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VISUAL STUDIES: WHY IS IT SO DIFFICULT TO PERCEIVE FORM*Olga Baranovska*

The intention of the article “ Visual Studies: Why Is It So Difficult To Perceive Form” is to clear out the theoretical and axiological conditions that hinder the possibility to “read” visual text. Such kind of task within the visual studies is quite relevant because of the necessity to comprehend the language of visuality and its influence on the structures and norms of thinking.

Key words: *visual form, visuality, visibility, imagery.*

Theoretical interest to visual studies evinces the exclusive place that all kinds of the visual forms have taken not only in the field of cultural life and social practices, but also in the interdisciplinary discourse. Visuality and conforming visual regimes, imagery and art or media depictions, etc., determine the very ‘optics’ of cultural, social studies and moreover as to Heidegger lead to viewing the world as picture, displacing the previous conception of the world as book or text.

The most meaningful problem of visual studies is the problem of visuality which “speaks by refusing to speak...” [Mitchell, 2012, 11]. Visuality considered as an option or a way of producing and representing senses needs to be delved into, but becomes a real challenge for our comprehension. The complexity is determined by quite different factors: from predominant rational thinking with its tendency to structuring and schematism, etc., normative aesthetics, scientific conventions and confines of linguistics or semiotics in particular, and up to the elicitation of the very realm or status of visuality and imagery in culture, and a lot of others. So the work on the problem requires analysis over these lines and assumes searching the theoretical possibilities for comprehension of the visual.

We should take into account the ambiguous attitude to visuality in general: it is usually considered as a representation of plain obviousness, though at the same time its deceitfulness is widely confessed. This contradiction turns into the problem of trust to the visible: visuality turns to visibility, mainly wrong visibility, and illusion. Thus as it happens, we deceive ourselves, so the credit is accorded mainly to the ordinary recognizable or easily identified images that may mean some kind of “blind seeing” when the visible needs to be followed by the narrative or the sounding. But what means to see something especially if there is no apparent conjunction between them? The visible has its own form of representation, so how its perusal can be possible?

The realm of the visible embraces observed, pictorial and aesthetic objects. They represent themselves but all the resource of their expressiveness is often considered to have mainly a serving function, whether it would be the demonstration of some traits, affinities, technic skills, sensuous lures or the exposition of certain cultural values. Thus the visuality itself appears to be inweaved into the network of quite different intentions therefore it is almost impossible to speak for its own sake. But visual arts establish the sphere where visuality obtains its self-sufficiency and may

reveal the plentitude of its own capabilities. During all their history visual arts have been demonstrating the work on expressive capabilities of visual form. And ultimately it could be summed up like that: *what* is “said” is constituted by *how* exactly it is “said”. However a hitherto widely spread common opinion and even the opinion of some theoreticians still insists that the visual arts are conferred to serve as a kind of ‘mirror’ for reflecting reality or spirituality or ideas. Though after Kant’s and romantic philosophers’ conclusions on the place of fine arts and specific art creativity, the comprehension of its independent role and its significant sense producing activity should have been induced. But even nowadays it should be reminded again and again particularly concerning visual images that “... images that is, both create and discover the “the real” at the same time”[Keith, 2008,141-142].

Nevertheless it may be considered that already from the last decades of the XIX century due to John Ruskin, Adolf von Hildebrand, Alois Riegl, Heinrich Wölfflin the distinct estimations on the importance of formal analyses for the theory of the visual arts gave the start to the studies of visuality for its own sake. Visuality appears out of the form representation where “Images are not illustrations but universes that offer a semantics created accordingly to its own laws...”, says Bredekamp [Keith,2008, 138]. Moving further in this direction a lot of art theoreticians, artists and philosophers tried to uncover the complexity of the subject.

Almost at the beginning of this way it gets obvious that there is some kind of gap between visual form expressiveness and its verbal interpretation. Surely this gap was not determined only by descriptive language limits but became rather an evidence of the disparate of these modes of saying. And before “the rift between the discursive and the ‘visible’, the seeable and sayable” became the subject of philosophical and scientific reflection it had urged the artists – Kazimir Malevich and Vassiliy Kandinskii – to develop the principles for the perusal of visual texts implied in depictions [Mitchel,1942,12]. They tried to evolve the basic elements of the visual – the spatial forms which produce all the spatial relations and constructions, but moreover they make the direct perception and even perusal of visual forms possible, without any verbal mediation. Precisely speaking in Malevich and Kandinskii’s researches the verbal description serves for the presentation or explication of what the elementary spatial forms and relations are able to mean, how they organize a depiction space and what senses they produce. But all this implies delving into the very art language, its “life”. Malevich finds out these elements to be circle, square and cross, but Kandinskii – dot, line and plane. It is akin to creating or constructing an alphabet for reading characters conveying a message in an unknown language. But unlike assigning meanings or character decoding in a decipherment, such way of ‘reading’ assumes that each of signs has endless multitude of meanings according to its specific individual form, definite position among other signs in a given space and so on. Such way of ‘reading’ also needs a special sensuousness which may be called a sense of form or an intuition of form and can give the ability to perceive forms saturated with meanings.

Of course this kind of auto-teaching or self-organizing makes a spectator highly concentrate his/her attention, over tune his/her view to quite different way of

perception. But this rather tedious process is possible under the condition that we take depictions or appearance of any visual objects as expressions in a language. Otherwise such an approach has no ground and sense. And informative, illustrative, psychological, aesthetic role or character of visuality will be completely ruling.

Objections to confessing the language format of visuality are based on several essential points. One of them grows up from the very concept of the linguistic turn in philosophy and science methodology. As J. Derrida shows in his “Of Grammatology”, the notion of language loses its conspicuous limits and is finally devaluated to the extent that as the principal concept it becomes overall. And it’s worth recognizing, because the language, being turned out to be in a ‘mirror labyrinth’ of self-reflection, could not avoid passing into a pervasive metaphor. The next issue concerns the disciplinary confines of linguistics and semiotics which make the language status of the visual and visual art rather doubtful.

Attempts to confer the language status to the visual mode of saying ran into the discussion on the grounds for the proper judgments and to some extent the discussion still goes on. It is induced mainly by an abeyance with theoretical attachment of language sphere – if it is linguistics, visual mode of saying cannot be attributed as a language, but if it is semiology taken as metalinguistic it can. Though about the sociological backing for the visual as a language there are some skeptical considerations of W.J.T. Mitchell: “that the best terms for describing representations, artistic or otherwise, are to be found in the immanent vernaculars of representational practices themselves” and “that the technical metalanguages of semiotics don’t offer us a scientific, transdisciplinary, or unbiased vocabulary, but only a host of new figures or theoretical pictures that themselves must be interpreted” [Mitchell, 1942, 14-15]. So by the thought of W.J.T. Mitchell, in this context it would be much more productive to evince what exactly predestines the discrepancy between the visual mode of saying and the linguistic paradigm.

Nevertheless it seems rather clear that the verdict on language status of visuality should not be based on the scientific confines as visual expressiveness and imagery do not fit into them. The standards of scientific thinking assume the formal analysis of language structures and even though visual images, visual art works need formal analysis as well, they are quite different ones. The formal analysis of the visible or visual objects does not assume any formalism or formal identifications, but – symbolic contemplation and hermeneutics of form inasmuch as the meeting of spatial and temporal traits of the objects constitutes their sense. And even at the stage of perception, as M. Dufrenne notices, we should see that “... perception can also veer toward a different sort of reflection which is “sym-pathetic” rather than objectifying and is more closely related to feeling than to understanding” [Duffrenne, 1953, 26-27].

J.-F. Lyotar was also completely convinced that a spatial manifestation couldn’t be included into linguistic field because of ontological rift between the space of the figure and the space of the text and because they “are two orders of meaning that communicate but which, by the same token, are divided” [Lyotar, 1971, 205]. So it is actually significant to find a way for discovering the irreducible selfness of visual

representation or the language of visual forms.

But on this way there are another barriers and first of all – aesthetic preferences mostly coming out as rates of individual pleasure or enjoyment tightly linked with psychological, cultural, historical, ethical, normative, ideological, artistic motivations. The realm of the visible being usually overloaded with almost all of them has no chance to represent itself. That’s rather trite, but still needs taking into account. Actually it relates to widely spread practices and even the methodology of identification visual forms or images with different thematic fields. Despite achieving a polymodal effect in exploring an image, for example, we nevertheless do not approach to the image with consideration of its individual character and a kind of autonomy. And this methodology leads mainly to the cleavage of images or visual forms when they declare their entirety. So there appears a question – how can we get this entirety and grasp their plenitude?

Therefore the phenomenological methodology (taken as well in the concept of Heidegger’s phenomenological hermeneutics) is considered as the most adequate one, though its significant part for the purpose – reduction – got under some doubts. M. Merleau-Ponty’s conclusion on impossibility of a complete reduction looks cogently enough and that certainly demands essential reinforcement for phenomenological procedures. For a spectator or viewer it supposes much more careful self-observing and in holding own prehensions, premises and intentions under control. And the hermeneutical practices turn us to the critique of our own preferences and preconceptions as well. Following H.-G. Gadamer, one should recognize however that self-understanding is always the unfinished work, it is every time a new affair and a new defeat [2, c. 248]. Thus the phenomenological and hermeneutical reflection appears to be not such an easy way for comprehending the expressiveness of visual forms and thereafter – its language. But nevertheless this is exactly what can open an access to the language of form and give us some kind of a remedy for reformatting our perception.

Perception of visual form implies concentration on the pure appearance of something and it is usually entangled by mixing up the visuality of a thing and the visuality of its representation. The visuality of a thing correlates with recognition of its acquainted form, so there is no need of staring its form itself. This point reveals a principal distinction in the organization, or maybe composition, of the perceptible and the conceivable – the distinction between *what* and *how* something is. And this persistent distinction has the evident priority of *‘what’* – as being deprived of a recognizable thing an ordinary perception becomes rather helpless. Such a state may testify that essentialism, consequent with objectivism and naturalism, dominates not only as a premise of cognition but mainly as an axiological one. Perhaps it shows that we still preserve our perception and contemplation from any risk of arbitrariness or subjectivity. J.W.T. Mitchell supposed that as a kind of power pervasive imagery calls fear, that is why it causes the problem of spectatorship [Mitchell, 1942, 15-16].

It could be assumed that the visual studies have a kind of mission which is aimed to converge ‘what’ and ‘how’ of our perception, to get over the theoretical

obstacles and develop the hermeneutics of visual form.

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Барановська Ольга

ВІЗУАЛЬНІ ДОСЛІДЖЕННЯ: ЧОМУ ТАК СКЛАДНО ОСЯГНУТИ ФОРМУ

Мета статті «Візуальні дослідження: чому так складно осягнути форму» – виявити теоретичні та аксіологічні умови, що перешкоджають можливості «читати» візуальний текст. Актуальність цього завдання в межах загального напрямку візуальних досліджень визначається необхідністю осягнути мову наочності та її вплив на структури і норми мислення.

Ключеві слова: візуальна форма, наочність, видимість, образність.

Барановская Ольга

ВИЗУАЛЬНЫЕ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЯ: ПОЧЕМУ ТАК ТРУДНО ПОСТИГНУТЬ ФОРМУ

Цель статьи «Визуальные исследования: почему так трудно постигнуть форму» – показать теоретические и аксиологические условия, препятствующие возможности «читать» визуальный текст. Актуальность такой задачи в рамках визуальных исследований определяется необходимостью понять язык наглядности и ее влияние на структуры и нормы мышления.

Ключевые слова: визуальная форма, наглядность, видимість, образность.