

The Gaze and the Camera: How the Psychoanalytic Notion of Gaze Becomes the Camera

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In 1956 Erich H. Gombrich wrote that “no era can be compared to ours in which visual representation is so cheap, in every sense of the word. Posters, advertisements, comic and visual magazine illustrations surround us and besiege us constantly. We see the images of reality illustrated on television, in movies, on mailing stamps and food packaging.”¹ The only change in the situation has been the aggravation of the “siege” of technical images due to the appearance of more modern technologies of image recording, opening up new front lines. While images had become the fundamental carriers of information in the 20th century, there also happened a considerable change in the perception of reality. That is, the technical images perfected the ways of representation to such an extent that differentiating between the original (signified) and the copy (signifier) had become problematic. In fact, in the last couple of decades one can notice the “turn of the vector of meaning,” or, in other words, the questioning of the whole traditional causal perspective, the substitution of cause with reason, or, that of the model with the original. As a result of this, the image is placed in front of reality and “we experience reality as a series of pictures.”² Or, in the words of Vilém Flusser, the technical images “[i]nstead of pre-senting the world to man, they represent it, put themselves in place of the world, to the extent that man lives as a function of the images he has produced.”³ If we take all that into account, one might ask the question: what reasons are responsible for the “mushrooming” and accumulation of images “substituting reality”?

According to Susan Sontag “our age” does not “place images in front of reality out of perversity, but as a reaction to cognitive trends in which the notion of reality had become more and more complex.”⁴ Roland Barthes ascribes the popularity of 20th century (popular) myths, including the mythic stories of films, to vaguely similar causes. They make it possible for the things of the world to be seen as organizable and offer the pleasure of understanding reality perfectly “in which the signs – without any obstacles, loss of meaning or contradictions – are finally in harmony with causes.”⁵ It is obvious that taking such pleasure and

calmness in understanding reality can only materialize through “blindness” that doesn’t take into account the questioning of traditional causal perspective.

The notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge (1910) by Rilke exhibits well *what* changes in the experience of the world people in the 20th century should *still* face. This diary-novel is filled with the comments of the last descendant of an aristocratic family whose life reached its limits: “This is a changed world. New life, full of new meanings. At the moment I have difficulties because everything is too new. Under my own circumstances, I am a beginner.”⁶ The main reason for him being without a home in the world and for being uncertain is the untenability of the “old” vision. Several allusions in the text refer to the fact that the writer of the comments is “learning to see” which could be interpreted as the main deed and hope of accommodation to and survival in the new world.⁷ If we examine the vision of Malte Laurids Brigge being formed, then it can be characterized by a certain replacement of the perception that needs an external confirmation by an individual by a subjective practice of vision. As a result of this, the difference between the internal and the external visual feelings becomes impossible to fathom. Or, as the narrator puts it, “[t]he time has come for different kinds of interpretations, every word detaches from the other, the meaning of things dissolves like a cloud, then descends like rain. [...] On the verge of change, I am the impression.”⁸ The passages illustrating the importance of vision-perception through closed eyes also prove the individuation of vision. For example, “I was staring in front of me and couldn’t see anything [...] All of a sudden I felt something cold and bright on my eyelids, clenched on my teary eyes, so that I don’t have to see anything.”⁹ The author of the notebooks sets out to do no less than appropriating the perspective which, together with his life, was “destined to *one single* person.”

In short, Rilke’s diary-novel proves that it is the questioning of the reality content in visual perception which conditioned the world experience to become more and more uncertain. In the text, with a metonymic move, visual experience replaces the process of world interpretation. Without exaggeration we can generalize this statement, and thus we can claim that this characteristic of the novel can be well described based on Merleau-Ponty’s concepts, according to which the explanation of the differences between classical and modern art lies in the fundamental differences between the different periods of vision.¹⁰

Becoming uncertain in the content of reality of the visual experience, against which the answer is the flood of technical images creating a high degree of illusion of objectivity, influences the way in which the subject perceives itself. One has to take this effect into account because seeing and being seen both play an important role in the construction of the subjective self-*image*. The other person's *gaze* forms and molds the subject who perceives this gaze, hence, one person becomes a mirror for the other one. According to Merleau-Ponty this relationship "exposes me to the gaze of others as a man among men or at least as a consciousness among consciousnesses."¹¹ The dependence of the social subject on others in the construction of its own meaning is determined to a great extent within the visual field. (Obviously, not to a full extent because verbal narratives influencing the position of the subject also play an important role in the construction of identity.¹²) Lacan says the gaze of the other is the foundation of conscience, adding that "[w]hat determines me, at the most profound level, in the visible, is the gaze that is outside, I am looked at, that is to say, I am a *picture*."¹³

In Samuel Beckett's *Film*, one can see the literary representation of the binding power of the internalized self-image. In the *General remarks* he foreshadows the concept of the "silent play" detailed in the main text "when all external perception – animal, human, divine – ceases, but self-perception remains. The search for non existence fails due to escaping external perception because self-perception is inescapable." The story of the impossibility of getting rid of the self-image is represented in a way that first the protagonist is divided into the internal gaze becoming external and the object of the external gaze: "in order to be able to demonstrate the protagonist in this situation [wanting to get rid of his own self-image] we need to divide him into object (O) and eye (E); the first flees, the latter chases it. It will only become clear at the end of the film that the chaser and the perceiver E is not a different person, but the I itself."¹⁴ O annihilates the gazes and the eyes looking at him in his rooms in vain (covers the mirror, the aquarium and the bird cage; puts the "staring" dog and cat outside the room; tears apart the print with God, the Heavenly Father cold eye staring at O), because eventually E, the internal gaze becoming external corners O. Another important aspect in the text is when O, escaping his own gaze destroys the photos in the room taken of him at different ages. (Picture 7 is the best proof of this, as it portrays a man in his thirties with a black bandage – the same as O's on his left eye). O's tearing the photos apart can be interpreted as the destruction of the

metaphors of the self-image because the camera taking the pictures can be interpreted as the metaphoric signifier of the position of the Other. This way, together with the pictures, the metaphor of the gaze, (the original position of) the camera staring at O is also destroyed.

The following quotation by Lacan proves that even in this brief analysis of Beckett's text we remained close to the psychoanalytic discourse: "It is through the gaze that I enter light and it is from the gaze that I receive its effects. Hence it comes about that the gaze is the instrument through which light is embodied and through which [...] I am *photo-graphed*."¹⁵ Undoubtedly, the camera is the metaphor of the gaze of the eternal Other and the photo is the objectified metaphor of being seen. When I am looking at a photo of me, I see it as the visible, materialized version of the mental image created by the Other. The invention and spread of photography, a tool for the objectification of identity appeared in visual perception. According to Barthes, "[h]istorically speaking, seeing ourselves (but not in a mirror) is a new experience. [...] Photography is my own appearance as another person, the separation of the identity in a cunning way. [...] The moment I feel the lens of the camera targeting me, everything changes, right away I am 'posing', I am immediately fabricating another self, another body, I become a picture in advance." But "when I discover myself in the result of the operation I see that I have Completely become a Picture, that is I died, I am Death myself; the others – the Other – deprive me of myself, objectify me crudely, hold me captive, deliver me, catalog me, and prepare me for slick traps."¹⁶

Based on this quotation from Barthes, it is easy to see that a photograph is a tool which can be, because of its object nature, appropriated, manipulated, and it can expose the subject of the representation or make it an object of tricks. Because of this characteristic of the photo, it can be viewed as a social "screen" which regulates, determines and controls the ways of appearance of the role of subject. In the following part, I will present briefly the theory of the timeless "screen" by Lacan and the theory analyzing the historical model of the "screen" by Kaja Silverman because these can enlarge the analysis of the medial determination of literary texts with important points of view.

In *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, Lacan explains his theory of vision based on the following three figures.¹⁷

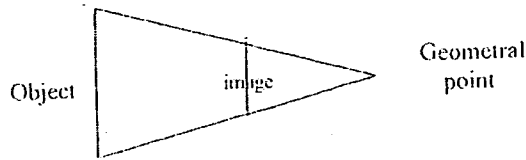


Figure 1

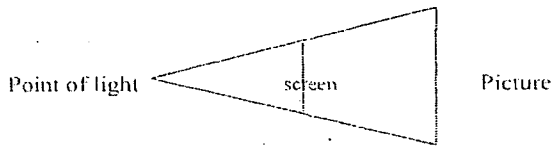


Figure 2

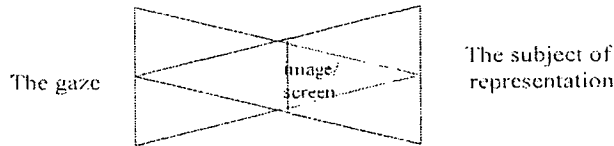


Figure 3

The first figure represents the position of the subject who is looking at an object from a location designated as the “geometral point.” The geometral point in this case is a place determined by perspectival vision from which position the object is visible predictably in its own reality, according to the geometric principles discovered by Alberti. The subject is observing the world from a transcendental position, giving the subject a divine point of view, or, epistemological authority. The subject position localized in the “geometral point” is very similar to the position of the observer of the camera obscura who is also looking at a

perspectival image projected on a screen from a supra-perceptual position. Lacan, however, doesn't characterize the subject this way.¹⁸ According to him at all times the observer can observe the "object" only through a "filter", that is, indirectly. The image visible in Figure 1 between the object and the geometral point disturbs the seeing subject's apparent certainty. What the observer sees is not directly the world of objects, but it is the way "objects reveal themselves," and hence, the image signifies this *indirectness*.

In Figure 2 the subject is marked as the picture and the gaze as the point of light. Indeed, Lacan links the gaze and the source of light, or, in other words, the gaze means the point from where light is projected on the subject, and, at the same time, it also means the presence of others as such.^[19] In this respect, the subject is—as the precondition of visibility—the light, and it moves within the area of visibility. Furthermore, Lacan separates the human eye (as "geometral points") from the gaze (as "source of light"). Using Lacanian terminology, Silverman understands the role of the gaze as "the intrusion of the symbolic into the field of vision," with the help of which the social judgment of the subject takes place.²⁰ The creation of our own self, our meaning, and our desires are all dependant on the other – as the gaze. Existence means to be seen by others. In Figure 2, a mediating element, the "screen" can also be seen. Such a breakup in the relationship can be interpreted in a way that the subject does not become a picture independently, rather, in a way determined by the screen. The screen in this sense regulates the process of the transformation of the subject into self-image. How does the subject become an image? Referring to the quote from Lacan again what "determines me, at the most profound level, in the visible, is the gaze that is outside. It is through the gaze that I enter light and it is from the gaze that I receive its effects. Hence it comes about that the gaze is the instrument through which light is embodied and through which [...] I am *photographed*."²¹ The notion of "becoming a photograph" presupposes that all this is actually happening because of the camera, therefore, a new metaphor enters the system: the trope of the "camera as the gaze" (already mentioned briefly in connection with *Film* by Beckett). Even though Lacan himself does not use the word camera (he prefers using the words "instrument" or "apparatus" instead), following Silverman and the implications of the quoted extracts, I placed the camera (see Figures 2 and 3) on the side of "gaze" and "light."



In Figure 3 the first two diagrams overlap, marking that Figure 2 always limits Figure 1, because even when we are looking, we are “in the picture,” or, in other words, we are the “subjects of representation.” In Figure 1, the gaze takes the place of the “object,” while in Figure 2 it is in the place of the “point of light.” The relationship between the points or sides on the left and on the right is mediated by the double field which builds in itself the “filters” of Figures 1 and 2: “image/screen.” Following Silverman, the latter, double “filter” will simply be referred to as “screen.” But what does this notion mean?

Even though Lacan does not define this element of seeing, he does have a few remarks characterizing the screen. The figures above show it clearly that the screen is not inserted only between the gaze and the subject as a view, but also between the gaze and the subject as seeing, and, between this latter and the object. Consequently, it has to define how we see the gaze, the object, ourselves, that is the subject (appearing as an image). When Lacan examines the screen in connection with the subject as view, he mentions that the subject is able to manipulate the screen in order to threaten, to camouflage or to mock. He calls these functions “plays with the screen.”²² He further emphasizes that the screen is “opaque,”²³ or is not a window-like entity. But, being a mediator and linking elements, it defines their knowledge about each other.

Silverman writes a separate chapter about this problem in *The Threshold of the Visible World*, and discusses in detail the question of the screen. He argues that “the screen is the site at which social and historical difference enters the field of vision.”²⁴ The screen defines how the gaze is comprehended in the different eras, how the world is perceived and how the subject experiences its visibility. Furthermore, this entity means the place where, for a certain society, the gaze becomes tangible, therefore, it depends on this place how the members of the society experience the effects of the gaze. Or, put differently, it operates the logic of visibility, i.e. the process through which we “figure objects and are in turn figured.”²⁵ Silverman, reflecting on Lacan’s views, emphasizes the “instrument”, by which we are “photographed” and “framed”. This instrument, repeatedly, is then nothing else but the camera which in this sense substitutes the screen, that is, it is the instrument through which the gaze is comprehended. According to Silverman the camera is “the imaginary source of the screen.”²⁶ The metaphoric linkage of the gaze and the camera and the metonymic association of the camera and the screen result in the strong attachment of the subject-defining role of

visibility to the apparatuses generating technical images and the changes they went through in history.

In summary, dominant imaging procedures in a given period of time determine the creation and internalization of the self-image. Silverman stresses the current fundamental role of videos, photos and movies, adding that all these procedures can be traced back to the photographic recording technique of the camera. Even though the above list could be completed with novel digital technologies of representation, the "social screen" which regulates the self-representation of the subject was brought forth by medial techniques.

A good example for the important role the inventory of representational techniques in the analysis of literary works may play is *American psycho* (1998) by Bret Easton Ellis. The "heroes" of this novel live in a world of microphones and cameras, thus in constant digital (and analog) feedback. For them, it is impossible to separate reality from films, magazines, television and computer screens. What is more, the narrator is one of the subjects being formed ambivalently (with no personal characteristic traits) by the mainly digital (social) "screen" of the text. The receiver of the novel, therefore, together with the mimetic un-determinability of the narrator, loses definitively the points of view of referentiality as well. Or, as Péter Fodor put it, Patrick Bateman "can be seen not as a person, but rather as the meeting point of medialized roles whose constancy is not even guaranteed by the identifying function of the proper name."²⁷ The non-differentiability of the real one from the filmic copy is further amplified in *Glamorama* (1998) by Ellis. Everywhere and every time in the world of the novel there are film shots taking place. This becomes important as the world of backdrops and mock-ups of the settings melts together inseparably with the reality as seen by the protagonist. Sliding fiction and reality into one another erases the differentiability of the part in the movie and the subject *appearing* in that part. Consequently, however parodistically exaggerated it may be, the novel by Ellis stages the fate of the individual subjected completely to the "social screen" (television, magazines, computers, etc.). "My situation?" – asks Victor Ward, the protagonist roaming in the maze of technical representation. "I don't have a situation."²⁸ Having no situation is the result of the new world-experience which was substantially defined by the media of the techniques of representation of the end of the century. Put another way, while the tools which,

paradoxically, are striving to give an even more perfect illusion, definitively question the faith put in the reality of seeing at the same time.

If, taking a step back, we look at the line of thought exposed in the present paper, we can observe the double nature of how the camera has been interpreted. On the one hand, it is defined as the metaphor of the gaze of the Other, but on the other hand, it is defined as an *object*, developed by science with specific aims to fulfill. As I mentioned above, the place of the self-representation of the subject, or the social screen is considerably influenced by those tools which render humans visible. These apparatuses (television, magazines, computers, etc.) apparently become the source of the screen in their tangible, material reality. Oversimplifying the problem a little one may say that we do not get photographed digitally in the same way as through analog technology. Conversely, when Lacan describes the process of subjectivization as the recording of an image through the gaze of Other, then he obviously uses the camera metaphorically and does not take into consideration its physical and material nature. This idea considers the camera, at the same time, as a linguistic sign about which we can say something, and, as an object which we actually use. Or rather, using Jonathan Crary's words: the camera is the avenue "where a discursive entity is carving out material habits;" a metaphor, that is a linguistic construct, and an object, that is a "mechanical construct."²⁹

To study the questions whether the double interpretation of the camera (an object and a metaphor at the same time) revealed (also) in the present paper is a mistake to correct or rather an unavoidable obligation that constantly characterizes the discourse on mediums—is way beyond the limits and obligations of the present paper.

¹ Erich H. Gombrich: *Művészet és illúzió. (A képi ábrázolás pszichológiája)* [Art and illusion. A study in the psychology of pictorial representation]. Trad. Árpád Szabó. Gondolat, Bp., 1972: 18. When the source of the quotation is a Hungarian translation, because out the unavailability of the original, all through the paper I use my own "re-translations."

² Susan Sontag: *A fényképezésről* [On photography]. Trad. Anna Nemes. Európa, Bp., 1999. 200.

³ Vilém Flusser: *A fotográfia filozófiája* [Towards a philosophy of photography]. Trad. Panka Veres and István Sebesi. Tartóshullám – Belvedere – ELTE BTK, Bp., 1990. 9. Cf. “The commonplace of modern studies of images, in fact, is that they must be understood as a kind of language; instead of providing a transparent window on the world, images are now regarded as the sort of sign that presents a deceptive appearance of naturalness and transparency concealing an opaque, distorting, arbitrary mechanism of representation, a process of ideological mystification.” (In: W. J. T. Mitchell: *Iconology. Image, Text, Ideology*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1986. 8.)

⁴ Sontag: *op. cit.* 200.

⁵ Roland Barthes: *Mitológiák* [Mythologies]. Trad. Péter Ádám. Európa Kiadó, Bp., 1983. 25.

⁶ Rainer Maria Rilke: “Malte Laurids Brigge feljegyzései [The notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge]”. Trad. Gábor Görgey. In: *Válogatott prózai művek* [Selected prose]. Európa Könyvkiadó, Bp., 1990. 56.

⁷ Cf. *op. cit.* 7. 16.

⁸ *Op. cit.* 41.

⁹ *Op. cit.* 28.

¹⁰ Quoted by Zsolt Bagi: “Maurice Merleau-Ponty festészetelmélete [The theory of painting of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s]”. In: *Passim* IV/1 (2002) 122.

¹¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty: *Phenomenology of Perception*. Trad. Colin Smith. Routledge, London – New York, 1998. xii.

¹² Cf. “The time we live in is intertwined with stories. Family narratives designate our positions in the world before we gain consciousness, or, we could say, before we are born” (László Tengelyi: *Élettörténet és sorseseemény* [Story of life and event of fate]. Atlantisz, Bp., 1998. 13.)

¹³ Jacques Lacan: *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*. Trad. Alan Sheridan. Penguin Books, Middlesex, 1994. 105-106. Emphases ours.

¹⁴ Samuel Beckett: “Film”. Trad. István Bart. In: *Samuel Beckett összes drámái* [Complete dramatic works of Samuel Beckett]. Európa Kiadó, Bp., 1998. 372.

¹⁵ Lacan: *op. cit.* 106. Original emphases.

¹⁶ Roland Barthes: *Világoskamra* [Camera lucida]. Trad. Magdolna Ferch. Európa Könyvkiadó, Bp., 1985. 17-20.

Sontag also talks about the objectification of the self-image in the photos in her work on photograph-theory: “we learn to see ourselves through the photographer’s eyes, and if we look good in the picture we claim to be attractive.” (Sontag: *A fényképezésről* [On photography]. 111.)

¹⁷ Lacan: *op. cit.* 91. 106.

¹⁸ Lacan proves through the analysis of *The ambassadors* by Hans Holbein (1533) that the application of the central perspective (independent of historical time) encloses the possibility of its own deconstruction, as the distorted skull at the feet of ambassadors only becomes visible from a different perspective, that is, from another perspectival order questioning at the same time the worldly authority of the figures represented from the dominant perspective: why have worldly power, if another, bigger, authority, death, can take it any moment. (*op. cit.* 88-89. 92.)

¹⁹ *Op. cit.* 84.

²⁰ Kaja Silverman: *The Threshold of the Visible Word*. Routledge, New York – London, 1996. 133.

²¹ Lacan: *op. cit.* 106. Emphases original.

²² *Op. cit.* 107.

²³ *Op. cit.* 96.

²⁴ Silverman: *op. cit.* 134.

²⁵ *Op. cit.* 195.

²⁶ *Op. cit.* 196.

²⁷ Péter Fodor: “Hiszem ha látom (Bret Easton Ellis: *Amerikai pszichó*) [I believe it only if I see it (Bret Easton Ellis: *American psycho*)]”. In: *Az esztétikai tapasztalat medialitása* [The mediality of the esthetic experience]. Zoltán Kulcsár-Szabó – Péter Szirák (eds). Ráció Kiadó, Bp., 2004. 407.

²⁸ Bret Easton Ellis: *Glamorama*. Picador, London, 2000. 351.

²⁹ Jonathan Crary: *A megfigyelő módszerei* [Techniques of the observer]. Trad. Eszter Lukács. Osiris, Bp., 1999. 46. Though Crary describes the camera obscura with these words, I still believe that because of the similarity of the problems, it allows for an interpretation referring to the 20th century camera.