

Preface

Vision and visuality, by virtue of their centrality in our experience, conception, interpretation and representation of the world, have always enjoyed a pivotal, although quite controversial, position in the Western tradition of philosophical, epistemological and aesthetic thought. Modernity, the era of the radical reorganization of social, economic, cultural and political life, is widely thought to be characterised by a multiform investment on and restructuring of visual experience and culture. Today vision and visuality has become a focal issue of research and theorisation across the full range of social and cultural disciplines, as well as the nodal point for conflicting interpretations regarding the character and the direction of modern culture. If the 1960s and the 1970s were the times of the so-called “linguistic turn”, with the emphasis on discourse, writing and the sign, what we have witnessed since the early 1980s has been a “visual turn”, with the emphasis on the image, the figure, the gaze and representation. Furthermore, far from being a quest for the specificity of the visual, this paradigm shift seems to question the traditional distinctions between the sensory and the semiotic, the visual and the verbal, encouraging a post-disciplinary approach to the totality of the field of representational activity which draws on concepts, analytical methods and models coming from all the traditionally distinct fields of sociological, anthropological, psychoanalytical, textual, aesthetic, communication and cultural theory.

In publicizing the topic of this special issue we invited papers dealing with the investigation and interpretation of the contemporary scopic and/or representational regime in all its multiform and proliferating variety. We are happy to say that the response to our call has far exceeded our expectations, both in terms of the variety of perspectives and themes explored, as well as of the sheer quantity of the work submitted. Having the painful task of restricting the latter according to the limits set by our publisher, we believe that the choice of papers included here is an eloquent sample and proof of the multifaceted research currently pursued internationally in the field of the study of contemporary visual culture, as well as of the challenges that the visual poses to traditional disciplinary boundaries and divisions.

In this truly kaleidoscopic collection of papers, an effective summary of its contents would run the risk of betraying what we think to be its most attractive and useful feature: its theoretical and methodological pluralism. The collection opens with C. Douzinas’s thorough examination of the intricate and intimate links that exist between political power, law and the image. Prof. Douzinas follows the development of these links from the time of the ancient Greek and Jewish culture, and the century-long iconoclastic controversy up to their most recent articulation in the context of the contemporary aesthetic-legal order of i-

images. The visual regime that has emerged in the last decade from the so-called *New Hollywood* forms the topic of M. Kokonis's paper, who explores it through the analysis both of its general, socio-economic and cultural dimensions, as well as of the specific questions raised by one of the most recent products of this new regime, Peter Weir's film *The Truman Show*.

The visual fictions of the electronic screen form the subject of the papers by A. McMahan and Y. Scarpelos. The former investigates the unique narrative forms and relations found in the on-line communities commonly known as MUDs, approaching their fluidity, interactivity and self-reflectivity as symptomatic of the cultural ethos distinguishing the functioning of contemporary Global Networks. The same cultural ethos is approached by Y. Scarpelos through an examination of the metaphorical structures employed, since the early 1980s, to visualize software, indicating the pervasive influence of their fictional or mythological dimension on the whole variety of ways through which we organize and make sense of our on-line experience.

N. Panagiotopoulos and H. Papaioannou both focus on the photographic gaze as a complex articulation of power and ideology. More specifically, the former examines how some of the most celebrated pictures taken by Nelly's, one of the most renowned Greek photographers, construct, through a unique internalization of the gaze of the Other, a Greece that exists traditionally only in the Western imagination. H. Papaioannou, on the other hand, investigates the manifold, at once ideological, political and economic, functions served by a seemingly innocuous collection of pictures of Cyprus taken by John Thompson in the late 1870s, when Cyprus became part of the British empire.

Photographs, and in particular, pictures of war, their reception and their politics, are also the subject of G. Paschalidis's paper. Beginning with a critique of the iconoclastic and technophobic bias that characterizes the condemnation of this kind of pictures by critics such as S. Sontag, P. Virilio and J. Baudrillard, he proceeds to analyse the century-long controversy concerning the proper representation of war as a case study which allows us to reconceptualize the history and the operation of the visual field on the basis of its close links to the processes of the articulation, legitimation and/or de-legitimation of political and cultural authority.

The two closing papers of our collection deal with the role of vision and visibility in strategies of identity formation. With a clearly postcolonial problematic, S. Vega-Gonzalez approaches the theme of supernatural vision traversing the fiction of contemporary African American women writers like Gloria Naylor, Toni Morrison et.al. and reveals its subversive and empowering potential against the hegemonic Western concepts of reality and history. L. Yoka, on the other hand, makes an intriguing contribution to the recently proliferating bibliography on the sociology of the intellectuals by investigating the elaborate rituals of visibility used by early 20th century intellectuals in Athens, as part of their symbolic strategies to develop their self consciousness and group separateness.

Michael Kokonis

Gregory Paschalidis