image. This invites us to talk about Novak's *pantopicon* (*pan* + *topos*), to describe the condition "of being in all places at one time, as opposed to seeing all places from one place" (Novak, 1996). According to Druckrey, in fact, being connected to the Internet was not so much a case of being 'immersed' in it, but rather 'being distributed'. This distribution of the individual around the framework of the web is a more precise definition of the Internet user, contradicting the old description of this situation in terms of 'immersion', just as it had appeared, for example, in Nicolas Schöffer's pioneering 1968 manifesto *The Future of Art*.

Nevertheless, our obsession with our connected devices' screens, the fact that we are almost constantly *chained* to them, should be understood, above all, in terms of addiction, of dependence on the intense pleasures that come from the Internet user's active 'surrender' – the screen takes on the role of the new, paralysing Medusa.

Observing the unmoving faces of the Internet users, captivated by the magical light from the screens of their computers and connected devices, by the light that comes from a luminous mirror, so radiant, invites us to rethink the idea of 'illumination' as addressed, for example, albeit too literally perhaps, in Evan Baden's photographic series *The Illuminati* (2006/07), but only to draw attention, critically, to its hypnotic power. It could even be said that the faces of the engrossed Internet users, subjected to constant *impressions*, are illuminated by the light that emanates from the compelling dynamism of the connected multitude itself. We are reminded of the exciting metaphors about the *energeia* of the multitude, which has long featured that individual who, as Benjamin put it, "plunges into the crowd as into a reservoir of electric energy" (1940/2007, p. 175).

Looking at the person who is looking at the screen is an attempt, within the field of artistic practices, to respond to the question about a figure who is hard to define and still largely unstudied: the computer user. Among the few thematisations of this figure, worthy of mention is, of course, the series *The Users*, by Kurt Caviezel, consisting of photographs of different Internet users captured via their own webcams. With a more ethnographic than artistic approach, there are other interesting projects based on documenting the reaction of the users of digital devices at certain moments, above all linked with the ever quickfire experience of videogames. *My Generation* (2010) by Eva and Franco Mattes, for example, showed intense moments of frustration and emotional outpouring by different gamers, revealing the powerfully addictive and uncontrolled nature of many digital devices. Also, Nia Burks, in pieces such as *Angry Gamers* (2010), carried out a visual exploration of the extreme emotional pressure felt by some young players of

online games such as World of Warcraft or Call of Duty, showing that what happens in the virtual, fictional space can have profound effects in the personal, real context. Similarly, the interviews with players of Grand Theft Auto regarding the situations experienced in the game, which were presented by Axel Stockburger in his work *Boys in the Hood* (2005), are good examples of addressing this phenomenology of videogaming, in which the borders between what happens in the digital space and what can happen, or seems to have happened, in *real* life, become greatly blurred.

Among works like this, it is also worth mentioning the series *Shooter* by Beate Geissler and Oliver Sann, which consists of images of gamers' faces whilst they are playing, showing the huge bodily tension generated by the game, and its expressive effect as body language (grimaces, head movements, etc.) in which the real body accompanies its avatar representation. This is a crossover of virtual experiences and *non-virtual* gestures, a creative exploration of the image of the body that exists *on the other side* of the screen. A look at the bodily effects of the virtual, in that barely-considered territory of the face of the computer user; the tension in the game causes expressions that are not a communication of feelings (the body, here, is not acting for anybody), but rather pure corporal dynamism, a strictly *organic* and *automatic* response to an intense regime of belief (one of absolute *engagement*, we could say) with regards to what is happening, what is being *lived* there on the screen.

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