

SEEING (PERFORMATIVE ACT OF)

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(First published May 31, 2025)

It. *Vedere* (azione performativa; Fr. *Voir* (*action performative*); Germ. *Sehen* (*performativer Akt*); Span. *Ver* (*acción performativa*). The term comes from the Latin *vedere* ("to see"). Considered as a performative act means that vision is embedded in social practices and performed like speech acts. The concept of performative praxis says something about way an action is realized.

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Not everything that can be perceived in a room or within a visual radius is actually noticed. From an inescapably individual perspective and from specific points in space and time each of us sees and fails to see in a particular way. In this respect, the ability to perceive is by no means simply determined by what is present. What is visible can be overlooked and what is indiscernible can be added. Yet, what is seen is anything but arbitrary; rather, perception is prompted by the presence of the perceptible. When we do agree on what is visible at a given time and place with others, then it is because we share an intersubjective world. On the one hand, seeing is thus a tried and tested means of orientation, information intake and interaction, while at the same time it represents a personality-specific and culturally variable form of individualised conception of reality. It can therefore neither be solely a representation of a physically existing 'given' nor a construction of individual perspectives, and yet it must contain elements of both.

Yet, the contradiction between a socially shared and personally non-sharable world of perception is not the only problem with seeing that requires clarification. The difficulties of determining the relationship between seeing and perspectives, or between perception and comprehension, are no less significant. As an act of consciousness, seeing is closely intertwined with other mental acts of understanding and apprehension, imagining or judging, with affective dispositions of hoping, desiring or fearing, with temporal aspects of remembering or expecting, which would be difficult to explain if seeing were primarily

a useful means of acquiring knowledge. Kant (1781/1787: A88-89/ B119-120) and Fichte (1794:227) therefore describe the imagination as a formative principle of perception.

Usually, a form of ascertaining 'seeing-that' is understood as a largely unproblematic case of recognising perception, and all more complex cases of seeing-something-as-something are described as interpretative conclusions, attributions or thoughts. But to 'see' that someone is sad is neither a 'mere' metaphorical way of seeing, nor pure thinking. It is an interpretation that is tied to a sensory experience; and only in retrospect can it be determined analytically, what in practice is constantly intertwined. An under-complex understanding of seeing as an act of noticing a depiction of reality and of the visible as an objective presence fails to recognise the configuring and meaning-generating capacities of the act of perception. The correlation between the seeing and the visible must therefore be reflected upon within a completely different interpretative framework. Neither empiricist theories of sense data nor constructivist theories of the production of vision are sufficient to grasp conceptually the peculiar, Protean disposition of vision between consciousness and world, interpretivity and responsivity, and between state of affairs and action. Instead, as this article will explain, approaches from action theory and the philosophy of media are more helpful. The following will be addressed:

- why seeing is a practice that cannot be described as either subjective or objective
- why this practice is performative, i.e. an act that creates something of a specific quality
- why performative perceptual action is simultaneously a medium in which and through which the visible world is disclosed perspectively.

If the concept of practice helps to elucidate the way in which subjective-constructivist and objective-representationalist aspects of perception interact, the concept of performativity can help to grasp the way in which vision and comprehension are connected.

In the history of ideas, the concept of practice draws on very different theoretical contexts, namely Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception (1966 and 1986), the later Wittgenstein (1953), Austin's theory of Speech Acts (1961 and 1982; Searle 1969) and Bourdieu's theory of practice (1980, 1982 and 1994). References to such a variety of authors are needed to free seeing from the false dichotomy of sensualism and mentalism so as to work out its medial intermediate position.

GUIDING ANALOGY: PERCEIVING AND SPEAKING

The capacity for perception has a similar world-disclosing function to language. Many investigations in the philosophy of language have shown that neither the theory of language as depiction nor the theory of language as tool can explain how linguistic formulations actually disclose reality. Not only can seeing be as communicative as speaking, when one thinks of the literally 'telling', warning or inviting looks that one can catch from one another. It is even related to the absent in an analogous way to language in the case of non-deictic use, because it also draws on what one expects to see or habitually overlooks, what one remembers or fears.

Furthermore, as for instance, Mead (1991), Winnicott (1973: 128–135) or Butler (2001: 7), have shown, the interpersonal seeing and being seen is identity-forming from the perspective of social and individual psychology.

Regarding language, Humboldt, made it particularly clear that it is not only a medium in the sense of a tool that can be used instrumentally as a means to an end, but is also a medium in the sense of a setting in which we move. Speaking, as *Ενέργεια* (Humboldt 1973: 36), is an activity that realises something in the process, beyond the means of communication.

In a similar way, seeing can be both means to the end of identification and orientation, as well as a mediating dimension between consciousness and world.

This is not to claim that all seeing is a language-like activity. Rather, the possible interactions between language and perception suggest the irreducible nature of the aesthetic, i.e. the sensually accessible world. Not only are perceptions influenced and made possible by what we have words for, but, as Humboldt (1973: 53) writes, perception also prefigures the use of language.

Seeing is no more exhausted by the ascertaining 'seeing-that' than speaking by propositional statements. Just as speech act theory has brought speaking as a significant dimension of action beyond mere information exchange into view, the concept of practice can elucidate perception as an act of perceptive action.

The performativity of this perceptual action is the truly significant dimension that the comparison with speech helps to elucidate: just as something is realised in the act of speaking, seeing is also an act in which and through which the world is made present. As a performative activity, through which something is effected, seeing has both constructive and responsive traits.

The later Wittgenstein showed the importance of language game and form of life contexts for the use and meaning of language, and the same is true for visual perception: the sense of sight is used in the context of cultural habits and practice. Collective visual conventions do not have the same status as fixed terms within a discursive language game, but they too follow well-rehearsed interpretative schemata and are prefigured by the totality of valid norms and prevailing customs – and the form of life – of a cultural community.

Forms of life affect perception like an eyepiece through which one looks. Like world views, they shape the dispositional horizon of speaking and perceiving, which is not thematic in itself, but is present in everything that is thematised.

The totality of historically and socially, publicly and institutionally recognised conventions and prevailing convictions, interests and claims to validity forms the practical context of the socially shared world of perception.

If we add Merleau-Ponty's focus on the corporeality of the perceptual process to these considerations, it becomes clear that the seer and the seen do not relate to each other as isolated subject-object entities, but are rather in a reciprocal, conditional relationship. Perceivers themselves are socially visible with their bodies and thereby stand in the midst of what they grasp. On the basis of an original corporeal familiarity with the world as a meaningful context, Merleau-Ponty develops seeing as a corporeal state of being affected, as a touching of something that is touched. The sense of sight interacts in a multi-modal way

with other sensory impressions. Furthermore, the visible is not an atomistic and tangible 'given', but rather an embodied, situated context. A look can be attracted by something visible, which in turn evokes attention.

If one describes seeing by using Wittgenstein's concept of practice as being embedded in the context of forms of life and with reference to Merleau-Ponty as phenomenological, one can with the help of the social theory of Pierre Bourdieu focus on its sociological and collective dimensions. In his action theory, Bourdieu distances himself equally from both instrumentalist and intentionalist conceptions of action and demonstrates that, in contrast to observation as a theoretical behaviour, action as practical behaviour presupposes a specific involvement in an independent practical order and its temporal dynamics, which cannot be presented to the individual actors in the manner of objects. According to Bourdieu (1993: 168), "performative practice strives to bring about what it acts or says" is not a setting of actions that can be described according to the model of tool use, because this presupposes both the tool and the reality to be processed with it. Performative action rather only produces what it simultaneously processes through its own execution.

Performativity is a structural element of every practice; the performativity of the practice of perception consists in the individuated form of the execution of the respective act of perception, through which something is realised and actualised. Just as the represented in a portrayal or by an actor is articulated or performed in a certain way, in the same way the perceived 'shows' itself in the process of seeing as something that is never neutral, but rather always in a certain light and a certain angle. In this perspectival formation and aspectuality, showing and seeing have the same as-structure (see Schürmann 2018). Although this presentational form of seeing lacks manifest objectivation, it does, in a sense, precede all objectivations; it is inherent in everything else: the director's seeing is inherent in the film, the painter's seeing in the picture. Someone sees something that presents itself to them in a certain way, namely in such a way that the modal *How* determines the semantic *What*.

The performative dimension of seeing also elucidates the proximity of the sense of sight to the mental, namely to processes of understanding, thinking and interpreting. Ways of seeing do not relate to their object like a vessel to its content, but rather form an aisthetical-intellectual structure of two inseparable *relata*: one cannot be changed without the other being transformed at the same time. Although, in theory, a separability of the two must be assumed, because one and the same object can be seen in many different ways, in practice, the two only occur intertwined.

But precisely to the extent that it is virtually impossible to speak of the mind other than "metaphorically", because it does not exist in a tangible form that can be proven, the talk of perspectives, 'mental seeing' or insights in the sense of Blumenberg (1999) requires absolute metaphors. When I see something in someone else – for example, that they are annoyed – it is literally and not just metaphorically a 'mental seeing' in the sense of insight, because it is an aesthetic act that is also mental.

Incidentally, the talk of 'intellectual apprehension', grasping, etc. is no less metaphorical (Mertens 1996), because the grammar of language compels us to speak in reified terms about the mind, which, as a non-extended thing, cannot literally see or disclose, but whose activity consists precisely in acknowledging or comprehending something.

When a child catches a warning look from its parents, it is not decoding sensual evidence, but rather sees and understands simultaneously. Meanwhile, its understanding remains a seeing and by no means a hearing or imagining. To explain something like this, one must assume that seeing and understanding form a unity that cannot possibly be understood only metaphorically, but must be taken literally. The actors in the practice of perception are not generally autonomous subjects of action who proceed according to a plan; but rather they act and react at the same time. In practice, seeing always takes place as a movement between two poles, between consciousness and world, sensuality and the mental, receptivity and spontaneity. The physically present world is not an objective object of perception, but rather something – as the above should have shown – that is constituted through a process and in accordance to individual and socio-cultural conditions. So, something to be found is simultaneously invented. Seeing is a mediated-immediate form of practical and performative world-disclosure.

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HOW TO QUOTE THIS ENTRY

E. Schürmann, *Seeing (Performative Act of)*, "International Lexicon of Aesthetics", Spring 2025 Edition,
URL = [https://lexicon.mimesisjournals.com/archive/2025/spring/Seeing\(PerformativeActOf\).pdf](https://lexicon.mimesisjournals.com/archive/2025/spring/Seeing(PerformativeActOf).pdf),
DOI:10.7413/18258630163.

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E. Schürmann, *Seeing (Performative Act of)*, "International Lexicon of Aesthetics", Vol. 8, Milano, Mimesis, 2026.