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Nathalie Heinich, "De la visibilité. Excellence et singularité en régime médiatique". Paris: Gallimard, 2012, 593 pp.

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Book Review

Nathalie Heinich, "De la visibilité. Excellence et singularité en régime médiatique". Paris: Gallimard, 2012, 593 pp.

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This is an ambitious and inspiring book. It provides a large-scale map to approach fame-as-visibility in the domain of the media and, more amply, popular culture. Over the last decade or so, social research has increasingly come to recognise that *visibility* ranks as one of those Maussian "total social facts" which social science cannot do without. In this book, conceived of as the summa of a 25-year inquiry, Heinich brings such a total-social-factual perspective to its completion.

Heinich recounts she was initially attracted to this field by an interest in celebrity culture and celebrity cults. Visibility, she argues, offers an enlarged framework to rethink celebrity and its dynamics. A reflection on that peculiar phenomenon of "attachment without familiarity" that contradistinguishes the impossible or "para-social" relation between the star and the fan enables the researcher to conceptualise visibility as a form of social *capital*, with its Hegelian games of recognition, its symmetries and asymmetries, its accumulative logic. The very notion of "public person" is at the centre of a series of visual manipulations carried out around a kind of paradoxical sacred-mundane body.

"Being public," Heinich ponders, cannot but begin as a sheer quantitative ratio between the number of people we know and the number of people who know us. Fame, as Tarde already remarked, is "a kind of social quantity." But, visibility is also a special kind of value or worth (*grandeur*) – one cannot fail to appreciate its intensive, qualitative dimension, its "coloration," so to speak. Thus, the task of visibility as a theoretical category and a social-scientific notion should include capturing the deeper meaning and the outcomes of such a special quantity-turned-into-quality.

Examining the star as a new social élite – a peculiar prolongation and transformation of the aristocracy of the *ancien régime* – Heinich observes how fame has turned from a mainly temporal axis (the "legacy of great men") to a spatial axis (the presence of superstars among us). Actors, singers, sports people, politicians, speakers, anchor-persons, and models (*mannequins*) form the constellations of such new star élite. The issue then becomes understanding the technological infrastructures as well as the economic, legal, and cultural consequences of various technical patterns of visibility. Better, what needs to be tackled is the array of "techniques of visibilisation" (*techniques de mise en visibilité*) that enable the instalment, circulation and consumption of personal images.

Accordingly, the history of media can be rewritten in terms of how subsequent media technologies have manipulated visibility. Visibility strategies and visibility management have passed through successive stages, shifting, for instance, from an artisanal to an industrial form (although the lineage might not be linear). The economy of visibility – including royalties, compensations etc. – and the legal framework of visibility – the right to one's image etc. – define the mould and the rational logic of such mediated social history. Ultimately, however, what is essential is the social "experience" of visibility. In the second part of her book, Heinich devotes her attention to grasp the emotional

attachment to the star, including addictive psychological phenomena such as fascination, idolatry, identification, obsession and possession. Scopophilia and exhibitionism, the desire to watch and the desire to be watched, are two potentially compulsory human drives entailed by star-related visibility games. An intense circulation of power is at play, for admiration is never far form surveillance and the will to control.

When the organised, collective cults and rituals of celebrity are also added to the picture, it becomes possible to appreciate the fact that visibility can never be severed from a whole axiology, a sphere of moral assessment. The ambivalences of the experience of visibility have been remarked. Mapping the various moral evaluations of the existence of celebrities, Heinich reveals the on-going oscillation between an evaluation of visibility as value or, contrarily, anti-value, according to whether visibility is deemed to be an "authentic" or an "artificial" phenomenon, and according to the relation that is required or recorded between "fame," "glory," "uniqueness" and "merit." The charge of vanity, falsity, alienation, narcissism, indecency, obscenity, and so on, represent the persistent moralist's counter-choir on visibility.

In conclusion, this book cannot but captivate. While various case studies focused on the French media system might not be immediately accessible to an international readership, all the major theoretical points are round and clear, and squarely put. Heinich has written an encompassing, rich, and faceted work. This book is a must read for all scholars interested in social visibilities.

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