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Introduction to the issue on the visuality of social classes, particularly class history, class conflict, and class consciousness.

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Visuality of Social Classes: Histories and Actions



Tout va bien (1972), directed by Jean-Luc Godard i Jean-Pierre Gorin

The notorious assertion that "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles" sounds like a good theory that warrants further investigation.
It implies that beneath much of history sits the structure of social class, and that a certain category of event – namely, successive eruptions of class struggle – underpins the main course of history. Looking from this perspective prompts a certain way of thinking about the past that imprints it with meaning. Not because it lays bare the *telos* of history, but because it orients our thinking about history and provides a conceptual framework for its investigation, politicizes our interpretation of the social past, and reveals its dominant strands.

But how to show such history? Can we actually see the events that make up history conceived in such a manner? Ostensibly, yes: after all, we are dealing with the history of material processes rather than the history of ideas, and because class struggle takes place within reality, it must, by extension, be visible – just as factories, workers' protests, farmers' strikes, and police batons are visible. This simple answer, however, is ultimately misleading. Firstly, because history viewed from a purely subjective perspective does not correspond to its objective counterpart.[1] The here and now does not necessarily prompt us to investigate the structures that brought us to this point: the violence of workers burning tires, farmers dumping grain on train tracks, and *banlieue* residents vandalizing cars obscures a different type of violence, one that is essentially invisible but still triggers outbursts of rage.

The desperation of the protesters, sometimes expressed using brutal means, is usually portrayed in too alluring and spectacular a manner to allow viewers to discern what media reports of such events tend to omit: the relations of power and domination that led to this desperation.

Secondly, the presumption that history will translate directly into the visible is inherently false, because class history was – in the light of the supposition cited above – supposed to be different from history woven together from singular events and grand personalities: it was to be history built upon concepts formulated by way of the scientific interrogation of history. Social class is a structure, and structures – to paraphrase the well-known slogan from May '68 – don't take to the streets. Thanks to the concept, however, we can, quite literally, see more.

The image we open this issue of *View* with – a freeze-frame from Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin's 1972 film *Tout va bien* – well illustrates this ambivalence, the vacillation between seeing and invisibility, between unmediated vision and intercession and interpretation. It shows a workers' strike, but framed in a manner that would have little chance of making it into the official media narrative as it shuns reportage tropes. We see a cross-section of a typical business office building, its interior divided into various rooms and passageways. In an upper-floor room, near the top-right corner, is the office of the chief executive, held hostage by workers. Several workers have also taken over the adjoining secretary's office, to guard their hostage and control the flow of communication. In the hallway are yet more workers, as there are on the stairs leading to the floors above. Some are dressed in overalls, while those still at their stations on the processing lines are wearing aprons stained with animal blood. Their bearing suggests anticipation. Theirs is a spontaneous sit-in strike, and everyone is waiting to see how the situation will unfold. In Godard and Gorin's film, the shot the frame is taken from is two minutes long, with the camera dollying

horizontally along the entire cross-section of the administrative building, revealing the spaces usually occupied by the factory's white-collar staff (the chief executive, his secretary, planners, and accountants), all of which have now been taken by force. At its heart, the picture politically "x-rays" the spontaneous strike, serving as both a reconstruction of and an inquiry into an eruption of class struggle. The workers soon chant, threatening to "kick the asses" of the upper management, and unfurl a banner in the center of the frame spelling out autonomist postulates such as: "Lock up the bosses, make the strike indefinite." The camera dollies from left to right and then all the way back, revealing to the careful viewer the "boundary of representation" – a ladder unlit by the stage lights, the backstage of the set.



Tout va bien (1972), directed by Jean-Luc Godard i Jean-Pierre Gorin

At first glance, the frame resembles theatrical scenery, as far as possible from a cinematic style that would imitate narratives woven by documentarians or TV reporters. Such theatrical associations obviously lead to Bertolt Brecht and the "alienation effect," generating, by way of representation, a space not just for feeling, but also thinking and reasoning. The image may also be conceptual, may stand for thinking about history, and may portray (or at least attempt to) events in which structures play the main role. "Actions" undertaken within this story also require some consideration, alongside conceptual work and translation into visual form. Not necessarily lending themselves to photography – like troops marching in formation or during battle – they may require an allegory, one that does not seek to conceal its own conditions of production, just like Godard and Gorin's film does not conceal them, opening with a scene of signing checks, a prerequisite for beginning principal photography on a film.

Likewise, the strike allegory from the freeze-frame on this issue's cover does not seek to conceal that it is a movie set, instead generating the distance necessary for the recognition of the strike as part of a certain structure: the enterprise-building, and ultimately also the (historical) mode of production.

The question of the visibility and visuality of social classes has been interrogated across the last two issues of *View*. At times, the question is framed directly as the problem of visualizing class and seeing the world through its eyes; at other times, this visibility is only indirectly manifest in the manner in which visual codes are incorporated into our conduct within the realms of labor, consumption, and politics. The two *View* issues, although featuring texts that interrogate disparate questions, are nevertheless intended to comprise a whole in which structure is inscribed into the course of history, while relations are also framed as actions – the basic events in the history of class. The common thread linking the essays in this latest issue of *View* is the particular attention they pay to the historical aspect of the visuality of class. These are issues related to class visibility and historical pursuits of class aesthetics, past attempts at identifying visual equivalents of class antagonisms, and, finally, the origins, persistence, and transformation of historical class habitus and their visual equivalents, props, and representations. Some of these habitus persist across centuries, breaking away from social conditions and becoming visual fossils, while certain class aesthetics are seized, recontextualized, and recirculated, relocating from the realm of labor to the realm of consumption. In the background of these metamorphoses are questions seeking to examine the historical agency of class: by way of visuality, class may call attention to its existence, but may also be "distilled" into an image created for its very eyes.

The **Close-Up** section opens with Adri Kácsor's essay *'Us' vs. 'Them': Communist Dialectical Images*, interrogating one of the essential inventions of communist visual culture: pictures

juxtaposing images of the bourgeoisie and the working class. By analyzing examples from interwar Central Europe and the Soviet Union, the author brings out their dialectical potential, which sought to inspire the emergence of revolutionary consciousness in their viewers. The next two essays, Maciej Duklewski's *The Worker's Photography Movement of the 1920s and 1930s* and Amelia Ochs' *Consuming Class*, also focus on the interwar period, and while they both explore the medium of photography, the archives the respective authors study could not be further from each other. Where Duklewski retraces the history of the debate around projects of photographing the working class launched at the time in Germany and Poland, Ochs recounts the visual origins of the middle-classes' fascination with the sophisticated aesthetics of consumption, using as examples early issues of the iconic lifestyle magazine *Vanity Fair*. In both cases, the properties of the photographic medium are used to mold and consolidate class identities. The shape of these identities, however, is radically different. Were we to juxtapose the archives produced by these two classes using the mechanism interrogated by Kácsor, then the exposed neck of the fitter portrayed by Bolesława Zdanowska, prominent against worn-out overalls, could be contrasted against the snow-white collar hovering over the chessboard, captured by Paul Outerbridge Jr.

While the arguments underpinning the next two essays center on contemporary images, the essays themselves continue to interrogate the historicity of class aesthetics. In her text *Behind the Ancestral Portrait*, Maja Głowacka examines media representations of contemporary aristocrats, exposing their paradoxical nature. In Głowacka's interpretation, the representations of the Polish aristocracy – historicizing, exotic, and based on exaggerated stylization – may serve as a cover for the actual upper classes (whose ranks are obviously not limited to the descendants of prominent landed families), their history and interests. In *Double 'Class'*, Arthur Crucq analyzes the

appropriation and commodification of the paraphernalia of working-class subcultures, using as an example the story behind Dr. Martens boots, which have been recontextualized from a functional, purpose-built object carrying strong working-class connotations into a trendy fashion item. In the essay, the author demonstrates that while appropriation and commodification may obscure the social realities of class in a late-capitalist society, they cannot erase them.

Viewpoint features Michał Januszaniec's visual essay, with accompanying text by Magda Szcześniak, proposing a look at the history of farmers' protests from the post-1989 transition era. Drawing on press photographs, TV footage, newsreels, and grass-roots video recordings, the authors construct an archive chronicling the popular resistance of farmers, who were struck particularly hard by free-market reforms. The mainstream public sphere is loath to bring up the memory of these protests, suppressed as it is by the story of the transition as a period of reveling in capitalism and building a civil society. It is crucial, from the perspective of this issue's theme, not only to recall the visual record of the transition-era protests – much of which was created by representatives of the mainstream media – but to extract from it the visual and performative "repertoires of contention" typical of 1990s peasant and popular movements. Many of the demonstrations, blockades, and occupations feature historicizing accessories such as scythes and stocks, used as avatars of the memory of historical violence inflicted on and committed by the peasantry. These props were often accompanied by effigies of the politicians implementing the free-market reforms. The food produced by the farmers – meat, eggs, bread, and grain – was repurposed as both a weapon and a protest prop, while the obscenity of the protesters – both figurative, as comedic vulgarity, and literal, in the form of manure poured on the streets – attested to their desperation.

Adam Lipszyc's essay *Red Meat, Green Death* offers a little respite from class themes. Writing about Maria Lassnig, the Austrian painter whose body of work was examined in a block of essays featured in a past issue of *View*, the author begins with an interrogation of the monstrousness that often marks the artist's self-portraits, proving that Lassnig's creatures – manifested as monster-animal or monster-machine hybrids – are visual manifestations of bodily anguish brought on by the process of (self-)subjugation. In **Perspectives** and **Snapshots**, we explore further historical examples of visualizing class, and inquire after the mechanisms and instruments underpinning these processes. In *The Power to Express Who You Can Become*, Magda Szcześniak interviews Sabine Hake about her book *The Proletarian Dream*, which examines the representation and self-representation of the German proletarian in the Imperial Germany and Weimar Republic periods. Analyzing images and performances produced across a variety of media and genres, Hake identifies two competing models of proletarian emotionality: passionate, ardent socialism, and the later vision of a disciplined and composed proletarian. In **Snapshots**, Małgorzata Litwinowicz reviews a number of recent publications exploring the popular history of Poland, retracing the undercurrents of their narratives and their suggested directions of "retelling everything anew." Wiktoria Tabak, meanwhile, examines three theater productions tackling the subject of class, and identifies a clear tendency among female theater artists working today to draw on private stories and tales of weakness for their storytelling.

The section closes with a double act centered on Michał Mokrzan's book *Klasa, kapitał i coaching* [*Class, Capital, and Coaching*]; taken together, the review penned by Kamila Biały and the author's response to it form a lively debate around the theoretical and methodological issues surrounding the study of identity-focused personal narratives.

Enjoy the read!

Editorial Team

1 The passage paraphrases Slavoj Žižek's distinction between subjective and objective violence, proposed in: idem, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008), 1–2, 9–15.