To discover and to invent – A genealogy of the concept of the documentary

1. Introduction

For the first time an image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man […] . All the arts are based on the presence of man, only photography derives an advantage from his absence (André Bazin 1997, p. 13).

Art does not reproduce the visible, it makes visible. (Paul Klee, ???)

With this discussion I want to show that there are traces left by the history of the inventions of photography and film that still play a part in how the camera is used and in how we understand and speak about these forms of depiction. In order to understand the camera, it is helpful to acknowledge its origins; the scientific, technological, philosophical and cultural preconditions for this invention. Its role as a paragon for noninterventionist or mechanical objectivity, its purpose as a visual aid or its significance for the idea of pure vision, should be taken into account when we try to understand why and how the documentary came about. These early scientific uses of photography and film do influence the practices we today refer to as documentary film and the discourses around it, but it is important to note that the documentary’s social, philosophical and technological histories do not determine the documentary. What I mean here, is that in order to understand the documentary, we have to approach certain philosophical questions that cannot be dissolved by the history of the camera or the history of the idea of the documentary. The bottom line is that the camera does not mediate the world in any specific sense. As Donald Evans points out; If the camera is to be said to see anything at all it can only be said to see what the viewer of the photograph can see (Evans 1977, p. 220).

Documentary photography and film is not determined by the machine and the ideologies behind this machine that enables it (as theorists such as Marshall McLuhan or Jean Baudrillard would have it). Although the inventions of photography and film can meaningfully be understood as results of an ideological venture, and this ideology evidently is expressed in the conventions of photography and film language, these forms of depiction are beyond ideology. Adorno on ideology & Art

As Gilles Deleuze points out, neither is a theory of cinema; ‘about’ cinema, but about the concepts that cinema gives rise to and which are themselves related to other concepts corresponding to other practices, the practice of concepts in general having no privilege over others, any more than one object has over others … Cinema’s concepts are not given in cinema (Deleuze in Branigan 2006, p. xiii).

My reason for citing Deleuze here is to open up the questions concerning cinema. Cinema is basically the art of film. This means that every piece of film, every snippet of celluloid or every digital record of film does not necessarily pass as cinema. Whereas every piece of film conveys some kind of information, the art of film has to make something of this; it has to communicate something, it has to contribute something to expression, make something visible, allude to how something is to be viewed etc. As Donald Evans points out questions about how it is possible for us to communicate by means of photographs are; naturally bound up with considerations of how it is possible to communicate at all (Evans 1979, p. 215).

Cinema is a practice in which one makes pictures. When one is making a picture of something this person is in a sense the first observer. He/she is not of course first in the sense that this person would be the first one to see something (although sometimes this might also be the case), but in the sense that this person is accountable for the picture, he/she is the first one to see how this specific picture should come about, what it will look like. The whole meaning of this task consists
in the observers’ active rendering of the world. But this rendering is not in any way solely a task for the eyes, but for a whole individual – an embodied human being living with a conscience. What I want to indicate here is that a picture can never be seen as merely a re-presentation of something. The world does not consist of readymade pictures. The task of making a picture does not consist of producing the visual per se. Comparably, neither does the uttering of a sentence consist of reproducing certain sounds.

An analogy that hopefully could clarify this is Ludwig Wittgenstein’s conception of knowledge in On Certainty. Knowledge, Wittgenstein claims, can never be something readymade – a description that will be the correct description that will eradicate all doubt. This kind of understanding of knowledge is parasitic in the sense that it works against the concept of knowledge. To understand something always involves an effort, it can never be a passive reception of facts or truths. This does not mean that knowledge or the effort involved in coming to an understanding, always would fail. It can not fail in the sense that it would never reach a completion, a certainty, since the aim of seeking an understanding is not to establish certain undeniable facts. However, knowledge always involves the possibility of failure, it is essential to it. This failure if it appears, is not doubt or uncertainty, but a failure of communication, a failure of understanding. When all, so called, facts are established, for example: “this house is red”, “it is rectangular”, “has five windows”, etc., etc., all real questions still remain, the effort of showing something to be the case is still ahead. As Wittgenstein puts it; That he does know remains to be shewn (1977, § 14). He goes on to explain this with the simple observation of how we conceive somebody as a reliable person. Paradoxically a person who is certain or without doubts does not qualify as reliable, quite the contrary. He writes; It would surely be remarkable if we had to believe the reliable person who says “I can’t be wrong”; or who says “I am not wrong” (1977, § 22). In this sense, the aptness for doubt is what constitutes understanding. I would like to talk about pictures in the same vein as Wittgenstein talks about knowledge. If a picture would simply serve as a copy of something it would render itself useless. As Theodore Adorno puts it:

If art were visual through and trough, it would be like the empirical life it wants to leave behind… It is impossible to think that an analysis of important works of art could show them to be pure visuality, for they are all pervaded by conceptual elements. (Adorno 2004, p. 141)

Art does not imitate the empirical world, rather the artist makes things visible, visuality in art is conceptual by nature.

My point with this introductory chapter is to show that – although documentary film today is another kind of vehicle than it was 80 years ago and although documentary filmmaking all in all is a different kind of practice than the 19th century scientific ordering of the world that was assisted by the camera – the concept of the documentary has always been inhabited by a tension between visual registration and our conceptions. This tension is present in a cluster of philosophical difficulties concerning vision, experience, facts, knowledge, understanding and the self.

One way to articulate this kind of difficulty can be found in Jakob Meloe’s discussion on the concept of a ‘natural harbour’. When we ask; “what is a natural harbour?”, “how do we determine that a place is suitable as a natural harbour?” we are engaged with a certain philosophical tension between concept and object. Is it our concept of a harbour projected on to a natural landscape? Or is it a natural landscape that creates our concept of the harbour? Meloe’s point is that neither of these alternatives is philosophically accurate. We can not dissolve the philosophical difficulty by choosing either of these alternative theories. In a separation of the concept from the object, both will become unintelligible. Meloe writes:
The method of investigating the concept of a harbour, therefore, is this: Situate yourself within the practice that this object belongs to, and then investigate the object and its contribution to that practice (Meloe 1988, p. 393).

In order for something to be a natural harbour, it has to have certain qualities. Our perception, our understanding or our concepts can not create these qualities in a material landscape. Of course we can build a harbour, and creates the required qualities in the landscape, but then it is not a natural harbour. In order to recognize such a place one has to understand a culture of seafaring and its relation to certain aspects of the landscape and in order to do so one has to be acquainted with the practice of sailing, fishing, etc. The qualities of a natural harbour are for example that it is: at least 4 metres deep, at low tide, its bottom should be of a material that will hold an anchor even if the wind is pressing against the boat with the force of a storm, and its surroundings of skerries or islands should be such as to make it possible to approach it in most sorts of weather (Meloe 1988, p. 392). To be able to see this, requires a certain life form, a certain experience and understanding of what exactly is required of these qualities of the geographical structure of a certain place. The natural harbour does not exist there a priori in nature. Without the activity and life form of the fisherman: there are no such formations to be seen, since there are then no eyes to see them. [...] If there are no fishermen, or other seafaring people, seeking refuge from foul weather, then there are no havens. (Meloe 1988, p. 392-393). A natural harbour is not created (like a man made harbour), it is discovered.

The case of the documentary seems to be special here since in one sense it alludes to something neutral. Should not the maker of a documentary refrain from intervening in the event that he documents in order to preserve what was there before the film crew arrived? On the other hand, in order to see, for example what the fisherman sees, should not the filmmaker situate himself in the practice of the fisherman? We have to acknowledge that we talk about two distinct practices. That of the maker of pictures and that of the fisherman. However, what distinguishes these practices from each other is not as clear as it might seem.

At this point it starts to become obvious that a discussion of pictures has to be somewhat different than the discourse about our everyday vision. Whereas the fisherman knows his practice, his eyes are connected to what he does, his view is inhabited by certain concepts. Can we say the same thing about the photographer or the filmmaker? Is then the filmmakers’ view inhabited by the concepts of cinema alone? As I have tried to point out earlier this can not be the case. This kind of separation has its philosophical history. Since Plato there has been a strong iconoclastic attitude within philosophy that seems to address this issue. In Plato’s view the practice of making images is distinct from all other practices, therefore it does not require any knowledge of anything else (Plato, Republic). But going along with this classical vein of thought still leaves the main issue untouched.

We do not need to doubt that if a fisherman perceives a natural harbour in the geography of a landscape, he most likely actually sees the landscape as an image. Images are present in our everyday experience of the world, it is because we have images that we have pictures in the first place. The fisherman is not however required to be a maker of pictures. If he also has this ability it does not necessarily correlate with his understanding of fishing (he might for all we know paint flowers, birds etc. His interest in making images does not necessarily stem from his occupation as a fisherman), whereas the ability to see the landscape as an image, to see with eyes inhabited by the practice of fishing as in the example of the natural harbour, certainly is inherently connected to the fisherman’s actual practice of seafaring and fishing.

For the filmmaker this relationship is different. There are certain things that are good for one to know if one intends to make a film. It is helpful if one knows something about the use of camera, objectives, montage etc. But the mastering of these practices alone will not guarantee a successful film about for example fishing.
Mastering these practices means that one understands the relationship between cinema (the art of making film) and the phenomena that one intends to depict. This relationship is not that of the inseparable relation between concept and object that Meloe describes, but that of concept (of cinema) and concept (of fishing). The filmmaker does not need to be a fisherman in order to make a film about fishing, but his depiction has to be informed to some extent by the vision of the fisherman. This relationship is not that of semblance. As Amresh Sinha points out in his reading of Adorno: “Art does not reflect the “mood” of the artist, is not a “replica” or a “fuzzy photograph” of the “psychic content” it is contribution to expression...” (Sinha 2000, p. 146). There is no way to reproduce the vision of the fisherman in a certain picture. This can not be the aim of cinema. In order to depict the fisherman’s view one has to understand what cinema does or what it can do in relation to what inhabits the fisherman’s vision. Whitney Davies discusses this relationship in the context of painting, which is not the same as the context of film, but the argument works for both forms of depiction. He writes:

The failure of shape-recognition is simultaneously the failure of depiction (the denotative status of certain resemblata in the configuration) as such. But the success of shape-recognition is not simultaneously the success of depiction. If this occurs at all—if a picture is present at all for the perceiver in question—it must be denotation-grasping or motif- and image-seeing. In the human lifeworld, the eye sees what the world means—at least when it sees what it is meant (Davis 2001, p. 33).

The quote by Davies is slightly cryptic, but it points out something essential for this discussion. Shape recognition is required for the practice of making pictures. In photography and film this is achieved automatically (as it is in the human vision of a healthy eye). However nothing is yet achieved by shape-recognition alone. The uninhabited view may be thought to see colours, light and certain shapes, this is not incorrect, and yet it sees nothing at all.

What I have tried to establish this far is that there is no concept of cinema that could be understood in isolation as disconnected from all other concepts. However, we can ask (as Edward Branigan does); what inhabits our concept/s of the camera, our concept/s of photography or our concept/s of the documentary? As a matter of fact I think it is highly relevant that we ask these questions, because these concepts are inhabited. To understand that something is a picture already presupposes a kind of understanding of what a picture is. For example, if we look at a painting we have to understand that the frame is not a part of the picture (Tilghman). Although it might be less evident, this is also the case for photography and film.

The concept of the documentary has always been inhabited. And its inhabitants have all left their un-removable traces on it. Its former tenants might have moved out, some of them might have made a horrible mess and forcibly been thrown out, but they have all left their traces on the estate with their different attitudes toward life and their different ways of living. There is no original state of the concept that we can enter, and there never has been such a state. The discussions between and within the tenants has formed the place so that it never can be brought back to an original state. Or, to put it more bluntly, there is no original state.

It is something like this that, I believe, Wittgenstein means with his notion of language game. A concept is defined by how, and by whom it is used. The peculiar thing about the concept of the documentary that makes it philosophically intriguing and problematic in many ways is that it is sometimes understood as uninhabited. The documentary image was thought to be a representation of pure observation, something that was essentially beyond human language, concepts, attitudes and theories. It was seen as a “natural perspective” or “nature’s perspective” as opposed to human understanding. The difference I want to indicate here is that this
understanding is also part of the use of the word documentary. Wittgenstein’s philosophy in its anti-essentialist understanding of language basically holds that the language game, the way that we use a word, defines its meaning. Language does not restrict a word or a sentence in a way so that we could point at an essence or an origin; language is not historical in this sense. Concepts are always inhabited, somebody is expressing them in order to act. We can not go beyond human language as a means of communication, but we can point away from it. This gesture is a part of language, it is not nonsensical as a gesture. What makes it nonsensical is if we really believe that, in this case the word documentary, signifies something that can not be expressed in language, that a pure observation “speaks the language of the phenomena” or that the photographic image is something beyond human testimony. That is, if we understand the “metaphysical” as an understanding in which truth and knowledge consist of a substructure of language (or of an order above nature, supernatural, etc.) something beyond communication, i.e. beyond language. It is here that fundamental and unsolvable paradoxes start to announce themselves – expressions beyond language, images dispatched from the viewers’ perception, a world picture seen from the view from nowhere. These kinds of metaphors should be understood exactly as metaphors, as expressions of the tension in the gesture of pointing outward from inside language.

This is how I approach the genealogy of the documentary. The tension of the documentary puzzles us. For some speakers inside this history, the puzzlement concerning the concept of the documentary leads to metaphysics in the problematic sense that I indicate above. Here is a discrepancy that should be kept in mind, between my philosophical account and the understanding of certain key figures within this history.

This is also one of the reasons why I have divided this book into two parts. The first part gives a brief account of the history of the documentary image. In this part I want to explain, as clearly as I can, the practices, ideologies and technologies that gave rise to the concept of the documentary. This will hopefully clarify why certain philosophical questions appear during the era of photography. Or vise versa, why photography is born, during an era when certain philosophical questions are dominant. As somebody convincingly put it, socialism was not created by Marx, it was the other way around. In this context this is not a point about Marx, Marxism or socialism, but about the direction that, I would argue, is always the same. Philosophers do not create philosophical systems that are applied in society, politics, culture, science etc. Philosophy has no such power. Rather philosophers, when they perform their task rigorously, engage with the problems, difficulties and attitudes of their time, because they are entwined, captured and shackled in this time, culture and society. But whereas ideologies are contingent and historical, philosophical questions remain, not necessarily in the same form as before, but they address the same inherent tensions of certain concepts, that can not be dissolved. The tension can not be dissolved, but it can be described and articulated.

In the second part I want to discuss the specific philosophical problems occurring in the different ways of understanding the visual and the concept of the documentary.

The purpose of neither of these parts is historically descriptive. In both parts I try to look at the questions concerning the documentary as conceptual or philosophical problems, not as historical curiosities.

The search for the innocent eye – A reduction of human understanding

What is a visual recording? Where does the idea of visual recording come from? And, what role do the practices involved in attaining and producing visual recordings play in our way of communicating with one other? When and why did the idea of recording and documentation enter the visual realm? Depending on how we approach the concept of visual recording, on how we understand its idea, different associations will announce themselves. At a point in time visual recording
is heavily influenced by an ocularcentric ideology that regards the visual as a form of total and pure empirical knowledge. Later on this ideal will start to fall apart and descend towards a new understanding of the visual order, in which vision starts to disintegrate – the unity, fixation and local grounding of vision starts to fall apart. In order to explain the concept of the documentary I want to look at the role of photography in this development. Its place in this narrative has to do with the camera’s role as a recording machine. Although this is just one of many uses of the camera it is central in the early years of this invention.

Photography gives way to a new form of metaphysics in 19th century attitudes towards the image. Paradoxically, photography and the idea of an image that is separated from the temptations and intentions that are inherent to human psychology, stem precisely from a breach with a metaphysical philosophical tradition. This is explicitly expressed among the scientists, artists and philosophers who welcome this new medium of representation.

**Artists:** Poe, Balzac, D.?

**Scientists:** Daguerre, F. Arago, Marey, Muybridge, Comté, Francis Galton

**Philosophers:** Shopenhauer, Berkeley, Nietzsche, ????

The development and decline of certain ideas and ideologies is not easily molded into a chronological historical account. Some ideas live on in the undergrowth of science and culture, others are transformed in to new takes on an old idea. I believe that, in order to understand the documentary, we have to understand the reasons for transitions in history. In order to understand what has happened here we need to look at the role of visuality and the role of aided and recorded vision, during the modern period. Whereas the technological evolution of the different means of aided vision (the telescope, the stereoscope, the microscope) and the means of visual recording (camera obscura, photography, film) is quite easy to trace and grasp, the cultural, social and philosophical grounds for the emergence of the visual record are more complex.

When Nicéphor Niépce, in the year 1826, manages to fixate the image inside a camera obscura on a pewter plate, a new order of representation is set on its way. Photography is not necessarily the starting point for transformation in this order of representation, but it realizes century old dreams of an image undetermined by the will, actions and conceptions of man. When I write “undetermined” I do not mean that the photographic picture would be disconnected from the conceptions, actions and the will of man. But it is not completely under the influence of human understanding. Neither is any other form of representation, solely a representation of the author’s vision, imagination, of his/her *vorstellung*. The visual world does not fully yield to our understanding, it is not produced by us and it does not consist of re-presentations. There is an interesting discrepancy here that, I believe, inspired the historical transformation that photography was a part of. It is important to understand that this change was part of an ideological venture. The dream that was realized by the invention of photography was based on an understanding where the natural phenomena spoke its own language. At a point in history, nature was no longer considered as consisting of a meaningful system of signs that derived from a benevolent God (Galileo, Berkeley). In a peculiar way the mechanical camera that recorded the workings of natural light, became an interpreter of a chaotic visual order of natural phenomena. Or to put it in another way, the supposedly pure observation aided by the automatic camera was a means of bringing order into a fragmented and hardly perceivable natural and social world. As Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison point out (1992, p. 83), this ideology consists of an understanding where freedom of will is sacrificed in order to establish a freedom from will. In this view, in order to understand nature one has to surpass ones psychological anthropomorphic attitude and become an unbiased observer. This ideal, of what Daston and Galison call non-interventionist or mechanical objectivity (1992, p. 82),
should not be seen merely as a historical or philosophical curiosity. The ethos of pure observation is linked to a reasonable understanding of the enlightenment. It stands in contrast to a concept of knowledge as determined by religious or political authority. Pure observation was seen as a means of attaining knowledge that was un-hierarchical or non-authoritative. When all things are revealed in this way, man will be equal. Or, so they thought. That this ethos has a shadow side that leads to social control, the idea of the normal or the characteristic etc., is due to compromising the ideal of enlightenment. Adorno

The modern conception of the self as Descartes or Leibniz would have put it, consist of a ghost in a machine that observes sensations that are provided by our mechanical senses. This self is a severed piece of incorporeal existence in a mechanized world. What this philosophy neglects is our social circumstances, our dependence on communication with others and the impossibility of a private language. As Michael Renov points out, the 100-year history of documentary film is deeply rooted in the modernist project that stems from the ideal of the dispassionate observer as a suitable attitude for extracting reliable knowledge. With the words of Emmanuel Lévinas, Renov describes the critique of modernism as an understanding where knowledge and truth are related to dialogue and human encounter, instead of different forms of objective evidence (Renov 2004, p. 147).

If we take Renov’s account of the documentary seriously, as I believe we should do, one of the sole purposes for the venture of creating visual records is a sceptical attitude towards communication, dialogue and human testimony. It reflects an attitude in which our reliance upon another is brought under suspicion. This modern venture is an attempt to rid science (as science is the realm in which the attempts to make objective visual records got on its way) of subjectivity and anthropomorphism. Daston and Galison trace the idea of a noninterventionist or mechanical objectivity to the practices of scientific atlas makers of the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. The goal for these scientists was to create, a *wordless science that spoke instead in high-speed photographs and mechanically generated curves* (Marey in Daston and Galison 1992, p. 81). The underlying assumption here was that human language as well as human observation is prone to error whereas the mechanical machine effortlessly captures the true qualities of the visual world. And more importantly, Daston and Galison point out that this attitude that sought to eliminate suspect human intervention, signified a strife towards a virtuous science where inward temptations, human judgments, theories and intentions where restrained by the automatic workings of different mechanical machines (p. 82).

The intent to rid science from metaphysics creates a new metaphysical order of representation. The invention of the telescope, the microscope, the stereoscope, the still camera and later the film camera, are partly based upon the idea that the human eye, or human vision in itself, is not sufficient to understand or comprehend the true qualities of the visual world. In order to attain objective representations of the world, the scientists of the 18th and 19th century constructed new visual aids that became the instruments of scientific observations of the visual qualities of the corporeal world. A century after Niepce’s first experiments with photography, the Russian filmmaker and theorist Dziga Vertov expresses this clearly in his manifest for documentary filmmaking, as follows:

> Our eyes see very little and very badly – so people dreamed up the microscope to let them see invisible phenomena; they invented the telescope [...] now they have perfected the cinecamera to penetrate more deeply into the visible world, to explore and record
visual phenomena so that what is happening now, which will have to be taken account of in the future, is not forgotten. (Kolla! Provisional Instructions to Kino-Eye Groups, Dziga Vertov, 1926)

In this scientific, empiricist or positivist ideology of the 19th century (that in Vertov’s case has poured over to the 20th century for different ideological reasons) the mimetic task of the image became literal as the visual record enabled an imitation of the natural and the historical world in absurdum. The mechanical apparatus of the camera was believed to be able to record the visual in infinity, whereas the attention of the human observer inevitably became weary and open for mistake and misjudgment. Daston and Galison describe this ideology as an understanding where; The phenomena never sleeps and neither should the observer; neither fatigue nor carelessness excuse a lapse in attention that smears a measurement or omits a detail; the vastness and variety of nature require that observations be endlessly repeated (p. 83). The machines due to their tireless repetition were considered virtuous compared to the slackness of human attention. In this line of thought the camera becomes a mediator between a hardly accessible visual realm and human visual perception. This idea presupposes that the apparatus gives us a more reliable factual image of the phenomena than the human eye that is directly determined by our contingent and subjective psychology. The photograph is conceived, not as an image of nature, but an image produced by nature, an image produced by the natural light of the sun (Fox Talbot, Poe, Bazin, Daguerre etc.).

This visual order of the 19th century was based on two significant changes in epistemology in which the camera played a central role. Firstly, it was established that the visual realm is the foundation for unbiased knowledge. This development was a complex venture that recurred throughout the whole history of Western thought from the Greeks onward. In modern philosophy the scene was set by Keplerian optics, Cartesian rationalism and British empiricism. The camera obscura played an essential part in this philosophical and scientific revolution of early modernity. It became an analogy for the workings of the human eye and vision. The camera obscura seemed to explain what vision consists of, how our perception works. Furthermore it became a device that served as an aid for our vision. Already during early renaissance the camera obscura was used as an aid in order to paint or draw copies of the projections inside its chamber. This practice was carried out by artists such as Leonardo da Vinci in order to discover ways of reproducing a correct representation of three dimensional space on a two dimensional surface. It was a scientific practice in which the artist tried to unveil the geometrical and mathematical qualities of a three dimensional corporeal world in order to reproduce a semblance of three-dimensionality on a flat surface (Panofsky ???? Check! p. 127?). The camera obscura enabled artists and scientists to isolate a piece of the visual world, in order for them to observe, scrutinize and explore its qualities. (Galileo, mathematical order)

In extension this idea seemed to indicate that like the camera, the mind resembles a dark room that is opened towards the world. When the room is opened a representation of the external world takes form in the mind. The mind became the locus for an idealized gaze, ideas seemed to consist of an assembly of images, fixed sights or visions that in no way resembled the sight of the corporeal, blinking and moving two eyes of the human observer (Jay 1993, p. 57). The camera obscura model of perception seemed to indicate that the visual world consists of an incorporeal view from nowhere (REF), the view of an angelic eye (Jay 1993, p. 81). Vision, in this sense, was not regarded as equivalent to the other senses of touch, smell, taste and hearing. The act of seeing was considered as inferior, as a sense among other senses, in comparison with the visual representations that our understanding presumably consists of. Jay describes this view with the words of Voltaire:
“What is an idea?” Voltaire asked in his Philosophical Dictionary. “It is an image”, he immediately replied, “that paints itself in my brain. . . . The most abstract ideas are the consequences of all the objects I’ve perceived. . . . I’ve ideas only because I’ve images in my head.” (Voltaire in Jay 1993, p. 83).

This analogy between human ideas and images, is also common for philosophers like Descartes, Leibniz, Bacon and Locke, despite their philosophical disputes. The visual for them was the fundament for human understanding. It was a form of total knowledge that, in contrast to platonic and medieval philosophy, conceived human ideas as interpretable visual representations. This ocularcentric ideology was adapted both by the rationalists and their empiricist rivals influenced by Locke, in that they, as Martin Jay points out: all shared a faith in the linkage between lucidity and rationality, which gave the Enlightenment its name (Jay 1993, p. 85).

Secondly, the privileging of the visual as a total form of knowledge spawned the idea that the subjective visual faculty of our consciousness, is not sufficient to grasp this objective visual realm. From the 17th century onward atlases of characteristic images started to appear in order to serve as accounts of different natural forms within varied scientific disciplines such as pathology, botany, zoology and paleontology (Daston and Galison 1992, p. 94-95). Later on during the latter part of the 19th century this practice of attaining characteristic images and ordering them into different volumes also became common within the human sciences like anthropology, psychology and criminology (Tagg 1988, p. 11). In the 19th century photography entered the scene and became the preferred technique for making visual records due to its automatic and mechanical way of producing images. Photography evolved into film, the x-ray image and different other techniques for capturing and recording the qualities of the visual world.

In this view the essence of things are concealed or clouded by our subjective hopes, expectations, generalizations, aesthetics, memory, judgments, intentions etc. As Daston and Galison point out (1992, p. 81-82), what was at stake for these encyclopedists was not only the accuracy or the reliability of science, but also an ideal of the morality of human understanding, which controversially was based on the exclusion of the role of the human. An attitude of not imposing an anthropomorphic filter on nature and its phenomena.

Martin Jay (1993) describes this shift as a disentanglement of the figural from its textual task. According to Jay, This involves a mechanization of the world picture. Whereas the scientists, artists and philosophers of the renaissance still understood the visual world as an intelligible text, a book of nature, the 19th century encyclopedists and positivistic scientists saw it as an observable but meaningless object per se (p. 51). It might seem an exaggeration on Jay’s part when he speaks of nature as a meaningless object. What would be the point of paying so much attention to observation, if the object of observation always proofs to be meaningless? However, I believe that this is not what Jay’s interpretation of the mindset of 19th century scientists indicates. In relation to an earlier order of representation it is clear that something has changed during the 19th century. The epistemologists of the 17th century understood nature as a harmonious order. The task of the scientists during this period, was as I mentioned earlier, to discover or unveil the order through interpreting the signs in nature. Here the order is there already from the start, in nature, waiting to be discovered. The problem for the renaissance scientist is not that he will face chaos in his observations, but that he

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1 Although the main philosophical framework is the same for these philosophers, in that they all regard ideas as representations, there are significant divergences. For Descartes the mind is active in its relation to the representations. The minds eye organizes the visual stimuli from two separate moving eyes into a comprehensible image. It is this deduction and rendering by an active mind that produce the ideas. Whereas, for positivist philosophers like Bacon, Locke, Newton and Voltaire, the mind is a passive receiver of visual representations. In the latter case the exterior objects are the producers of the ideas (Jay 1993, p. 84).
will fail to interpret the signs correctly. The interpretation is to be made on the terms of the order of nature (in general mathematics, geometry, the quantifiable and measurable), not on the terms of subjective speculations. Later on the picture has changed. The 19th century scientist has no certain order to rely upon. It is in his mind completely possible that nature is beyond order, however the notion of pure observation will hopefully bring structure to this disorder. Mathematics and geometry become the instruments of science, but they are not regarded as the order of nature per se. In this sense the notion of pure observation is there to help the observer to construct new systems, the relationship between discovering and inventing has changed its meaning. (Nietzsche, Galison: Einstein)

Daston and Galison (1992) express a similar interpretation of this historical shift. They write:

The problem for nineteenth-century atlas makers was not a mismatch between world and mind, as it had been for seventeenth-century epistemologists, but rather a struggle with inward temptation. The moral remedies sought were those of self-restraint: images mechanically reproduced and published warts and all; texts so laconic that they threaten to disappear entirely (p. 82).

Here is a thin line between an understandable moral attitude towards ones surroundings in which the observer restrains from projecting his own subjective conceptions on the world and a philosophically and morally problematic attitude in which the difference between discovering and inventing is muddled. Whereas the former moral attitude has some merit, the latter, the idea of a wordless science is completely nonsensical. Nietzsche describes this muddled world view in Twilight of the Idols, in his polemic way:

And what a nice delusion we had perpetrated with this "empirical evidence;" we interpreted the real world as a world of causes, a world of wills, a world of spirits. The most ancient and enduring psychology was at work here: it simply interpreted everything that happened in the world as an act, as the effect of will; the world was inhabited with a multiplicity of wills; an agent (a "subject") was slipped under the surface of events. It was out of himself that man projected his three most unquestioned "inner facts" – the will, spirit, the ego. He even took the concept of being from the concept of the ego; he interpreted "thing" as "being" in accordance with his concept of the ego as a cause. Small wonder that later he always found in things what he had already put into them. The thing itself, the concept of things is a mere extension of the faith in the ego as cause. [...] The "spirit as cause" mistaken for reality! And made the very measure of reality! And called God! (Check Nietzsche 1895, The Twilight of the Idols, Part 5, sec. 4)

What complicates this issue is that both the 17th century epistemologists and the 19th century scientists dream of a language beyond human understanding. The former, see the world as consisting of a metaphysical order that when discovered, will constitute a solid framework for all scientific questions. The latter cling to reason and mechanical reproductions in order to transcend human language. But as long as the language of God or the language of mechanically produced visual representations are not translatable into ordinary language, they will both create incomprehensible metaphysical systems.

The self of the observer

Different issues will in their different ways play a part in why the modern era becomes the paradigm of the privileging of vision. Martin Jay writes:

From the curious, observant scientist to the exhibitionist, self-displaying courtier, from the private
reader of printed books to the painter of perspectival landscapes, from the map-making colonizer of foreign lands to the quantifying businessman guided by instrumental rationality, modern men and women opened their eyes and beheld a world unveiled to their eager gaze (Jay 1993 p. 69).

During modernity the internal weaknesses of the ideal of pure observation will become more apparent. Not only is the idea of an innocent eye dispatched from human psychology, problematic in the many senses that Nietzsche indicates. (Kant; the innocent eye is blind (Donald Evans p220) … .) Even taken that vision could be isolated from our human conceptions of things, the metaphor of the camera obscura as a view from nowhere, falls on its own premises. One mistake that is obvious for the camera obscura model of vision, is that the cameras’ perspectival view indicates the private, isolated and secluded nature of vision. Leibniz is concerned with this issue. In his Monadology he discusses an apparent discrepancy; as the same city regarded from different sides offers quite different aspects, and thus appears multiplied by the perspectives, so it also happens that the infinite multitude of simple substances creates the appearance of as many different universes. Yet they are but perspectives of a single universe … (Leibniz in Cray 1992, p. 52). What this sentence points out is that the comparison of the camera obscura with an divine eye or the perspective of God falls short, since the infinite perspectives that the camera obscura and the human eye stand for, rather indicate a model for an essentially fragmented, unfixed and relative nature of vision.

Another issue that Nietzsche touches upon is the psychological issue that is linked to this development. If the world is no longer ordered upon a theological foundation this will cause anxiety. As for Descartes, who begins his meditations with the assumption that his senses are beyond his control. They might, for all that he knows, be manipulated or even produced by an evil spirit that wants to tamper with his soul. This philosophy starts out from an inner anxiety. The remedy for Descartes’ anxiety is found in his belief that, although this possibility of the corrupt manipulation of the senses might be the case, the rational workings of the mind are descent from a benevolent God and that this rationality is based on a spiritual order that can not reasonably be put under suspicion. In Descartes’ case there is still an inner, rational and metaphysical order that can be trusted. When this order starts the dissolve a new kind of anxiety announces itself. If nature in its essence is beyond order what can be the remedy for this anxiety? The problem here is that there seems to be no remedy, just the possibility of different attempts to bring an anthropomorphic order into an essentially chaotic nature. Nietzsche describes this anxiety as follows:

The psychological explanation: to extract something familiar from something unknown relieves, comforts, and satisfies us, besides giving us a feeling of power. With the unknown, one is confronted with, danger, discomfort, and care; the first instinct is to abolish these painful states. First principle: any explanation is better than none. Because it is fundamentally just our desire to be rid of an unpleasant uncertainty, we are not very particular about how we get rid of it: the first interpretation that explains the unknown in familiar terms feels so good that one “accepts it as true.” We use the feeling of pleasure (“of strength”) as our criterion of truth. (Nietzsche 1895, The Twilight of the Idols, Part 5, sec. 4)

It is this kind of limbo that keeps the scientists of the 19th century occupied. And, not only the scientist, but people from all walks of life. The only remedy for this anxiety seems to be control.

The issue of control is central for modernity in many ways. Firstly, as scholars like Michel Foucault and John Tagg have pointed out, the recording camera lends itself to different practices of surveillance, the registering and archiving of personal data. This is an political and economical system symbolized by the panopticon of Bentham (Foucault), a society where power dwells among hidden observers that
organize and define the world, to be seen is to be powerless to be relegated to a
position in which one becomes part of a visual system which’s structure is
controlled in the shadows. But if we consider the origins of the photographic image,
it is also a part of a reorganization of the observer. The dark side of the documentary
is not only due to a hierarchical power divide between the ones that observe and the
ones who are being observed. The camera is not only an instrument for controlling
the observed, but fundamentally it plays a role in controlling our way of observing,
of paying attention to something. A central argument in the critique of modernity is
the way this new visual world of the modern detaches the viewer from the world,
and how new forms of representations isolate the visual from our other senses and
in the end from our body. Jonathan Crary regards this development as something
essential for the period that starts with the industrial revolution, an ideology that still
determines our present day way of life. When we today perform different tasks with
the help of the visual interface of a computer, this is accomplished through a long
indoctrination of the observer. For an 18th century human being it would be
completely incomprehensible to perform tasks solely by the means of visual
attention (Crary 2001, p. 1). The sense which, at a point in time, was considered the
most obscure, has become the main faculty that we use instrumentally in order to
engage with the world. Crary, sees this as a result of the separation of the senses or
an industrial remapping of the body (Crary 1992, p. 19), he quotes Guy Debord;

This remapping will have fundamental consequences. When the observer of the 19th
century enters the scene, that is, when our visual faculty has become instrumental to
a certain extent, he/she faces a new world containing; … new urban spaces,
technologies, and new economic and symbolic functions of images and products—
forms of artificial lighting, new uses of mirrors, glass and steel architecture,
railroads, museums, gardens, photography, fashion, crowds (Crary 1992, p. 20).
This new world demands attention. It complicates the conditions for the
contemplative beholder. The modern world redefines the observer. In its worst form
this control that Crary investigates leads to bondage. The self, becomes an isolated
observer controlled by attention, severed from its multimodal sensations and its
body.

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