

VISION: the Art of Manifesting the Invisible

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Abstract

The article addresses the theme of vision considering it as the ‘art of making things real’. To stretch the meaning we should say that vision is an act of faith, since it operates as if the future were actual or as if immaterial entities were concrete. In this version, the concept of vision combines a common meaning with a metaphorical one. The term ‘vision’, in fact, simultaneously evokes the sense of sight and the mental exercises of imagining, forecasting, and representing. These functions are metaphorical because they transfer the meaning beyond the description, thus producing multiple interpretations. The core of this study is precisely the analysis of the performative nature of vision in different organizational domains. Four meanings of vision are discussed: representing, forecasting, normalizing, organizing. The investigation draws on organizational studies, philosophy of language, STS, urban sociology and human geography, and combines theory with case studies.

Introduction

Recently in the U.S. Christian fundamentalism has been growing particularly in the so-called “Bible Belt” which includes those southern states where radical Protestantism is particularly strong. In that area have flourished evangelical universities and colleges, such as the Liberty University in Virginia, the Museum of Creationism of Petersburg in Kentucky, open since 2007 and theme parks, such as the *Holy Land and Experience* in Orlando, Florida, where actors perform passages from the Bible. The reportage by the French journalist David Fauquemberg (2008) on the spread of creationism in the U.S. provides interesting examples of the narratives used by the creationism movement to promote its message and prove the truthfulness of its beliefs.

‘Prepare to believe’ is the welcome message of the Creation Museum website. A similar, but even more explicit, message is the one that Fauquemberg saw in Tennessee in front of a Baptist church: *‘Vision is the art of seeing invisible things’*. That sentence caught my attention and prompted me to think what it would be to consider vision in these terms.

The case of creationism may appear alien to analysis of vision in organizational environments. Instead, I found it inspiring because it directly concerns a topical issue: the mechanisms upon which vision is based and works. “We need, in other words, to look at the way in which someone convinces someone else to take up a statement, to pass it along, to make it more of a fact” (Latour 1986: 5).

Is it not significant that even religion, which should by definition be a matter of faith, has an urgent need to demonstrate its propositions by resorting both to drama and science? In order to make it more accessible and to compete at the same level with scientific argumentation, religion has become a sensible and verifiable phenomenon. Accordingly, we have two different and apparently contrasting narrative patterns: the dramatic one, as in the case of the Orlando theme park where passages from the Bible are enacted, and the scientific one aimed at providing undisputable proofs. The Museum of Creationism, for example, seeks to demonstrate the real existence of Adam and Eve through an analysis of Genesis, and to establish the age of the Earth by means of a detailed genealogical analysis of the Old Testament.

Scientists, for their part, have the same attitude to visualization. They consider visual devices as means to demonstrate the truth: “You doubt of what I say? I’ll show you”. (Latour 1986: 13). Latour’s words clearly posit the problem being discussed here by addressing two questions. The first concerns recognition that, given the predominance of sight over the other

senses, knowledge is inevitably mediated by the visual, so that visibility connects the domains of aesthetics and politics together (Brighenti 2007).

Secondly, since we rely on the visible, the power of visibility has become overwhelming, not only because “what is not seen is not thematized as an object in the domain of action” but also because “distortions *in* visibility lead to distortions in social representation” (Brighenti 2007: 328-330). For these reasons I shall begin my discussion on vision by addressing the more literal meaning, that the one related to sight.

With the above example of creationism I meant to introduce the topic of vision by beginning with its political implications, my purpose being to raise questions on how vision relates to knowledge and sense-making. Moreover, that example provides an opportunity to reflect on the relationship between knowledge and faith in a broad sense. By treating vision as an act of faith towards the practices and tools on which we rely to know and manage our world, this study explores the performative nature of vision in different organizational domains. Analysis of this concept is supported with examples taken from the literature and with case studies. Four meanings of vision are discussed: representing, forecasting, normalizing, and organizing. The investigation draws on organizational studies, philosophy of language, STS, urban sociology and human geography. By means of this review of cases and examples, the aim of the article is to examine the concept ‘in action’ in order to account for its properties and effects.

1. Representing displaying, describing

Making things sensible is not confined to the realm of senses (sight); on the contrary, it involves the mediation of culture. If perceiving is itself a way of thinking (Merleau-Ponty 1964) and “believing is seeing rather than the reverse” (Perlmutter and Dahmen 2008: 245), the duality between visible and articulable (Foucault 1972) is less stringent. Brighenti (2007: 329) observes that, despite this distinction, what can be seen and what is matter of discourse coexist: the visible is immediate but “in fact it is because the political (Foucault’s articulable) is always already there”.

Vision performs a kind of translation and reduction that enables our cognitive capacities to overcome the limits of our perception: for instance, to imagine a place faraway, or to experience a situation that is not yet real. In other words, vision enables us to explore the realm of ‘what could be’ and to grasp entities that would otherwise escape our perception. Latour, for instance, is interested in the process of making an economy visible and recounts the steps and means required to achieve a simple and comprehensive idea of a country’s economy. The core reason for his interest is not only the possibility of turning the chain of actions that forms what we call ‘economy’ into a concrete entity; it also concerns the generative capacity of such a visual language. Since we do not have access to the entire set of exchanges behind the word ‘economy’, nor to the mass of charts and calculations used to interpret it, when we talk about the economy we take for granted all this information enabling us to understand a phenomenon that otherwise would be beyond the grasp of most people.

What, then, is our vision of the economy? It is based on economic reports, newspaper articles, and documents issued by the Ministry of Economics. The relevance of Latour’s analysis is precisely this: it provides an opportunity to recognize and discuss the power of representations and how they function. Vision entails a visualization effort that induces us to take what is represented for granted and to mix the phenomenon with its representation through the mechanism of “seeing-as” (Schön 1978: 259). In other words, vision acts metaphorically: on the one hand it works as a metonymy or a synecdoche because representation takes the place of the object, assuming its properties within the visual language. On the other hand, vision as a metaphor re-describes reality by stressing one aspect

over another, thus orienting the sense-making, and highlighting new perspectives and new ways of framing problems (Schön 1978).

Many visual artefacts serve the purpose of ‘being in place of’. Renderings, maps or strategic plans are all examples of vision: they replace what they are intended to represent. Maps are interesting examples of this mechanism: their proportions do not change in place and time, so that they are usable in different conditions. In other words, they have the properties of being immutable and mobile (Latour 1986). But do they really perform a translation without corruption? Translation is never neutral: it first involves an interpretation, and then a transcription. Cartography, too, makes a selective reading (Mangani 2006: 13) that lays the bases for new readings because it shapes the way in which a territory is experienced (Farinelli 2003: 15). “To be understood, therefore, cartography should undergo a deconstructive rhetorical analysis as if it were a text, and, precisely, a literary work. Like literary texts, in fact, it is rooted in mental images acting emotionally to produce actions, not aseptic descriptions” (Mangani 2006: 13). Of course, the map is not the territory: “no one can smell or hear or touch the Sakhalin island” through the map (Latour 1986: 7); nonetheless, cartography has historically shaped the political discourse generating states and legitimizing the political organization of a territory (Farinelli 2009). Mapping has been not only a form of knowledge but also a way to create territory.

Our experience of the world is increasingly mediated by visual artefacts and instruments. We simply have faith in them: we trust in maps, renderings or other visual devices without ever wondering to what extent they are able to convey the complexity of the phenomena they aim to reproduce, or to what extent we should trust them instead of our senses Fine (2006). Similarly, Virilio draws attention to the revolutionary change wrought by photography in the realm of vision by establishing a “fusion-confusion of eye and camera lens” (1994: 13) and how, despite the significance of this change, it became commonly accepted without awareness of it.

According to Farinelli, today, for the first time, sight is unable to convey something significant about the mechanisms governing the world. Farinelli considers this change to be a huge problem for Western culture, “which for centuries based knowledge on vision and in the modern era has made knowledge coincide with the certainty of representation” (Farinelli 2003, 53), because there is no immediate correspondence between the functioning of the world and what is visible. It is consequently difficult to establish connections and understand the complexity of contemporary territories from an overall view.

Despite the inability of visualization tools to produce detailed descriptions, we increasingly rely on the technology that produces handy maps rich with personalized details. It would be interesting to conduct further examination of the relationship between the kind of knowledge produced by visual devices and their proliferation in advanced societies (Virilio 1994). However, my concern here is to investigate how the primacy of sight is affecting the quality of our knowledge, given not only that what is out of sight cannot be narrated, but also that “the language affects both what we constitute as objects of concern and the action we conceive” (Dunford and Jones 2000: 1208).

2. Translating, orienting, forecasting

Thus far we have explored the concept of vision in terms of the most common meanings attached to sight, representation, and demonstration. We may be confused about the use of performances in the *Holy Land and Experience Park* to give visitors a dramatic understanding of the history of the Bible. On the other hand, however, we do not pay much attention to the role of representations in the techno-scientific domain. This is because we are familiar with the rationale of science, and we expect scientists to provide figures, diagrams,

and so on, to explain their theories and make us see what they have discovered. Moreover, we are accustomed to thinking that demonstration is not the principle on which religion is based. But if we compare these narratives, we see that both serve the same purpose: to present things that are not visible. They use a visual language to convey concepts that would otherwise remain obscure to most people (Lynch 1991). These remarks suggest that vision, rather than providing descriptions of reality, is involved in sense-making and decision-making processes.

In order to make abstract entities sensible and understandable, vision works through simplification, reduction, and interpretation. A well-known study in the STS literature (Latour 1987) has investigated the process of translation (Callon and Latour 1991; Knorr Cetina 1995) that accompanies scientific work. This is an excellent example of the process of making things visible, and it shows how visualization is designed to meet or to define public interests. Pasteur's discovery of anthrax vaccine focused the attention of breeders of cattle- afflicted by anthrax on his laboratory. His research on *Bacillus anthracis* obtained visibility also outside the scientific community because of the way in which Pasteur managed his discovery: he gave public demonstrations where he simulated what had happened in his laboratory. By giving visibility to what is usually hidden, the microbes, Pasteur was able to reach a wider public and gain the trust of non-experts who, although unable to understand the technical language of microbiology, could personally verify that the discovery really worked and could save both animals and humans.

Latour traces the spread of the breakthrough not only by focusing on Pasteur's role but also, in accordance with the ANT perspective, taking account of all the actors/actants involved in the process. In fact, the importance of Pasteur's vaccine was determined by network building through translation and visualization. Neither the accuracy of procedures nor the usability of results can determine the success of a project unless they are combined with a translation of aims and a configuration of scenarios. Translation is thus part of a visualizing process where the object, physically constituted and a matter of concern, takes shape through the network of positions at stake and is reframed in multiple versions that may also clash with each other. Consequently, translation is not neutral (Sismondo 2004: 69) for it affects sense-making by others: "translating interests means at once offering new interpretations of these interests and challenging people in different directions" (Latour 1987: 117).

The connection between sense-making and the orientation of others' meanings has been extensively analyzed in organizational studies. The contribution by Corvellec and Risberg (2007) is a further development because it introduces the notion of *mise en sens* as a combination of sense-making and sense-giving. While sense-making is concerned with 'meaning construction and reconstruction', sense-giving relates to the possibility of influencing meaning construction by others. There is a sort of meta discourse related to the notion of *mise en sens* because, while considering it a practice of organization management, we should remember that it is also a matter of meaning management.

Corvellec and Risberg analyze the process of obtaining environmental and building permits for wind turbines in Sweden, and they frame their account of that episode in terms of *mise en sens*. This neologism on the one hand alludes to the idea of staging (*mise en scene*) and on the other plays with the twofold meaning of the French term '*sens*', which denotes both meaning and direction. In the case discussed by Corvellec and Risberg, the use of technical language was combined with dramatization in order to convey an attractive scenario that might foster acceptance of the project by influencing the public and the permit-granting authorities. By means of such literary creativity, in fact, the developers embedded wind power within a wider narrative on city renewal. The purpose of the project was to supply a new urban district in the western harbour area of Malmö with 100% locally produced renewable

energy, including wind power. The new urban district was the focus of the first European Housing Expo Bo01 – City of Tomorrow in 2001.

That episode demonstrates the strength of the relationship between aesthetics and politics, between the technical and social sides of a project. In this regard, vision is a form of meaning management that falls within both the sense-making and sense-giving domains. Accordingly, the layout and the aesthetic of such presentations become crucial because they make increasing use of visual language. Similarly, urban and regional strategic plans and, at a micro-level, the renderings of infrastructures produce visions with the precise aim of describing the project, contextualizing its features, and orienting public sense-making in order to obtain a coherent version (Houdart 2008).

In the above examples, the use of vision comes closer to the notion of sense-giving than to that of sense-making, because the focus is on “making sense for others rather than primarily for oneself or one’s own organization” (Corvellec and Risberg 2001: 321). Both controversies exemplify the performative nature of vision: the presentation of a project provides new perspectives and enacts objects that, far from being univocal stable entities, become plural in the process of network building. Such enactment recalls Schön’s ‘generative metaphors’ which connect different domains of experience to suggest new ways of looking at things. Particularly, vision exhibits the same property that Schön attributes to metaphor: it is both a representation and a process disclosing multiple meanings.

Vision is not only the set of argumentations used to present a project, to corroborate a demonstration, or to explain the perspective drawings of an artefact; it is also the public discourse generated by the visualization of an issue. In other words, vision is considered to be the network building in its entirety. In fact, it is not the recognition of the microbe responsible for the disease or the concession/rejection of permits to install wind turbines that determine the end of the project, since neither result establishes a definitive meaning.

The above examples introduce another meaning of vision, that of foresight. The representation provided by vision is more than a description; it is also an anticipation, a sort of wishful thinking that orients action nets. Urban plans, for instance, imprint an outlook on the possible development of an area. Not only do they anticipate how a place could change, they also interact with people’s wishes. “This is why they are fascinating: projects deliberately exist to affect our destinies” (Corvellec 2001a: 28).

Czarniawska (2001: 12), for instance, identifies collective incantation and will as the premises for the development of regional projects like that of the Öresund region. She emphasises the strength of collective visions in making things happen. The case is even more emblematic if compared to another one discussed by Corvellec in the same book. He recounts the phases of a never implemented urban project for the construction of a third railway track for the city of Stockholm. Corvellec (2001a, b) examines the debate (which lasted for fully ten years) on the project and the stakeholders’ narratives.

Controversies originating from techno-scientific breakthroughs or urban projects suggest that a project almost never develops as smoothly as its presentations claim. It usually has to undergo a phase of discussion and negotiation that may stop its realization, as evidenced by the Stockholm third railway project. According to Corvellec, “the debate is a way of envisioning the project” (2001b: 207) and should be considered part of the project itself since it contributes to its outcomes. Vision is effective, whatever the results may be, because it activates a public discourse, reactions and counter-arguments that may lead to completely different outcomes.

Large infrastructure projects make increasing use of perspective drawings to represent the physical change that the new artefact introduces. As Houdart’s ethnographic research showed, not only do they try to reconstruct the entire setting in which the infrastructure is to be installed, but they aim to provide a scenario suggesting possible uses and ways of life.

Renderings are interesting visual devices that embody two functions of vision: materializing abstract entities, and orienting sense-making by anticipating new scenarios. Here it is important to clarify how vision works: it does not only materialize an artefact through images; it also makes the artefact present because people react and discuss as if it has already been built. In other words, visualization consists of the entire action net developed around the project.

The controversy provoked by the rendering of a warehouse wall (Coletta, Gabbi, Sonda 2009) is illustrative of the performative nature of vision. In light of that controversy we can follow the trajectory of a building as a project (Latour and Yaneva 2008: 82). In an industrial area of Trento (Italy), the construction of a warehouse had been an issue discussed in the local press for several months. The controversy concerned the height of the wall and focused on its misrepresentation by the designer's graphic rendering. The difference between the actual height of the wall and that of the graphic design provoked the reaction of local residents, who set up a local committee to campaign against the wall's visual impact. The company's counter-action consisted in attributing the entire responsibility to the urban development plan, which classified the area as industrial and thus legitimized the construction. For its part, the local administration justified its decisions as compliant with standards and planning rules.

The rendering of the wall was not taken to be a representation of an infrastructure; rather, it was perceived as the wall itself because it represented what had been negotiated and finally agreed, and it established a term of comparison with the future building. The paradox of the static view of buildings is precisely that it reduces things to drawings, forgetting that they are bound to change: "a building is never at rest and never in shape" (Latour and Yaneva 2008: 85). As a project, a building has to balance many constraints, and once it has been constructed, transformations go along with uses (Yaneva 2005, 2008; Schön and Rein 1994: 89). The controversial project for the warehouse wall was far from static! Flows of actors took part in the process, both regulating it and being oriented by it in their turn.

The warehouse wall episode highlights the problem of translation that every description entails. The problem is not rooted in visual devices, but in their use. If we continue to consider visual devices as perfect reproductions of reality, we may be disappointed and be locked into our mental constructs. If we do not question the primacy of sight (Brighenti, Farinelli, Virilio, among others) and we do not verify how we describe the world, we will be unable to account for and manage complexity. This is an epistemological issue of prime importance that involves different domains: from language to organizational studies, from human geography to visual sociology.

Accordingly, these remarks concern not only visual artefacts, such as renderings and maps, but also narratives in the broad sense. News, too, "does not so much inform as orient the public" (Park 1940: 677) producing an echo effect: on the one hand it turns news into discussion about news; on the other, it shapes the language of inhabitants, providing them with a specific vocabulary (Bifulco, de Leonardis 2005). Metaphors such as 'showpiece' or, at the other extreme, 'Bronx' used to describe neighborhoods in fact do much more than describe: they picture places and label them. They are powerful because they affect our knowledge, our reading of phenomena and, consequently, our way of addressing public policies.

3 Normalizing

Another function of vision closely related to foresight is normalization of the decision-making process. By sketching 'what-if' scenarios, vision sets objectives, desired outcomes, and indicates how to achieve them. Vision becomes not only the goal to pursue but also the

way to reach it. Within organizations, and in urban management in particular, we can observe the extent to which foresight leads to standardization as a way to manage complexity and emergency. To illustrate the implications of vision for organizational decision-making, I refer to the interesting review by Robert Freeland of Diane Vaughan's book, *The Challenger Launch Decision*, which provides a detailed ethnography of engineers at work and reconstructs the chain of events that led to that disaster.

Vaughan's analysis shows that the disaster was not the result of organizational deviance, but rather of acting in accordance with NASA guidelines. It was not the violation of safety rules that provoked the failure, but the reproduction of learned cognitive and cultural scripts. In fact, vision and its related guidelines, protocols etc. are conceptualised for use in conditions of uncertainty; that is, when taking a decision may be difficult and risky. To be noted is that in an uncertain situation of this kind, without clear evidence, the protocol prevailed over the analysis of parameters suggesting a different direction. Disintegration of the entire vehicle began after an O-ring seal in its right solid rocket booster (SRB) failed at liftoff. Forecasts for January 28 predicted an unusually cold morning, with temperatures close to 31 °F (−1 °C), the minimum temperature permitted for launch. Several engineers expressed their concern about the effect of the temperature on the resilience of the rubber O-rings sealing the joints of the SRBs. In particular, Thiokol engineers, responsible for the construction and maintenance of the shuttle's SRBs, argued that they did not have enough data to determine whether the joint would seal properly if the O-rings were colder than 53° F (12° C). On the contrary, NASA people were confident that if the primary O-ring failed the secondary O-ring would still seal.

While Vaughan comes to the conclusion that the launch was rule-based and actors had a passive role, Freeland gives another interpretation that views compliance as a strategic behaviour. In the case of the Challenger launch, compliance with procedure had a strategic value: it was intended to avoid setting a precedent that, by establishing a new temperature parameter, could have limited future missions, thus compromising the entire Shuttle program. Freeland stresses the political character of that decision, whereas Vaughan's interpretation of conformity is focused more on the role of learned cultural scripts. For Freeland, the decision was not simply a non-reflective reproduction of a routine; rather, it was based on "strategic consideration in a highly politicized environment" (Freeland 1997: 133). Freeland thus highlights an important aspect of organizational functioning: the justification of one's acting through compliance with rules and adherence to mechanical claims (Fine 2006: 7).

If the issue is framed in these terms, another important characteristic of vision becomes clear: vision is strategic not only because it provides guidelines that orient behaviour, making it possible to plan action in advance and to anticipate opponents' moves; it is also strategic because it acts as justification for that behavior. Which means that it can be used afterwards to make sense of the course of action (Hardy, Palmer and Phillips 2000). In other words, vision acts both prospectively when it orients decision-making, and retrospectively when it functions as a form of accountability.

Organizational analysis of the decision-making process preceding the Challenger launch, despite the specificity of the setting, provides useful insights into how organizations manage complexity and uncertainty and take decisions under strong pressure and expectations. Although the setting is different, this episode illustrates the tendency to rely on devices that mediate our experience of reality and standardize our ways of seeing (Virilio 1994: 13).

Cities are interesting organizing settings where emergencies are frequent and strategic vision is often thrown into crisis by everyday practices. They therefore represent a suitable field in which to observe how vision affects urban management. Cities are constantly re-organized through usual and unexpected uses that alter its urban configuration. Urban management must

constantly cope with a variety of situations that escape the administrative vision and are difficult to handle on the basis of guidelines.

An episode that illustrates the relationship between vision as a strategic tool and the resolution of critical situations concerns the regulation of buskers in the city of Trento (Coletta, Gabbi, Sonda 2008). The study reconstructs how the local administration managed the presence of street musicians in the city centre and analyzes the gap between protocols and everyday practices. After the protests of people working and living in the city centre, a municipal police regulation established specific areas where music performances were allowed. Because such performances are improvised, they fall outside the framework of the strategic plan regulating the organization of cultural events. The plan reveals how the public administration conceives the use of public spaces for entertainment: everything has its specific position in time and space. Hence, noise and disruption are only tolerated as planned exceptions, as pertaining to institutional cultural events. This attitude provides a scenario of how the city, or part of it, should function, and it implicitly establishes a standard that defines what is suitable and what is not for a city centre. Consequently, whatever does not fall within that vision is perceived as deviant and remains out of control until normalized. Paradoxically, it is the 'protocol' that gives rise to an emergency. Emergencies, in fact, are non-codified situations which are thus perceived as problematic. Procedures, on the other hand, are meant to normalize problems, to address indeterminate situations through determinate steps. Not abiding by them means invalidating the rationale of the strategy itself and creating a precedent – as in the case of the Challenger launch.

Strategic plans (both urban and regional) represent a specific version of territorial development and trace its path. The vision they embody functions as a model for action. A model, in fact, provides a lens through which to address a problem, to grasp reality and approach it. Models simulate reality in order to make its interpretation easier. In this sense, a mock-up is an instrument for re-description. Ricoeur (1975), in his analysis of metaphorical language, addresses the relationship between metaphor and model to show that a model operates like a metaphor since it re-describes a phenomenon through the device of resemblance. In metaphor, in fact, the similar is perceived notwithstanding differences.

Metaphors and models are not only descriptive; they also have the heuristic value of disclosing new meanings and perspectives by displaying connections between entities perceived as distant. Ricoeur observes that metaphor is for poetic language what a model is for scientific language. The purpose of scale models, in particular, is to create or reproduce by shrinking, enlarging or slackening. Such models enable understanding of the properties of the original by showing what it looks like, or how it works. Like metaphors, which do not consider the term of comparison in its entirety, they reproduce only the main characteristics. Models of this kind have another important property: they are based on conventions that furnish a knowledge-gathering method (Farinelli 2009: 66). These properties of scale models recall Latour's 'immutable mobiles'. A map, for instance, has the distinctive feature of reproducing, on a different scale, the real proportions of a territory and keeping them invariable through time and space.

Unlike scale models, diagrams and theory pictures may convey a message without actually representing visible objects or resembling observable phenomena. Lynch (1991) discusses the rhetorical and representational uses of these illustrations in different scientific texts. He shows how, although they add very little to description, they are used to simulate the key passages of a theory and "to exhibit and authorize a certain 'impression of rationality'" (Lynch 1991: 11). Such interest in representational realism has become increasingly common outside the scientific domain, especially in corporate discourse and marketing strategies, where their purpose is to summarize an entire phenomenon in schematic presentations that can easily describe complex relations.

4. Organizing

It is possible to recognize a common trait of vision in the cases examined thus far: its capacity to orient our sense-making and courses of action. By providing a direction, vision functions as an organizing principle both when it acts prospectively and when it is used retrospectively to give account of a decision or behaviour. Projects and renderings not only re-organize space through drawings, graphs and figures; they first shape it through our expectations and counter-arguments and affect our relationship with places.

Vision organizes because it provides a structure within which one should move: it sets agendas, defines priorities, establishes standards, and determines functions. It also seeks to manage the unpredictable by means of protocols. In other words, representing, anticipating, and normalizing are all ways of organizing.

The organizing capacity of vision relies on the management of information through visualization: representations are ‘governing tools’ in Latour’s sense when he says that “the ‘great man’ is a little man looking at a good map” (Latour 1986: 26). Human geography has widely discussed the role of cartography in shaping our relation with the world and how we conceive reality (Farinelli 2009: 29). Accordingly, the ‘visual culture’ characterizing our society tends to believe more in inscriptions than in experience (Latour 1986; Farinelli 2003; Virilio 1994, among others).

Spatial visions (Shipley, 2000; Fellagra, 2004: 180) are examples of organizing and controlling *dispositifs*. According to Sennett (1991), the grid used to organize the development of American cities is a frame, a scheme used to neutralize the heterogeneity of places in order to be free to organize the territory regardless of the limits of its shape. A grid is neutral *per se* and may have different applications; it is the vision that determines its use and its effects. In the cases discussed by Sennett, the grid produces a space of authority because it is grounded in the supremacy of the normative tool over the interpretation of peculiarities. Here again, vision acts as a form of normalization intended to restore what is ‘out of shape’ within the grid’s organization. Thus complexity is managed through neutralization, by means of a standard which may be a grid in the case of spatial organization or a protocol in the case of decision-making.

Let us again consider the urban domain. Although vision is produced by public administrations to manage the disorder of cities and to regulate their development, it does not incorporate disorder as an innate characteristic of cities because these are seen “above all as a *structure*, not a *process*” (Czarniawska and Solli 2001: 8). Accordingly, close attention is paid to the construction of a reassuring urban image and the organization of its functions, as if such a pattern could last despite the disorder introduced by everyday practices.

The case of the measure regulating buskers in the Trento city centre (Coletta, Gabbi, Sonda 2008) is a precise example of urban management. The new ordinance on busking identifies specific areas around the old town centre where musicians are allowed to perform without restrictions and without previous announcement. Within the old town centre, instead, street performances are limited and buskers are required to notify the urban police three days before their performance. The introduction of notification is a device that enables city police to exercise control over urban space, since they know in advance where the music performances will take place, and they can verify from the notification the time assigned for the performance.

The ‘grid’ used to manage busking is a sort of zoning device that organizes the use of public spaces in the city centre and allows coordination of the presence of street musicians at a distance. This frame reflects a vision of the city centre whereby the public character of space is a residual dimension after residential and professional needs and from exceptional events. The measure also reflects the main attitude towards urban practices like busking, which are even more disturbing because their visibility encroaches on our individuality (Sennett 1991).

In fact, by framing deviance as a moral difference, visibility “can be empowering as well as disempowering” (Brighenti 2007: 335). In the eyes of public opinion, buskers are beggars, while they try to distance themselves from that label. According to the process of image construction outlined by Czarniawska (2008), buskers build their image through *allomorphy*: that is, they differentiate themselves in opposition to an undesirable entity (the beggars). Likewise, newspapers address the issue in terms of ‘innocuousness’ by constructing a specific emplotment in which innocuousness is the price buskers pay to perform.

Conclusion

The main aspects outlined in this article have emerged from a review of applications which range across highly heterogeneous domains and thus traverse different fields of research. While organizing the materials for this article, I realized that the many connections among those meanings were possibly due to an inner characteristic of vision: that of being a form of narrative, a discourse that shapes sense-making. Vision, in other words, despite being a many-sided concept, is above all a matter of meaning management.

Vision can be framed as a process of *mise en sens*: on the one hand it is itself a product of a sense-making, on the other it enacts different behaviours that in their turn re-shape the vision. When people faithfully follow maps, or when they react to urban plans or contest the scenario presented in a rendering, they legitimate those entities and corroborate their existence while affecting them. Accordingly, a vision is the result of an action net, but in its turn it activates human and non-human actors.

The cases discussed in this article suggest that vision is performative because it does more than give visibility to abstract entities. Firstly, vision, as a metaphor, orients our gaze, fosters our imagination and enables us to discover new patterns and new configurations. Secondly, the political implications of vision relate to the action net developing around it, as in the case of guidelines, or in project developments. Thirdly, vision acts as a frame that organizes our agenda, affects our way of experiencing the world and produces control devices, such as grids, to normalize the territory and organize social action.

A case in point is the map. This increasingly mediates our relationship with spaces, and it is becoming a new form of faith: we rely on maps more than on our experience and cognitive capabilities. As in a state of uncertainty forecasters are hostage to their models (Fine 2006) and engineers to protocols (Vaughan 1996; Freeland 1997), we are at the mercy of visual devices when we treat the information that they provide as unquestionable facts, without interpreting them through our common sense. Although “the absence of a report is not the absence of a storm” (Fine 2006, 14) we tend to lapse into an automatism which proves the faith that we place in scripts. The article opened with the singular case of creationists seeking to support faith with visible proofs; it then described a reverse situation in which a sort of lay faith enters everyday life as a mediator between us and the functioning of the world.

Some similarities have emerged during the exploration of the term ‘vision’ particularly with the concepts of metaphor and strategy, which, in fact, corroborate the narrative character of vision. Within discourse analysis, strategy is considered to be a linguistic construct that serves to make sense of the world and organize it (Hardy, Palmer, Phillips 2000: 1229-1230). Similarly, vision, both when it is used to account for past decisions or prospectively to provide a scenario, does not mirror reality; instead, it shapes reality.

Despite the overwhelming presence of visual devices, vision is still mainly a narrative that can be used, as we have seen, to promote, justify and describe a specific version of reality. This characteristic incorporates all the other definitions and functions – or better, it informs them. Storytelling is, in fact, a form of organizing and rationalizing. Ricoeur

addresses this topic in *Temps et récit* (1985), where he focuses on the functions of narrative emplotment. He observes that the plot represents the order that enables the elements of a story to be connected together. Through emplotment the heterogeneity of events, agents and objects becomes meaningful as part of the network that constitutes the narrative rationale. Emplotment creates a “concordant discordance,” a coherent unity in which constitutive elements have an explanatory role and provide a causal sequence. Similarly, vision aims at conveying a clear and rational picture where the elements are kept together to give rise to a logical and convincing account.

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