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Visual, Visible, Ethnographic

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The paper explores visibility as a category to describe certain characteristics of the social that can be observed by ethnographers. The field of visibility spans the most immediate interactions that take place in a situated context and mediated social relations. Visibility offers a useful comparative tool to research because very different practices can be compared as specific configurations or regimes of visibility. The effects of visibility are contingent upon the type of regime, as the cases of recognition, control, and spectacle illustrate. The paper does not seek to propose visibility as a catch-all term; rather, it suggests that ethnographic research is inevitably concerned with how features of visibility are employed by actors to introduce thresholds of relevance in the definition of relational territories. In its attempt to understand the constitution of social territories as 'locales', ethnography cross-cuts the distinction between the how and the why of observed phenomena.
Keywords*: visuality, visibility, ethnographic research, interaction, ethnographic locales*

1. The visual and the visible

It is perhaps unnecessary to stress the importance of the visual dimension in social interaction. Bearing witness to this are the classical sociologists. In his *excursus* on the sociology of the senses, Georg Simmel (1908) investigated the 'strictly sociological function' of the eye, and specifically the *reciprocal contact* between gazes. The symmetrical immediateness of eye-to-eye contact – the mutual visibility which exists only as long as it is immediate (external to forms of mediation like language or representations, for instance) – is for Simmel the most fundamental type of human interaction, for it yields an understanding of the other which is not filtered by general categories but is instead truly individual and singular.[1] This

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presentation is grounded on the reciprocal visibility of the presence of each component in the interaction.

Erving Goffman described the subtle ways in which visibility relationships take shape in rituals of self-presentation (Goffman 1959). Behaviour in public places (Goffman 1963b) is always subject to, and conducted through, practices for the reciprocal management of visibility among social actors. Yet visibility is not exercised in an undifferentiated fashion; rather, it concerns thresholds. The 'normal appearance' (Goffman 1971) of a setting is its invisibility. In the absence of alarm signals, the setting is 'transparent' to the observer. In other words, the normal is neither noticed nor thematized owing to its invisibility. Conversely, it is the anomalous which is marked and transposed to a different register of visibility. Also the stigma (Goffman 1963a) is an interactional visibility device in this sense. A negative moral characteristic can be associated with any physical sign, but for this mechanism to work the sign in question must become perceivable. Moreover, for Goffman the visibility of a stigma is different from knowledge about it, and also from its immediate relevance to interaction, because many stigmata are visible before they are known or thematized. Consequently, there exists a sort of 'precession' of visibility: visibility establishes the thresholds above which the stigmatization mechanism is able to operate.

Analysis of the functions performed by reciprocal gaze in order to control others, and to coordinate joint cognitive or expressive work with them, has been conducted by other researchers, notably Sudnow (1972) and Kendon (1990), which continued sociologically a line of inquiry already begun by social psychologists. For these scholars, 'seeing-at-a-glance' established the temporal synchronization (timing) of interpersonal action. Glances are interactive phenomena for the joint production of normal contexts. For Kendon, reciprocal gaze signals an act of taking into consideration which is determined as follows: the duration of a gaze is directly proportional to the effort spent on the interaction but inversely proportional to the actors' degree of emotional commitment. Because gaze management is deeply imbued with commitment, it can be a highly delicate undertaking, as evidenced when gaze is perceived as a territorial challenge or as an affront to honour.

Although these examples demonstrate the importance of the visual dimension in social interaction, little has been done to incorporate such research into a more general category and thereby expand understanding among sociologists and

1 The gaze as access to the immediate experience of the other has been analysed by phenomenologists. For instance, Schütz (1967: § 4) distinguished between observation and relation, on the grounds that only in the latter does a mutual commitment between the interacting subjects come about. In his turn, Merleau-Ponty termed this characteristic 'reversibility'.

ethnographers of the social mechanisms of visibility. For this purpose, interesting contributions may be drawn from areas of research which have examined visibility, such as media and communication studies. Many such studies interpret and discuss visibility as 'modality of representation', or more simply as 'social representation' (Rocher 2002). Examples of visibility relationships include political scandals (Thompson 2000), the discursive figures of the *banlieue* inhabitant (Champagne 1993) and the criminal (Melossi 2000), and the workings of web search engines (Brin and Page 1998). These various phenomena can be interpreted not only as social representations but also as specific visibility phenomena, in that they concern a field in which careful work of reciprocal management of gaze and attention takes place through the establishment of precise thresholds separating and bringing into contact what is observable with what is not. John P. Thompson, for example, has traced the history of the political scandal as a visibility mechanism gone awry – or even, one might say, become the nemesis of visibility. Scandal originates in the structural tension between the need for visibility as a means to exercise political power and its inevitable collateral effects on management of media visibility. Following Bourdieu, Patrick Champagne has discussed the development of a 'media vision' which explains the distinction between dominant and dominated groups as resulting from the capacity or otherwise to control the representations of oneself conveyed by the media. Likewise, Dario Melossi has pointed out that representations of the criminal differ widely from one historical period to another. They alternate between sympathetic and antipathetic because their production and circulation is structurally located within the broader organization of a society's system of relations. Finally, Sergey Brin and Larry Page, the founders of Google, have developed a web search engine based on an algorithm which classifies the contents of websites hierarchically. By enabling webpages to be hierarchised according to both the importance of their content and external links to the relative website (in other words, its social visibility), Brin and Page have inaugurated a new era for the internet: that of the struggle for visibility and the consequent strategies of search engine optimization.

It might be objected that two distinct meanings of the term 'visibility' are being confused here: a 'literal' meaning pertaining to the immediate sensory sphere; and a 'metaphorical' one instead pertaining to the set of symbolic meanings attached to particular phenomena communicated via the media. Yet the overall thesis argued by this article is precisely that the difference between the two meanings is not one of nature but of degree. In other words, the idea that will be explored here is that we are dealing, not with the simple phenomenon related to the polysemy of the term 'visibility', but on the contrary with the complex phenomenon realted to two different aspects of the same phenomenon.

As a matter of fact, more than one sociological theory able to link the two above aspects of visibility is already available: for example, Marshall McLuhan's (1964) proposal that the media should be viewed as sensory extensions of the human being. McLuhan defined media as comprising not only the *mass* media, or those which Parsons and Habermas called the 'generalized media of exchange' like money and power, but more broadly and radically any communication infrastructure, including, to cite two deliberately heterogeneous examples, cars and language. Although McLuhan furnished a rather sketchy characterization of the relationship between the media and the senses, hypothesising that each type of relationship corresponded *tout court* to a particular type of society (proposing what in a worst case interpretative scenario one might take to be an evolutionary theory based on technological determinism). However, his main thesis allows us to link the 'literal' dimension of the visual to the 'metaphorical' one of visibility. This unified conception should not be confused with a naive trust in the truth of media contents. The sensory extensions constituted by the media are not neutral, for they engender specific modifications within the field of the visible: hence McLuhan's famous dictum that the medium is the only true message. The media make messages visible, whilst they make the structures of such visibility invisible. According to McLuhan, therefore, the objective of media studies is to give visibility to those specific effects of media technologies which would otherwise be hidden by the messages communicated.

A similar idea was subsequently advanced by Pierre Bourdieu (1996) in his critical analysis of television. Bourdieu considered not so much the relationship between the technological infrastructure of the medium and the content of the message as the relationship between the content of the message and the economic, organizational and cultural infrastructure of its production. In his study on television journalism, Bourdieu described the structural mechanisms that enable 'invisible censorship' to be exercised on the public's vision. Television increasingly determines access to social life, but its ability to construct democratic visibility is compromised by the dependence of the televisual message on the economic structure of its production, which is invisible because it is literally 'out of frame'. Moreover, the hypervisibility of television messages produces repercussions and distortions in other social fields, such as the political and the legal domains.

On studying a specific work context – that of airport personnel supervising embarkation and disembarkation procedures via closed circuit television cameras – Charles Goodwin (1996) maintained that being able to perceive a significant event – for instance, *seeing* that there was a problem with a movable ramp that had to connect with an airplane's door – is an activity conducted situationally and collaboratively. The airport technicians observed by Goodwin used the media available to them (radio, computer and video) to conduct coordinated work by

furnishing each other with 'instructions for seeing': that is, instructions (often in the form of phonetic emissions lasting a few tenths of a second) on how to interpret the images and act accordingly.

These examples show that the various forms of media visibility do not essentially differ from those of visuality in social interaction. The differences between these forms are instead due to the specific configurations assumed by the field of visibility in specific empirical cases – or, as we might call them, the different *regimes of visibility*. Hence whilst the role of vision in social interaction has been amply explored since the classical sociologists, considering media studies in the context of general reflection on visibility as a sociological category means 'de-exceptionalizing' media vision. In effect, the media are only structures configuring the asymmetry of visibilities. Contributing to these configurations are many other factors, which will be described below. What has been said thus far, however, seems enough to state that the field of the visible is not equivalent to that of the simply visual. The visible is instead an *extension* or a *prolongation* of the visual. By 'prolongation' I mean a type of connection among ontologically heterogeneous elements comprised in a composite mechanism or dynamic. Prolongation is a type of connection that falls neither in the categories of evolution nor in those of system. Although not developed with the epistemological tools customarily used by the social sciences, the concept of prolongation can be traced back to the phenomenology of the mass and power developed by Elias Canetti (1960). The type of relationship described by Canetti between the individual and the mass, or between climbing and trading, or between jaws and prison, or between excrement and morality, can be allocated to the category of prolongation. More recent sociological approaches, like *acteur-réseau* theory, move in a similar direction by stressing continuity *cum* ontological heterogeneity, doing so from a perspective which is neither systemic nor evolutionist. Prolongation has similarities with what Latour (1991) calls 'mediation work' or, elsewhere, '*factiche*' and 'collective of beings'.

Just as one can evidence a visual dimension in the media, so one can show a dimension of visibility in visual interaction. Some scholars of visual culture have emphasised this aspect by adopting a markedly relational approach to the visual. Mirzoeff (1999: 13), for instance, proposes that we should focus, not on the visual object but on the visual *event*, defined as "the interaction of the visual sign, the technology that enables and sustains that sign, and the viewer". Using the concept of prolongation, one may say that the constitution of the visible is that of a prolongation of the visual *impregnated with the symbolic*. To correctly understand this notion, one must reverse the traditional approach to the study of the symbolic and say, *not* that it is the objects of the field of visibilities (images, gestures, 'representations') that symbolize something, but rather that symbols are specific

relations in the field of visibilities (like images, gestures and representations). In other words, symbols are neither more nor less than whatever *renders* visible. Thus established is a peculiar tension between symbol and image. Whereas a symbol is an 'image under control' (despite, or perhaps due to, the fact that the content of the symbol is often projected into the realm of the inexpressible), images are never fully controllable; on the contrary, they always comprise an elusive quality. Consequently, to speak of the visible as the visual imbued with the symbolic is to assume as one's unit of analysis the hybrid nature of the *articulability of the visible*. Whereas Michel Foucault (1969) postulated the visible and the articulable as two separate and incommensurable domains corresponding to the non-discursive and the discursive (therefore hypothesising the priority of the latter over the former), the visible and the articulable are co-present in the field of visibility. Contrary to the radical separation of the visible and the articulable it must be recognised that, as soon as we try to imagine a pure visible or a pure articulable separate from each other, we rapidly lapse into a paradox. The aesthetic domain (and specifically the aesthetic-visual) impacts upon us first, instantaneously, but only because in reality the political domain (Foucault's articulable) has always been present. The two domains speak different languages; but at the same time they support each other and, in a sort of wave-particle dualism, they carry each other forward. It is not simply that they occasionally mix; rather they are always mixed together. There is no visible without modes of seeing. On the other hand, the same abstract articulation that makes these 'modes' possible can be understood as 'invisible' in Merleau-Ponty's sense,[2] rather than being a separate, uncorrelated regime. The fundamental ambiguity of visibility derives precisely from this continuous interweaving among its components. *Inscription* in the visible through inscription technologies consequently always takes place in the dual form of the observable and the articulable.[3]

The argument thus far can be summed up in the proposition that it is possible to conceive the visible, beyond the merely visual, as a form of the social.

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2 In his working notes of 1960, Merleau-Ponty (1964) remarked that the invisible is not simply something visible that is contingently out of sight. Rather, the invisible is what it is here without being an object. The invisible is intrinsic to the visible; it is what it makes the visible possible. Thus, the punctum caecum of the eye, which the eye can never see, is also what makes it possible for the eye to see the rest of the world. The blind point, the invisible, is precisely what physically connects the subject-observer to the object-observed.

3 Derrida's concepts of trace, becoming and différance can be used to understand inscription procedures in general.

2. The visible as social

The management of visibilities is a social enterprise whose output is a field of interactions created by defining and drawing cones and vectors of visibility. Behind these geometric images lies one of the crucial apsect of visibility: namely, the *social construction* of subjects through their positionings within a field that creates and distribute visibility symmetries and asymmetries. The specific effects of the different forms of visibility, in fact, allow one to conceptualize the creation of *subject positions* in the field of visibilities. Also evident here is the political and normative dimension of the visible: corresponding to every definition of a field of visibility are demands and tensions which endeavour to establish a connection between the possible and the proper, between what *can* be seen and what *should* or *should not* be seen, between who can and who cannot see others.

Consider three types or models of visibility: the visibility of recognition, the visibility of control, and the visibility of spectacle.

The first model – visibility as *recognition* – derives from Hegel's master/servant dialectic (Hegel 1807). For Hegel, the existence of the human being is constituted through mutual recognition: "Self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being recognized [*ein Anerkanntes*]".[4] An intersubjective conception of this type was later introduced into social theory by George Herbert Mead (1934). Since in social interaction a *significant other* bears witness to our existence and proves it by looking at us, visibility pertains to the processes of subjectivization, objectivation, and the onto-epistemological construction of objects and subjects in the social world. For Mead, the significant other is prolonged into the *generalized other*, that is, the sanctioning gaze with which the community controls the behaviour of its members. In contemporary political philosophy, Hegel's concept of recognition has been worked upon by Charles Taylor (1989), who has interpreted it as fundamental category of modern human identity. In every political unit composed of plural and heterogeneous

4 With his use of the concept of self-consciousness, Hegel was the first modern philosopher expressly to thematize the reflexive nature of the knowing subject, which in the master/servant dialectic he treated in relational and social terms. The origin of the concept was Leibniz's distinction between perception and apperception. By contrast, neither Descartes, the philosopher of intuition as evidence, nor Locke, the philosopher of identity as permanence, dealt with self-consciousness. The term Anerkennung (recognition) was introduced into philosophy by Fichte in his Foundation of Natural Law (1796). One key aspect of the master/servant is the prolongation that goes from survival to work: "The consciousness that toils and serves accordingly attains by this means the direct comprehension of that independent being as its self". Marx's theory of alienation is somewhat founded on this passage. Although discussion of the Marxian theory in terms of social visibility would obviously be beyond the scope of the present article, this genealogy of the work/alienation dialectic in recognition and therefore in a practice of visibility is remarkable in itself.

elements there develop "struggles for recognition" (Honneth 1996) so that an entire field of "politics of recognition" arises (Taylor 1992). Honneth, besides proposing three fundamental spheres of recognition (love, law, social solidarity), concentrates on the effects of a lack of recognition, or misrecognition. These configurations of social visibility have crucial impact on the type of relationship that develops between minority groups (of whatever type: cultural, ethnic, sexual, political, religious, moral) and the social mainstream. Raph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1947: 7) provides an early literary example of how for racial minorities – but the same holds for minorities of other type – being invisible means being deprived of recognition: "That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact".

However, visibility is not linked to recognition in a direct and linear way. There intervenes the function performed by *thresholds of visibility*. In other words, there is a minimum and a maximum of what we may call 'correct visibility' – regardless of what criteria of correctness are adopted. Beneath the lower threshold, a person is socially excluded. Stephen Frears' film *Dirty Pretty Things* (2002) paints an extremely vivid picture of the daily life – especially the 'night' life – of the illegal immigrant. Although the illegal immigrant is socially invisible, s/he is also a highly visible *homo sacer* and indeed symbolically crucial for defining the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion (Agamben 1995; Rajaram and Grundy-Warr 2004). Analogous dynamics of invisibility and hypervisibility are apparent in the debate on the urban underclass (Mingione, ed., 1996; Wacquant 1999; Wacquant 2006). When persons move, or are pushed, above the upper threshold of correct visibility, they enter a zone of supra-visibility or super-visibility in which any action undertaken becomes so enormous that it paralyses the person performing it. This is a paradoxical double bind whereby a person is prohibited from doing what s/he is simultaneously required to do by the set of social constraints to which s/he is subject. Media representations of immigrants as criminal are supra-visible, and so too are numerous other forms of moral panic which selectively focus on actors assumed to represent moral minorities (Dal Lago 2001). The positioning of a subject below or above the thresholds of correct visibility relates to the problem of managing one's social image, and particularly the extent to which it can be managed in one's own terms or in those of others. Distortions *in* visibility give rise to distortions in social representations, to distortions *through* visibility.

It is accordingly necessary to sociologically refine the concept of recognition, specifying the existence of different types of recognition not on the basis of the social spheres or settings in which recognition is exercised (as Honneth proposes in his philosophy) but on the contrary starting from the cognitive dimension of the interactional making of recognition. At least four types of recognition can be

identified: categorical, individual, personal, and spectacular. *Categorical* recognition is founded on the simple, and for the most part routine, typification of people. It is 'urban' recognition *par excellence* in that it is exchanged among strangers. Lyn Lofland (1998) adopts the presence of this type of recognition as the marker to define the 'public domain' as "areas of urban settlements in which individuals in co-presence tend to be personally unknown or only categorically known to each other" (ibid., 9). *Individual* recognition, or identification, is typically exercised by the state in regard to the population. It acquires its most complete form in such instruments of classification and control as registry office records, identity cards, or fingerprints (in 1902 Alphonse Bertillon for the first time identified a criminal using his fingerprints), and the sophisticated biometric profiles of today. John C. Scott (1998) has critically analysed the development of a 'gaze of the state' in modern countries. In government, a way of seeing predisposes a way of acting and intervening in reality. The centralist gaze of the state, Scott argues, is impoverished: it filters the multiplicity of social life and reduces the plurality of lived experience to a Procrustean bed in order to improve legibility in the interpretation and management of phenomena concerning the population.[5] Thirdly, *personal* recognition derives from what is commonly termed 'personal knowledge'. Goffman (1963b) provided a detailed description of the norms associated with acquaintanceship, and particularly the 'right to initiate a direct relationship' (e.g. speaking to someone) to which personal recognition gives entitlement. Finally, *spectacular* recognition has to do with the distinction between the two regimes of the ordinary and the extraordinary, or if you will, between the profane and the sacred. The most typical case of spectacular recognition in everyday life is that of 'celebrity sighting'. The distinctive feature of this type of encounter is the fact that "celebrities, heroes and media figures are technically strangers to their audience, even as those audience members feel they know the celebrity personally, and react accordingly" (Ferris 2004: 239).

The types of recognition just described undoubtedly interweave, but they do not perfectly overlap. The most sociologically interesting cases are those located in the zones of intersection and ambiguity: personal recognition without individual recognition (people to whom we occasionally speak but do not know their names); conflict between categorical and personal recognition (social types from which we

5 According to Scott, social engineering, supported by a high modernist ideology, has expropriated local experience, in that the gaze of central executive power is narrowly focused on functional manipulation and the imposition of uniformity on the population. The legibility of social phenomena is often obtained at the expense of recognition of their richness, so that a single gaze, analogous to a 'view from nowhere', hides the multiplicity of real gazes. Foucault (1977) investigated the concept of population as an object of government. Individual recognition should be understood as that singulatim which, as an essential complement to the omnes, allows definition of the object on which governmentality is exerted.

expect a certain behaviour which is not forthcoming); the short circuit between categorical and individual recognition (for instance in the curcuit of criminalization of immigrants); and so on.

We have seen thus far that visibility is associated with recognition. The second model of visibility counterposes the dynamics and struggles for recognition with the ancient concept of the *arcana imperii* and the modern concepts of discipline and control. A group of 'antiocularcentric' authors (Jay 1993) have focused on the inextricable interweaving between vision and power.[6] Whilst inquiry into visibility has often taken the form of an investigation into social recognition, Michel Foucault's thesis on the formation of the disciplinary society describes an antithetical scenario of visibility. By tracing the origin of the word 'surveillance' in clinical language (Foucault 1963), the disciplinary thesis reveals a meaning completely different from being seen and observed: not recognition but subjugation, imposition of behaviour, means of control. In the disciplinary society, visibility means deprivation of power. Foucault (1975: 205) describes the practice of examining or inspecting in these terms:

> disciplinary power imposes on those whom it subjects a principle of compulsory visibility. In discipline, it is the subjects who have to be seen. Their visibility assures the hold of power that is exercised over them. It is the fact of being constantly seen, of being able always to be seen, that maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection.

The simple fact of being aware of one's visibility status – and not the fact of being effectively under control – efficaciously influences behaviour. Bentham's Panopticon, as analysed by Foucault, is a mechanism of visibility. Most important for its effective operation is not only the first-order asymmetry between the guard who watches and the inmate who is watched but the asymmetry that regards the entire control device. It was for this reason that Deleuze (1986) stressed that the Panopticon is in fact a logical diagram of power, rather than a simple physical-visual setting. What Deleuze underestimated, however, is that the diagram exhibits – precisely because of its invisibility – a mechanism of visibility. For the panoptic diagram consists in a *second-order* asymmetry of vision between those aware of the existence of the diagram and those unaware of it – those in the dark, so to speak. Foucault saw the disappearance of punitive torture as marking the advent of a new type of 'political technology of the

6 Martin Jay (1993) has conducted detailed analysis of antiocularcentrism in the French intellectual tradition, tracing its development from the avant-garde movements influenced by psychoanalysis to the philosophers who denigrated the classical conceptions of vision: a large group to which Jay allocates Bataille, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Lacan, Althusser, Foucault, Debord, Barthes, Metz, Derrida, Irigaray, Levinas and Lyotard.

body' which sought not only to produce 'docile bodies' but to conceal the normative scheme from the public's gaze through internment, creating on the one hand the disciplinary institutions ('punitive institution'), and on the other, the *mise en scène* of public morality ('punitive city').

The strand of studies on surveillance and the technologies of control, too, has recently explored this type of effect. David Lyon (2002: 2;) describes the interweaving between surveillance and visibility as follows:

> Surveillance tries to make visible the identities or the behaviours of people of interest to the agency in question. The Personal Identification Number (PIN) needed for use with a credit card verifies that the cardholder is who s/he appears to be, and the public closed circuit television camera (CCTV) observes the suspicious or unusual behaviour of those walking down the street [...] In the former case, the process is automated, whereas in the latter operators normally are employed to keep an eye on the screens. Such forms of visibility were new in the twentieth century, for although people have for centuries had to identify themselves or have been under observation, this has usually been for highly specific, limited, purposes. Surveillance of all became routine during the twentieth century. Visibility became a political and social issue in a new way.

Research on surveillance processes is founded upon Foucault's analysis, but it has also somewhat transformed its point of departure. Once one accepts that surveillance can be interpreted as the specific management of the relative visibilities of people, one notes that in contemporary society surveillance has become methodical, systematic, and in many cases automatic, rather than being discontinuous as it was in the case of the disciplinary model. The reality of control has changed, so that virtual control is replaced by real control made possible by the new technologies. Or put better, there is an indistinct zone between the virtual and its actualizations. The vision by definition non-reciprocal inherent in surveillance also gives rise to a qualitatively different way of seeing. Because the subjects under surveillance cannot see who is observing them and cannot establish direct eye-to-eye contact with them, they always seem in a certain sense to be suspect, if not guilty, merely because they are being observed unidirectionally. More radically, following Simmel's intuition of the reciprocal nature of the fundamental form of sociability in eye-to-eye contact, subjects under surveillance are not even human subjects. Inherent to the unidirectional gaze is a sort of dehumanization of the observed – and perhaps, indirectly, of the observer as well. The technologies of vision generate a 'gazeless vision' described thus by Virilio (1994: 56):

> This is the formation of optical imagery with no apparent base, no permanency beyond that of mental or instrumental visual memory. Today it is impossible to talk about the development of the audiovisual without also talking about the development of virtual imagery and its influence on

human behaviour, or without pointing to the new industrialization of vision, the growth of a veritable market in synthetic perception and all the ethical questions this entails.

However, visibility does not simply concern visual tools, such as video cameras and technologies for the management of images. The more that surveillance is supported by advanced technologies, the more it becomes abstract and apparently no longer connected to human beings and their biological eyes. Hence it becomes increasingly crucial to track and to check information and dataflows, which are often in digital format (Lyon 2004). Deleuze (1990) was the first to speak of a shift from the disciplinary society to the control society, a new scenario in which the closed institutions produced by the disciplinary form have been superseded by new arrangements: the corporation has replaced the factory; the individual has been replaced by a new type of *dividual* being. Finally, it is the password, rather than the old watchword of the disciplinary society, which has become the central device of control. Surveillance processes are no longer interested in *observing* people, but rather in *tracking* movements (not only of people, but of money, choices, habits – in short, of information) in a way which enables the surveillant agencies to grant or deny access to specific spaces for specific subjects. The entire process changes from being centred on people to being centred on codes. In this new regime of visibility, control is no longer exercised within a single gravitational system with the government apparatus at its centre; rather, it is distributed, delegated and disseminated. Resuming a concept developed by Deleuze and Guattari, Haggerty and Ericson (2000) have termed 'surveillant assemblage' this new type of mixed control exercised in network form. Such an assemblage is composite, centralized (as was the Panopticon), and polycentric (because of the pervasiveness of the network form). It operates both top-downwards and bottom-upwards. The surveillant assemblage denotes a situation in which visibilities are not organized unitarily, as in the scenarios of the Panopticon or Orwell's Big Brother, but polycentrically. This highlights its usefulness as an analytical category with which to understand the visibility strategies developed by actors.

I have mentioned that the disciplinary diagram, contemporary practices of control, and the gaze of the state pertain to a more ancient tradition: that of the *arcana imperii* in which power was closely bound up with invisibility. Elias Canetti and Norberto Bobbio have well described the characteristics of the elitist tradition of the *arcana*. On this conception of power, what really matters is the dark core where matters are decided and ordered, the unknown room where the planner compiles his algorithm: "In the autocratic states the place of ultimate decision-making was the secret cabinet, the secret chamber, the secret council" (Bobbio 1999: 357). While the model of visibility as recognition is rooted in the idea that visibility confers power, the tradition of the *arcana imperii* starts from the diametrically opposite

premise that invisibility strengthens power. "The secret lies at the core of power" (Canetti, 1960: 350). With Canetti, we may therefore conceive power as a form of external visibility (visibility of effects) associated with inner invisibility (invisibility of identification): the effects of the power are visible to all, but what power is in its essence, and where it really resides, will not be revealed.[7] For Bobbio, opposed to the *arcana* is the model of democracy: what he calls 'power in public', or power made visible and, as such, controllable. Visibility asymmetries are therefore power asymmetries in a further sense besides that evinced by surveillance processes. The powerful stand at the vertex of a cone of one-directional visibility: they see, but they cannot be seen by normal eyes. Furthermore, the powerful also differ from Bentham's guards because they are not at all interested in watching others, whom they find insignificant and uninteresting. The powerful are therefore akin to monuments or *admonishments*; but they are always monuments to themselves. This paradox is well illustrated by the final scene of Lars von Trier's *Dogville* (2003), when the boss has the curtain of his car drawn back just after he has ordered the slaughter of the entire village ("it is no longer necessary"): the boss will now be visible, but there will be nobody alive to see him. In effect, following Freud, the boss embodies the paradox of an utterly antisocial individual placed atop the social hierarchy (see Moscovici 1985: 331).

3. The social as visible

The argument of this article is not that society can be reduced to the visible or that it can be entirely interpreted in terms of visibility. An idea of such kind would very soon lead to an imperialistic use of the concept of visibility as a distinguishing feature of contemporary society, or to an 'x society' theory, analogous, for instance, to the 'risk society', the 'consumption society', the 'network society', and so on. Theories of the 'x society' seek to provide descriptions of society on the basis of certain features of a given historical social arrangement. Daniel Innerarity uses the concept of visibility in this way. He speaks of 'invisible society' in order to point out that, "in contrast to the most pessimist previsions, not the fear of being watched but rather the pleasure of watching has been spreading throughout our societies"

7 Moreover, at the basis of every conspiracy theory is the idea that power and invisibility are connected. Conspiracy theorists envisage a society in which the invisible 'few' endowed with secret knowledge (freemasons, illuminati, reptilians or extraterrestrials) stand at the apex of a pyramid from which they control and direct the many living in ignorance. Viewed from within this visibility regime, no event can be random or accidental, and the most visible interpretation of an event will always be deliberately deceitful.

(Innerarity 2004: 126). However legitimate 'x society' theories may be in general, their formulation is fundamentally different from the attempt to define and use a concept or a sociological category as a descriptive, interpretative and analytical research tool. In particular, a theory of the 'invisible society' proposed as general framework to interpret contemporary society as a whole is theoretically weak and, above all, unable to give indications useful for ethnographic research and the study of social interaction.

With this point clarified, the idea proposed here is that sociological research may find it profitable to interpret social settings using the analytical category of visibility. For visibility is not a quality that generally and uniformly inheres in the social. Rather, it inheres in configurations, connections, forces, mechanisms, associations, regimes, strategies, practices, and situated activities. Visibility is important for forming thresholds, drawing boundaries, and defining relational territories. These are processes which may be directed towards the most diverse of goals: focusing the attention, establishing forms of respect, affirming hierarchies, issuing commands, raising resistances, and so on. Through the configurations of visibility, relationships are stabilized and power effects are determined. But these effects are not always univocal. The opposition between recognition and control highlights that visibility is a two-edged sword: it can confer power, but it can also take it away; it can be a source of both empowerment and disempowerment.

The ambivalences of visibility are best evidenced by the third of the above-described forms: spectacular visibility. What characterizes the spectacle is that it exists in a regime separate from everyday life. For the critical theorists, the spectacle is a set of images detached from life but simultaneously proposed as an illusory (ideological) form of unity: in short, "The spectacle is not a collection of images; it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images" (Debord 1967: §4). Also for the Frankfurt critical theorists, the visibility of advertising objects and media personages is only the other side of the coin of discipline, control and standardization of the masses. Allen Feldman (2005) has more recently used the expression 'actuarial gaze' to denote a regime of spectacular visibility pertaining to the traumatic realism of disaster. The actuarial gaze operates through emotions such as shock and fear. It exposes some subjects and hides others; it classifies events and marks out a separation – a *cordon sanitaire* – between event and non-event, between te visible and invisible:

> Bio-political threats are projected onto a multiplicity of world screens in order to hygienically filter and *screen out* negating penetrations from viruses to terrorists. I term this cultural-political agenda the *actuarial gaze*, by which I mean a visual organization and institutionalization of threat perception and prophylaxis, which cross cuts politics, public health, public safety, policing, the urban planning and media practice (Feldman 2005: 206)

Aside from value judgments on regimes of separateness, the spectacle understood as a visibility mechanism undoubtedly has numerous interesting aspects that can be studied. It should be borne in mind, in fact, that visibility asymmetries are connected not only particular political and technological systems but also closely interweave with situational factors. It is always the situation that determines the importance of the normative or normalizing dimension of the visible within a given technological-political setting. The spectacle is an ancient anthropological interactive structure, in whose most elementary forms a minimal role is played by technological factors. Those who 'make a spectacle of themselves' by performing a specific role which makes them visible to an audience alter the situational field of visibilities. This modification also partly explains the relief and pleasure felt by the audience: all gazes are morally authorized to direct themselves at the performer and even to fix upon him/her, thereby temporarily resolving uncertainties concerning their reciprocal management. Hence, whilst the deliberate performer of self-spectacle, the actor, often needs the gaze of the audience, also an unwitting performer modifies the field of visibilities by offering him/herself to an audience's gaze. The already-cited case of the political scandal, for example, displays a dynamic whereby certain actions, behaviours or matters initially intended to be kept invisible are suddenly revealed to a broad public (Thompson 2000). The more visible it becomes that there was a state of affairs originally intended and even organized to be invisible – that is, the more evident it becomes that there has been an attempt to conceal something – the greater the impact of its revelation. During political scandals there arises, as said, a type of visibility gone awry: actors previously accustomed to being visible, who have indeed built their entire careers and fortunes on being visible, suddenly find themselves persecuted by their selfsame visibility, at times with tragicomic if not grotesque effects. What constituted their strength is now their most implacable enemy. Concentrations of visibility-as-power seem irremediably to attract their visible nemesis made up of degradation and downfall (Giglioli, Cavicchioli and Fele 1997).

Von Donnersmark's film *The Lives of Others* (*Das Leben der Anderen*, 2006) clearly shows the ambiguous space that exists among the different schemes of visibility as recognition, as control, and as spectacle. When, during a casual meeting in a bar, the actress Christa Sieland asks Gert Wiesler – the STASI captain who, unbeknownst to her, has been stalking her for months and eavesdropping on every instant of her life (hence the title of the film) – to tell her who he is, Wiesler responds with the simple and enigmatic sentence: "I am your public". On the one hand, Wiesler is indeed one of the many spectators that observe Christa Sieland on the stage; but on the other he is also the privileged and solitary spectator who controls every intimate moment of her private life. In both cases he is the unseen

anonymous observer, witness to the existence of Christa, and as such without an existence of his own.

Moreover, it is no mystery that the asymmetry between seeing and being seen is deeply imbued with gender, and even has an openly sexualized dimension. In Western society, as in many traditional societies, it is typically the male that watches, while it is the female that is watched. Obviously present in this mechanism is a form of control and domination, as well as a good deal of masculine hypocrisy. The dominant visual representation of the woman is contrived to imply that the woman is always conscious of being seen, and that the impersonal gaze of the observer is in fact a masculine gaze (Mulvey 1975). Seduction is a social relation that unfolds wholly within this sexualized dimension of visibility. Sight is a sense that can violently provoke lust, and visibility relations are often imbued with voyeurism. Visual culture, from the history of the art to advertising, is replete with examples of visual attraction which is implicitly or expressly erotic and sexual (Berger et al. 1972). More poetically, in *La recherche* Proust thus described his impression of a beautiful stranger whose gaze momentarily met his own in the city: "the gods of Olympus have descended to the streets". One finds here one of the loftiest celebrations of modern seduction, which is essentially impersonal in nature. Nor is this feeling necessarily only Western. In Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950), one of the bandits remembers the apparition of the beldam of the samurai, whom he will end up by assaulting: "A glimpse and she was gone: I thought she was a goddess" In John Fante, the duration of the gaze is almost embarrassingly prolonged:

> She had not recollected the nickel for the coffee. She would have to do so, unless I left it on the table and walked out. But I wasn't going to walk out. A half hour passed. When she hurried to the bar for more beer, she no longer waited at the rail in plain sight. She walked around to the back of the bar. She didn't look at me any more, but I knew she knew I watched her.

This literary description of a man watching a women highlights a phenomenon of extraordinary interest for those interested in studying how fields of visibility are constructed: the awareness of being observed. Only apparently is watching active, and being watched passive. In reality, visibility relationships are highly complex on a epistemological level as well. At present, the social and psychological sciences do not have the tools with which thoroughly to explain how awareness of being observed is possible. Perhaps the best reflection on the matter has been developed within Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. The question is nevertheless of great importance for the social sciences, even if the effects of 'awareness of gaze' are only superficially considered. In this regard, Gabriel Tarde (1898), when discussing imitation phenomenon as a fundamental social characteristic, theorized that influence among persons proceeds through the 'thought of the other's gaze'.

The construction of visibility through gaze must not be conceived as a purely mental process; even less as a disembodied process, or as one in which physical variables play no role. On the contrary, distance is a crucial factor. Elias Canetti (1960: 18) has conducted an interesting analysis of the management of distances in human life:

> All life, so far as [man] knows it, is laid out in distances – the house in which he shuts himself and his property, the positions he holds, the rank he desires – all these serve to create distances, to confirm and extend them […] In different societies the distances are differently balanced against esch other, the stress in some lying on birth, in others on occupation or property.

Although one may disagree that all distances equate with forms of social hierarchy, the analytical point of view advanced by Canetti is still fruitful: it suggests that the visible is the dimension of the creation and demarcation of distances. Hence, the visible fundamentally involves the demarcation of thresholds and the maintenance of distances which make it possible to draw *boundaries* and therefore to create *territories* (Brighenti 2006). These territories give form both to relations within the situation and to the boundaries and prolongations of the situation. Goffman (1963b; 1971) initially defined regions and situations on the basis of spatial and physical parameters, using the concept of 'barriers to perception': *prima facie*, a region and a situation extend as far as the gaze can reach. If we are to speak of architectures of the visibility, we must start with architecture in the literal sense, because it is architecture and design that construct and shape the most concrete barriers of the visual. In this regard, the utopian glass architectures of visionaries like Paul Scheerbart and Moholy-Nagy exhibit a singular convergence between technological elements (new construction materials) and ideal ones (the desire to imagine a new form of life for mass society). Moholy-Nagy saw revolutionary potential in a type of architecture in which "it is no longer possible to keep apart the inside and outside" (1947: 62). By eliminating the fundamental habitative distinction between interior and exterior, transparency would give rise to new ways of seeing the world. Not dissimilar ideas are to be found in the unitary urbanism of the situationists.

Such ideas are not exceptions; instead, they link with a body of reflection on the city as the scenario of visibility that extends from Baudelaire, Benjamin and Simmel until contemporary theorists like Richard Sennett (1994) and Paul Virilio (2004). In his unfinished and fragmentary work on the *passages* of Paris, Walter Benjamin (1927-40: 834) described these glass-roofed shopping arcades as "the most important architecture of the nineteenth century" in the city which he regarded as that century's true capital. The importance of the *passages* derived in large part from their ambiguity. Prototypes of the shopping mall and forms of visibility similar to

spectacle and to control, the *passages* were at the same time oneiric places protected against noise and the weather, separated from the ordinary and the prosaic: places in which the distinction between inside and outside, between daytime and night became uncertain, enigmatic places in which to rethink or recast the human figure, in which to construct a new visibility of recognition. Not by chance, for Benjamin the human figures of the *passages* were, on the one hand, the shopkeeper, the public citizen *par excellence* indifferent to being seen and, on the other hand, the collector, the private personage intent on hiding the object with himself, to transform it from a commodity into a personal fetish. Similarly complex and interrelated with the forms of urban visibility is the concept of porosity (Benjamin 1929-37: 174). The life of a city like Naples, Benjamin observes, reflects its architecture: both are "dispersed, porous and commingled". Porosity inheres in a relational space-time structure of the city, whose 'pores' are intermediary places, passages or 'thresholds' in Simmel's (1908) sense, zones or junctions that connect and separate. This also means that spatial and physical elements do not determine perception; rather, they offer it a series of *pertinences*, 'grips' or affordances (Gibson 1986) that can be activated, i.e. made visible, in interaction. Hence, surprise, desire and memory are modalizations of the gaze which re-articulate visibilities, establishing new lines and new thresholds. If the city is a scenario of visibility, it is naturally also one of invisibility, since knowledge can produce an inability to see, as in the invisible city described by Calvino (1974: 91-92), which becomes visible only to the (in)expert eye:

> But it so happens that, instead, you must stay in Phyllis and spend the rest of your days there. Soon the city fades before your eyes, the rose windows are expunged, the statues on the corbels, the domes. Like all of Phyllis's inhabitants, you follow zigzag lines from one street to another, you distinguish the patches of sunlight from the patches of shade, a door here, a stairway there, a bench where you can put down your basket, a hole where your foot stumbles if you are not careful. All the rest of the city is invisible […] Millions of eyes look up at windows, bridges, caper trees, and they might be scanning a blank page. Many are the cities like Phyllis, which elude the gaze of all, except the man who catches them by surprise.

4. The visible and the ethnographic

In conclusion, what is the relevance of the category of visibility to ethnography? To answer this question, it is useful first to contextualize the activity of the ethnographer.

The ethnographic enterprise is characterized by two main features. First, it conducts its research *in vivo* in the places where the phenomena and the knowledge

under consideration are produced. Second, it makes naturalist, but not behaviourist, assumptions about the social world, or better its sub-worlds, and about the situations generated within it. In other words, the ethnographer is confronted, not by structures and systems, but by a *locale* – a *situation* in Goffman's (1971) sense, a *there* in Geertz's (1988: § 1) – a here-and-now in which the ethnographer is immersed, and in which there constantly occur events, shaped by forces, which primarily involve bodies. This becoming, taken as a whole, with its instantaneous velocities, is chaos or *plenum*. The ethnographer endeavours to *slow down* events in order to make *visible* the linkages and logics that traverse the plenum. The most radical challenge posed by ethnography with respect to other methods is probably a willingness to deal with what might be called the *muck* of culture, of communication, of organization, and so on. Whereas other methods and theories seek to identify – or they merely postulate – the presence within the plenum of coherent structures and closed systems, ethnography accepts the existence of a fundamental *porosity*. It does so firstly because there exist, within the here-and-now of the plenum, structures and systems which are neither closed nor pure, but instead *fields* which interpenetrate to various extents; and secondly because the locale itself is porous, in that it prolongs towards an elsewhere which, though not present in the here-and-now of the locale, becomes part of the plenum through that same prolongation. Hence it happens that objects, actors, events, practices and concatenations not present in the here-and-now are important and even crucial for the plenum. These processes of importation and exportation come about essentially through the media, which act as bridges, corridors or thresholds which traverse the plenum to connect the here-and-now.[8] The thresholds and boundaries constructed in the visible – that is, the inscription which separates the visible from the invisible – create a territory; and this territory is neither more nor less than the social.

From this point of view, the research agenda – perhaps also the poetic – of ethnography is inextricably bound up with the dynamics of visibility, and this has major epistemological implications. Ethnography has been frequently dismissed as a

8 It is thus evident that multisite ethnography (Hannerz 2003) is not at all an exception, but on the contrary a logical continuation, a normal kind of ethnographic research because it attempts to follow the prolongations of the locale and of the situation in order to understand ongoing linkages. Multisited ethnography can only appear as a singularity in light of the imperative of circumscription laid down by Evans-Pritchard and reaffirmed by Gluckman in English social anthropology.

'simply descriptive' enterprise unable to produce explanatory models.[9] In regard to this type of criticism, Jack Katz (2001; 2002) has recently discussed the relationship between research on *how* and research on *why* in ethnography. Examination of the *how* – the activity of producing phenomenologically accurate descriptions of the place observed – seems the best way to conduct research (one does not get very far by asking people why they do certain things; but it is often very useful to have them explain in detail how they do those things). Nevertheless, the better this activity is performed, and the more able it is to reveal the enigmas, paradoxes and absurdities of social life, the more it inevitably raises questions about the causes of the phenomena observed. According to Katz, 'luminous explanations', in their various forms, link together the two activities of research into the how and the why. For example, evidencing the 'poignant moments' of situations enables the researcher to grasp in condensed form the lines of force and tension inscribed within them, and eventually to *see* the interweaving of the social forces within a context, the pattern of dynamics underlying an event. Put otherwise, and to resume the terms employed above, the situation is the place wherein forces converge and materialize, while complementarily the situation or place relates to an elsewhere, incorporating it into itself. In this gestalt dialectic between ground and figure, between background and foreground, the *how* is the visible, and the *why* is the invisible. In light of what has been said thus far, therefore, visible and invisible are not counterposed to each other like the present is counterposed to the absent; rather, they are intertwined in the prolongation. To develop Katz's suggestion, ethnographic visibility has to do with the focusing of questions, with focal points and problematic junctures.

Yet Katz's reasoning is somewhat similar to a Wittgenstein ladder, to be discarded after use. Ultimately, the *how* and the *why* are nothing more than crude indicators of certain ways to interrogate the social, and to improve our understanding of it. But there are no grounds for maintaining that these ways are exclusive, successive or even hierarchized. If explaining means showing the forces that operate within – and through – the singularity of a place or a situation, by its very nature ethnographic research seeks to bring to light how the 'locale' – which may be a place as diverse as a crowded square, an operating theatre, the territory of a graffiti crew, a bedroom, or a talkshow – prolongs, through linkages, practices and media, to space-time

9 This criticism reprises Windelband's distinction between idiographic and nomothetic sciences. Yet it was already apparent to Max Weber that nomothetic and idiographic were co-essential to the scientific enterprise. Windelband's distinction, moreover, has been criticised by ethnographers themselves, for instance by Robert Lowie in the 1930s. According to Lévi-Strauss's pessimistic position in Structural Anthropology, the limited explanatory capacity of anthropology would emerge in relation to the object rather than to the method in itself. Suited to explaining archaic societies, anthropology would lapse into descriptivism as soon as it turned its attention to complex societies.

elsewheres which are likewise places, tracing the interconnection between the singular and the recurrent or, in philosophical terms, between the actual and the virtual. When one adopts a wholly relational approach, a theoretical perspective of 'field' (Martin 2003) or of 'generative structuralism' (Vandenberghe 1999 on Bourdieu), the difference between modality and causality is no longer relevant, because it is cross-cut by other issues: for instance, clarification and understanding of the strategies, negotiations, bodies of knowledge and conflicts inherent in the operations of importation to the place and exportation from it, which are far from *taken-for-granted*.

A brief survey of significant ethnographic studies – some of them also discussed by Katz – can illustrate the point, highlighting the analytical role performed by the category of visibility in ethnographic investigation.

To begin with, ethnographic studies on appearance and 'face work' (Goffman 1967), like those on the presentation of selves, perception and formation of habitus, evidently involve questions of visibility. Whilst in what are by now classic works Becker (1963) and Matza (1969) showed how people make use of labelling to represent themselves as deviants, more recently Lankenau (1999) has examined how beggars enact strategies to present themselves in the most favourable light to their potential donors, resisting the humiliation inherent in their condition, of which they are perfectly aware. These studies thematize the relation between visibility and the classification-labelling of people. In Italy, Barnao's (2004) ethnographic study on homeless migrant people vividly describes the strategies deployed by the public authorities to manage the visibility of marginal subjects perceived as excessive, annoying and problematic.

In regard to the interweaving between the formation of a professional identity and gender identity, Hochschild (1997) has conducted an interesting discussion on the arrangement of family photographs by executives and employees, male and female, working for a large corporation. The executives had framed photographs of their families taken in classic poses, but kept them distant from their workstations. By contrast, the secretaries had attached snapshots of their children to places close at hand, for instance next to the telephone or the keyboard; and these informal photographs aroused comments and questions almost exclusively from other women, as if the men could not see them. This is an example of a setting in which the selective activation of visibility thresholds contributes to the definition of different identities. This applies as much to gender as to other ascriptive groups. In an article on the genesis of the sense of belonging and the perception of gender and ethnicity, or on 'believing is seeing', Farough (2006) has used the term 'matrix of vision'. He argues that the way in which white males interpret the visual field depends on a historically specific matrix of vision and that, accordingly, visual intelligibility depends

on a discursive and interactive process: "the range of different ways of seeing create identity standpoints that are provisional, unfolding, and move along a continuum of visibility and invisibility, ranging from micro-level interactions to macro-level formations of power" (ibid., 53). Again in regard to the formation of matrixes of vision, Linden and Klandermans (2007) have reconstructed the stages in the ideological formation of right-wing extremists in the Netherlands, while Garot (2007) has analysed rituals of presentation and self-definition among gang members and taggers, which often involve a performance consisting in the exchange of ritual questions: "Where you from?" and "What you write?".

Turning to the concept of habitus and the processes of its acquisition, Wacquant (2000) has concentrated – also reflexively – on what is required to perceive oneself as a boxer and to acquire a 'pugilistic habitus' – that is, to see the world as a boxer sees it. Bourgois and Schonberg (2007) have likewise shown how an 'ethnicized habitus' forms among the drug addicts of a neighbourhood to reaffirm divisions and even hierarchies among their different ethnic identities. Finally, some authors have explored the habitus as the acquisition of a corporeal practical capacity, irreflexive and irreducible to a formalizable body of knowledge (i.e. the habitus as invisible knowledge): this, for example, is the case of Sudnow's (2001) classic study on jazz piano improvisation, and O'Connor's (2005) ethnography of glassblowers.

The aim of these studies is not just to analyse what is involved in a gaze or an interweaving of gazes, but also to reconstruct a local field of visibilities, a specific regime of visibility. Accordingly, the ethnographic study of the practices of drawing boundaries, forming categories, and introducing thresholds of relevance in professional or public settings involves questions of visibility and selective visibilization. In this type of research, the ethnographer must often give visibility to constraints of various kinds (organizational, economic, ideological, and so on) to which people and events are subject. Showing a constraint or a necessity – which does not differ greatly from what in traditional terms is called identifying a cause – is simply to make visible things that are not *prima facie* apparent to an inexperienced observer, but also things that people involved seek to keep invisible. In more colloquial terms, it means twisting a knife in the wound. In this regard, Becker et al. (1961) used the concept of the 'latent culture' of a class of medical students to determine what strategy was most frequently used to cope with the class's main problem – study overload – and the consequent need to establish the limits of what it was necessary to learn. Those who exceeded these limits were ostracized. Or they risked a fate like that of the sighted in the country of the blind, as described in H. G. Wells' short story: marginalized (in the story even enslaved) because they insisted on referring to an invisible domain of experience which did not exist, or better *should not* exist. The medical environment offers numerous opportunities for the study of

visibility, because the demarcation of thresholds performs a crucial role in organizational life. Sudnow (1967) examined management of the visibility and invisibility of death in a hospital ward, showing that a dead body could be made invisible without being physically removed from sight. More recently, Mizrachi (2001) has described the management of visibilities through the architectural separation and the norms implicit in a Tel Aviv hospital for severely handicapped children.

The ethnomethodologists Bittner (1967) and Sacks (1972) have analysed the practices used by police officers, especially those patrolling 'skid rows', to assess the morality of vagrants on the basis of their appearance, the purpose being both to decide whether to stop and search them and to handle those deemed 'problematic'. Paperman (2003) has instead discussed the police uniform as an interactional visibility device. The subway police in Paris use the visibility of their uniform both to provoke 'revealing' reactions in suspects, and to check the social meaning – and, essentially, the impression of legitimacy – which passers-by attribute to the overt physical action – at times violent – taken against individuals apparently doing nothing. The uniform's visibility therefore serves to make the occurrence of illegality situation visible to all those present. The action strategies of the subway police are to a certain extent determined more by the constraints imposed by the spatial and organizational situation of their work that by the type of crime actually occurring in the subway. This is not the only case in which visibility is used to mark out the boundaries of a professional group with respect to another. For example, Fine (1996) has illustrated the connection between the aesthetic values of a professional community of chefs and the temporal and organizational constraints to which the members of the community were subject, hypothesising that the formation of culinary aesthetic canons was a response to, and a way to cope with, those invisible constraints.

By means of these examples drawn from the ethnographic literature, I have sought to show the importance of the analytical category of visibility for qualitative research. If visibility, as conceptualized here, is an category 'orphan' of an overall theory, and instead resembles a tool to be delpoyed tactically according to the research interest, this feature has an elective affinity with a fundamental belief among ethnographers: namely that the social world is not a laboratory. If this is so, ethnographers must accept that they too are the *subjects* of visibility.[10] Their

10 The 'naturally reflexive' dimension of ethnography has been much discussed in debate which cannot be dealt with here. Nevertheless, particularly worthy of note is that, as Bruni (2006) has pointed out, also those phases of ethnographic work which generally tend to be invisible because they are preliminary, like negotiating access to the field, are in reality an integral part of the social world to be studied, given that "the processes inducing actors to accept the presence of a researcher do not relate to a logic other than that which operates in everyday organizational practices" (ibid 148).

presence alters the field and precludes *ceteris paribus* clauses, complete control over the variables, the *adhocness* prohibition, and so on. Their positioning within a social field of reciprocal visibilities organized into regimes of visibility is therefore part – but not the whole, as in the excesses of postmodernist autoethnography (see e.g. Minge 2007) – of what that they are seeking to understand.

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