

Vortrag

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From Visibility to The Visible. A Social-Theoretical Exploration

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Abstract. In this lecture, what I invite to inquire into is not so much *visibility* – understood as a relational and positional quality that can be predicated of certain objects present in a social field – as much as *the visible* – understood as the element in which social life itself unfolds. Here, ‘element’ should be understood in the same way in which air, water, earth, fire and æther were enumerated as elements by Aristotle. The visible, however, cannot be reduced to a sheer physicalist notion – least, a notion grounded in Newtonian physics (quantum reality might be a more accurate rendition). The visible is inextricably interwoven with the coming about of a type of *life* which we characterise as specifically social. The leading question then is: Whose life is social life? To tackle this question, it is suggested, we need to attend not the structure, but the *fibre* of the visible. Such ‘fibre of the visible’ includes not only structures and relations, but also objects, events and milieux. Singular events bring structures to light by embodying a series of ‘actual occasions’. There is a peculiarity in this movement towards the light, as social life is neither properly transparent nor opaque. Instead, it seems to be played out in a hyaline element, a *medium*. Visibility, I argue, can be described as a relational field (a nexus or ‘prehension’ of structures, objects, events and milieux) that only make sense inside an element through which social formations emerge. This means that the difference between objects and environments is not ontological, rather, it is the difference between various modes of *inscription* into the visible. Such ‘ways of inscription’ reinterpret the old notion of ‘structures’. A whole geography of the visible can thus be conceived and explored, defined as it is by moving ‘fibred’ margins which appear to be in thriving states. Crowd or quantum states (eigenstates) of the visible then become a new pivotal topic of study.

Andrea Mubi Brighenti is professor of Social Theory and Space & Culture at the Department of Sociology, University of Trento, Italy. Research topics focus on space, power and society. He has published *The Ambiguous Multiplicities: Materials, episteme and politics of some cluttered social formations* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), *Visibility in Social Theory and Social Research* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) and *Territori migranti [Migrant Territories. Space and Control of Global Mobility]* (ombre corte, 2009). Has edited *Urban Interstices. The Aesthetics and Politics of Spatial In-betweens* (Ashgate, 2013), *Uma Cidade de Imagens* (Mundos Sociais, 2012 – with Ricardo Campos and Luciano Spinelli), and *The Wall and the City* (professionaldreamers, 2009).

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