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## ***The Social Meaning of Seeing the Bodies of Others and Showing One's Own Body: Alleys and Cafes in Seoul, South Korea<sup>1</sup>***

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This article investigates people's reactions to strangers' glances in public places. The study addresses the social meaning of simple visual interactions between strangers in public or semi-public spaces, with special attention to unconscious aspects. The ethnographic material was collected among old people sitting in alleys and young customers — in their 20s — of 'transparent' cafes with glass curtain walls. The analysis shows that the reaction to strangers' glances varies from person to person. On the other hand, there is a difference in the opportunities for visual interactions with strangers between the elderly using the alleys and young cafe customers. Drawing on the mirror neuron theory, the discussion shows that the difference in opportunities is directly related to the different reactions to strangers' glances. The ultimate aim is to contribute to extending the discussion on the social meanings of street spaces to unconscious aspects of interactions.

**Keywords:** Strangers, mirror neurons, public spaces, alley, cafe, visual interactions.

### **The Social Meaning of Simple Visual Interactions**

The focus of my research is the occasional interaction of 'seeing the bodies of others and showing one's own body' that occurs between strangers in the public or semi-public spaces. The aim is to disclose the social meaning of such a simple visual interaction, focusing on the unconscious aspect. Here, the 'body' is intended in Merleau-Ponty's sense as a unity of the physical body and the mind. His rejection of the mind-body dichotomy is famously expressed in his declaration 'I am my body' (Merleau-Ponty 1945: 175).

The study is cast in the anthropological approach to the urban space. As Prato and Pardo (2013) point out, until the 1980s, mainstream urban anthropology tended to be an 'anthropology of the city' as opposed to the conceptualization of 'anthropological research in the city'. Furthermore, the subjects of urban anthropology ranged from religious identity to ethnic minority, migrants, gender issues, education, social networks and so on (Prato and Pardo 2013: 92). A so-called 'spatial turn' occurred in the 1990s and 2000s, putting the urban spaces among the subjects of urban anthropology. Some anthropologists began to employ spatial theory and focused on the built environment (Low 2014: 15-17). In particular, several scholars have emphasized the social functions of the urban public space. In his study of Brasilia, Holston (1989: 107) refers to the streets as an urban space where one can experience public display and transactions of crowds. Lefebvre (2003: 18-19) enumerates the functions of the urban space of the street as follows: 'a meeting place', 'a form of spontaneous theater', a space where 'revolutionary events generally take place', and so on. Benjamin (1999: 423) argues that the streets are the dwelling place of the collective who is an eternally unquiet, eternally agitated being and that the masses of people learn, understand and invent in the space between the building fronts.

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However, unlike the above-mentioned studies, in discussing the social function of the streets, the present article focuses on the unconscious aspect of street encounters. In agreement with the approach that consider strangers as a major factor of public urban spaces (Jacobs 2010: 273; Lofland 1985: viii), this article focuses on very simple visual interactions that happen between people in the streets.

Academic debate on the visual interactions of strangers in the public spaces owes a great deal to Goffman's book, *Behavior in Public Places* (1963). According to Goffman, unfocused interactions are the kind of non-spoken communication that occurs when one person enters another person's field of view at an instant, and such interaction usually occurs in the situation of 'sheer and mere copresence' in relatively unobstructed places like public streets (Goffman 1963: 17-24, 33). These unfocused interactions comprise body idiom, that is, the bodily appearance and personal act such as dress, bearing, movement and position, sound level, physical gestures (Goffman 1963: 33). Goffman (1963: 35) argues that an aggregate of individuals constitutes a society when everyone shares some knowledge about body idioms. Gehl (2011: 21) points out that we get information about the outside social world by just being with others, and through this information we establish a confident relationship with the world around us.

Current academic interest in the visual interactions of strangers is reflected in the growing number of studies on the public realm. Lofland (1998: 77) notes that popular public realms are associated with pleasure and people-watching is one of the sources of such pleasure. Lofland defines 'public realm' as a social territory, the world of strangers and 'streets' (Lofland 1998: 10, 51). On a different level, Whyte (1980), a pioneer of visual sociology, recorded and analysed the streets of New York from different perspectives, using several kinds of cameras, and identified not only environments (movable chairs, fountains, etc.) but also people (pedestrians, musicians, etc.) as key elements that attract people in the public spaces (Lofland 1980: 19). In a similar line, research on urban life tends to rely on 'seeing' both as research methods and in relation to the research subject (Krase 2012: 20).

As I mentioned, the aim of this article is to extend the study of the social function of visual interactions between strangers in urban public spaces to the unconscious level. The 'mirror neuron' theory makes such an attempt possible. Mirror neurons have radically changed our understanding of social interactions (Keysers 2011: 10). According to this theory, some specific neurons 'mirror' the behaviour and emotions of the people surrounding us in a way that others become part of us. From such perspective, social cognition is understood as a form of communication that relies on the resemblances between organisms (Keysers 2011: 32).

Pardo and Prato (2018: 2) state that field research is an 'art of the possible', and in cities there are many possibilities thanks to the complexity of urban life. They also suggest that cooperation and exchange of knowledge across cognate disciplines can contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexity of the world. This article moves in that direction, trying to connect the field research based on ethnographic methods to the theory of neuroscience for a better understanding of the simple visual interactions between strangers in the streets.

## **A Bath of Multitude, Intercorporeality and Mirror neurons**

In the early 1990s, a team led by Rizzolatti discovered mirror neurons in a macaque monkey; they were described as neurons that are activated not only when directly executing a motion but also when observing the motion of others (Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia 2008: x-xi). Further discovery was made by Fogassi et al. (2005: 664-665), who found out that mirror neurons differentiate various intentions hidden under the same motion. At the same time, fMRI and PET revealed that such mirror neurons also exist in the human brain (Heyes 2010: 578; Keysers 2011: 42-45; Rizzolatti and Craighero 2004: 175-6). In particular, fMRI largely contributed to specifying where mirror neurons are located in the human brain (Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia 2008: 119).

Mirror neurons in the human brain are more complex than those in the monkey brain. To begin with, while the latter respond only in the transitive motions with the object, the former are also activated by the intransitive actions (Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia 2008: 117). Moreover, mirror neurons were discovered in wider areas of the human brain than in the monkey brain (Keysers 2011: 45-47). Finally, human mirror neurons are involved in a wide range of social cognition tasks as well as performing a specialized role in action understanding (Heyes 2010: 576-581). Heyes (2010: 579) enumerated and analysed the experiments carried out by Calvo-Merino et al. (2005) and Haslinger et al. (2005), among others, which showed that the activation of mirror neurons can be modulated by observation, sensory stimulation and learning. He concluded that the above-mentioned differences between monkeys and human beings can be explained by the different growth of the mirror neuron system. Several experiments also showed that mirror neurons may change even after becoming adults (Bastiaansen et al. 2011, Lahav et al. 2007). Furthermore, Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia (2008: 192) have argued that the elaboration of the mirror neuron system requires a potentially shared space for action; similarly, Bauer (2006: 54) has suggested that mirror neurons do not develop without a partner.

Some scholars have gone beyond ‘action understanding’ and tried to explain empathy with neural mirroring. It must be noted, however, that even long before the discovery of mirror neurons, authors like Baudelaire and Merleau-Ponty were interested in ‘the direct communication between bodies’. For example, Baudelaire’s prose poem ‘Crowd’ gives an excellent insight into the intuitive communication experienced among the mass, the main agent of modern cities.

‘It is not given to every man to take a bath of multitude; enjoying a crowd is an art [...] The poet enjoys the incomparable privilege of being able to be himself or some one else, as he chooses. Like those wandering souls who go looking for a body, he enters as he likes into each man’s personality. [...] The solitary and thoughtful stroller finds a singular intoxication in this universal communion. The man who loves to lose himself in a crowd enjoys feverish delights that the egoist locked up in himself as in a box, and the slothful man like a mollusc in his shell, will be eternally deprived of. He adopts as his own all the occupations, all the joys and all the sorrows that chance offers.’ (Baudelaire 1970: 20).

In Baudelaire's poem, 'a bath of multitude' is the privilege of being able to be oneself or someone else. The subject who takes the bath is 'the poet' who loves to lose himself in a crowd and adopts as his own all the occupation, all the joys and all the sorrows of the crowd. On the opposite side is 'the egoist locked up in himself as in a box' or 'the slothful man like a mollusc in his shell'. In conclusion, a bath of multitude is a metaphor for a kind of communication that breaks the boundary between one's body and another person's body.

In *Phénoménologie de la Perception* (1945), the philosopher Merleau-Ponty elaborates his analysis of physical and sensual interactions. Later, he argued that the communication of gestures comes about as if the other person's intention inhabits 'my body and mine his' (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 215), meaning that a person and another person are like organs of one single intercorporeality (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 168). Communication is based on a similar psycho-physical body in that it is precisely my body that perceives the body of the other and discovers a miraculous prolongation of my own intention in the other body (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 411-412). Merleau-Ponty argued for the immediate and direct communication between bodies about 50 years earlier than the discovery of mirror neurons. Contemporary scholars call Merleau-Ponty's theorization 'intercorporeality' (Tanaka 2015: 460-461), and this concept supplies a theoretical basis to neuroscientific analyses on empathy (Gallese 2009: 526).

Singer et al. (2004) and Wicker et al. (2003) draw on their experimental results to argue that visual stimuli cause neural mirroring. Thus, people can obtain emotional empathy or intuitive perception of the pain or disgust experienced by others.

Inspired by this diverse literature, in this article I look at very simple and basic visual interactions — that is, 'seeing other bodies and showing one's own body' — that take place in public or semi-public spaces. The discussion attempts to contribute to extending the social meaning of such visual interactions to the unconscious aspects.

## **Visual Interactions between Strangers**

### *Field Sites: Alleys and Transparent Cafes*

I carried out fieldwork in the spaces where visual interactions between strangers take place in real-time. The aim was to collect not opinions based on memory but the feeling when the interactions occurred. Initially, I planned to conduct fieldwork only in alleys. In Seoul, the alley is the space where, traditionally, communal relationships occur (Cho 2015: 78). However, since the 1980s, the Housing Redevelopment Project of the Seoul government has prompted the replacement of low-density residential areas inhabited by low-income people with expensive high-rise apartment complexes; as a consequence, the alleys have almost disappeared (Cho 2015: 52-53). According to Hwang (2005: 71), the 'loss' of social interactions in the alleys is a phenomenon found across many cities in South Korea. Nevertheless, Seoul is a city with many mountains and, therefore, small neighbourhoods with alleys are still located on steep slopes around the foot of the mountains. So, I expected that during the fieldwork it would be easy to discover people sitting in the alleys in these neighbourhoods and to be able to ask them why they were spending time outside their houses.

During my first field trip in the winter of 2020, while walking around several neighbourhoods located on mountain slopes, I observed a few benches and traditional wooden bedsteads (*pyungsang*) in the alleys of *Heangchon-dong*. I decided that this neighbourhood would be my field site. *Heangchon-dong* is a neighbourhood (*dong*) in *Jongno-gu*. As of 2015, the total population of the neighbourhood was about 4,000 (Seoul Government 2016: 118-120). Geographically, the neighbourhood is located at the bottom of the *Inwang* Mountain, one of four mountains that are connected by the Fortress Wall of Seoul, a traditional fortress in old Seoul.

However, when early summer arrived and the weather got warm, I did not see people sitting in the alleys. The exception were old people sitting outside the open front yard of the community centre for the elderly (*gyungro-dang*)<sup>2</sup> and a few elderly females chatting while trimming vegetables on the cement porch of Sr-3's house. Sr-3 is one of the senior citizens whom I interviewed. I use the numbered acronyms Sr-1, Sr-2, and so on, to maintain the anonymity of my interlocutors. I soon realized that chance encounters with the chosen group of elderly people would not be easy; they were mainly affected by the weather conditions, like the rainy season or heat waves, and, later, by the severity of the COVID-19 emergency measures. Thus, I identified the 'transparent' cafes as an additional field site. The expression 'transparent cafe' refers to a cafe with glass-curtain walls, which fosters a relationship of 'mutual intrusion' between streets and cafes. In other words, thanks to the transparent walls, pedestrians can see cafe customers sitting by windows; at the same time, cafe customers can see passers-by and enjoy the street landscape.

While wandering the streets, I saw cafe customers sitting by the window of the transparent cafes, although there were other seats available inside the cafes, and wondered why they chose those specific seats. Architect Gyeong-hwan Chun (the representative of the architect's office, Deep Scenery) whom I interviewed, notes that cafes with glass-curtain walls have been popular since the early 1990s in Seoul. According to him, this type of cafe appeared for the first time in *Apgujeong-dong* and then expanded to *Sinchon*. More specifically, the cafe 'Bodyguard', which opened in *Apgujeong-dong* in 1993, is considered the first transparent cafe with glass-curtain walls. The KBS news of 9 June 1994 refers to the transparent cafes around *Gangnam* and *Sinchon* as 'so-called Bodyguard cafes'.

In architectural history, the fashion of glass walls is the result not only of new techniques, such as curtain walls and steel frames, but also of a new conception of 'space-time' (Giedion 1969: 430, 483-492, 598-599). This new conception emerged at the beginning of the 20th century, following attempts to integrate space and time in various fields such as science, art and architecture. The space-time is characterized by a 'simultaneity' that allows perspectives from various angles and 'the interpenetration' between inner and outer space (Giedion 1969: ivi, 436, 445, 529). Today, glass contributes greatly to realizing this concept in architecture, of which transparent cafes with glass walls are a representative example.

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<sup>2</sup> In Seoul, there is at least one *gyungro-dang* in the administrative division of *dong*.

Eventually, I decided that my research sites would be the alleys in *Heangchon-dong* and the four transparent cafes located in *Mangwon-dong* and *Changcheon-dong*. For the collection of ethnographic material, I found three methods particularly relevant; walking, interviews and questionnaires. Walking helped me to identify the features of the streets and discover suitable sites for the fieldwork. Also, walking was a way to find potential interviewees. I carried out interviews with the elderly sitting by the *gyungro-dang* and in the alleys. According to a staff of *Gyonam-dong* Community Service Office, as of 2020, the total number of members of the *gyungro-dang* in *Heangchon-dong* is 36. Of these, 10 senior citizens were interviewed. A short-answers questionnaire was used instead for customers of the transparent cafes in *Changcheon-dong* and *Mangwon-dong*.<sup>3</sup> Because the two selected neighbourhoods were crowded with transparent cafes, I could easily move to a different cafe in case the owner or staff did not allow me to distribute the questionnaire, or if there were no customers sitting by the window. Let me explain why I used questionnaires instead of interviews in the cafes.

In the last decade, the number of cafes in Seoul has sharply increased, to the point that it is called a ‘City of Cafes’. Cafes are now used not only as places for drinking tea or meeting people but also as reading rooms, study rooms or offices (Jun and Kim 2021: 30-44; Kim 2019: 3-5). The increase in the number of cafes can be partly explained with the individualized, residential instability, and employment difficulties in Korean society (Jun and Kim 2021: 44). Generally, cafes are not a place where one would talk to strangers. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic made it more difficult to conduct interviews indoors. So, instead of interviewing them, I asked cafe customers sitting by the window to fill in a questionnaire. A total of 10 people — 9 cafe customers and 1 employee — completed the questionnaire. The staff volunteered to complete the questionnaire.

#### *The Senior Citizens in the Alleys*

Interviews in the alleys were carried out among old people who were sitting at the two aforementioned places; that is, the yard of the *gyungro-dang* and the porch of Sr-3’s house. I did not collect personal information such as the name or age of the elderly. As I mentioned earlier, interviewees were identified by a number added to the abbreviation for ‘Senior’ (‘Sr’); thus, I shall refer to them as Sr-1, Sr-2, and so on. The interviews were carried out intermittently, from June to September 2020, avoiding the periods when the number of COVID-19 infections sharply increased and the summer rainy season (*jangma*) which lasted 54 days.

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<sup>3</sup> *Mangwon-dong* a neighbourhood in *Mapo-gu*, and *Changcheon-dong* a neighbourhood in *Sinchon*.



Figure 1. The benches in front of the *gyunggro-dang*. Photograph by Kim Young-Jin.

Sr-1, Sr-2, Sr-3 were interviewed in June, Sr-4 in August, interviews with Sr-5 to Sr-10 were conducted in September. All, except Sr-3 and Sr-6, are female and were interviewed in the yard of the *gyunggro-dang*. Sr-3, female, was interviewed at her house's porch. Sr-6 is the only male interviewee. I came across Sr-6 while he was walking with a stick near the *gyunggro-dang*; I asked if I could interview him. Sr-6 agreed, sat in a chair in front of a house near the *gyunggro-dang* and answered all my questions.

I was told that elderly males usually do not sit on the bench of the centre and that they usually spend time at home or walk along the promenade route of the *Inwang* Mountain. Even when senior citizens attended the centre before the COVID-19 pandemic, female seniors and male seniors used different floors: the former stayed on the first floor and the latter on the second floor. The sex ratio of the elderly population in this neighbourhood sharply changes after the age of 75. Specifically, as of 2010, the men ratio per 100 women is 66.3% for the 75-79 years old and 43.30% for the 80-84 years old (Seoul Government 2016: 121). Local residents reported to me that male members are less than 10 among a total of 36 members. This explains the scarce presence of elderly males in the neighbourhood.

Unlike elderly males, elderly females are often seen sitting on the wooden benches of the open yard of the centre. According to Sr-1, the elderly usually stayed inside the centre, but now are sitting in the yard because all *gyunggro-dangs* in Seoul have been shut down due to COVID-19 since early February 2020.

*Researcher (henceforth, Resch):* I have walked the alleys of the neighbourhood for a few days. But it was hard to see people.

*Sr-1:* Yes. People do not spend a lot of time in the alleys.

*Resch:* Why aren't they coming out?

*Sr-1:* Because of Corona.

*Resch:* Did they spend a lot of time in the alleys before Corona?

*Sr-1:* Oh, the *gyunggro-dang* was not closed at that time, so people usually stayed inside the *gyunggro-dang*.

*Resch*: You are usually staying indoors?

*Sr-1*: Yes, I am.

*Resch*: So, there are normally not many people in the alleys? Or only these days?

*Sr-1*: No, it was like that in the old days, too. Even when I go to the market, I go fast and come back home by bus.

Usually, elderly females preferred to stay inside the centre rather than in its yard. All female interviewees said that they see people passing by because they now sit in the yard, but they do not enjoy watching strangers. Nevertheless, they prefer to sit in this yard rather than staying at home on their own. Sr-2 said that she prefers to stay in this yard because she can meet people. Sr-4 explained:

‘It is good because this yard is cool and I can hear people’s voices. It is better coming here than only changing the channel on television at home.’ (Sr-4)

The senior citizens of *Heangchon-dong* generally spend most of their time in the neighbourhood, except when they go to markets, cathedrals, churches or the *Jongno* Culture and Sports Centre. Sr-10 said, ‘The rich can go around in their own cars. But in our case, we all go to *Youngcheon* market, at best’. This traditional market is a few bus-stops away. Their daily interactions, too, were centred among the neighbours. Sr-2 said, ‘On the day when I do not meet any acquaintance in this yard, I am a little depressed and disappointed’.

Sr-3 also said that she feels ‘disappointed’ on the day when she does not see neighbours. She cannot take long walks because of health problems. So, she usually meets neighbours outside her house. She used the word ‘cool’, to describe how she feels when sitting on the porch in front of her house. Then she added that while the inside of her house is also cool because of being airy, it is enjoyable talking to and playing with neighbours coming and going by the house. Therefore, ‘cool’ can be interpreted as expressing both emotion and temperature.

*Resch*: Do you feel depressed on the day you do not see any neighbours?

*Sr-3*: I feel disappointed when there is no acquaintance in the alley.

*Resch*: Is there a difference between staying inside and sitting in front of your house?

*Sr-3*: Oh, it is cool when I am sitting here. When I come out of my house, then I can see people coming and going. But my house is cool, too. Even though other houses might be hot, my house is airy if I open that door [she points at a door inside her house]. So, the inside of my house is cool. Nonetheless, when I stay here, neighbours who pass by sit and play. I am sitting here because it is enjoyable.

When I asked, ‘How do you feel when strangers passing by in the alley look at you?’, I got two different answers, split equally among the interviewees. Sr-1, Sr-2, Sr-3 and Sr-8 answered ‘I feel uncomfortable’, while Sr-4, Sr-5, Sr-7 and Sr-9 said ‘I do not care about it’. Most of them could not explain the reason for their answer. Only Sr-5 said, ‘I don’t care about it. They have eyes. So, they can look at me’.



Besides, two elderly people pointed out that there had been changes after the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, in answering the question, ‘Why do you feel uncomfortable when strangers look at you?’, Sr-6 said:

‘It’s a thin story! We do not know whether they have a disease or not. People do not talk to each other even though they pass by each other. [...] Before, people were kind to each other, had a conversation even with strangers in the park. [...] There’s absolutely no such person these days!’ (Sr-6)

While answering the question, Sr-6’s feelings ran high and he left abruptly without saying goodbye.

Another interviewee, Sr-10, complained that, after the COVID-19 pandemic, she felt hostility from strangers’ glances; before, she said, she did not have this feeling. It must be pointed out that the Korean government began to implement Social Distancing in February 2020, forcing people to use masks and maintain a physical distance of 2 meters in both public and business places.

‘Before Corona, it was okay. These days, I am scared of people’s eyes. I feel hostility from people’s eyes. [...] These days, I am scared even of the youth of the neighbourhood.’ (Sr-10)

Then, I asked whether senior citizens look in the mirror and care about their clothes before they go to the yard of the centre. Most interviewees said that they usually do so when they go out. For instance, Sr-2 answered:

‘When I go out of my home, I change my clothes and care about my appearance. [...] Anyway, I care little about the clothes but I change at least a top when I go out.’ (Sr-2)

I asked why elderly people care about their appearance. Sr-1 answered, ‘Because of meeting people’ and Sr-2 said, ‘Because neat is better than dirty when one comes into contact with people’.

To recap, the interviews I carried out among elderly people in *Haengchon-dong* show that they began to get together in the front yard of the *gyungro-dang* after the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead, before the pandemic, they spent much of their time inside the centre; furthermore, they did not often go outside the neighbourhood. Therefore, they did not have many opportunities to come face to face with strangers in their everyday lives. However, we have also seen that a few elderly women gathered for a chat on the cement porch of Sr-3’s house. When I asked the elderly women sitting on the benches and the cement porch how they felt when strangers looked at them, half said that they felt uncomfortable, while the other half said that they did not care. I shall compare this material with the responses of the transparent cafe customers, which I will present in the next sub-section. Let me anticipate that I found a negative response to strangers’ glances more among the elderly sitting in the alleys than among the transparent cafe customers.

### Customers Sitting by Windows of ‘Transparent’ Cafes

The transparent walls of cafes reveal the entire body of a customer sitting inside, from head to toe. Through such a large window, the customers can see the street landscapes and, at the same time, become part of the street landscape. The present study focused on the visual interaction between street pedestrians and cafe customers that happens at this kind of cafe.



Figure 2. The transparent walls of Personal Coffee. Photograph by Kim Young-Jin.

The questionnaire survey was carried out focusing on the customers sitting by the window in four cafes, from June to July 2020. The cafes were ‘Starbucks’ and ‘Hollys’ in *Changcheon-dong*, and ‘Offnen’ and ‘Personal Coffee’ in *Mangwon-dong*. For reference, the word, Offnen, means ‘to open’ in German. A total of 10 persons completed the questionnaire and the results are as follows. All respondents said that they preferred window seats, ‘because of being able to see outside scenery’. The exceptions were Respondent-C (henceforth, Respt-C) and Respt-D (see Table 1). Respt-C said, ‘As it is bright’; Respt-D said, ‘I can concentrate easily’.

Respt	sex	age	Q-2: (If you prefer to window seats) What is the reason?
A	F	early 20s	Because of good view.
B	F	early 20s	I feel good because I can see the outside.
C	M	late 20s	As it is bright.
D	M	late 20s	I can concentrate easily as my eyes do not go onto the place where sound comes out.
E	M	late 20s	I like the seat to watch the outdoor scenery. As it is open.
F	F	early 20s	Because of watching outside the windows and looking at people passing by.
G	F	late 20s	Because I can watch outside the window.
H	F	early 20s	I like watching people passing by, nature, etc. I like open areas as it is not stuffy.
I	M	early 20s	Because I like watching the street landscapes from window seats.
J	F	late 20s	Because I like being in an open space.

Table 1. Answers to Q-2.

The third question (Q-3) was ‘Do you feel uncomfortable when people walking in the streets see you?’ 9 of 10 respondents answered ‘No’ to this question. Respt-D said ‘Yes’. Those who said ‘No’ explained their answer as follows (see also Table 2). Respt-C, Respt-F, Respt-J gave a tautological answer, saying, ‘I don’t care about other people’s glances’ but gave no explanation as to why they do not care about other people’s glances. Respt-B, Respt-G and Respt-H replied, ‘Because I know that people are not interested in others’. This statement is interesting when compared to those by elderly people. None of the elderly people mentioned the nature of strangers’ glances. However, many of the cafe customers referred to the nature of the public’s glances.

Looking at the other answers, Respt-A answered, ‘As I am sitting on the second floor, I do not make eye contact’; Respt-E said, ‘I am not conscious of others’ glances when I focus on work’; Respt-I said, ‘Because I also look at people inside cafes when walking in the streets’. Respt-I’s answer deserves some attention in that he took a reciprocity position: ‘you can do it because I do it’.

Respt	Q-3	Q-4: (If not uncomfortable) What is the reason?
A	No	As I am sitting the second floor, I do not make eye contact.
B	No	I don’t think that, usually, people are interested in others.
C	No	I don’t care.
D	Yes	I intend to avoid the seats with too wider windows. I do not like that strangers see me and that I make eye contact with them.
E	No	I am not conscious of others’ glance when I focus on work.
F	No	Because I’m not conscious of other’s glance.
G	No	Because people don’t seem to be looking at me.
H	No	I know that people don’t look at other persons attentively.
I	No	Because I also look at people inside cafes when walking in the streets.
J	No	I became less conscious of people’s glance.

Table 2. Answers to Q-3 and Q-4.

The answers given by cafe customers, ranging from ‘People could look at me because I look at them’ to ‘People are not interested in others’, show a kind of ‘familiarity of mind’. Bauer (2006: 112) states that, thanks to mirror neurons, people can obtain a ‘familiarity of mind’; that is, the sense that ‘I am basically the same as other people, and other people are basically the same as me’ (Bauer 2006: 112). Four cafe customers took strangers’ glances for granted as part of people’s behaviour. Among the elderly respondents, only Sr-5 gave a similar answer, saying, ‘They have eyes. So, they can look at us’.

On the other hand, Respt-D answered ‘Yes’ to Q-3 and explained, ‘I tend to avoid the seats with too wide windows. I do not like that strangers see me and that I make eye contact with them’. He was sitting by the window on the second floor of a cafe and that seat was by a column crossing the window vertically. Thus, he could avoid the glances of both pedestrians and cafe customers. Nonetheless, he answered Q-6 (How are you feeling when looking at the people in the street?) saying, ‘I sometimes look at people in order to refresh my mood while studying’.

Respt	Q-5	Q-6: How are you feeling when looking at people in the street?
A	Yes	Vitality and peacefulness.
B	No	I also don't care about other people.
C	No	I don't pay attention.
D	Yes	I don't think anything when I look at them. But I look at them sometimes in order to refresh my mood while studying.
E	No	I don't feel anything.
F	Yes	It is peaceful. I also wonder what for they come to this street.
G	Yes	I wonder what kind of life they live.
H	Yes	I get the impression such as 'The baby is cute', 'That man is stylish', etc. I change my mood by looking at other people.
I	Yes	All people live a busy life.
J	Yes	I do not get any feeling.

Table 3. Answers to Q-5 and Q-6.

It is interesting that Respt-A felt vitality when looking at pedestrians, despite sitting in a chair. Lee (2011: 37, 49) points out that a kind of 'relationship looking at each other' is established between cafe customers and pedestrians thanks to the transparency of cafe windows. According to Lee, while walking, people look inside cafes; in turn, cafe customers perform a kind of 'walking of sight' by watching pedestrians. Mirror neurons are activated not only by performing an action but also by seeing the behaviour of others. From this perspective, the expression 'walking of sight' is not an exaggeration; beyond a metaphorical expression, it is indeed what happens in the brain.

The last question, 'What kind of image do you want people in the streets to see?' (Q-7), was a multiple-choice question with five options. The results are shown in Table 4. The option '2' was selected 5 times; '4' was selected 3 times, and '5' was selected 2 times. Respt-C did not choose any option. Respt-B and Respt-J chose the options '2' and '4'. Lastly, three respondents choose option '5'; they were Respt-D, Respt-E and Respt-H. In the blank space reserved for additional comments, Respt-D wrote, 'I hope not to give any image'; Respt-E wrote, 'I do not want anything'; and Respt-H wrote, 'Happy'.

Options	(1) active	(2) leisurely	(3) social	(4) comfortable	(5) Additional comments
Total Nmb.	0	5	0	3	3

Table 4. Answers to Q-7.

Although Respt-F and Respt-J, had answered Q-3 saying, 'I do not care about others' glances', they responded also to Q-7. Respt-F chose '2 leisurely' and Respt-J '4 comfortable'.

Looking at the answers to the questionnaires given by cafe customers, all in their 20s, we realize that almost all declared that pedestrians' glances did not make them uncomfortable, which is interesting when compared to the responses given by the senior citizens of *Heangchon-*

*dong*. Half said that they feel uncomfortable when strangers look at them; also, while all elderly people, except Sr-5, could not explain why they feel uncomfortable at strangers' glances, some cafe customers offered a clear explanation.

Respt-B, Respt-G and Respt-H generalized the nature of strangers' glances, saying that people are not usually interested in others. Respt-I took it for granted pedestrians' glances, based on mutual respect. These answers show that there is a kind of 'familiarity of mind' between these respondents and pedestrians. On the other hand, Respt-A mentioned, perhaps ironically, that she felt 'vitality' when looking at pedestrians. Yet, the existence of mirror neurons makes it possible to understand the vitality that she felt despite sitting in a chair, for the mirror neurons in her brain fire not only when she directly performs an activity but also when she sees the other's activity. Today, this function of mirror neurons is applied in rehabilitation therapy for stroke patients. Ertelt et al. (2007: T164) show that action-observation has a positive additional impact on the recovery of motor areas in the brain of stroke patients.

## Conclusion

This study has dealt with a very simple visual interaction between strangers, focusing on the two field sites of alleys and transparent cafes. The findings have shown that, first, the reaction to strangers' glances varies depending on people. Second, the number of respondents who said that they felt uncomfortable under the strangers' glances was greater among the elderly sitting in alleys than among cafe customers. Relying on the mirror neuron theory, I have suggested that these differences may be related to the fact that elderly people had fewer opportunities than cafe customers to do neural mirroring with strangers. The former preferred to stay inside the *gyungro-dang* before the COVID-19 pandemic and did not spend much time outside. On the other hand, younger people spent a long time in the cafes, which were crowded with strangers. In short, there was a difference between these two groups in terms of opportunities for visual interactions with strangers.

Mirror neurons make the unconscious and direct communications of bodies possible. Several experiments also show that mirror neurons may grow by stimuli and experience, which leads to the argument that shared spaces and partners are needed for neural mirroring. In the study that I have discussed here, only one among the elderly people explained why they felt uncomfortable when strangers looked at them, whereas many cafe customers mentioned the nature of the strangers' glances. The difference in these responses may be the result of a gap in opportunity for neural mirroring that contributes to forming a kind of 'familiarity of mind'. In conclusion, the visual interactions between strangers in public spaces have a social meaning in that they may give people an opportunity for neuron mirroring with strangers and, as a result, contribute to a greater understanding of strangers or to encouraging the view that others are basically the same as me.

I must point out that the present study has limitations in that there is a great gap in the age range of the participants and the methods applied in studying different participants are different. First, it was originally not intended that the study should belong to two age groups, the elderly and people in their 20s. Second, the former group was interviewed, while the latter was asked

to complete a questionnaire. So, the possibility could not be ruled out that the age variable and the different empirical methods applied may have had an influence on the research results. Additionally, the study did not take into account the gender, social class, occupational status and marital status of the participants. These factors need to be addressed in future research.

Nonetheless, the study is meaningful in that it shows that it is not always given that strangers peacefully and naturally look at each other in public or semi-public spaces. Also, it has significantly attempted to connect the mirror neuron theory with urban fieldwork in order to examine the social meaning of simple visual interactions between strangers. Such an attempt lays the foundation for us to consider a very fundamental aspect of the public spaces by extending the discussion on visual interactions between strangers to the unconscious aspect. Ultimately, this endeavour aims to emphasize the social function of public spaces.

Psychological experiments showing that sensory deprivation causes mental disorder or cognitive impairment (Beck 2015: 7; Heron 1956: 53; Kaye 2009: 6) are contributing theoretically to neuroarchitecture, a discipline that deals with the influence of the built environment on the human brain and behaviour. Metzger (2018: 154), the author of *Neuroarchitecture*, notes that, in order to keep the senses alert and healthy, human beings are dependent on experiencing daily the dynamics of sensory fields. He offers various examples of built environment where people can have a multisensory experience. Other experiments demonstrate the positive influence of the built environment on the human brain and body generally, including the correlation between ceiling height and creativity (Meyers-Levy and Zhu 2007: 183), the therapeutic influence of the view through a window (Ulrich 1984: 421), and so on. These scholars point out that the built environment can guarantee multisensory or dynamic stimuli through porosity.

However, the urban space of Seoul is becoming more and more closed. Above all, here the physical exclusiveness of residential areas has become a universal phenomenon (Kim and Choi 2012: 110). This trend results from the fashion of building apartment complexes, coupled with the commercialization of apartments and the deepening of residential segregation (Gelézeau 2007; Kim and Choi 2012: 109). As a result, we see barricades at the entrances of these apartment complexes, a keypad lock installed at the communal entrance and the restricted use of elevators. Spaces for socialization are marked by physical exclusiveness, too. In Seoul, people usually spend their spare time in a walled space like *Song-bang*, *Game-bang* or *PC-bang*. This phenomenon is called ‘*bang* (room) culture’ (Song 2004: 88). So, both residential areas and the spaces for social life are characterized by physical exclusiveness. This situation focuses on the public space as an arena for exchanges and for direct contact among diverse persons. It is hoped that this article contributes to bring out the importance of public spaces.

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