The Regime of Visibility

Camiel van Winkel

Essay – April 13, 2005

Using a number of examples from fashion, advertising, graphic design and television, Camiel van Winkel investigates the regime of visibility and its implications for a critical approach to contemporary visual culture. This article is a condensed version of Chapter 1 of his forthcoming book *The Regime of Visibility*.

There are too few images. The dynamics of contemporary culture are determined by a visual shortage rather than a visual surfeit. The demand for images – not just 'complex' or 'interesting' images, but any images – far outstrips supply. Life in a world dominated by visual media is subject to a permanent pressure to furnish the missing visuals; to visualize practices and processes that do not belong to the realm of the visual, or that aren't even visible as such. This is the regime of visibility. Images may be omnipresent, but as a social force they are less powerful than the imperative to visualize. The visual shortage creates an unstable situation requiring constant effort in accordance with the economic principle of permanent growth. Success equals visibility and visibility equals success. Anyone failing to conform to this model automatically places themselves at a disadvantage. No further conspiracy is necessary. That which is invisible does not exist.

The regime of visibility is no mere dictate issued by the mass media. The individuals, institutions and practices that are afflicted by it actively contribute to it as well. The regime of visibility permeates all levels of culture and society, from top to bottom, from centre to periphery. The most diverse forms of cultural production – in the widest sense of the word – have reduced themselves (or allowed themselves to be reduced) to a number of visually mediatable aspects. Self-awareness, coupled with the sense that one is different from the rest of the world, has to be expressed in a visible form, otherwise 'it doesn't work'.

In visual disciplines such as art, architecture and film, the regime of visibility results in shifts that may seem small but that are always significant. It appears there is a superlative of visibility – an extra degree of visualization. In 2001 sculptures that for many years had occupied various modest outdoor locations in Rotterdam were brought to a specially designed, light-flooded 'sculpture terrace' in the centre of the city. Despite their original locations in public space, they were deemed insufficiently visible. Anyone who had thought the idea of a sculpture terrace to be an anachronism was mistaken; it was an utterly contemporary solution to an utterly contemporary problem. Without that extra level of visualization the sculptures would have been doomed to disappear from the city altogether. They could survive only by being reassembled into a 'visual statement' that would contribute to the official self-image of Rotterdam.

The explosive rise in popularity of photography – both in the museum and gallery world and among collectors and artists – can also be linked to this collective craving to visualize the invisible. Photography has developed into a dominant model of image production; it has pushed painting and other visual media to the sidelines and imposed its own quality criteria on them. The appeal of photography is that it accords perfectly with the speed, lack of time and impatience that dominates the life of the modern citizen; moreover, it

provides an illusion of immediacy and direct contact with the world, free from the intrusion of all sorts of awkward, uncontrollable filters and intermediaries. Photographs appear to offer a pure visuality that transcends every form of rhetorical manipulation and theoretical interference. 'A good photo is worth a thousand words.' Compared with any other art form, photography possesses the invaluable advantage that every ingredient of the work is ostensibly there for all to see; everything the maker has put into the work is immediately there and recognizable on the surface. Photography is honest because it is unable to conceal anything. Everybody can understand a photo – or rather, there is nothing *to* understand.

In the case of non-visual forms of cultural production, such as music and literature, the regime of visibility can sometimes lead to even more drastic disruptions of priority, as cultural pessimists know only too well. The degeneration of pop music into an audiovisual phenomenon whereby a band's success has come to depend on the success of their video clip, is a familiar but already stale example. According to the recent formula of *Idols*, one first creates the star and only then the accompanying music. Even in the field of classical music and opera pressure is felt to conform to the television window. The choice between full concert broadcasts and free tv adaptations is seen as a choice between two evils: in the first case those involved complain about a lack of dynamics and dedication; in the second case the extra visual layer is felt to be frivolous and irrelevant. During a symposium devoted to this question a Dutch filmmaker claimed that 'opera is already music, light and theatre, you shouldn't superimpose too much tv on top of it.' Another participant held firmly to the belief that 'music is not made for television', as if this could turn the tide.[1]

Within the field of literature, extreme positions regarding the regime of visibility are adopted on the one hand by publishers who take out full-page ads in the daily papers for novels written by fashion models, and on the other by pseudo-heroic mavericks like Jeroen Brouwers, the Dutch writer who refused to take part in a television broadcast organized around the presentation of the 2001 ako literary prize. The result of Brouwers' refusal, incidentally, was that the following year the board of the organizing foundation inserted a clause into its rules obliging nominees to appear on television.

The reality soap genre that got off to a flying start at the end of the 1990s with the launch of *Big Brother*, demonstrates that the dictate of the visual media can scarcely be distinguished from the demand by members of the public to be allowed to exercise their right to personal development and self-expression in the democratized public sphere of the media.

Programmes belonging to the reality genre fit seamlessly into the talking culture that characterizes television as a medium. During the second season of *Big Brother* in particular, viewers were endlessly entertained with the psycho-babble of the participants. They effectively spent 24 hours a day justifying, analysing and evaluating their own and each other's behaviour in relation to the isolation the format of the programme had condemned them to. In the soaps of the 1980s and '90s, famous actors played the roles of ordinary people with their everyday trials and tribulations, their ups and downs. In *Big Brother* the stars who play ordinary people were in turn imitated by ordinary people who had spent their whole lives watching soaps. This caricatural reconstruction of the soap genre was made even more explicit in the third season by the introduction of a structure of competition and reward, providing for dramatic contrasts between wealth and poverty, masters and slaves, and spun-out intrigues of rivalry, jealousy and greed.

Notwithstanding the plentiful chatter, in the end the primary aim in contemporary television culture is not verbal but visual communication. It is precisely the most intimate moments of life that qualify to be shown to an anonymous audience of television viewers. People want to get married on tv, make love on tv, suffer, weep and break up on tv, lust,

sleep and mourn on tv. This graphic 'coming out' television is the ultimate result of the propagation and vulgarization of radical ideas from the 1960s and '70s. The emancipation of the individual is complete; we now live in a classless society in which every minority has been granted civil rights. Given that situation, nobody can survive without being intensely self-aware and without expressing this awareness in a clear and recognizable form. To passionately celebrate, in public, one's own identity has become the ultimate goal – and every single individual now has the right to pursue that goal, regardless of skin colour, sexual preference, social position and financial status. After thirty years of coaching, training and therapy, the humanistic ideology of personal development has reached a paradoxical turning point: my identity is no longer located in the inner regions of my selfhood, but in my expression of them – in the way I 'design' my personality, in the signals that I send to my environment.

This externalized and quasi-playful self-awareness functions today as the last great communal mode of exchange between citizens, institutions and corporations. It therefore comes as no surprise that even politicians, when campaigning for the elections, try to hook up to that mode of exchange. In May 2002, *Elle* and *Marie-Claire* published fashion spreads featuring MPs and aspiring MPs in the role of photo model. The studied-casual photos left just enough space for snippets of interview. One of the 'models' provided the following quote: 'In politics you've always got to be prepared for the sudden appearance of a camera. Whenever I'm too lazy to dress well, I invariably regret it.' To a more serious medium she justified her performance as fashion model by saying: 'If there wasn't any accompanying text, I wouldn't do it.' **2**

Another name for the regime of visibility is the primacy of design. Artworks and cultural products from high to low are increasingly ***designed*** rather than just ***made***. The principles of 'good design' have acquired universal currency. On this point there seems to be little difference between a cd by Madonna, a painting by Jeff Koons, a novel by Lulu Wang, a talk show by Oprah Winfrey, or underwear by Calvin Klein. To design something is to visualize it; to visualize something is to transfer it to the visual media. A production model dominates in which everything revolves around styling, coding, placement and arrangement; around effective communication with a specified audience or target group; around instant identification and efficient seduction. This applies not only to the big names with their monster budgets and commercial appeal. Even young artists operating in alternative circuits are acutely aware of the importance of a good presentation; they search for a direct exchange with their audience and develop informal, sometimes playful versions of direct marketing.

The ten criteria for designing a successful logo have been listed in professional literature as follows: visibility, cross-media application; distinctiveness; simplicity and universality; retention; colour; descriptiveness; timelessness; modularity; and equity ('knowing when and what to redesign'). **3** These criteria can be applied without too many changes to the production of hit singles, musicals, skyscrapers, magazine covers, museum exhibitions and bridges. It is no accident that, shortly after its erection in 1996, the Erasmus Bridge in Rotterdam was adopted as the city logo; in fact Van Berkel & Bos's design was selected primarily for its graphic qualities.

The regime of visibility creates the symptoms of a contemporary anxiety or fear. I am paralysed by the idea (or is it a feeling? – it feels like an idea) that while I may be getting more and more to see, I am experiencing less and less. Not only is my sense of reality destabilized by the exclusive domination of visual stimuli; under the present circumstances it is even becoming more difficult to determine what 'sense of reality' actually means.

In a world that has been excessively visualized, the visual possesses an ambiguous

potential. It is inherently linked to two contradictory dimensions. On the one hand, the visual is the aspect of the world in which we easily lose ourselves. It functions by way of immersion. The gaze is absorbed by a scene while the body either becomes limp and languid or imperceptibly tenses up. The visual squeezes consciousness through a narrow slit, on the other side of which it ceases to be my or your consciousness and becomes a mindless copy of the things themselves. Gazing for any length of time into an open fire, or staring out of a window or at a computer screen causes the space of experience to fold up into a flat envelope, the contents of which are always somewhere else.

Diametrically opposed to this immersive dimension is the culturally determined association of the visual with distance, detachment and control; with contemplation and reflection. The gaze imparts depth. From sight follows insight; from insight, supervision. This second dimension of the visual has been elaborated by such authors as Marshall McLuhan and Jean Baudrillard. McLuhan associated the spatial-geometric formula of the 'point of view' with the age and world-view of mechanization. This is characterized by observation from a distance, linear thinking, rationalization and fragmentation; chains of cause and effect, the breaking up of complex processes into simple steps, and the expansion from centre to periphery. [4] With the transition from a mechanized universe to an electronic global city, this optical model would lose its dominance. 'Fragmented, literate, and visual individualism is not possible in an electrically patterned and imploded society.' [5] McLuhan and Baudrillard anticipated an age *beyond* the visual, a world in which the distance between observer and observed object shrinks and is ultimately eliminated altogether by electronic extensions of the human nervous system; an imploding world in which visual perception is transformed into direct skin contact, and tactile communication prevails. While Fredric Jameson has associated the visual with a loss of distance and reflection – 'rapt, mindless fascination' [6] – for McLuhan and Baudrillard the loss of distance and reflection is associated with a collective transcendence of the visual. Baudrillard proclaimed the end of the gaze and even the end of the spectacle. All forms of technological and biological exchange would cohere to form the hyperreality of an integrated and aestheticized environment in which distance, depth and perspective had ceased to exist.

With regard to the regime of visibility one could indeed speak of the end of the gaze and the end of spectacle, in the sense that visibility, in today's over-visualized culture, oddly enough has nothing to do with *seeing* any more. Visibility has become a quantitative affair that can only be verified by statistical means such as polls, viewing figures and market research.

The classic duality of *looking* and *being looked* at has disappeared: there may be something that is being looked at, but there is no longer anybody doing the looking. As such the regime of visibility differs from what Christian Metz and Martin Jay have respectively designated 'the scopic regime' and 'the empire of the gaze'. [7] *Being seen* takes over the central position previously occupied by *seeing* and absorbs all connotations of activity and domination. It is not the gaze but the object of the gaze that dominates the visual field – even if there is no one left to be dominated.

The apparent contradictions of the visual are more than a theoretical issue; the paradoxical coupling of mindless immersion and detached observation penetrates deep into the phenomenology of contemporary life. That life is characterized *both* by total immersion in stimulating and stimulated environments *and* by the evaporation of experience in a panoramic overview. Each of these phenomena is inconsistent with the other, yet both are equally 'true'. The psychopathology of contemporary society is marked by a seemingly random oscillation between moments of immense synaesthetic euphoria and moments of total numbness and disconnection. The thing that sparks uneasiness is that this acutely felt contradiction cannot be resolved by any overarching concept. And,

like the symptoms of two different, non-related disorders, they cannot cancel each other out. This split 'syndrome' follows an increasingly abrupt and fragmentary pattern. Individual and collective eruptions of emotion appear as discrete incidents devoid of any underlying coherence or structure. Conversely, this lack of connection only serves to increase the intensity of the fragments. Every sensation is at once an absolute sensation. Historical comparison or contextualization is felt to be impossible, undesirable or irrelevant. Everybody communicates for themselves with their own, private version of reality. Nobody is prepared to relinquish the illusion of a unique, individual experience. As such, it is scarcely possible to draw a clear distinction between feelings and ideas; opinion polls and election results are subject to the vagaries of an emotional thermometer.

As a rule, the antithesis between mindless immersion and detached observation is not interpreted as a paradoxical duality typical of the visual per se, but rather as a rift that divides the totality of visual production in two, separating vulgar pulp culture on one side from the intelligent production of artists and independent filmmakers on the other. Even academic researchers specializing in 'visual culture' and drawing their material from the lowest strata of the pulp industry, range themselves with their theoretical and philosophical references automatically on the side of analytical observation. Thus the alleged split in visual production, which these researchers at first sight appear to dispute, is unconsciously propagated at the secondary level of the book: books for the coffee table versus books for the university library.

The question whether the antithesis between 'high' and 'low' culture still exists should therefore always be accompanied by a second question that defines the true objective of the first: how should that antithesis – or what remains of it – be approached by criticism? What attitude should critics and theorists take vis à vis the entire field of cultural production, including its most gratuitous and most complex exponents? According to the philosopher Boris Groys, author of *Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin* and *Über das Neue*, the antithesis between elite culture and mass culture – an antithesis that he regards as an essential and defining element of modernity – has not disappeared, as postmodern critics claimed; it has merely shifted to the interior of each individual product. The fact that there is a constant exchange of visual inventions between kitsch manufacturers and museum artists is seen by Groys as a confirmation of the gulf that divides them; yet he also uses this fact to support his claim that the split between pure form and shallow effect no longer runs through the field of production but through the field of interpretation. Groys talks of 'sign-splitting': every sign (cultural product) has theoretically acquired an autonomous, elite, avant-gardist and at the same time a mass-cultural, heteronomous, kitsch interpretation. Interpretation has thus become undecidable.[8]

The weakness of Groys's theory is that in refuting the postmodern myth of a homogeneous and undivided cultural space, he still displays postmodern views, in particular on the erosion of signs and the neutralization of kitsch. He merely shifts the undecidability from the primary to the secondary level – the level of reception – and in so doing leaves the door wide open to boundless relativism.

Even if Groys is correct in claiming that interpretation has become undecidable, that can be no reason for abandoning interpretation altogether. The fruitless dispute between the cultural pessimist who complains of the increasing lack of content, and the advocate of contemporaneity who objects that, on the contrary, there is more and more content,[9] should be called off on the grounds that it is possible to attribute a meaning (and not just an effect) to even the most banal, everyday phenomena.

'As the conduct of life veers away from the compass point of tradition and inner conviction,' writes Hugues Boekraad, 'so it comes within the force field of professional languages and patterns of behaviour, evaluation and observational categories. It is at this

moment that designers appear on scene. The function of design – including the design of individual life – has become so dominant that it can serve as a metaphor for post-traditional life. In the absence of prescribed forms, life becomes a quest for new forms.'[10] Here we once again find confirmed that the primacy of design is another name for the regime of visibility. 'The culture of interiority is abolished by the design culture that is by definition directed towards externality and visibility. As a visualization strategy, design is the quintessence of postmodern self-determination, whether it concerns institutions or individuals.' [11]

To assume the former existence of a pure 'culture of interiority', incompatible with external priorities, that was consequently obliterated by a postmodern design culture, may offer the critic a comfortable point of departure; yet this assumption is too absolute. After all, there is no logic in claiming that a particular phenomenon, in this case design culture, is extremely superficial and at the same time has profound consequences. If it were true that there is no common ground between the traditional culture of interiority and the postmodern culture of design, the latter could not have impacted on the former, let alone swept it away. In reality that common ground does exist: no culture without an awareness of form, no substance without representation. For the observer this would have to be a reason to search for mutual adjustments and transformations rather than to fear the end of the ideal tradition.

The critical reflection on art should focus on investigating the shifts and effects that in recent decades have occurred in the field of visual art under the regime of strategies of visualization and design. Although this undertaking is in line with Boekraad's contention that design is the 'quintessence of postmodern self-determination', it will also make clear that questions relating to the visualization of the non-visual and the externalization of internal processes are not by definition alien to the agenda of the artist. On the contrary: such questions traditionally belong to the realm of visual art. The real point is that 'visual intelligence' has become a sort of common pool that ad makers and fashion photographers can draw on (and add to) just as much as visual artists. Thus art is in danger of losing the last bits of its historical advantage. What is there left for critics to do once they have been forced to abandon the idea that artists are capable of doing things that ordinary people are not? Is it possible to adopt a critical stance vis à vis the amorphous totality of contemporary visual culture? And if so, from where would such a critique derive its authority?

Camiel van Winkel writes on contemporary art and occasionally curates exhibitions. Based in Amsterdam, he teaches art theory and art philosophy at LUCA School of Arts / Sint-Lukas Brussels. He is advisor at the Rijksakademie, Amsterdam. He is the author of *Moderne leegte. Over kunst en openbaarheid* (1999), *The Regime of Visibility* (2005) and *The Myth of Artisthood* (2007 / 2013). His latest book, based on his PhD dissertation, is *During the Exhibition the Gallery Will Be Closed. Contemporary Art and the Paradoxes of Conceptualism* (Valiz, 2012).

Footnotes

1. *NRC Handelsblad*, 16 / 17 March 2002.
2. Agnes Kant (SP), quoted in the Dutch edition of *Elle* (May 2002), p. 97, and in *NRC Handelsblad*, 27 April 2002.
3. Gregory Thomas / Earl A. Powell, *How to Design Logos, Symbols & Icons. 23 Internationally Renowned Studios Reveal How They Develop Trademarks for Print And New Media*, North Light Books, Cincinnati 2000, p. 18.
4. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media. The Extensions of Man*, Routledge, London / New York 2002, 11964, pp. 5 ff.
5. Ibid., p. 56.
6. Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible*, Routledge, New York / London 1992, p. 1.
7. See Christian Metz, *Le signifiant imaginaire. Psychanalyse et cinema*, Union Générale d'Éditions, Paris 1977; and Martin Jay, 'Scopic Regimes of Modernity,' in: Hal Foster (ed.), *Vision and Visuality*, Discussions in Contemporary Culture 2, Bay Press, Seattle 1988, pp. 3–23.
8. Boris Groys, 'Fundamentalismus als Mittelweg zwischen Hoch- und Massenkultur,' in: idem, *Logik der Sammlung. Am Ende des musealen Zeitalters*, Carl Hanser Verlag, Munich / Vienna 1997, pp. 63–80.
9. See Jouke Kleerebezem, 'Een onbetekenende tijd,' *De Witte Raaf* no. 100 (November-December 2002), pp. 2–3.
10. Frederike Huygen and Hugues Boekraad, *Wim Crouwel. Mode en module*, 010 Publishers, Rotterdam 1997, p. 189.
11. Ibid., p. 192.

Tags

Art Discourse, Design, Image, Media Society