

# The Cultural Paradigm of Visuality in Times of Blindness

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Visuality can be generically described as the quality of the visual, that is, as the given visual field in which a subject's attention is concentrated. In fact, the visual is intrinsically linked to human vision, and this presupposes the existence of a visible horizon from which (visual) images are given. However, this formulation presents something uncanny paradoxical because it forgets, on one hand, the broader status of the image (such as auditory and olfactory images)—seeing is not just a visual process (at least since Diderot we know it) and there are mental mechanisms in the visual constitution process that help to fabricate reality and that gestalt theory has explained—and on the other hand, the possibility of seeing beyond what is visible, after all, everything (or almost everything) that presents itself in a digital and virtual environment it can be quite ontologically suspect. Based on some of these premises, we will trace a path of analysis that leads us to the current blindness: unconditional faith in digital technology and the fragile hope of happiness in a way that rejects the reality of the visible.

*Keywords:* visuality, visible, Diderot, Magritte, Merleau-Ponty, blindness

## Brief Introduction to a Major Theme

The discussion between the visual and its quality, visuality, can be long and, in a sense, present little or no results, at least in its most scientific form. One of the reasons is related to the scope of what the visual refers to, that is, everything related to the sight or the vision (even in a certain sense, the change of visual that can be done in a person implies this relationship with the vision, that is, with what is seen). A second reason is related to the inevitable link that is established between the visual and the visible, which means that in this sense, visuality can only be connected to what is presented with visibility. A third reason points to the visual as the product of an optical and neurological operation that transforms elements of the visible into visual elements that we normally call mental images. Basically, one can say that the latter subsumes the previous two and presents the uncanny question of knowing what to do with the horizon of invisibility, that is, what to do with all the non-visual imagery; it should be noted that there is a certain dimension of existence where things can be presented but not present—visually presented as such, for instance phenomenon's like rainbows.

Considering the purpose of this essay—to explore the paradoxical/challenging question about visuality—a division must be done: First, one will carry out a thematic approach and establish a brief dialogue based on Diderot, René Magritte, and Merleau-Ponty, whose common problem is, we believe, within the same order, the reality of the visible (the truth of the sensible) or its illusionary character and how it can be revealing to the order of visuality; in a second moment, to reveal how the visuality of the world is condemned by blindness technology (digital and virtual ones) that, ironically, may not be on the skyline of visibility that underlies the visual.

### What Is (In)visible Is Real? Diderot, Magritte, and Merleau-Ponty

Diderot's famous *Letter of the Blind for the Use of Those Who Can See* (original French, *Lettre sur les aveugles à l'usage de ceux qui voient*) (1749) presents the discussion of the relationship between reasoning and knowledge acquired through perception. But the most importantly (as the title suggests) is vision, which evokes here, ironically, who will be the blind people in discussion. Diderot takes into account mainly the two senses that are present in the aesthetic feeling: sight and hearing. Let us focus on the first for the purpose of this essay.

Diderot analyzes the human spirit as the ability to compose images that appeal to the confrontation of reason, which reminds us of Aristotle when saying that "the soul never thinks without an image" (in *De Anima*, 431a 16). Thus, discussions related to the aesthetic movement in the 18th century, namely neoclassicism with an Enlightenment basis, combined with the conception of a supremacy of the sensitive over the visible, end up being felt in Diderot's texts, as making an image "speak", as the painting starting to have "life", as it opens itself up to the world, that is, opens up (and remains open) to the beholders interpretation. Note that it is from the subject (not the object) that something can be judge, felt, and said to be pleasant, beautiful, and other aesthetic judgments (as it is known, Kant becomes the major representative figure about this thesis in his *Critique of Judgment*, 2007).

The visibility described in Diderot's theory of vision (according to the *Letter on the Blind*) allows this transition from the trustworthy to the real and the introduction of the figure of Saunderson does nothing more than attest that our knowledge results from the crossing of several instances, of the different senses, in this case, of touch and vision. Diderot really wants to undermine this belief in the identity between thought and vision, allowing himself to question a certain metaphysics of the evidence, that is, above all provided by the absolute evidence, which came reinforced at least since Descartes—this could be, in a sense, the beginning of a phenomenology of perception (we think this is why Merleau-Ponty launched the dialogue precisely with Descartes).

There is, thus, in Diderot, a certain phenomenological realism that leads, without great effort, to interpret that in each blind person there is a world; there is a certain "vision" of the sensitive reality, if ones prefer, a certain perspective that provides a vision of the world outside the (blind) subject. Diderot knows that such a position is difficult to accept and even sustain, and we can read that in the way he describes the phenomenon. He asks:

How can a man born blind form ideas and figures? By the movements of his own body and by stretching his hand in various directions, by passing his fingers continuously over an object, he gets an idea of space. If he passes his fingers along a taut thread, he obtains the idea of a straight line; if he follows the curve of a slack thread, that of a curve. In a more general sense, by repeat usage of the sense of touch he has a memory of sensations experienced at different points and he is capable of combining these sensations or points and forming figures. (Diderot, 2011, pp. 83-84)

A similar metaphor occurs in the work of José Saramago, in the *Essay on Blindness* (1995) when the author ironizes blindness (the blind who see and those who see are blind). In this metaphorical sense, we revisit this linguistic game that seeks to translate the molded and illusory meaning of words and/or vision with regard to the encounter with reality. The validity of seeing without seeing is what seems to be contained in the symbolic statement that what you see may not be real. When René Magritte mentions that something is not something—"ceci n' est pas un pipe"—it is already at the heart of a theory of vision that surpasses reality and that it does not necessarily betray it. As we know, Magritte practiced realistic surrealism, that is to say, metaphorically and poetically surrealized the sensitive, the real. His painting, perfect in its sharpness as if it mimics the figuration of the real, establishes visual paradoxes that dialogue, at the same time with the accuracy and the illusion of the

visible. One of the best examples can be found in the work “The Human Condition”, in which the painting that rests on the easel serves the landscape and the landscape merges with the painting, being part of a large painting that is the painting by Magritte. This false premise given to understanding makes the representation of reality a game, an imperceptible and repetitive circle in which the subject sees (even against his will) the representation of the (reality of) representation. What is representable, that is, what is made present is already in the order of the figuration of the real; it is already a transposition of the order of the real. It is here that this tenuous border between illusion and reality is established and defines the possible visibility for the human condition/world.

In the well-known, the “Betrayal of Images”, Magritte is playing the game of the visibility and the illusion provided by the visibility; the painted pipe “which is not a pipe” cannot be touched and cannot be smoked. Another painting called “Two Mysteries” emphasizes the same: The two great mysteries are posed by the questions: What is the visible reality? And the visible illusion? Magritte himself says: “everything we see hides something else, and we always want to see what is hidden by what we see” (renemagritte.org). The dialectic game is between what is visible and what is hidden, and it is using everyday objects that he can twist perception (what is illusion, what is real, what is the frontier of the impossible). From here, one can start the dialogue with Merleau-Ponty, in the exact extent that the author’s philosophical thought is elaborated on the (attempt to reveal the) invisibility and the visible phenomenon’s that fulfils the sensible (in “The Eye and the Mind” and “Cezanne’s Doubt”).

Merleau-Ponty examines how painting exhibits the act of seeing the world with phenomenological openness and immersion, that is, what allows us to see beyond what is immediately given. His studies dedicated to Cezanne’s painting also reveal this desire to make the visual visible. What is shown in the painting, in this dialectic between the visible and the invisible, suggests Merleau-Ponty awakens in the painter this desire to see and allows him to touch “at both ends”, that is, at the horizon where vision meets the sensitive real. What Merleau-Ponty wants to highlight (1964b) is that there is a primary ontological order, which even if not seen determines the existence of the (in)visible of the sensitive world—something that painting, art can help to perceive, providing a vision. In a metaphorical level one can say that the French philosopher meets Diderot.

### **In Sort of Conclusion: Blindness in Virtual Worlds**

One can ask: Are we living in blindness times? The answer is yes. New media, new platforms of social interaction, and new ways of making politics (populism, fake news, etc.) are providing, not a clear view of society but a blind one. Visuality is already compromised, since virtual images invade everyday life. What defines truth is transparency. But there is no guarantee of truth in what is seen. Virtually, what is seen does not mean a real existence (just a different degree of existence). In this sense, it seems that we are living in the matrix: in a cultural paradigm of visibility where everything seems visible but it’s only a product of a blind and carelessness society.

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