

The Pleasures of the "Vulgar" Look

Peter de Bolla, *The Education of the Eye: Painting, Landscape, and Architecture in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003)

In the past few years there has been an emerging interest in the questions of visuality from the aspect of Cultural Studies. The new impulse of this interest partly resulted from the challenge which the abundance and the ubiquity of visual impulses mean to the humanities. It is not only that Art History sought to renew itself by taking into account this new challenge, but there is a growing tendency to rediscover lost knowledge or to put old information into a new light in the entire field of the humanities. The first schools of this tendency are usually based in departments of Art History, renamed as departments of Visual Studies. The interdisciplinary approach to works of art is characteristic of these schools since a number of theorists in this field come from a literary background (one can mention such prominent names from the Chicago school as W. J. T. Mitchell or Mieke Bal). These theorists do not only try to get away from the traditional comparative examination of texts and images, namely from seeking either to prove or to refute the similar-

ity or the continuity of the sister arts, the verbal and the visual, but in concert with recent literary and art theoretical interest, they look into matters which concern the formation of subjectivity, that is, what subject position is designated by a work of art; the modalities of framing meaning – or, to use Bal's phrase, meaning making – and the formation or transmission of culture. These queries cannot be restricted purely to the realm of the visual, partly because they are rooted in discursivity, and also because the intertwining of the verbal and the visual (in one way or another) proves to be prevalent in the history of art. Moreover these questions are not independent of historical or sociocultural changes, therefore a true interdisciplinary approach involves the historical, the philosophical, and the social background for the re-examination of any cultural phenomena. Visual Studies call attention to the fact that the images or visual instances surrounding us do have a part in the formation of culture, thus today it is impossible to evade the question of visuality or to restrict it only to the field of Art History. A further novelty of these studies is that they are not restricted to the examination of high, elitist cultural products either, on the contrary, they take into account works which are usually conceived as marginal, low, popular, thus unworthy of

academic attention. These studies both challenge the elitist approach to art and question the borders of the high and the low.

Peter de Bolla's salient work is a continuation of this trend: he theorises the visual with the help of eighteenth century visual phenomena, by basing the main thrust of his investigation on the modalities of seeing as well as on the subject positions that certain ways of seeing or viewing entail. His work can be fitted into the corpus of such recent publications as D'Arcy Wood's *The Shock of the Real*, Chloe Chard's *Pleasure and Guilt on the Grand Tour* or William Galperin's *The Return of the Visible in British Romanticism*, etc. From the aspect of English Studies this work and the recent interdisciplinary trend in the humanities can be of great importance, on the one hand because visuality, or visual culture, usually plays an unjustifiably marginal part in the curricula or in the research field of English Studies. On the other hand because the findings of these approaches can considerably enrich or broaden the horizon of any cultural investigation (be it literary, sociological, art historical, or other).

In *The Education of the Eye* de Bolla employs a network of interrelated topics and assumptions as his point of departure. In a way this work continues the argument he started in *The Dis-course of the Sublime*, namely, how the

subject can be constructed discursively. In *The Education of the Eye*, however, the question of subject-formation is put in a different light: here it is the activity of looking that has a definitive function in such a process. He focuses on "how looking gives shape to a human agent and to a specific mode of behaviour and how such agency is embedded in the visual" (2). The visual, in his interpretation, is an intricate phenomenon, an umbrella term which incorporates optics, the techniques of seeing and decoding optical information, the modes of visual address to human agents, the technologies of image/art production, and the significance attached to them (3). De Bolla assumes that the examination of the visual is indispensable since it is instrumental in the formation of culture and of certain subject positions (that is, subjectivity). In his theory of the visual the greatest importance is attached to the activity of looking – to be precise, to a mode of looking, namely to the "sentimental look."

Looking is a cultural form: de Bolla claims that there is a difference between optics that is the physical aspect of seeing and the activity of seeing (or looking) itself. This activity has more to do with the psyche and with culture than with physics. Corollary looking is a technique, a technology of producing subjectivity: it defines how to participate in culture, through displaying one-

self or making oneself visible as well as how to look (and look like); how to give coherence to oneself; how to be a “citizen in the demos of taste” and who is allowed to identify him- or herself as a subject within culture. The look therefore, or as de Bolla terms his invention, the “sentimental look” is also influenced by historical changes. Unlike most theoretical approaches, he, more or less in concert with the recent development of Cultural Studies or New Historicism,¹ attempts the theoretical elaboration of the subject through the lens of historical inquiry.

One of the impulses of de Bolla’s work was his dissatisfaction with the lack of historical sensitivity of the theoretical framework of visual studies. He detects this lack in the concept of the gaze and the glance. Despite the revolutionary influence on visual and literary studies (and specifically on narratology) this theoretical approach is devoid of historical dimension, the two terms are seen as historical invariables that underlie or direct the organisation of works. In this respect de Bolla’s criticism of the gaze and the glance is justified. In his taxonomy of viewing, however, the idea of the gaze and the glance is not neglected, the sentimental look is defined through its relationship to the two terms. Originally in Bryson’s theory² the gaze coincides with the Cartesian perspective: the viewing body is reduced to one point only, namely to

the retina of a single eye, a single point of view (binocular disparity was technically not taken into account in terms of visuality before the eighteenth century).³ The moment of the gaze is “placed outside duration” (96), outside the spatial and the temporal due to which it arrests the flux of phenomena. In this mode of seeing the subject is united with the “Founding Perception”: he or she takes a disembodied, God-like, coherent subject position. It seeks to bracket out the temporal process of viewing in order to create a synchronic instant of viewing, which means that the image is reduced to an ideal, but frozen moment. The glance in contrast is a distinct technique, which follows the staccato-movement of the eye, the to and fro activity of real-time looking. It requires the insertion of time and of the body into vision, therefore, “the path of its movement is irregular, unpredictable, intermittent” (121). The glance is a kind of trickster on the gaze, which undermines the rational singular and identifiable subject position in vision and entails a fragmentary, changeable subjecthood.

In de Bolla’s interpretation the logic of the glance slightly diverges from the Brysonian concept, probably in order to give his invention – the sentimental look – a more striking and progressive framework. For him the gaze is static, studious, attentive, penetrative (211); it organizes the entire visual field: “the

objectifying gaze structures both the field of vision and the spectator's position within that field." The gaze through its penetration to the visual field attempts to achieve coherence or meaning (73), and this is done through recognition. Thus the gaze renders depth and inner meaning to the object and corollary subjecthood, which on the analogy of the object is based on the "surface appearance" - "inner self" binarism. The glance, in contrast, is a mode in which the eye "moves hurriedly across surfaces," or around the visual field, and as such "it feels itself to be located, positioned by the space within which it moves" (73). Whereas the gaze imposes its logic on the visual field, in the glance the "viewing eye is subjected to the rules of formation governing visibility," it does not have its own structure, but it is "ordered through its encounter with the visual field" (74). The glancing eye "skids and slides off surfaces in a restless tracking" (211). Hence it renders a different subject position, one which finds itself in identification before recognition happens, and for which any reflecting surface in which the seeing eye glimpses itself would suffice. In his tercial system it is only the sentimental look that requires the somatic insertion of the viewer into the scopic activity; this means that the body is present to sight. With this claim de Bolla ignores the fact that the aspect of corporeality is already

a constituent part of the notion of the Brysonian glance. Yet, the emphasis on the corporeal factuality of the viewing activity is crucial, since it provides the ground for the historical dimension of his study. The three-way circuit of the gaze, the glance and the look bears its importance in his elaboration of the cultural-historical construction of subjectivity, that is how one can enter into the scopic regime,⁴ how one can become a viewer. In this process the body of the observer, its look in a portrait or in the exhibition room, just like its bodily movement through gardens or buildings, plays an indispensable role.

The sentimental look, according to de Bolla, is a new style of looking that emerges in the middle of the eighteenth century; he provides a precise date to this new way of visibility, the year of the first public exhibition in England in 1760. This is the reason why he devotes himself to scrutinizing the cultural phenomena of the eighteenth century. The sentimental look is a "way of looking *with* the artwork, which creates an affective response in the viewer (hence the sentimental tag)" (11). This kind of look renders possible a new viewing public for visual culture (a prospect consumer) and thus creates a new demand of the visual, which allows for a more democratic and publicly available way of participating in art, therefore different forms of art than that of the elitist sphere's. It makes available the

right to offer visuality to a broader public since looking at art becomes a social activity and as such coincides with being seen as a viewer.

In de Bolla's theory the sentimental look is created in the oscillatory movement between the objectifying gaze and the superficial glance. It utilizes both, but it is not constrained by either of them. In order to explicate this oscillatory movement between the two realms, de Bolla introduces two other terms, "the regime of the picture" and "the regime of the eye." In his taxonomy the former coincides with the gaze whereas the latter with the glance. The regime of the picture entails the elitist, learned, classifying gaze: one sees what one already knows since the actual scopical regime determines the production and the consumption of the artwork. The regime of the picture "requires a special way of recognition (that is a Matisse!), that leads to the pleasurable identification of the looker" (17). This way he or she can claim to be a cultured viewer, even though the position of the cultured viewer is that of the connoisseur (an unpopular label even in the eighteenth century). In this regime the "correct ways of looking are legitimized by the institutions of cultural evolution." This is the position that the Royal Academy, which could very effectively police the values so as to treasure art from any popular mode of artefact, held.

The regime of the eye, as de Bolla claims, terminates into a different subject position: it privileges identification over recognition. Encountering works which are created according to the logic of the regime of the eye one learns how to look by looking itself, that is to say one is compelled by the optical, haptic function of the seen without the need of any previously received knowledge or familiarity with art. The regime of the eye requires an affective response on the part of the viewer. The sentimental look by oscillating between the two positions using both techniques diverges from them at one crucial point: it is a fully somatic insertion of the eye or of the subject into the visual field, whereby it allows the viewer to recognize itself in the place of the seen and to identify with the process of seeing. This offers an alternative visual activity to the elitist learned way of seeing things through previously set standards, therefore it is a more democratic, a publicly more available way of encountering cultural products. Another important feature of the sentimental look is that it temporizes the viewing activity, gives it a temporal, narrative folding out in time, in which the seeing eye becomes the seeing I.

De Bolla's terminology seems slightly hazy at this tercial differentiation, and in places he seems to be arguing more along the logic of the glance than setting up his own approach to the tech-

nology of the look. Nevertheless, his central claim concerning the emergence of a new order of viewing practices, and a new order of society, which is grounded in the theory of spectatorial subjectivity, is important in many respects. Firstly, because it allows for the historical-material examination of the culture of Romanticism. The emergence of the modern society, as he points out, is deeply rooted in visuality. Since in this scopical technique one has to give up the sovereign subjectivity of optics in order to see, it engenders the *sensus communis* of art, a form in which one has to be with others (as well as with the work of art). Secondly, because it provides an occasion to reevaluate such phenomena that usually do not fall within academic interest, yet they are or were fully influential cultural products in their time. Finally, the novelty of de Bolla's book is that through the analysis of the sentimental look he shows how it challenges the concept of the Cartesian subjectivity by a more complex notion of the subject, which is formed in the activity of looking without the traditional separation of the observer from the observed.⁵ The sentimental look thus shows a new way of seeing at its birth; this look by the insertion of the body into the work, that is, by a way of being with art, allows for a certain mode of identification: to learn how to participate in culture. As opposed to the elitist and closed view-

ing practice which privileges recognition (a way of self-definition based on pre-set knowledge), this means a more democratic learning process through the activity of viewing, one that teaches the viewer on the spot (even though this also has its privileged class that tries to lay its foundation in this process, that of the bourgeois). The sentimental look therefore is a new viewing practice which is rendered possible by the new visual phenomena that emerge from the eighteenth century. In de Bolla's opinion traditional, elitist views denigrated this mode of looking after the eighteenth century until very recently when he sees a new possibility for the return of a new democratic order in the arts. De Bolla's choice of cultural phenomena reflects precisely his theoretical presumptions: he gives account of portraits, gardens and a building because they were created and made available for the broader public and also because the bodily pleasure of the viewing public was a constituent part of these works.

In the first chapter of his book he looks at the genre of the portrait painting, the miniature and the conversational piece. He claims that it is through the portrait that the newly rich class records itself as entering into the domain of culture. This is a genre in which one can point out how the private self is turned into a public one: by displaying oneself one learns how to

appear in public, that is how to participate in *polite* culture and acquire the sense of *taste*. The poses of the conversational pieces or family portraits provide a sample of behaving in the exhibition room (while sometimes being exhibited); seeing and being seen were crucial indices to one's social standing, to one's self-depiction. In the genre of the conversational piece de Bolla provides special interest for the paintings of Joseph Wright of Derby (*An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump* and *Academy by Lamplight*). According to de Bolla, these paintings are eye-catchers, in which one can identify a taxonomy of looks ranging from the studious gaze to the flirting sideways glance. The curiosity of these paintings is that they provide space for the spectator within the canvas, while his or her eye is captivated so much that the image performs an educative task: it teaches the viewer how to look. The painting addresses the viewer and leads him or her "through the modes of identification toward recognition, thereby enabling the sensation of being a spectator within culture" (66). These eye-catchers allow for the emergence of the new type of look, one that differs from the voyeuristic look of desire.

Secondly, de Bolla examines the genre of landscape or garden building, landscape gardening. He chooses the Vauxhall gardens for the site of his examination. Firstly, because in this

pleasure garden paintings were displayed. Secondly, because here the activity of looking became visible in the experience of exhibiting the garden (80). By entering the garden the visitor is to take part in the civilizing process the garden imposes on him or her. As de Bolla notes there is a special look of satisfaction and pleasure on the face of each visitor, which is also reflected in Frances Hayman's paintings. The look of satisfaction on the faces of these paintings signals their recognition of being members of the culture of the visual (87). Hayman's paintings, which were hung in the painting room of the garden, perform the task of educating the eye by using both the regime of the picture and the regime of the eye. The spectator had a sense of being in the picture while standing in front of it as a viewer as he or she entered the picture room at the end of the rotunda. The aim of the Vauxhall project as de Bolla terms it was to "embrace as large an audience as possible for its time and to argue for a socioscopics built on the regime of the eye that was not antagonistic with the regime of the picture" and also to construct the "sentimental look, an aesthetics responsive to the drives and pleasures of the eye" (103).

The third chapter also deals with the landscape, namely with the Leasowes and Hagley Park. As is well known, there is a difference between the English and the French garden; though

both are artificial objects, the former pretends to be naturalistic, as if it was exactly how nature would have created the landscape, whereas the latter was neatly designed, structured and artificial. In de Bolla's opinion the English landscape is counternaturalistic. He differentiates between two different attitudes to landscape gardening that manifest themselves in manuals. One is the elitist, cultured way, represented in Horace Walpole's *History of Modern Gardening*, the other is Heely's *Letters on the Beauties of Hagley, Envil, and the Leasowes*. In Walpole's account the garden was created so as to correct creation, to polish nature. The world or the open country becomes a vast canvas on which a landscape might be designed. The designer takes a painterly look at everything, the landscape is seen through the painter's eye, and the visitor to these gardens can take the God-like, singular position of the designer in order to identify with him. Neither is it devoid of political interest, it takes part in the constitution of "real" Englishness. In Heely's account the point of designing a garden is to construct a vision of the "real," a group fantasy through the specific politics of visibility. Fantasy was the part of the landscape experience, a prompt for a garden, a sublime introspection of self-regard (149). In de Bolla's view this is a bourgeois reaction to place the elitist cultural form into a mobile bourgeois

tourist industry. Whereas the elitist model claimed an analogical relation to the real landscape, the popular demanded an affective bodily experience. In this model the eye/I is inserted into the landscape and the visual activity is stretched in time and space. This allows for a more democratic anti-pictorialist mode of looking based on the inner vision of a new class.

Lastly de Bolla turns to a building to detect the workings of the sentimental look. His site of examination is Kedleston Hall, which also marks the emergence of a new architectural style, the Adam style. The building was designed by Robert Adam, an architect who accomplished the compulsory Grand Tour in order to polish his architectural skills, and by its owner Nathaniel Curzon. De Bolla calls this monument of artifice a cultural imaginary, an edifice of the collective imagination. It allows for a particular form of historical consciousness: "an attitude for addressing the past in a form of fantasy that erases the materiality of history." Just like the gardens of the previous chapter, in the construction of the building fantasy projection plays a great role: its design is an eclectic borrowing to fabricate an "image in its fantasized version of the antique." Adam with this building makes the antique Roman culture come alive in the fantasy life of an eighteenth century British gentlemen. Kendelston Hall embodies absolute good taste and

its conceptual space determines how and what we experience while we are within. But it is not only that space tells the viewer how to look that bears importance, but also that the viewer catches himself in the activity of viewing. Adam with this building created a taste out of a fantasized projection of backward forward movement in his contemporary polite culture. It rendered a publicly available private ethos of civic virtue. By moving in the building one took part in an educative process: in buildings one can take the somatic insertion of the viewer in a literal sense which otherwise is not possible apart from the recent development of installations in the plastic arts. The insertion of the visitor into the artwork raises a new problem of his or her relation to it: this undermines the Cartesian subject position and requires the redefinition of the subject as there is no privileged station the viewer can occupy.

The greatest achievement of the visual culture of the eighteenth century is that it provided "a terrain within which one might be and become someone else, a space in which one's fantasies might be realised" (223). De Bolla's account of the cultural products of the eighteenth century is highly interesting and entertaining, despite the heavy theoretical background of the book. One can learn curious and entertaining details about the period under scrutiny.

This is a work of great interest and hopefully provides a link to the interdisciplinary approach of English Studies that can connect the theoretical queries of literary theory to culture understood in a broader and more democratic (that is not exclusively elitist) sense.

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Notes

1. Stephen Greenblatt and Catherine Gallagher, *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

2. Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), pp. 87–131.

3. Crary, *Techniques of the Observer* (London: MIT Press, An October Book, 1991).

4. The term "scopic regime" is coined by Martin Jay in his essay "The Scopic Regimes of Modernity," in *Vision and Visuality*, ed. Hal Forster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988).

5. J. Crary also deals with the problems of separating the object from the observing subject, a topic that was extremely popular during Romanticism. Crary, nevertheless, takes a slightly different approach in his historical investigation and examines the technological and physiological inventions of the 18th and 19th century, see Crary, *The Techniques of the Observer*.