

Transcript of Part Seven (by Andy Elliot, 2007)

I use the French expression - the translation in English is “vanishing point” - to make it clear what I am referring to. Both the Italian expression 'perspectiva' and the French 'point de fuite' refer exactly to what I would like to discuss today. Basically we are going to discuss another change, which follows those discussed in previous lectures; the change that was described within an analysis of paintings, and only recently in cinema. It affects not only cinema and philosophy but has made a change in culture in the whole of Europe. The idea is that when we assumed that Nature was an autonomous part of our life, that nature was organised, and had its own logic and laws, then the task of the artist was to identify (i) a system, (ii) a tool, and (iii) a methodology to reproduce that nature, a perspective which has been developed in Europe since the work of Pico della Mirandola and Piero della Francesca up to the beginning of the 20th century. The idea was that if we reproduce something from nature, the physical status of something, then we need to have a sort of technique, and this is when the idea of perspective arose. There are quite long analyses of what is meant by the term perspective, but basically it is a methodology which allows you to have a standard which you use when you choose to represent an object, and this standard is constant, so that you keep the proportion in physical terms. When the artists were producing these ideas, they were working in a society in which the idea of reality was equivalent to the physical world, so the more something was physical, the more 'real', the more 'true' that object was. What happened now, was that this assumption has been discarded. Now, as we have studied in the previous lectures, we cannot associate any more the physical world, the physical system with reality, that link has been broken. So that idea of perspective is no longer applicable, as it was grounded in the idea that we need to create an effective tool to represent objects, and the more accurate our representation, the better our art is.

There is another idea about perspective that I would like to briefly address, that is connected with the idea that when you are constructing a painting, and you place that painting in a place to be observed, normally perspective allows you to establish an imaginary point outside the painting that is a single point from which you can establish lines which, going in the direction of the painting can indicate the crucial path of that painting. So basically, you have several places within the painting from which if you extend an imaginary line to some distance from that painting you will have one, single point. What I am saying is that in the traditional work of art, and I mean traditional in relation to cinematography, those works which have been based in this idea of reality, when you face a particular work of that type, it was possible to establish the *imaginary place of the observer*. From the painting, you can establish a single point - one or several - in which you can place the observer. This is important, because what will happen later, when this idea of reality does not refer to the physical world is that this situation is going to be reversed. The single point is going to be established within the painting, within the object, and what becomes important is the horizon, the idea of *vanishing point*, the idea that if you place an object, and you trace an imaginary line from the object to the horizon, you arrive at a point in which things are vanishing and things disappear. The analysis of art, and the analysis in general of artistic manifestation in this first model was placed between the painting and the observer, here, in a close relationship. We can no longer establish a clear area in which we can place this analysis, because everything has moved in a direction in which we can no longer catch a specific point. This is something that Paul Virilio discusses extensively in different books, and it connects with this idea of present which we have been discussing before, this idea that we cannot catch any more a present, a particular moment, and our perception of objects is working more or less in the same direction. We perceive objects, we perceive artistic manifestations which instead of bringing us something, put forward all of the meaning, put forward all of the possible interpretations, and go to this vanishing point area, in which everything is grey and difficult to grasp. That is, in brief, the question of this idea of *point de fuite*, and this is why I say 'perspective ambition' (the perspective as dominant element).

We switch from one world in which perspective was dominating the methodologies to visually approach an object; we switch to another world, in which the visual way to approach a project is no longer a methodology, it is an idea of vision, in which we are

struggling to establish a particular concept, or methodology, and that is where cinematography is taking a leading role. In that struggle, in that new area, in that moment in which arts have difficulties to establish an exact meaning of the objects which they produce, is when cinematography, as the art of images in that context, came up. The *vanishing point* is, as I just explained to you, this idea that we are constantly catching up things, we tend to be more concerned with the horizon than what we have immediately here. This is something which we are going to see later in regards to film as well, we are living in such conditions in which we create expectation about what is going to happen, we construct our horizon. So we live our present not in the present but in the future, in what we expect is going to happen, and this is why cinematography is important, because cinematography is by far the most effective methodology which produces this kind of expectation, this kind of decision about what should happen in the future. And of course if you accept this hypothesis that this change did happen, then all of the ideas from empiricism to imagination also changed. And I would like to say something regarding this general condition; not just about cinematography but about this change, just to make sure that you really understand what I am trying to say.

We are moving away from one society in which everything has been surrounding, in which the gravitational centre has been the physical world, because we were thinking that it was self-organised, autonomous and having its own logic. We are moving from that environment to another in which we basically do not have a gravitational centre any more, we have many, but they certainly are not physical. Reality now is grounded in non-visible, non-physical objects, and this is crucial. If we are living in a world in which we believe reality is placed in something which we cannot see in ordinary life, then indeed cinematography is the art of our life, because it is the methodology which tries to put images to what is not visible.

So, going back to the idea of empiricism through our imagination, this concept which has been helping for a long time to develop ideas regarding ideologies, philosophical schools, scientific orientation and even cinematography now is completely changed. The idea of true for example can no longer be worked out, because we are living in a system in which things are more than true, they are effective. True was connected with some kind of coherence, some kind of consistence, regularity, things remaining

true for a long time. On the contrary, now we are living in a situation in which everything is constantly changing, because there are no regularities, no consistencies, and it is difficult to establish general perspective, because we tend to be, as we discussed in the first part of the course, organising things more locally, connected with a specific and individual situation. So in that context, true indeed gives place to ideas that are considered because they are effective, for example, from the semantic point of view. Even the idea of empiricism that has been quite extensively developed in science, has been changed, from this original idea of classic empiricism, which allowed empiricism to say then that “to understand what is tangible allows us to understand the world, how the world works, and how we are situated in relation to that”. That idea of course evaporated, because what is tangible from the senses point of view (perception) doesn't mean very much in terms of cinematography. And again this classical idea of imagination as something which allows people to have an alternative to this notion of Reality (with a capital); that perspective disappeared too, because that notion of Reality had disappeared along with it. So the traditional idea of imagination cannot help us any more. So basically those were the points I was planning to discuss with you today.

The recommended reading is a chapter from *War and Cinema*, which is again an overview of this aspect that we have been discussing. Then I have made some recommendations: Paul Virilio from *Speed and Politics*, Part One is an interesting description of this situation, this change of perspective from the media and political point of view; Aumont, in the same book I mentioned before, Chapter Four gives an interesting approach to this idea of perspective; Ruggero Pierantoni is a very long book, a huge, impressive work, very interesting, I think chapter fifteen is the most pertinent one for us; Stoichita, *L'invenzione del quadro*, is very interesting because it gives us a specific position on how this switch in perspective affected the idea of painting that we have, I thought that could be very useful; from Solso *Cognition and the Visual Arts*, Chapter Eight gives an interesting perspective on the relation between knowledge or possibility of knowing something within the concept of visual arts nowadays; Monique Sicard, the third part is interesting because she tries to explore where we are heading in this visual-orientated society, especially if we accept that what we see is not close to us but always escaping into the horizon; Simon, *L'archaéologie de la vision*; Starobinski remains a very interesting book; and a

general perspective about what is the meaning of vision in the 20th comes from Gervereau. Again as I always say, you don't need to go through all of this, it is important just to have an overall idea, and anyway, you can contact me and we can discuss whatever you would like to go through.

Recommend Reading

Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception* (London: Verso, 1989), Chapter 7.

Suggested Reading

Paul Virilio, *Speed and Politics* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1986), Part One.

Jacques Aumont, *The Image* (London: BFI, 1997), Chapter Four.

Ruggero Pierantoni, *Forma fluens. Il movimento e la sua rappresentazione nella scienza, nell'arte e nella tecnica* (Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 1999), Chapter 15.

Victor I. Stoichita, *L'invenzione del quadro. Arte, artefici e artifici nella pittura europea* (Milano: Il Saggiatore, 1998), Part three.

Robert L. Solso, *Cognition and the Visual Arts* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), Chapter 8.

Monique Sicard, *La fabrique du regard* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1998), Part three.

Gérard Simon, *Archéologie de la vision. L'optique, le corps, la peinture* (Paris: Seuil, 2003), 'Epilogue'.

Jean Starobinski, *La relation critique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), Part II.

Laurent Gervereau, *Histoire du visuel au XXe siècle* (Paris : Seuil, 2003), Part II.