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## Novoe zrenie / Neues Sehen / New Vision

*New Vision* is an aesthetic concept that emerged in the 1920s simultaneously in both literature and the visual arts. Across the media, *New Vision* intended a critique of classical realistic representation and a break with habitual patterns of perception. As a genuinely pan-European movement it had institutional hubs in Weimar and Dessau (Bauhaus), St Petersburg (State Institute of Artistic Culture [Gosudarstvennyi institut khudozhestvennoi kul'tury, GINKhUK]), and Moscow (Institute of Artistic Culture [Institut khudozhestvennoi kul'tury, INKhUK] and Higher State Artistic and Technical Studios [Vysshiye khudozhestvenno-tekhnicheskie masterskie, Vkhutemas]) – as well as in Łódź (Association of Polish Artists and Designers [Związek Zawodowy Polskich Artystów Plastyków], Karol Hiller, Władysław Strzemiński) and Leiden (De Stijl). While transatlantic ideas made a decisive impact on *New Vision* through straight photography (Alfred Stieglitz, Edward Weston), *New Vision* in turn had a formative influence on Modernist art in the United States via protagonists such as the Hungarian constructivist László Moholy-Nagy, who in the years 1923–1928 worked at the Bauhaus school in Weimar and then Dessau to become the first director of the New Bauhaus established in Chicago in 1937. It was canonized as an international avant-garde movement with the 1929 Werkbund exhibition *Film und Foto* (called *FiFo*) in Stuttgart, featuring almost 200 artists and subsequently showing in Zurich, Berlin, Gdańsk, Vienna, as well as sections of the exhibition in Tokyo and Osaka.

The key notions of *New Vision* are summed up in a review of *FiFo* by the architect and Werkbund member Gustav Stotz:

A new optic has developed. We see things around us differently than before, without painterly aims in an impressionistic sense. Also things are important to us today which were hardly noticed before, i. e. shoe trees, a gutter, spools of thread, material, machines, and so forth. They interest us in their material substance, in their simple thingness. (Stotz 1929, 154)

Even if the concept of *New Vision* is most closely associated with photography, the first to articulate the principle of *New Vision* were the literary theorists of early Russian formalism. Formalism, in the context of the poetics of defamiliarization (see Erik Martin's chapter on *ostranenie* in this volume), coined the term 'New Vision' in reference to the devices of estrangement in presentation and perception. In his seminal essay "Iskusstvo kak priem" (1917, "Art as Technique"), Viktor Shklovskii asserted that defamiliarization aesthetics is based on the antagonism between *seeing* (*videnie*) and *recognition* (*uznavanie*): "The purpose of art is to impart a sensation of things as seeing and not as recognition" (Shklovskii 1917, 8).

As an artistic technique that wrenches things from their usual context, defamiliarization increases the difficulty of poetic language, resulting in an impeded perception of aesthetic objects that opens up new perspectives on art and life. The formalist concept of seeing results from this unexpected and alienated mode of apprehension through cognitive *misconception* (*neuznavanie*). As a re-framed form of sight it is oriented toward a sharpened awareness for the processes of making and discerning aesthetic objects by reason of their technical and physical qualities. Seeing is a particular perception that lies between intensified *sensual experience* (*oshushchenie*) and an emphatic first-time encounter.

To more precisely define the quality of seeing in the sense of perceiving and producing difference, Shklovskii introduced, ten years later, the poetic agenda of New Vision. In his article “O pisatele” (1927, “The Writer”) he states that the writer “has to be a person, who sees things anew” (Shklovskii 1927, 30). Shklovskii returned to this concept more explicitly in his late works on literature and cinematography (*Za sorok let*, 1965, *Forty years later*), namely in the film adaption of Chekhov’s novella *Dama s sobachkoj* (1899, *The Lady with the Dog*), and in the last pages of his late *Povesti o proze* (1966, *Stories on Prose*) with a brief chapter entitled “On New Vision” (“O novom videnii”), which was dedicated to the imagery in Sholokhov’s epic novel *Tikhij Don* (1925–1932, *And Quiet Flows the Don*). Here, Shklovskii pointed out a double bind specific to New Vision. Although New Vision emphasizes the possibility (and necessity) of seeing things from a different perspective, from a novel and unexpected angle, what is seen at no point translates into a coherent, comprehensible, consistent image: New Vision is per se iconoclastic, it disarticulates forms and frames.

The early formalist juxtaposition of seeing (anew) and recognition in literary theory has two main objectives:

Firstly, it addresses poetic aspects of perception and production within the conceptual framework of optics. From this (new) point of view, literature is no longer considered a verbal art but becomes a visual art that is leveled at the eye. The theory of New Vision therefore regards all forms of art and media, including the written, primarily as optical. Formalism had already anticipated the pivotal significance of the image in literature. However, the iconoclastic nature of New Vision categorically precludes any immediate reference to the literary image of the inner eye of the imagination. In his essay “O khudozhestvennom slove” (1987 [1921], “On the artistic word”), Boris Ėikhenbaum conceded that

[...] perhaps people exist whose visual imagination is so strongly developed that they ‘see’ words, that is, that they can create all kinds of images with their inner eye. But this is a psychological idiosyncrasy and has nothing to do with poetry. [...] Ideas evoked by speaking or words are not visual ideas. (Ėikhenbaum 1987 [1921], 337)

This verdict on visual idealism in poetics is in keeping with the avant-garde emphasis on object-oriented art. El Lissitzky explicitly summed up the specific material visuality in literature in the first thesis of his Merz manifesto “Topographie der Typographie” (1923, “Topography of Typography”): “The words on a printed page are read and not listened to” (Lissitzky 1923). Each and every problem related to texts being heard or read thus becomes a problem of the visibility of writing. Because literature, along with other (aesthetic) phenomena, is now identified as “optical wave motion” (Lissitzky 1925, 152), Moholy-Nagy called for a “new culture of seeing” (Moholy-Nagy 1925a, 348) in regard to books, making reading an experience of New Vision. His call resonated with Dada and constructivist posters and book art, for example in John Heartfield’s montages combining photos and text or Lissitzky’s book-art object for Vladimir Maiakovskii’s poem “Dlia golosa” (“For the voice”), which was published in 1923 in Berlin.

Secondly, the objectives of New Vision establish the eye as the primary organ of aesthetic experience. Wholly consistent with the “scopic regime of modernity” (Jay 1988), art – manifest in a diversity of media – privileges the sense of sight in qualitatively different ways. Thus, under the auspices of the Modernist visual turn, retinal processing determines the aesthetic status of an object. The triumph of the new visual media leads to an apotheosis of the eye, with film and photography, now mass-reproducible, at the forefront. In this way, the avant-garde aesthetics of New Vision continues in the tradition of a well-established cultural ocularcentrism that, since antiquity, regards the eye as the privileged organ of art and knowledge. However, in contrast to the classical ‘nobility of sight’ (*Adel des Sehens*; see Hans Jonas 2010), Modernist New Vision is no longer at the command of a disembodied, rationalistic aesthetic with its idealistic eye of cognition and of theoretical contemplation. Rather, New Vision stands at the crossroads of at least three optical dispositifs, each creating their own visual subcultures: a) modern knowledge of the psychophysics of seeing; b) modern technologies of vision and electromechanical augmentations of the eye; and c) modern utopias of omni-visibility prompted by the dissolution of the visible into currents and rays.

Re a) Theories of optical perception strongly influence the New Vision theorem, especially those advanced by Hermann von Helmholtz and those of empirical experimental psychology in the wake of Gustav Fechner or Wilhelm Wundt, the latter a former student of Helmholtz. Helmholtz’s studies on the anatomy of the eye and on the physiology of facial perception – as well as Wundt’s research on the psychological intensity of neural stimuli and the so-called ‘Wundt illusion’ – inspired many artists of the Modernist period to experiment aesthetically and scientifically with the perception of color, form, and light. Series of experiments and extensive test studies on light stimuli, optic nerves, as well as central and peripheral stimuli were, for example, carried out by the painter and art theorist

Mikhail Matiushin, head of the department of organic culture at Leningrad State Institute of Artistic Culture (GINKhUK). The methods used were derived not only from those of Helmholtz but also especially from Wilhelm Ostwald's *Farbenlehre* (1918–1923, *Color theory*), which was translated into Russian in 1926 (Matiushin 1932). Artistic research on the psychophysics of vision also led to a synesthetic optic. Wassily Kandinsky, who was intimately acquainted with Wundt's writings, initiated research in this field during his brief functions in 1920 as the first director of the Moscow Institute of Artistic Culture (INKhUK) and in 1921 as the initiator of the physico-psychology department at the State Academy of Art Studies (*Gosudarstvennaia akademiia khudozhestvennykh nauk*, GAKhN), yet could only establish his psychophysical investigations of perception of color, form, sound, and space while a Bauhaus teacher from 1922 to 1933.

Re b) In film and photography, the eye fetishism of the avant-garde was inseparably related to attempts at compensating for the deficiencies in the human eye by means of technical devices. Reciprocally superimposing the human and the camera lens as expressed, for example, in the metaphors *kino-glaz* (1924, 'camera eye', Dziga Vertov) or *Foto-Auge* (1929, 'photo eye', Franz Roh and Jan Tschichold) was part of the great avant-garde utopia of the transformation of the human body into a machine. At the same time, the camera as an eye prosthesis of this body and as a new way of seeing also engendered a new visual language. Vertov had his *kino-glaz* say: "I am kino-eye. I am a mechanical eye. I, a machine, show you the world as only I can see it. [...] My path leads to a fresh perception of the world. I decipher in a new way a world unknown to you" (Vertov 1923, 135). The literary theorist Osip Brik reacted by stating the following: "Vertov is right. The camera can act in an autonomous fashion. It can see things that man is not accustomed to seeing. [...] The ordinary human field of vision must be abandoned" (Brik 1926, 22). The technogenic perfection of human perception went hand in hand with shaping it. The constructivist Aleksandr Rodchenko, one of the participants at *FiFo* in 1929, postulated that

[...] to teach people a new way of seeing [...] [requires that] everyday, familiar objects be revealed to them from surprising angles and in unexpected circumstance. [...] We must [...] unlock the world of the visible. We must revolutionize our visual thinking. We must draw back the curtain from our eyes. (Rodchenko 1928, 38)

In this vein, New Vision does not just imply an altered, more intense way of seeing confined to the logics of defamiliarization. Rather, it refers to a depersonalized, objective, neutral, even pure way of seeing: "For this reason we have in the camera the most reliable tool in our possession for regaining a truly objective way of seeing" (Moholy-Nagy 1925b, 26). Moholy-Nagy, in his essay "fotografie: die objektive sehform unserer zeit" (1936, "Photography: The objective mode

of vision in our times”), differentiated between eight kinds of objective photographic vision: seeing abstractly, precisely, quickly, slowly, more, simultaneously, and differently. Together they represent one ideal of vision: seeing everything everywhere. The integration of a technogenic eye into an organic body pursues a radical policy of panopticism.

Re c) New Vision expands the hitherto known horizons of visibility with the phantasm of ubiquitous and total surveillance. Just as the telescope, microscope, and daguerreotype had remapped the domain of vision in earlier days, Modernism in the twentieth century faced the influence of new technologies that provide access to previously concealed sights. Especially film as the most prominent among the new developments in image media cultivates transgressions of vision, promising to explore the realms of the “optical unconscious” (Benjamin 1977, 162). Furthermore, the fascination for a boundless vision also precipitates in the search for optical media and forms of seeing that are thought to make the occult spheres of the invisible accessible. The scientific discovery of a new type of radiation (X-rays) or new sources and kinds of energy triggered intensive research in the area of thoughtography (also called psychic photography), which was intensively explored throughout Europe. For example, in 1913 Louis Darget sent his essay “Exposé des différents méthodes” (“Exposé on various methods”), together with several photographic prints, to Kandinskii, who experimented with techniques in producing spiritualistic vision himself.

However, the modernist project to integrate extra-retinal phenomena into the field of vision did not necessarily require film or photography technology. Inspired by ideas of omni-visibility, Matiushin founded the *Zorved* Group (acronym derived from *zorkoe vedenie*, i. e. sharp sighted knowledge) in 1923 with his laboratory at GINKhUK. *Zorved* studied ways of expanding the horizon of vision to encompass 360 degrees:

Latest results in research have proven that the centers of the brain processing spatial impressions, light, color, and form are at the rear of the skull. A series of experiments and observations made by ‘Zorved’ artists clearly lead to the conclusion that the visual cortex at the occiput responds to spatial stimuli. (Matiushin 1923, 15)

To explore this, Matiushin asked his students to see in terms of “breadth” and – without moving their bodies – allow their “eyes follow the shape of the object under observation” (Matiushin, quoted and trans. in Klotz 1991, 44).

The conceptual spectrum of New Vision clearly demonstrates the ambivalence of the visual turn of the Modernist era, revealing the field of vision to be a highly contested terrain. New Vision is not only on the lookout for enhanced or augmented visual impressions that have been optimized and upgraded by technical devices or psychophysical training. Not least, the visual turn displays, again

and again, an alienated or obscured vision. The writer and theorist Sergei Tret'iakov (1928) coined the metaphor 'steamy glasses' (*neprotertye ochki*) to describe this kind of handicapped seeing under difficult conditions and from unusual points of view. Yet, the limits of Modernist optical fetishism have nowhere been as impressively and painfully exhibited as in the film *Un chien andalou* (1929, *An Andalusian Dog*) by Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí, with its close shot of slicing through an open eye. These optic counter-narratives witness the "denigration[s] of vision" (Jay 1994) in Modernist aesthetics. They reveal a concept of New Vision not in the shape of an apology but as a critique of visibility. Modernist New Vision revels in excessive sights while also engaged in an iconoclasm that generates new modes of blindness.

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