6. Visual Culture Studies' Operational Concept
Visuality – Seeing in the Cultural Field

Visuality must be considered the key concept in the theoretical and practical basis of visual culture studies. The word is not a poststructuralist neologism, nor is it precisely situated in theoretical terms. Therefore I can only describe its use in these texts: as a metaphor that is deployed in different ways and as an abstract concept with similarly diverse definitions. The first usage cited is from Thomas Carlyle, praising Dante for the intensity with which he works out not just the whole, but every detail "into truth, into clear visuality".[1] Here, visuality is that quality of a text whose intensity allows the reader to imagine something with the clarity of vision; at the same time, this "clear visuality" is equated with truth. For Carlyle, visuality is the essence of a historiography which, imagined from the elevated position of the hero, shows the grand heroic whole of history, like history painting, defying the revolutions since 1789 and the rise of positivism.[2] The key here, it seems to me, is that this visuality does not mean the actual seeing of a visual object or an exchange of glances between people, referring instead to what the text evokes in the reader's *imagination* while it is being read.

In order to trace the ways the term visuality is used in visual culture studies – however unclear this usage may be – there follow readings of texts by three writers: W.J.T. Mitchell, Nicholas Mirzoeff and Mieke Bal. If one wished to situate their positions between the poles of essentializing the visual on

1 Thomas Carlyle: On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History, Lecture III. The Hero as Poet. Dante: Shakespeare (May 12, 1840): "Not the general whole only; every compartment of it is worked out, with intense earnestness, into truth, into clear visuality." http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/1091 (accessed 26 Sept 2016).

2 On Carlyle and visuality, see also Nicholas Mirzoeff, "On Visuality" in *Journal of Visual Culture* 5, no. 1 (2006), 53-79. Mirzoeff situates this visuality in the context of reactionary and anti-modern currents of the time.

the one hand and constructivism on the other, Mirzoeff would be on the side of essentializing, Mitchell would stand halfway between the two with his attempt to maintain the two extremes in a relationship of tension and paradox, and Bal would represent the constructivist-semiological pole.[3] In this light, the three positions I have chosen as examples cover the full breadth of the discussion.

What is visual culture? W.J.T. Mitchell

In 1995, when W.J.T. Mitchell published *What is Visual Culture?*,[4] the first courses in visual culture were just a few years old;[5] they were developed not on a common basis but according to the interests and disciplines of those involved and the existing structures at the institutions in question, giving each course its own genesis and its own focus.

In *What is Visual Culture?* Mitchell presented his version of visual culture studies, developed in 1993 with a corresponding syllabus as an internal memo for a working group on visual culture at The University of Chicago including colleagues from literary criticism, film studies and art history. As Mitchell writes, the group's members agreed that it could not just be about uniting humanities scholars around the problem of visual culture, but that social and natural sciences should also be involved, as well as non-western concepts and practices of the visual. This is followed by a long list of key questions for the "study of human visuality", including cultural otherness, the society of the spectacle, scientific research on vision and imaging, imaging technologies, and prosthetic "extensions" of the visible.[6] He thus formulates a comprehensive collection of themes for knowledge production on visuality, while avoiding any fixed definition of the term. His approach is characterized above all

3 In her 2003 essay "Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture", Bal accuses Mirzoeff of visual essentialism. See the section on Mieke Bal in this chapter.

4 W.J.T. Mitchell, "What is Visual Culture?" in Irving Lavin (ed.), *Meaning in the Visual Arts. Views from the Outside. A Centennial Commemoration of Erwin Panofsky* (Princeton 1995), 207-217.

5 In Cornell, Harvard, Rochester, Irvine, Santa Cruz and Chicago. See W.J.T. Mitchell, "Interdisciplinarity and Visual Culture" in *The Art Bulletin* 77, no. 4 (1995), 540-544: 541; see also Dikovitskaya, *Visual Culture*, chapter 2.

6 Mitchell, "What is Visual Culture?", 208.

by two further strategies: he avoids being pinned down on the basis of polarizations, and he juxtaposes approaches that seemed to be the subject of consensus with their opposites. As one example, he contrasts the consensus on the social and cultural construction of visuality with the question of the natural dimension of the visual: "What is the boundary between visual culture and visual nature?"[7] – a question rejected by Mieke Bal, who insists on the cultural construction of the visual.[8]

It is interesting to see the context in which Mitchell published this "failed attempt at a manifesto", as he calls it: *Meaning in the Visual Arts. Views from the Outside. A Centennial Commemoration of Erwin Panofsky* is an anthology edited by art historian Irving Lavin that examines Panofsky's art history, as the title claims, from outside the discipline. And indeed, of the scholars who came to visual culture studies from outside art history, Mitchell is the one who has declared and maintained the greatest affinity with the latter discipline. This is reflected in his adoption or "reconstruction"[9] of Panofsky's iconology. On another point, too, Mitchell appears as Panofsky's ethical heir: taking his example of the greeting (the "primal scene" for Panofsky's iconology in which he meets a man who greets him on the street and he recognizes his gesture as a greeting) he reinterprets it in the sense of a critical iconology.[10] Mitchell also refers to this scene in other texts; it is a very vivid, narrative-dramatic metaphor that makes a brief and striking appearance in *What is Visual Culture?*, where he states: Panofsky's "comparison of looking at painting to greeting other persons has deep resonances for the whole issue of visuality and alterity".[11] To greet means to recognize; extending this into greeting one another turns the scene into a dialogical situation that brings forth a recognition of the other. Because Mitchell does not state whether this other is an object in the sense of an artwork or another subject, the metaphor applies both to the act of interpreting an object and to communication between people. As well as allowing Mitchell to conceive of visuality as a social field, this allows me to refer back to Olin's dialogical concept of the gaze, which I contrasted

7 Ibid., 211.

8 See Bal, "Visual Essentialism".

9 See W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago 1986) and Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (Chicago 1994), especially chapter 1.

10 In Erwin Panofsky, "Iconography and Iconology: An Introduction to the Study of Renaissance Art", in Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts: Papers in and on Art History*, (Garden City, NY 1955), 26-54: 26.

11 Mitchell, "What is Visual Culture?", 211.

with the narcissist model of Lacan as interpreted by Bryson. Unlike Bryson, then, Mitchell takes a dialogical structure of seeing as the point of departure for both the social and the object-based dimension of visuality.

What is Visual Culture clearly reflects the aim of bringing together all of the various facets of a discussion on visual culture that had not, until then, been conducted systematically, though it can hardly be called systematic. Rather than any attempt to define key concepts, there is more of a quest to describe and redefine a field that is not (yet) a discipline and its central concerns. A first indication is given by a brief account of the genesis of visual culture: a revolution in literary theory, new philosophical approaches to representation and its connection with language, and new developments in art history (we are not told which) have, Mitchell argues, laid the foundations for thinking "visual realities (including everyday habits of visual perception) as cultural constructions, therefore interpretable or readable".[12] Neither film studies with its strong feminist theories[13] nor cultural studies, whose agenda in the 1980s was far more political than that of literary theory or art history, are mentioned at this point. This may be because for Mitchell, with his doctorate in literature, there is another central problem that now becomes critical again as the emphasis is placed on the visual: the difference between language and image[14] that is also reflected in the division of the humanities into "verbal" and "visual" camps. The new field of visual culture is associated with the promise of overcoming these divisions or at least loosening them in the sense of interdisciplinarity.[15] In view of the analysis of language by linguistics, the lack of a corresponding system for the image – or the visual[16] – is an unsettling flaw (and Mitchell is not the only one to address it). This applies in particular with respect to the institutionalization of the field as a discipline. Here, Mitchell is concerned above all with avoiding definitions and delimitations that might lead visual culture studies to ossify into a discipline in its earliest years; he repeatedly emphasizes the impossibility of separating language from the visual,

12 Ibid., 207.

13 See also chapter 5, *The model of the gaze*, on the reception of Lacan's model of the gaze in film studies.

14 This begins with his dissertation, *Blake's Composite Art* (Princeton 1977). Further titles include: *Iconology* (1986) and *Picture Theory* (1994).

15 On interdisciplinarity in relation to visual culture studies, see Mitchell, *Interdisciplinarity and Visual Culture*.

16 In my opinion, the line between the two, where it is deliberately discussed at all the debates surrounding visual culture studies, is extremely blurred.

highlighting their fields of interaction. For Mitchell, this implies a special mission for visual culture studies: "The emergence of visual culture is a challenge to traditional notions of reading and literacy as such; it is as much a revolution in verbal culture as it is in the study of the visual image proper."[17] Mitchell sees fit to address the challenge of renewal to literary studies and to art history in equal measure. Art history can no longer rely on the traditional concepts of beauty and aesthetic meaning to define its object, he claims. As examples of such concepts, however, he then names myths that have been subject to criticism in the practice of left-wing and feminist art history in both the English- and German-speaking worlds since the 1970s, if not before: aesthetic hierarchy, the discourse of mastery and genius. Like the other advocates of visual culture studies, Mitchell draws a narrow, reduced picture of art history as a discipline, constructing it as the other of visual culture studies. Finally there is a conciliatory turn in the form of a dialectical argument: juxtaposition with the productions of kitsch and mass culture, he claims, will actually reinforce the greatness of "authentic artistic achievements" – a conservative appeal to quality and authenticity that recent art history would hardly endorse.

With the transfer of theory from the "verbal" camp, then, "visual realities" become "legible" as social constructions. This gives us a first description of the visual. But what are these visual realities? Less abstract than "visuality", this description seems to point not to exchanges of looks between people, but to looks directed by the perceiving subject towards external reality. Although there are signs of approaches like the gaze or the visibility of the subject itself being involved, the main emphasis here is clearly the gaze that the subject fixes on external object-reality.

Soon after, Mitchell was to ask a question that seemed to reverse this direction: *What do pictures really want?* This essay, later followed by a book,[18] contains a sentence that may illustrate his attitude to visuality: "What pictures want from us, what we have failed to give them, is an *idea of visuality adequate to their ontology.*" (my italics) Just as pictures have an ontology, he claims, there should also be an ontology of visuality. This would certainly make Mitchell's opening up of cultural constructivism towards the "nature" of the visual (more) understandable. But the following passage marks a clearer distancing than previously from the semiotic model: "Contemporary discussions

17 Mitchell, "What is Visual Culture?", 209.

18 W.J.T. Mitchell, "What do pictures really want?" in *October* 77 (1996), 71-82, and *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago 2007).

of visual culture often seem distracted by a rhetoric of innovation and modernization. They want to update art history by playing catch-up with the text-based disciplines and with the study of film and mass culture. … They appeal to 'semiotic' or 'discursive' models of images that will reveal them as projections of ideology, technologies of domination to be resisted by clear-sighted critique." These words betray a certain anger directed, as I see it, against the instrumentalization of pictures (and the visual, terms Mitchell uses more or less interchangeably) and against the semiotic equating of language and image.[19] Once again, Panofsky's "greeting acquaintance" comes into play; here it supports Mitchell's appeal for a hermeneutics that does justice to pictures, one "that would return to the opening gesture of Panofsky's iconology".[20] But Mitchell cannot be simply tied down to an ontology of the visual beyond culture: "The most far-reaching shift signalled by the search for an adequate concept of visual culture is its emphasis on the social field of the visual, the everyday processes of looking at others and being looked at. This complex field of visual *reciprocity* [my italics] is not merely a by-product of social reality but actively constitutive of it. Vision is as important as language in mediating social relations, and it is not reducible to language, to the 'sign' or to discourse." In connection with Panofsky's metaphor of the encounter, "reciprocity" supports Mitchell's vehement defence of the picture as an Other.[21]

Let us return to Mitchell's promisingly titled *What is visual culture?* Here he brings us no closer to a definition of visuality. Instead, he makes it clear that visual culture studies in the mid-1990s is a very open field, so open that Mitchell hopes (in contrast to later statements) that the field could become a "coherent discipline". He backs up this hope with a clever paradox: precisely the "self-critical tendencies of its principal constituents" give grounds for such a hope, self-critique as a path to consolidating a discipline. Later, in 2002, with increasingly successful institutionalization, Mitchell feels obliged,

19 As a note informs us, this anger is directed against the introduction to the anthology *Visual Culture. Images and Interpretations* (London 1994) written by its editors Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Holly and Keith Moxey.

20 Mitchell, "What Do Pictures Really Want?", 82.

21 On certain basic points, I agree with Mitchell's vehement defence here; what I find problematic is that his list of interpretative approaches to be rejected includes discourse theory. The visual in its distinct way is part of discourse as is language. In Mitchell's version, situated beyond discursivity, the concept of visuality appears to end up in an ontology that is neither culturally or socially accessible. This is where Mitchell's desire of having it both ways comes up against its limits.

in *Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture*, to write against the creeping ossification of the discipline.[22]

Visuality as event – Nicholas Mirzoeff

In 1999, Nicholas Mirzoeff opened his *Introduction to Visual Culture* with the apodictic statement: "Modern life takes place onscreen."[23] For Mirzoeff, the screen, understood here as the television or computer screen, is *the* site of visual consumption. From this, he infers that visual culture is a modern and especially a postmodern phenomenon. It also marks a boundary between epochs: the period from 1650 to 1820 was dominated by the formal logic of the "*ancien régime* image", followed by the modern era (1820-1975).[24] The difference between the two periods is that until 1820, visuality was dominated by the logic of the image, whereas in modernity the visual stimulus, amplified to a "hyper-stimulus", is the stronger influence: "visual culture does not depend on pictures themselves but the modern tendency to picture or visualize existence"[25] – whether this is a fundamental structural difference or a quantitative one remains unclear. In postmodernity, he claims, the kind of visualization specific to modernity is further heightened: "it [visualizing] has now become all but compulsory".[26] For Mirzoeff, postmodernity as a so-called crisis of modernity is the consequence of modernity's inability to deal with the failure of its strategy of visualization: "in other words, it is the visual crisis of culture that creates postmodernity, not its textuality. While print culture is certainly not going to disappear, the fascination with the visual and its effects that marked modernism has engendered a postmodern culture that is most postmodern when it is visual."[27] These are strong words, and they make no effort to cultivate the interlocking of textuality and visuality favoured by

22 Mitchell, "Showing Seeing".
23 Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, 1. Moreover, Mirzoeff always speaks only of visual culture, regardless of whether he is talking about the discipline's subject matter or the discipline itself.
24 Ibid., 7-8.
25 Ibid., 5.
26 Ibid., 6.
27 Ibid., 3.

Mitchell. For Mirzoeff, visuality is *the* characteristic of post-/modernity, which is also why visual culture deals primarily with this period.[28]

"Visual culture is concerned with visual events in which information, meaning, or pleasure is sought by the consumer in an interface with visual technology. By visual technology I mean any form of apparatus designed either to be looked at or to enhance natural vision, from oil painting to television and the Internet."[29] This gives an indication that Mirzoeff conceives of visuality as a visual event that takes place at the "interface" of consumer and visual medium. The specific quality of this visuality, analogous to the "disjunctured and fragmented culture that we call postmodernism",[30] is that it must react ever more quickly to the ever-increasing numbers of different, fragmented, simultaneous stimuli – "the constant swirl of the global village"[31] – which also impacts on a perceptive apparatus that possesses a seemingly unlimited capacity to adapt to these growing demands; "The hyper-stimulus of modern visual culture from the nineteenth century to the present day", he asserts, "has been dedicated to trying to saturate the visual field, a process that continually fails as we learn to see and connect ever faster."[32]

There is a causal link between this hyper-stimulus and the circulation of images that are no longer indexically connected to realities, as was still the case with the analogue versions of film and photography, but that now produce virtual realities. As Mirzoeff wishes to focus his discussion of visual culture mainly on new media and their consumers, it is understandable that for him, unlike Mitchell or Bal, the concept of the simulacrum from the French postmodern theory of writers like Virilio, Baudrillard and Lyotard plays a major role. "The (post)modern destruction of reality is accomplished in everyday life, not in the studios of the avant-garde."[33] Mirzoeff links the notion of the simulacrum as reality substitute with the metaphor of the "visual event" that emphasizes the visual-sensory experience and supposed immediacy already implicit in "event". The relationship between the virtuality and constructedness of media/realities on the one hand and, on the other, the "immediacy" of visual experience, however, remains unexplained. With this metaphor of

28 Although Mirzoeff never states this explicitly, he would therefore find it hard to apply visual culture studies to older periods.
29 Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, 3.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid., 1.
32 Ibid., 5.
33 Ibid., 17.

the "visual event", Mirzoeff wishes to make it possible "to advance interpretive strategies beyond the now familiar use of semiotic terminology".[34] For him, then, the "sensual immediacy" of the visual constitutes the fundamental difference between image and text/language[35] (a point on which he has been accused of visual essentialism by critics including Mieke Bal, of which more later). Mirzoeff proposes a theoretical keyword for the experience of sensory immediacy that results from "intense and surprising visual power", prompting reactions of "admiration, awe, terror and desire": the sublime: "The sublime is the pleasurable experience in representation of that which would be painful or terrifying in reality, leading to a realization of the limits of the human and of the powers of nature."[36] For Mirzoeff the sublime becomes the central dimension of visual culture, "at the heart of all visual events".[37] An aesthetic concept originating in the eighteenth century, the sublime is taken up here to strengthen his description of the visual event as going beyond language, and thus to position visual culture studies against semiotics.

What this theoretical shortcut ignores or bypasses is the factor of mediality structuring the "interface" between picture and consumer. Although Mirzoeff is interested in experience with post-modern media, he has no concept of media. In Mirzoeff's view of the relationship between consumer and medium, the experience of consuming has far greater weight than that of the image/medium: "visual culture [does] prioritize the everyday experience of the visual, from the snapshot to the VCR and even the blockbuster art exhibition." Apparently, the ever-changing media landscape is sufficient reason to forego a conceptualization of mediality in favour of visual experience. As a result Mirzoeff emphasizes all the more the external conditions of this experience. More than in traditional locations such as museum or cinema, "most of our visual experience takes place aside from these formally structured moments of looking";[38] we watch movies in planes or at home, we see paintings on book covers or posters. For Mirzoeff, these conditions seem to have a more serious impact than media specificity on spectatorship, a term that goes beyond the process of perception itself to include all the accompanying factors

34 Ibid., 13.

35 These are the also the grounds given for his critique of the semiotic approach, ending with the verdict: "Structuralism was in the end unproductive." *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, 14-15.

36 Ibid, 16.

37 Ibid., 16.

38 Ibid., 7.

of time, space and setting, as well as the social and cultural practices of visual consumption.

"Visual culture is a tactic with which to study the genealogy, definition and functions of postmodern everyday life *from the point of view of the consumer*, [my italics] rather than the producer."[39] So what of the triad of producer/object/interpreter? In Mirzoeff's analysis the author or producer is no longer relevant to the visual culture of postmodernity. In this, he draws a logical conclusion (realistically, I would say) from the actual weakening of authorship that can no longer even be theoretically founded since it takes place in the copy-and-paste practice of the Internet. Images, on the other hand, come in Mirzoeff's argument to represent compulsory visualizing itself. Once again, then, the viewer stands at the centre, without a dialogical point of reference. In contrast to Bryson's model, however, the viewer here is not an interpreter but a consumer, the "key agent in postmodern capitalist society".[40] But there is one important parallel: Bryson seeks the recognition of this interpretative role, the empowerment of the viewer as author, while Mirzoeff seeks the empowerment of the consumer who is to be emancipated from the vortex of capitalist over-production with the help of the insights of visual culture studies. But Mirzoeff does not behave like the classically Marxist, anti-visual enemy of the culture industry (the negative example he gives being Frederic Jameson[41]). Mirzoeff's agenda takes the viewer's pleasure into account rather than damning it.

This brings me to the question of the political implications of Mirzoeff's version of visual culture studies. What, I would ask, is he writing against? In terms of academic politics, he is writing against the linguistic turn and the influence of structuralism on the study of visual culture. His argument links the view of a postmodern culture of simulacra based on visuality with the sensory "immediacy" evoked in the consumer by these simulacra, an immediacy surpassing the analytic power of semiotics. There are other villains, too, explicit and/or implied, including "spin doctors, pollsters and other demons of the contemporary imagination", against whose manipulative power to launch and spread discriminatory or politically hegemonic narratives "everyday visual experience" offers a reservoir of resistance that is beyond the reach of

39 Ibid., 3 (my italics).
40 Ibid., 27.
41 See ibid., 10f.; another anti-visualist he writes against here is Pierre Bourdieu.

the manipulators on account of its unpredictability.[42] According to Mirzoeff, then, visual culture has a special potential for political resistance: "Visual culture is new precisely because of its focus on the visual as a place where meanings are created and *contested*."[43] Western culture, Mirzoeff argues, has privileged the spoken word (and not the written word, which, according to Mitchell, inevitably also has visual aspects) as the highest form of intellectual practice, considering visual representations as "second-rate illustrations of ideas". Put this way, Mirzoeff's militant vindication of visual culture in the face of discrimination appears as a logical reflex.

The combative structure of this argument, fighting for the visual, popular culture of discriminated identities of race, class, sexual orientation and gender, seamlessly gives rise to a catchy metaphor describing visual culture studies: not a discipline, but, with deliberate reference to military parlance, a tactic: "A tactic is carried out in full view of the enemy, the society of control in which we live. … in the ongoing culture wars, tactics are necessary to avoid defeat."[44] Visual culture is "a fluid interpretive structure, centered on understanding the response to visual media of both individuals and groups. … Like the other approaches mentioned above, it hopes to reach beyond the traditional confines of the university to interact with people's everyday lives."[45]

This makes clear the extent to which Mirzoeff derives his motivation from the militant identity politics of the 1980s and '90s, and his desire to conduct politically engaged studies for "people's lives". Such a desire is often accompanied by a denial of the difference between theory and practice. Wanting to bridge this gap brings with it the risk of theoretical pitfalls such as failing to take into account a further difference – that between simulated reality and the medium of its simulation. Where the militant side of the genesis of visual culture studies in identity politics is concerned, Mirzoeff is certainly the most explicit of the three writers discussed in this chapter. He links the struggle with something I would call visual vitalism. This is localized in the recipient's fascination with visually simulated realities, leading ultimately to what Mieke Bal was to refer to several years later, in a text that triggered an intense debate, as "visual essentialism".[46]

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42 Ibid., 29. Here Mirzoeff refers to Appadurai and Rogoff.

43 Ibid., 6 (my italics).

44 Ibid., 8.

45 Ibid., 4-5.

46 See Bal, "Visual Essentialism". The debate on this text also took place in the *Journal of Visual Culture*, in the following issue (2:2, 2003), 229-268.

Seeing is reading[47] – Mieke Bal

Unlike Mirzoeff, Mieke Bal never figured as a proponent of visual culture studies in the narrow sense. But she was involved in founding the first visual culture program at the University of Rochester in 1989/90, together with Michael Ann Holly, Norman Bryson, Kaja Silverman and Craig Owens. And in the 1990s, together with Bryson, she pursued a project I propose to call the semioticization of art history.[48] Like Bryson and Mitchell, Bal's background is in literary criticism; like Mitchell, she is writing against a polarization of text and image, language and vision.

With her 2003 article *Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture* – a fundamental critique of visual culture studies – Bal launched a self-reflexive debate within visual culture studies that signals the end of the first phase of the academic establishment of the discipline. This debate had been heralded a year earlier by Mitchell's article *Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture*. Unlike Mitchell, however, Bal made direct attacks on several colleagues so that the *Journal of Visual Culture*, where both texts were published, devoted space in the following issue to responses from within the field (not only from those who felt attacked). I will be focussing here on Bal's concept of visuality, characterized by a radically *semiotic* approach which Mirzoeff rejects and which Mitchell tries to combine with the dimension of the visual.

In 1991, Bal caused a sensation and drew sharp criticism from art historians with *Reading "Rembrandt". Beyond the Word-Image Opposition*,[49] her first book on images and visuality. Later reflecting on this work, she wrote: "Throughout the book, I studied visuality in discourse and discursivity in images, relations between the two, and the cultural impact of events of encounter or struggle on vision and subjects. Instead of trying to define visuality per se, I explored aspects and effects, forms and meanings that

47 See Mieke Bal, *A Mieke Bal Reader* (Chicago 2006), 280. She notes that vision is a "semiotic activity of an inherently rhetorical kind".

48 See Bal, Bryson, "Semiotics and Art History".

49 Mieke Bal, *Reading "Rembrandt". Beyond the Word-Image Opposition* (Cambridge, New York 1991). The critical reactions included Michael Podro, "*Reading 'Rembrandt'. Beyond the Word-Image Opposition* by Mieke Bal" in *The Burlington Magazine* 135, no. 1987 (1993), 699-700, and Roger Seamon, "*Reading 'Rembrandt'. Beyond the Word-Image Opposition* by Mieke Bal" in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 54, no. 1 (1996), 82-84. An enthusiastic response came from Griselda Pollock, "*Reading 'Rembrandt'. Beyond the Word-Image Opposition* by Mieke Bal" in *The Art Bulletin* 75, no. 3 (1993), 529-535.

visuality possesses or makes possible. …, visuality gained the status of a discourse, not as subjected to language but as a kind of language with its own capacity of meaning production."[50] Without going into detail on this controversial book here, I will outline only those issues that relate to visuality. In the foreword, Bal explains what moved her, as a literary scholar, to work with images: "I could not remain blind to the fact that the overt emphasis on the word hardly conceals an overwhelmingly visual dimension in our culture, including both literature and the study of it. This prompted me to study systematically the interplay of visual and verbal elements."[51] On the one hand, Bal writes against the separation of writing/text and image, verbal and visual communication. On the other, she picks up on two strands of feminist theory and art history: firstly, the feminist revision of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis developed by Laura Mulvey, Kaja Silverman, Teresa de Lauretis and Jacqueline Rose in connection with questions of looking and the gaze; and secondly, a critique of the concept of male artistic authorship discussed in feminist art history since the early 1980s. The latter is the reason for the inverted commas around *Rembrandt* in the book's title, labelling the artist and his œuvre as constructions of traditional art-historical dating and attribution.

Bal's focus as a literary scholar is on narratology, and thus she draws an analogy between verbal and visual narrative strategies: "If we are to bring the verbal and the visual together, we must consider the relationship between the position of the focalizer in the verbal narrative and the viewer in the visual."[52] Here she takes the concept of the focalizer from Gérard Genette, who distinguishes between narrator (the person telling the story) and focalizer (the person who sees), and develops it further.[53] The focalizer is the figure through whose eyes and thoughts the story is seen; the reader follows and identifies with the viewpoint of this figure – with seeing used as a metaphor here for the function performed by the focalizer in the narrative text: "focalization be-

50 Mieke Bal, *Looking in: The Art of Viewing* (Introduction by Norman Bryson) (Amsterdam 2001), 266.

51 Bal, *Reading "Rembrandt"*, xiii.

52 Ibid., 141.

53 On focalization in narratology, see Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse* (New York, 1980). French: *Discours du récit* in *Figures III* (Paris 1972). On focalization in Bal, besides *Reading "Rembrandt"*, see also the chapter on "Dispersing the Gaze: Focalization" in *Looking In*, 41-64.

longs to the story; it is the layer between the linguistic text and the fabula",[54] fabula being the story that is read or seen. By creating this analogy between focalization in the text and seeing in the visual (text), Bal interconnects text and image – although she limits seeing to the function of producing meaning in the context of the narrative and its reception. The example she uses to illustrate this interconnection is Rembrandt's painting *Susanna and the Elders*, which is based on a written story: "I shall propose a visual reading of the biblical Susanna story and a narrative reading of the paintings."[55]

This process of seeing linking text/image and reader/viewer as the basis for interpretation, is expressed via a feminist terminology of "voyeurism, the glance, and the gaze".[56] Bal thus borrows narratology with its visual metaphor of focalization from literary theory and then transfers it back to its visual source, linking it with the feminist critique of the patriarchal scopic regime. This is based on a key assumption: that seeing, which Bal treats as both visual and verbal, is the semiotic activity. Seeing is thus not only responsible for collecting the information for an interpretation; the interpretation already takes place in the act of seeing. "In narrative discourse, focalization is the direct content of the linguistic signifiers. In visual art, it would thus be the direct content of visual signifiers, such as lines, dots, light and dark, and composition. In both cases, focalization is already an interpretation, or subjectivized content."[57] Those elements of a picture discussed in art history under categories of form, technique and style – the aesthetic and material constitution of the painted surface – are thus included here in the production of meaning and its interpretation as signifiers. Focalizers within the picture, such as eye contact, directed gazes or pointing gestures between figures, are just as important as similar focalizers linking the figures in the painting with the viewer.

The connections between narratology and reception aesthetics, as imported from German literary theory into art history by Wolfgang Kemp, are twofold: both are oriented towards reception, and both view pictures in terms of narrative. The meaning produced in the act of seeing is a narrative. As a basic assumption this is, I suggest, too narrow a view of what visual objects can evoke in the recipient and of what might count as meaning. If

54 Bal, *Looking In*, 47.
55 See Bal, *Reading "Rembrandt"*, chapter 4, 141.
56 Ibid.
57 Bal, *Looking In*, 54 (my italics).

one does not follow this assumption of narrative as the ultimate producer of meaning in the sense of an anthropological constant, one must ask whether focalization can only work for narrative pictures – like *Susanna and the Elders*, which can be classified within the genre of history painting due to being based on a biblical story.

Focalization and focalizer are metaphors for a model of communication between object/picture and viewer that functions via an identification of the viewer with the focalizing agent. The focalizing agent generates an "appeal to identification".[58] This basic assumption concerning the communication between text/image and reader/viewer is unthinkable without psychoanalytical theory. In film theory, for example, the psychoanalytical concept of identification formed the basis of Laura Mulvey's conception of the male gaze and visual pleasure. Mulvey identified an active (male) and a passive (female) pole of reception, tracing this back to the filmic structure of identification within the rigid setting of consuming Hollywood movies. And her proposed strategy of resistance to this power constellation of the gaze is also directed against the inner narrative structure of such movies: this structure should be destroyed by means of avant-garde filmmaking and with it the conditions for identification within the scopic regime of the gaze. Bal's assumptions concerning the conditions of communication between visual object (picture, film) and viewer differ from Mulvey's. Bal sees potential for resistance to the gaze in her reading-based strategy of focalization: "As I see it, at the heart of focalization, and hence, of both linguistic narrative and visual art, is a hub that shifts and destabilizes the gaze."[59] While Mulvey argues in terms of production (the film itself must change), Bal proposes a specific strategy for reception.

In his introduction to a collection of Bal's essays, Norman Bryson gives his analysis of the differences between the strategies marshalled by Mulvey and Bal against the gaze,[60] referring to Mulvey's theory of the gaze as optical and to Bal's as rhetorical or semiotic. Mulvey's stage for the gaze is the cinema: a darkened room, the audience fix their gaze on the screen, only the beam of light from the projector and the surface of the screen are visible. As a space, this setting, as I indicated earlier, resembles the Albertian construction of

58 Bal, *Reading "Rembrandt"*, 160.

59 Bal, *Looking In*, chapter on "Dispersing the Gaze: Focalization", 42.

60 Norman Bryson, "Introduction" in Bal, *Looking In*, 1-40. On Mulvey and Bal, see especially 6-12.

perspective with a fixed viewer position and the visual pyramid between projector and screen, into which the viewer inserts herself. "Mulvey's model recapitulates centuries of optical speculation in the West, faithfully retracing its perennial geometry: the retina, the lens, and the plane of representations."[61] Here it is again, that reprehensible western one-point perspective, which fixes the gaze within an order and knows only one direction of looking, only one focus.

Not so Bal's model. In her work, Bryson asserts: "sight is figured not as scenic but as semiotic. The first step is to postulate signs rather than scenes as the basic stuff of vision." He continues: "The space is that of discourse rather than projective geometry: of any human language where there are signs for *I, you, she, he* – and where there exist stories, *narratives* (perhaps the key term in all of Bal's work)."[62] In contrast to the "implacable dualism"[63] of active subject position and passive object position in Mulvey's model, Bal's is multifocal. Her transfer of focalization from literary theory into the visual realm opens up possibilities of seeing that are not subject to any polarization. It can be read as a kind of counter-model to one-point perspective and thus as an emancipation of the viewer position from perspective's fixedness: "Resistance is built into each point of the image's field: the narrator 'Rembrandt', Lucretia, the viewer. That each point possesses powers of resistance creates a far more complex and volatile arena of power in vision …: power not as a monolith, or pyramid (the 'visual pyramid'), …, but rather a set of relations or a 'swarm of points' (Foucault) such that the possibility of reversing the power relation is present at each node of the image's focalization."[64] But Bryson's characterization of Bal's approach, making her semioticization of seeing responsible for emancipating it from a fixed dualism, seems to me inherently indebted to the antivisualism of French poststructuralism as diagnosed by Martin Jay.[65]

In her Rembrandt book, Bal's use of the term *visuality* is correspondingly flexible. It covers more than the *gaze* or the *glance*. In specific cases, it may be about the visuality of a picture, as when Bal writes of the "self-evidential effect of the painting" that is attributed to the visuality of the picture.[66] This kind of visuality relates to reception (the effect) and is not conceived of

61 Ibid., 8.
62 Ibid.
63 Ibid., 9.
64 Ibid., 15.
65 See Jay, *Downcast Eyes*.
66 Bal, *Reading "Rembrandt"*, 270.

in ontological terms. But visuality is also the Other of discursivity, two poles that Bal is interested in interweaving not in the sense of an abolition of the difference between image and text, but by integrating discursivity "into the very center of visuality. Thus she approvingly notes of Alpers' and Steinberg's interpretations of Velasquez's *Las Meninas* that, rather than reading the picture with a "stable conception of the sign", they explain it as a "sign event" between image and interpreter, integrating the discourses about the picture into the interpretation.[67] The *sign event* in Bal corresponds to the *visual event* in Mirzoeff.

Bal's founding of visuality in psychoanalysis is theoretically pivotal, as it forms the basis for her other case studies. It is also here, however, that an anthropological constant creeps in of the kind that becomes inevitable as soon as psychoanalysis is deployed as a metatheory: Bal speaks in a Freudian sense of "primary visuality" as the experience that brings forth a fear of castration. Visuality is thus an experience that is both a fundamental and a gender-specific part of identity formation.[68] Another fundamental nexus between self and visuality in Bal is the psychoanalytical concept of narcissism, which is based on the motif of the mirror and in which the fraught relationship between self and other is read as a kind of visual allegory.[69] This motif runs through the Rembrandt book in various combinations; to borrow a metaphor from music theory it forms the dominant of Bal's thinking.

Finally, Bal's intellectual trains of thought and arguments seem to me to be based on metaphors of the visual. One might even say that visuality is the allegory of her theory and of her modus operandi. The result of this, as Michael Podro puts it in his review of the Rembrandt book, is "to make the picture an image of its criticism".[70] Looking back, she described her personal turn towards the visual: "I felt empowered by *visuality* and knew that … I had to explore this concept further."[71] It seems to me that Bal tries to *speak/write* visuality, or, conversely, to bring forth visuality in writing.

What of the relationship between artist/object/interpreter? In Podro's view, Bal's interpretative practice does not offer a dialogical relationship between interpreter and object because its self-reflexivity (which he sees as the core of her writing) ends up with the work reflecting her own process back at

67 Ibid., 277.
68 Ibid., 288.
69 See in particular Bal, *Reading "Rembrandt"*, 18 f., and chapters 7, 8 and 9.
70 Podro, "Beyond the Word-Image Opposition", 699.
71 Bal, *Looking In*, 265.

her. Bal's basic assumption that signs receive their meaning from the viewer, he claims, leads to the difference between the work and our "discourse upon it" being overwritten or suspended.[72] This is contrasted with his view that "if we recognize that utterances and depictions address and show themselves to a viewer and that this is a fact internal to their making, then we see that at the centre of our activity is the respect of painter for viewer and vice-versa". And he adds: "The reciprocity of conversation is a better model for the relation of viewer to work than interpreting our own dreams." To this reciprocity, he adds the distancing motif of historical imagination, because "otherwise we simply allow our own concerns and obsessions to feed on the works at which we look".

But is the dialogical model, characterized by Podro as an ethical one via his use of the word 'respect', even compatible with Lacan's narcissistic model of the gaze on which Bal's position is based? This question implies further problems for both art history and visual culture studies, such as that of the relationship between interpretative present and historical alterity, or unfamiliarity, of the object. Like Bryson, Bal argues for the present as the sole legitimate moment of interpretation, while the historicity of the object must be considered as inaccessible and any effort in this direction, out of a desire for objectivity, can only be "pseudo".

But quite apart from the fact that the very intensity of the recurring disputes over the relevance of history to the present speaks in favour of such a relevance, it is the material presence of the historical object in a context determined by contemporary culture that sets in motion the interpreter's confrontation with the object. What is most interesting here is the way this question of historicity, which plays an important role in the academic policing of the borders between art history and visual culture studies, acquires relevance precisely in connection with visuality. Bryson, Mirzoeff and Bal share a tendency towards a certain presentism. For Mirzoeff, it is the presence of the fascinated and manipulated consumer; for Bal and Bryson, that of the seeing, reading interpreter.

72 Podro, "Beyond the Word-Image Opposition", 700.