



(Through) Otthein's Eyes

Natàlia Cantó-Milà

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NATÀLIA CANTÓ-MILÀ

It was spring day in 1997. A rainy Monday morning in mid April. I was an Erasmus student at the Faculty of Sociology at the University of Bielefeld when I first met Otthein Rammstedt. I was a couple of months away from finishing my Sociology degree, full of hope and curiosity. Otthein offered an undergraduate course about the classics of sociology, and I had decided to attend despite my German being so poor that I could barely manage my weekly shopping in that language. That day he spoke about Durkheim, and that is almost all I can recall of the contents of that particular *Vorlesung*. I did not understand much else. Yet I can vividly recall many details of that morning, which were revealing to me. As I did not understand what he said, I had over an hour time to observe Otthein's other forms of communicating, of relating to others, to a whole world of contents, to the sober seminar room in which we were seated.

I observed how Otthein moved around the room and gesticulated with an energy that my own stereotypes did not allow me to expect from a German professor. He seemed to get moved by what he shared with us. I could see a passion in his eyes that I had seldom encountered in other scholars, that I have seldom encountered since. Otthein loved sociology, its history, but also its future and its possibilities. He could speak about that love and admiration without words, with his eyes and his gestures. He had a special way of communicating with/through his eyes, his so bright and expressive blue eyes, those same eyes that kept shining and speaking volumes when he was a very old man, so much weaker than when I first met him in that seminar room.

A few semesters after that April day, when my command of the German language did not stop me from engaging in deep conversations with Otthein (my PhD supervisor by then), I read the 'Sociology of the Senses' and could finally put into words what I had experienced in that seminar room, and had so often experienced since then in conversations with Otthein. I never dared to tell him. In that short piece about the senses, Simmel spoke about the look, as that vivid, processual relation between living beings which flows and binds, which simultaneously gives and takes: the look as pure relationality, in this case between human beings. Otthein was well aware of this, and he lived it to the fullest. He sought in the eyes of his interlocutors that same passion for knowledge and for exploring new ideas, that thirst for intellectual adventures.

The most precious gift Otthein could give to his students was a glimpse at the world through his eyes. He looked at the world as a painter would do. In fact, this should not come as a surprise. He was an excellent painter, although he seldom spoke about it. I only found out after praising a painting that fascinated me. One that stood in his living room and which looked like the secret map to a hidden world to me. Only then he would reveal that he had painted it.

It could happen in that same living room, in his office or at the Greek restaurant (that had stopped being a Greek restaurant long before I met him, but which to Otthein remained being 'the' Greek restaurant until his retirement). He would start painting a picture using his words, his eyes and his hands as his brushes. Otthein's eyes were a lens through which we could experience what it meant to engage in sociological observation, to exercise what Wright Mills called the 'sociological imagination.' I had studied the concept and Wright Mills' book during my degree, but I only came to understand what it meant through Otthein's eyes and his display of sociological imagination. Anything could be the spark that got him started. It could be a novel, a film, a certain wine, a person, ... And he would begin to pull threads that

connected the initial observation to so many other issues, hence pointing at a complex world of relations where one would have believed there were no relations to be found. One knew he was about to finish because a soft smile would appear on his face, as if he were pleased with himself, or with the picture he had just painted, perhaps with both. And the image, subtle, complex, full of freshly woven relational threads, disappeared slowly from our sight, as if only Otthein could summon this relational world that was not visible in plain sight. He accompanied his descriptions with the same hand gestures that had intrigued me in that first class, years ago, and which he used as if he was really painting on an invisible canvas. Attention and tension were sustained through his eyes, which shone with delight at discovering anew the relationality of the social, of life, of the world.

Otthein was a generous soul. I knew this from the beginning, but I fully grasped the width of his generosity when one day I raised my eyes from the books, looked around me, and understood that he had granted me with the greatest gift: I could suddenly see the world through Otthein's eyes.