

INTRODUCTION

Visuality and Viewing in Ancient Greece and Rome

Rerum enim optumarum cognitionem nobis oculi adtulerunt.
The best things have been brought to our knowledge by the eyes.

CICERO, *TIMAEUS* 52

Les gens regardent,
confondant la vie, la vue, la vision.

HENRI LEFÈBVRE

The aim of the chapters that follow is to explore some specific phenomena and aspects of the visual dimension of Greek and Roman culture. Considering the increasing relevance of visuality in our present time, of visual strategies and impacts in the media as well as in the reality of public and social life, there is probably little need to defend the choice of this theme. Who would not like to know how Peisistratos staged his famous entry to Athens on a chariot and in company of Phye, the tall girl disguised as the goddess Athena, which helped him seize tyrannical power? Or how the Athenian state burial ceremony was laid out when Perikles delivered his funerary speech in the first year of the Peloponnesian War? How Mark Antony achieved visibility for his spectacular offering of a diadem to Julius Caesar at the festival of the Lupercalia in 44 B.C.? What the Roman Forum looked like on the day of the murder of Julius Caesar, or on the occasion of Augustus's funerals? Obviously, to know such things would significantly help us understand the public impact and the emotional atmosphere of the events.

VIEWING IN A SOCIETY OF IMMEDIATE ACTING

In ancient Greece and Rome, visuality played an enormous role at all levels of life. Social life meant living with images. But there was more: Social life as such was also to an extreme degree stamped by visual manifestations, experiences, and interactions.¹

This was not a contingent phenomenon of manners and habits: Face-to-face visuality was deeply rooted in the cultural anthropology of Greek and Roman societies.² While the

great neighboring empires of the ancient Near East and Egypt were dominated by superstructures of divine and royal power, based on mass-producing techniques, and assigning to all subjects their roles within the prestabilized order of the world, Greek societies were almost completely lacking in institutionalized political or religious power; instead, they developed toward intense and intentional face to face interaction. Within the polis, and between the poleis, all issues were negotiated through personal interaction and direct communication among the members of those communities. According to Aristotle, a polis—the basic political entity in ancient Greece—should allow all its members to know one another and to hear the public herald's voice. The main festivals of the city gods or goddesses were ideally celebrated by the whole community, while in the people's assemblies the whole body of male citizens came together for political decisions. In such collective situations, as well as in all other realms of life, persuasion and conviction based upon personal qualities played an enormous role: As Andrew Stewart has underlined, social life was strongly dominated by the public eye, watching over the collective norms of behavior; in these circumstances individual prestige and power were fought for with the spirit and wit of speech as well as with the impact of personal appearance: brightness of the body and seduction through *cháris*.³ All such devices implied a high degree of visibility. Athena endows Odysseus with superhuman radiance for various social situations: not only to impress Nausikaa at the shore of the sea or Penelope in the hall of the palace, but also to make the Phaeacians aware of his powerful and venerable authority. In historical times, the importance of visibility becomes evident in figures like Alkibiades and Alexander the Great, whose political success depended in large part on their physical brightness.⁴ Later, the Roman Empire was informed by much wider geographical dimensions of political power and interaction. Yet the city, with its characteristic forms of face-to-face interaction remained the basic unit of social life, entailing the continuation—albeit modified—of specific forms and practices of figurative art.

Other realms of social life, too, were marked by highly corporeal qualities, implying men's—and women's—visual appearance. According to Plato, the most appreciated way of hunting was in direct encounter, without technical means, using only sword or lance, as immediate tools of the body. Warfare, in particular, was largely conceived of as a manifestation of personal bravery and bodily force, exerted through weapons of direct fighting, lance and sword: hand-to-hand, face-to-face—and eye-to-eye. Homer already presents his warrior heroes as resplendent to behold: It is through the mere sight of Achilles's radiant appearance, with his refulgent armor, that Priam is struck by his terrifying heroic superiority. On the other hand, Paris, although a coward, might appear in his charming beauty to be a formidable warrior. Even in historical times, protagonists in war could impress opponents by their bright bodies: When Epameinondas was about to conquer Sparta, this hitherto invincible city was saved by a certain Isidas, who plunged into the battle splendidly naked, an irresistible sight, like a superhuman. The fundamentals of this culture of the body were laid in athletic training and contests, where the qualities of bright manliness and (homo)erotic charisma exerted a strong visual impact.

Greek societies, and to some degree also Roman societies, constitute themselves in the form of a culture of immediate acting, implying a prominent role of immediate visual appearance and perception.⁵

Significantly, the term designating the official form of collective participation in religious cult was *theōría*, a nominal cognate of *theâsthai*, 'to see.' Thus, participation in religious matters essentially meant to view and to observe places and activities of cult. Even the complex philosophical term *eîdos*, the essential form of beings and things, as well as Plato's notion of *idéa*, is rooted in *ideîn*, the activity of the eye. Viewing was a fundamental concept in man's relation to society and the world.⁶

This kind of viewing is much more than a passive reaction of the retina to the rays of light that spring from the objects of the surrounding world, more than a receptive perception of visual impacts from outside. Modern psychology of perception underlines and investigates the aspects of activity in human viewing: for example, the movements of the gaze in confrontation with a landscape, a scene of life, or a picture. In this sense, viewing is not just a process of nature, directed by prestabilized laws of physiology. It is also an activity of culture, of culturally stamped behavior embedded in specific cultural practices. Different societies develop and adopt specific modes of viewing.

According to ancient Greek concepts, viewing is an interactive encounter, a kind of reciprocal activity between the active eyes of the viewer and the powerfully shining objects of the world: The eye appropriates the objects by emitting rays of light, thereby meeting the radiance vice-versa emitted by the beings and things looked at. In this encounter between eyes and the outside world, physical and physiological aspects are united with psychological impulses: In the famous discourse between Sokrates and Parrhasios, preserved by Xenophon, the philosopher and the painter agree that men dispose of benevolent or hostile gaze. The expression of the eyes is on the one hand driven by emotive forces, such as terror, amazement, or love, and is on the other hand attracted by the emotive power of the visual phenomena. The more viewing is emotionally intensified, the nearer it comes to an ecstatic state of *thámbos*, 'amazement.' From Homer on this was the general Greek concept of viewing, and from the fifth century B.C. onward, theoretical thinking aimed in various forms to rationalize this basic concept of the activity of the eye. In this sense, viewing was one of the various modes by which men interfere with beings and objects of the surrounding world. Therefore, seeing was a decisive factor of social interaction in the conceptual community of human beings and things.⁷

When Pausanias describes the Sanctuary of Zeus at Olympia, he does not depict a visual panorama of the site's buildings, altars, and statues, and their relation in space to one another, as they might have appeared to a distant and objective viewer. Instead, he presents the objects in the form of four separate tours through the sanctuary: the altars, the statues of Zeus, the other major votive offerings, and the portrait statues, in particular of victorious athletes; significantly, he never makes any interconnection between the items enumerated on these tours. This is much more than a literary device of organizing his text; it is also, and above all, a specific way of viewing: no passive perception of

simultaneous sensual impressions but an active visual encounter with the objects, driven by his own choice, meeting them, dealing and interfering with them.⁸ On a large scale, the same kind of active viewing was dominating in geography. Geographical descriptions in antiquity do not present the reader with an overall image of topographical interrelations between different places but follow the routes of traveling, with conquering eyes, through the landscape and along the seaside. Even geographical maps are stamped with this kind of concrete experience, giving precise information on distances of sites along travel routes but totally neglecting the interrelations between the sites of different routes.⁹ The eye was, so to speak, an active tool of the body, closely connected with the body's movements—almost an extension of the body's members, like its arms and hands.

In accordance with this connection, descriptions of beings and objects in Pausanias and other ancient authors are no mere representations but are focused on their active use. Pausanias's enumeration of the altars of Olympia follows the tortuous sequence in which the procession of cult personnel performed the ritual sacrifices once every month, emphasizing above all those aspects that are essential for their function during these rituals. His textual presentation of the altars is largely a literary reproduction of their function in ritual practice. Generally speaking: Viewing and describing objects and beings are strongly oriented toward cultural dealing and interfering with them.¹⁰

In this sense beings and objects are conceived of not only as visual appearances but as autonomous entities, like persons. Looking at a living person creates a reciprocal contact with her or him, as is still the case in many contemporary societies; the person looked at is called upon to react, either by responding to or by avoiding or even by rejecting the eye contact. But this is not all: The visual appearance of a bright person as such was conceived of as an active force. The heroic warriors Achilles and Herakles, who are equipped with miraculous armor fashioned by the god Hephaistos, are described in epic poetry as arousing fright and terror by their appearance as well as by their shouting. Thus, both the visual and the acoustic impact are experienced in the same way, as active manifestations of power. The staring eye painted on a warrior's shield is an intensifying duplication of his own gaze (fig. 1).¹¹

Even material objects were in some respect considered to possess some active power of responding to eye contact. Well-known examples are wine vessels used at symposia, adorned with large painted eyes staring at the company of the drinking party (fig. 2). In the same way, other objects both large and small could be equipped with wide-open eyes, expressing some power of visual activity: weapons, warships, city walls, musical instruments, and so forth.¹² Viewing is a reciprocal visual meeting.

The active force of objects endowed with eyes may be realized from two rather eccentric examples. Attic vases show depictions of *hetairai* dealing with artificial phalloi of more or less fanciful size. Sometimes such phalloi have eyes painted on the tip, implying an aspect of active viewing in sexual potency, and thereby demonstrating the vigor that was felt not only in the artificial instrument but in the male organ itself (fig. 3).¹³ An extreme case, widespread throughout antiquity, is the Gorgon, a mythical monster with



FIGURE 1
Departure of a warrior. White-ground
lekythos, circa 440 B.C. (Athens, Ethnikon
Archaologikon Mouseion; E. Simon, *Die
griechischen Vasen* [Munich, 1976], pl. 197.)

mortifying gaze, decapitated by Perseus with his head turned away in order to avoid being petrified by the dreadful sight of her (fig. 4). Jean-Pierre Vernant has impressively explained the Gorgon's face as the deadly opposite to human life. Perseus and the Gorgon personify the reciprocal fascination of seeing and being seen in its extreme form: the Gorgon shooting glances like perilous flames, fixing her vis-à-vis; Perseus in danger of being caught and petrified by the terrifying sight. In this myth the fundamental Greek experience of face-to-face and eye-to-eye encounters appears in its most perilous aspects. The Gorgon's severed head still exerts its annihilating impact, and her artificial image, the *gorgóneion*, became the ubiquitous deterring icon on temples, tombs, and other objects that were to be saved from damage, destruction, and curse.¹⁴