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GAZE

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It. *Sguardo*; Fr. *Regard*; Germ. *Blick*; Span. *Mirada*. Theories of the gaze, especially since the 1970s and 80s, have enjoyed particular fortune in three main fields of knowledge: art history, psychoanalysis (starting from Lacan in particular) and reflections on the relationship between the gaze and alterity, in their various declinations within the fields of gender studies, feminist studies and postcolonial studies (Elkins 2010; Pinotti, Somaini 2016). Moreover, studies of the gaze have become closely linked to the birth and development of the Visual culture studies. Aside from the different instruments and methods of research and in the absence of a unitary definition of the concept, the notion of the gaze, as opposed to the simple physiological and natural exercise of the eye, defines a historical, cultural and political mode of observation and reception of images by active observing subjects. The use of the term, in particular the French term "*regard*", underlines a character of reciprocity and of exchange of gazes that influences our relationship with images. In front of a work of art or an image, gazes can meet and, just like a living person, the image can at the same time be observed from outside and look back at us, returning the gaze in the form of power or desire (Didi-Huberman 1992; Elkins 1996; Olin 2003: 319-320; Mitchell 2006).

James Elkins, though recognising the centrality and utility of the theories of the gaze for visual culture, also found among the different methods of approaching the theme the incapacity to find a unifying synthesis between often incompatible perspectives. The concept of "gaze is both overdetermined (burdened by contradictory theories) and radically undetermined (worn too thin to have much purchase on individual artworks)", to the point that it is qualified as "a treacherous concept" (Elkins 2010). On a general methodological level, aware of such difficulties, historical-cultural studies of the gaze have taken an indirect approach of observation, seeking to reconstruct determined ways of collective vision starting with images and literary and scientific texts in our possession. The gaze is by definition in fact an elusive theoretical object, inaccessible to direct knowledge, despite leaving traces of itself in images and texts (Havelange 1998).

The studies of the art historians (Baxandall, Alpers, Fried, Bryson), who contributed to the definition of the fundamental concepts of Visual culture studies, have examined the gaze represented in artistic images, paintings in particular, based on the position and the statute of the observer. The attention of New Art History for the relation between the gaze of images and the spectator falls within the area of a broader thematization of the decisive role of spectatorship in the deciphering of the cultural sense of the works, which, starting from Panofsky's and Gombrich's work, then found in Baxandall and Alpers two of its most astute interpreters.

The desire to reconstruct, in the form of hypothesis, the way in which images were observed in a certain historical period led Baxandall to coin the fortunate expression "Period Eye", which he used to refer to in particular the eye of the 15th century (Baxandall 1972). The public gaze towards artistic images of a certain historical period is therefore the product of a series of visual skills, of mental plans, historically variable and common to a certain society, which define the cognitive style of a period that is able to read and interpret the dominant pictorial style. Although exclusively focused on the analysis of artistic images, Baxandall's studies, like those of Alpers on the visual culture of 17th century Holland (Alpers 1983), shed light on the role of society and of culture in modelling forms of widespread and daily visual experiences that influence the creation of works of art.

Fried investigated the fecundity of two opposing modalities (absorption and theatricality) in the course of the history of modern and contemporary art: according to them, the artistic image may explicitly direct or deny its own attention (its own "gaze") in relation to the spectator (Fried 1980; 2008). Bryson reconstructed instead an archaeology of the logic of the Western gaze, which he compared to the vision typical of Oriental painting (Bryson 1983). Western art in the course of its historical development, between the Renaissance and the art of the 17th century, removed both the dimension of the temporal duration of the process of creation and reception, and the body, reducing the spectator to a disincarnated eye and to a punctual instant of gaze. The term "Gaze" implies contemplative and intense observation and thus connotes the typical Western approach to the image, while "Glance" is incarnated, mobile, subject to the contingency of time and space, activated by Japanese art, but also by different contemporary artistic experiences.

This comparative approach, in its broad examination of different cultures of gaze, which is not immune to excessive generalisation, also led Belting to a historical-cultural comparison of the meeting of gazes between the European culture and the Islamic culture (Belting 2008). His recent project of a critical iconology of the gaze constitutes an ideal continuation of his anthropology of images: the gaze is in fact attributed a decisive role in the process of the symbolic animation of images, a process that is realised and objectified in "images of the gaze" (Belting 2006). The dialectic articulation between the image and the medium, the two fundamental concepts of the anthropology of images, finds in the gaze that originating symbolic function able to animate the image from within, freeing it of its external support in order to incorporate it in the living medium of the observer's body.

The attention for the collective and impersonal character of forms of vision is at the centre of the notion of *scopic regime*, elaborated by Martin Jay, who borrowed it from Christian Metz. Jay states that the character

of the gaze is always historically and culturally situated compared to the expected “naturalness” of a wild or innocent eye, aside from any cultural filter (Jay 1988; 2011). To speak of “scopic regime” or of “visuality” is to subject individual vision to a common perspective, to the overall articulation of a super-individual device that regulates, disciplines and directs the personal modes and contingencies of the exercise of seeing. The level of generality and universality of such collective and social models of gaze dominant in a certain period has nevertheless proved problematic: and for this very reason Jay argues that every scopic regime coexists with a differentiation of visual subcultures, which may be conflicting, and never appears alone on the scene of the history of vision.

The interest for the collective, social and historical dimension of vision, which is in close relation to the history of optical devices and media, is at the centre of the ample periodizations of the “régimes du regard”, of the “iconospheres” proposed by Debray (1992) and of studies by Crary, inspired by Benjamin and Foucault, on the transformations of the gaze of the subject-observer starting from the modern age (Crary 1990; Somaini 2006).

The dynamics of power and desire, in the wake of a rereading of the texts of Foucault, Lacan (Lacan 1978) and French philosophy (Sartre and Merleau-Ponty), influenced a large part of the studies carried out in the 1970s on the question of the gaze. In particular, in the field of gender studies, Laura Mulvey, in a decisive essay for the feminist film critic, analysed classic American narrative cinema, founded on the net distinction between the male gaze, active and involved in the voyeuristic pleasure of the spectacle, and the image of the woman, passive object of male erotic desire (Mulvey 1975). The criticism stirred by this essay incited Mulvey to reformulate the possibilities of fruition and identification of the female spectator in relation to the classic Hollywood film (Mulvey 1999). It is nevertheless important to remember that the recognition of the sexually and emotionally-oriented nature of the gaze of images was a central theme for the art of the 1970s, cultural studies and art criticism (Berger 1972).

Margaret Olin, in contrast to the dominant negative accepted meaning of the concept of gaze (developed above all within Sartre’s philosophical reasoning and Lacan’s psychoanalysis, and founded on a dissymmetry of power between who sees and who is seen), proposed an equalitarian and relational dialogic model of the meeting of gazes that involves the seer and the seen (Olin 2003).

In conclusion, the interest in the theories of the gaze lies in their capacity to enter an area between the physiological dimension of vision and the historical and cultural horizon of images, which also involves the recent philosophical debate on the “Historicity of the Eye”, which has witnessed contrasts between historical-cultural positions and pre-cultural cognitivist positions (Danto 2001; Davis 2001).

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