

# journal of visual culture



## Showing seeing: a critique of visual culture

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### Abstract

This essay attempts to map out the main issues surrounding visual studies as an emergent academic formation, and as a theoretical concept or object of research and teaching. After a survey of some of the resistances encountered by visual studies in fields such as art history, aesthetics, and media studies, and a suggestion that visual studies is playing the role of 'dangerous supplement' to these fields, the essay turns to a discussion of some of the major received ideas that have seemed foundational to both negative and positive accounts of visual studies. These received ideas or myths include notions of the de-materialization of the image, and the erasure of boundaries between art and non-art, or visual and verbal media. They also include notions such as the very idea that there are such things as distinctly 'visual media'. The political stakes of iconoclastic criticism (e.g. the overturning of 'scopic regimes') are also questioned, and an alternative (Nietzschean) strategy of 'sounding the idols' is proposed. The essay concludes with a description of pedagogical strategies in the teaching of visual culture, centered on an exercise the author calls 'showing seeing'.

### Key words

aesthetics • art history • communication • cultural studies • discipline(s) and interdisciplinarity • image studies • media and media studies • pedagogy • poetics • rhetoric

What is visual culture or visual studies? Is it an emergent discipline, a passing moment of interdisciplinary turbulence, a research topic, a field or subfield of cultural studies, media studies, rhetoric and communication, art history, or aesthetics? Does it have a specific object of research, or is it a grab-bag of problems left over from respectable, well-established disciplines? If it is a field, what are its boundaries and limiting definitions? Should it be institutionalized as an academic structure, made into a department or given programmatic status, with all the appurtenances of syllabi, textbooks, prerequisites, requirements, and degrees? How

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should it be taught? What would it mean to profess visual culture in a way that is more than improvisatory?

I have to confess that, after almost 10 years of teaching a course called Visual Culture at the University of Chicago, I still do not have categorical answers to all these questions.<sup>1</sup> What I can offer is my own take on where the field of visual studies is going today, and how it might avoid a number of pitfalls along the way. What follows is based mainly on my own formation as a literary scholar who has been involved as a migrant worker in the fields of art history, aesthetics, and media studies. It is also based on my experience as a teacher attempting to awaken students to the wonders of visibility, practices of seeing the world and especially the seeing of other people. My aim in this course has been to overcome the veil of familiarity and self-evidence that surrounds the experience of seeing, and to turn it into a problem for analysis, a mystery to be unraveled. In doing this, I suspect that I am rather typical of those that teach this subject, and that this is the common core of our interest, however different our methods or reading lists might be. The problem is one of staging a paradox that can be formulated in a number of ways: that vision is itself invisible; that we cannot see what seeing is; that the eyeball (*pace* Emerson) is never transparent. I take my task as a teacher to be to make seeing show itself, to put it on display, and make it accessible to analysis. I call this 'showing seeing', a variation on the American elementary school ritual called 'show and tell', and I return to it at the conclusion of this article.

### The dangerous supplement

Let me begin, however, with the gray matters: the questions of disciplines, fields, and programs that are intersected by visual studies. I think it's useful at the outset to distinguish between visual studies and visual culture as, respectively, the field of study and the object or target of study. Visual studies is the study of visual culture. This avoids the ambiguity that plagues subjects like history, in which the field and the things covered by the field bear the same name. In practice, of course, we often confuse the two, and I prefer to let visual culture stand for both the field and its content, and to let the context clarify the meaning. I also prefer visual culture because it is less neutral than visual studies, and commits one at the outset to a set of hypotheses that need to be tested – for example, that vision is (as we say) a cultural construction, that it is learned and cultivated, not simply given by nature; that therefore it might have a history related in some yet to be determined way to the history of arts, technologies, media, and social practices of display and spectatorship; and (finally) that it is deeply involved with human societies, with the ethics and politics, aesthetics and epistemology of seeing and being seen. So far, I hope (possibly in vain) that we are all singing the same tune.<sup>2</sup>

The dissonance begins, as I see it, when we ask what the relation of visual studies is to existing disciplines such as art history and aesthetics (see Foster, 1987). At this point, certain disciplinary anxieties, not to mention territorial grumpiness and defensiveness, begin to emerge. If I were a representative of cinema and media studies, for instance, I would ask why the discipline that addresses the major new art forms of the 20th century is so often marginalized in favor of fields that date to

the 18th and 19th centuries.<sup>3</sup> If I were here to represent visual studies (which I am) I might see the triangulation of my field in relation to the venerable fields of art history and aesthetics as a classic pincers movement, designed to erase visual studies from the map. The logic of this operation is easy enough to describe. Aesthetics and art history are in a complementary and collaborative alliance. Aesthetics is the theoretical branch of the study of art. It raises fundamental questions about the nature of art, artistic value, and artistic perception within the general field of perceptual experience. Art history is the historical study of artists, artistic practices, styles, movements, and institutions. Together, then, art history and aesthetics provide a kind of completeness; they cover any conceivable question one might have about the visual arts. And if one conceives them in their most expansive manifestations, art history as a general iconology or hermeneutics of visual images, aesthetics as the study of sensation and perception, then it seems clear that they already take care of any issues that a discipline of visual studies might want to raise. The theory of visual experience would be dealt with in aesthetics; the history of images and visual forms would be dealt with in art history.

Visual studies, then, is from a certain familiar disciplinary point of view, quite unnecessary. We don't need it. It adds on a vague, ill-defined body of issues that are covered quite adequately within the existing academic structure of knowledge. And yet, here it is, cropping up as a kind of quasi-field or pseudo-discipline, complete with anthologies, courses, debates, conferences, and professors. The only question is: what is visual studies a symptom of? Why has this unnecessary thing appeared?

It should be clear by this point that the disciplinary anxiety provoked by visual studies is a classic instance of what Jacques Derrida called the 'dangerous supplement'. Visual studies stands in an ambiguous relation to art history and aesthetics. On the one hand, it functions as an internal complement to these fields, a way of filling in a gap. If art history is about visual images, and aesthetics about the senses, what could be more natural than a subdiscipline that would focus on visuality as such, linking aesthetics and art history around the problems of light, optics, visual apparatuses and experience, the eye as a perceptual organ, the scopic drive, etc.? But this complementary function of visual studies threatens to become supplementary as well: first, in that it indicates an incompleteness in the internal coherence of aesthetics and art history, as if these disciplines had somehow failed to pay attention to what was most central in their own domains; and second, in that it opens both disciplines to outside issues that threaten their boundaries. Visual studies threatens to make art history and aesthetics into subdisciplines within some expanded field of inquiry whose boundaries are anything but clear. What, after all, can fit inside the domain of visual studies? Not just art history and aesthetics, but scientific and technical imaging, film, television, and digital media, as well as philosophical inquiries into the epistemology of vision, semiotic studies of images and visual signs, psychoanalytic investigation of the scopic drive, phenomenological, physiological, and cognitive studies of the visual process, sociological studies of spectatorship and display, visual anthropology, physical optics and animal vision, and so forth and so on. If the object of visual studies is what Hal Foster (1987) calls visuality, it is a capacious topic indeed, one that may be impossible to delimit in a systematic way.

Can visual studies be an emergent field, a discipline, a coherent domain of research, even (*mirabile dictu*) an academic *department*? Should art history fold its tent and, in a new alliance with aesthetics and media studies, aim to build a larger edifice around the concept of visual culture? Should we just merge everything into cultural studies? We know very well, of course, that institutional efforts of this sort have already been underway for some time at places like Irvine, Rochester, Chicago, Wisconsin, and no doubt others of which I am unaware. I have been a small part of some of these efforts, and have generally been supportive of institution-building efforts. I am mindful, however, of the larger forces in academic politics which have, in some cases, exploited interdisciplinary efforts like cultural studies in order to downsize and eliminate traditional departments and disciplines, or to produce what Tom Crow has called a de-skilling of whole generations of scholars.<sup>4</sup> The erosion of the forensic skills of connoisseurship and authentication among art historians in favor of a generalized iconological interpretive expertise is a trade-off that ought to trouble us. I want both kinds of expertise to be available, so that the next generation of art historians will be skilled with *both* the concrete materiality of art objects and practices, *and* with the intricacies of the dazzling PowerPoint presentation that moves effortlessly across the audio-visual media in search of meaning. I want visual studies to attend *both* to the specificity of the things we see, *and* to the fact that most of traditional art history was already mediated by highly imperfect representations such as the lantern slide, and before that by engraving, lithographs, or verbal descriptions.<sup>5</sup>

So if visual studies is a dangerous supplement to art history and aesthetics, it seems to me important neither to romanticize nor to underestimate the danger, but also important not to let disciplinary anxieties lure us into a siege mentality, circling our wagons around straight art history, or narrow notions of tradition.<sup>6</sup> We might take some comfort from the precedent of Derrida's own canonical figure of the dangerous supplement, the phenomenon of *writing*, and its relation to speech, to the study of language, literature, and philosophical discourse. Derrida (1978) traces the way that writing, traditionally thought of as a merely instrumental tool for recording speech, invades the domain of speech once one understands the general condition of language to be its iterability, its foundation in repetition and re-citation. The authentic *presence* of the voice, of the phonocentric core of language, *immediately* connected to meaning in the speaker's mind, is lost in the traces of writing, which remain when the speaker is absent and ultimately even when he or she is present. The whole onto-theological domain of originary self-presence is undermined and re-staged as an effect of writing, of an infinite series of substitutions, deferrals, and differentials. This was heady, intoxicating and dangerous news in the 1970s when it hit the American academy. Could it be that not only linguistics, but all the human sciences, indeed all human knowledge, was about to be swallowed up in a new field called grammatology. Could it be that our own anxieties about the boundlessness of visual studies are a replay of an earlier panic brought on by the news that there is nothing outside the text?

One obvious connection between the two panic attacks is their common emphasis on *visuality* and *spacing*. Grammatology promoted the visible signs of written language, from pictographs to hieroglyphics to alphabetic scripts to the invention of printing and finally of digital media, from their status as parasitical supplements to

an original, phonetic language-as-speech, to the position of primacy, as the general precondition for all notions of language, meaning, and presence. Grammatology challenged the primacy of language as invisible, authentic speech in the same way that iconology challenges the primacy of the unique, original artifact. A general condition of iterability or citationality – the repeatable acoustic image in one case, the visual image in the other – undermines the privilege of both visual art and literary language, placing them inside a larger field that, at first, seemed merely supplementary to them. Writing, not so accidentally, stands at the nexus of language and vision, epitomized in the figure of the rebus or hieroglyphic, the painted word or the visible language of a gesture-speech that precedes vocal expression.<sup>7</sup> Both grammatology and iconology, then, evoke the fear of the visual image, an iconoclastic panic that, in the one case, involves anxieties about rendering the invisible spirit of language in visible forms, in the other, the worry that the immediacy and concreteness of the visible image is in danger of being spirited away by the dematerialized, visual copy – a mere image of an image. It is no accident that Martin Jay's (1994) investigation of the history of philosophical optics is mainly a story of suspicion and anxiety about vision, or that my own explorations of iconology (Mitchell, 1987) tended to find a fear of imagery lurking beneath every theory of imagery.

Defensive postures and territorial anxieties may be inevitable in the bureaucratic battlegrounds of academic institutions, but they are notoriously bad for the purposes of clear, dispassionate thinking. My sense is that visual studies is not quite as dangerous as it has been made out to be (as, for instance, a training ground to prepare subjects for the next phase of global capitalism)<sup>8</sup> but that its own defenders have not been especially adroit in questioning the assumptions and impact of their own emergent field either. I want to turn, then, to a set of fallacies or myths about visual studies that are commonly accepted (with different value quotients) by both the opponents and proponents of this field. I will then offer a set of counter-theses which, in my view, emerge when the study of visual culture moves beyond these received ideas, and begins to define and analyze its object of investigation in some detail. I have summarized these fallacies and counter-theses in the following broadside (followed by a commentary). The broadside may be handy for nailing up on the doors of certain academic departments.

## **Critique: myths and counter-theses**

### **Ten myths about visual culture**

1. Visual culture entails the liquidation of art as we have known it.
2. Visual culture accepts without question the view that art is to be defined by its working exclusively through the optical faculties.
3. Visual culture transforms the history of art into a history of images.
4. Visual culture implies that the difference between a literary text and a painting is a non-problem. Words and images dissolve into undifferentiated representation.
5. Visual culture implies a predilection for the disembodied, dematerialized image.

6. We live in a predominantly visual era. Modernity entails the hegemony of vision and visual media.
7. There is a coherent class of things called visual media.
8. Visual culture is fundamentally about the social construction of the visual field. What we see, and the manner in which we come to see it, is not simply part of a natural ability.
9. Visual culture entails an anthropological, and therefore unhistorical, approach to vision.
10. Visual culture consists of scopic regimes and mystifying images to be overthrown by political critique.

#### **Eight counter-theses on visual culture**

1. Visual culture encourages reflection on the differences between art and non-art, visual and verbal signs, and the ratios between different sensory and semiotic modes.
2. Visual culture entails a meditation on blindness, the invisible, the unseen, the unseeable, and the overlooked; also on deafness and the visible language of gesture; it also compels attention to the tactile, the auditory, the haptic, and the phenomenon of synesthesia.
3. Visual culture is not limited to the study of images or media, but extends to everyday practices of seeing and showing, especially those that we take to be immediate or unmediated. It is less concerned with the meaning of images than with their lives and loves.
4. There are no visual media. All media are mixed media, with varying ratios of senses and sign-types.
5. The disembodied image and the embodied artifact are permanent elements in the dialectics of visual culture. Images are to pictures and works of art as species are to specimens in biology.
6. We do not live in a uniquely visual era. The visual or pictorial turn is a recurrent trope that displaces moral and political panic onto images and so-called visual media. Images are convenient scapegoats, and the offensive eye is ritually plucked out by ruthless critique.
7. Visual culture is the visual construction of the social, not just the social construction of vision. The question of visual *nature* is therefore a central and unavoidable issue, along with the role of animals as images and spectators.
8. The political task of visual culture is to perform critique without the comforts of iconoclasm.

\*Note: most of the fallacies above are quotations or close paraphrases of statements by well-known critics of visual culture. A prize will be awarded to anyone who can identify all of them.

#### **Commentary**

If there is a defining moment in the concept of visual culture, I suppose it would be in that instant that the hoary concept of social construction made itself central to the field. We are all familiar with this Eureka! moment, when we reveal to our students and colleagues that vision and visual images, things that (to the novice) are apparently automatic, transparent, and natural, are actually symbolic constructions, like a language to be learned, a system of codes that interposes an ideological veil

between us and the real world.<sup>9</sup> This overcoming of what has been called the natural attitude has been crucial to the elaboration of visual studies as an arena for political and ethical critique, and we should not underestimate its importance (see Byron, 1983). But if it becomes an unexamined dogma, it threatens to become a fallacy just as disabling as the naturalistic fallacy it sought to overturn. To what extent is vision *unlike* language, working (as Roland Barthes, 1982, observed of photography) like a message without a code? In what ways does it *transcend* specific or local forms of social construction to function like a universal language that is relatively free of textual or interpretive elements? (We should recall that Bishop Berkeley, 1709, who first claimed that vision was like a language, also insisted that it was a universal language, not a local or national language.) To what extent is vision *not* a learned activity, but a genetically determined capacity, and a programmed set of automatisms that has to be activated at the right time, but that are not learned in anything like the way that human languages are learned?

A dialectical concept of visual culture leaves itself open to these questions rather than foreclosing them with the received wisdom of social construction and linguistic models. It expects that the very notion of vision as a *cultural* activity necessarily entails an investigation of its *non-cultural* dimensions, its pervasiveness as a sensory mechanism that operates in animal organisms all the way from the flea to the elephant. This version of visual culture understands itself as the opening of a dialogue with visual *nature*. It does not forget Lacan's (1978: 91) reminder that the eye goes back as far as the species that represent the appearance of life, and that oysters are seeing organisms. It does not content itself with victories over natural attitudes and naturalistic fallacies, but regards the seeming naturalness of vision and visual imagery as a problem to be explored, rather than a benighted prejudice to be overcome.<sup>10</sup> In short, a dialectical concept of visual culture cannot rest content with a definition of its object as the social construction of the visual field, but must insist on exploring the chiasmic reversal of this proposition, *the visual construction of the social field*. It is not just that we see the way we do because we are social animals, but also that our social arrangements take the forms they do because we are seeing animals.

The fallacy of overcoming the naturalistic fallacy (we might call it the naturalistic fallacy fallacy, or naturalistic fallacy<sup>2</sup>)<sup>11</sup> is not the only received idea that has hamstrung the embryonic discipline of visual culture. The field has trapped itself inside of a whole set of related assumptions and commonplaces that, unfortunately, have become the common currency of both those who defend and attack visual studies as a dangerous supplement to art history and aesthetics. Here is a résumé of what might be called the constitutive fallacies or myths of visual culture, as outlined in my earlier broadside:

1. that visual culture means an end to the distinction between artistic and non-artistic images, a dissolving of the history of art into a history of images. This might be called the democratic or leveling fallacy, and it is greeted with alarm by unreconstructed high modernists and old-fashioned aesthetes, and heralded as a revolutionary breakthrough by the theorists of visual culture. It involves related worries (or elation) at the leveling of semiotic distinctions between words and images, digital and analog communication, between art and non-art, and between different kinds of media, or different concrete artifactual specimens.

2. that it is a reflex of, and consists in a visual turn or hegemony of the visible in modern culture, a dominance of visual media and spectacle over the verbal activities of speech, writing, textuality, and reading. It is often linked with the notion that other sensory modalities such as hearing and touch are likely to atrophy in the age of visuality. This might be called the fallacy of the pictorial turn, a development viewed with horror by iconophobes and opponents of mass culture, who see it as the cause of a decline in literacy, and with delight by iconophiles who see new and higher forms of consciousness emerging from the plethora of visual images and media.

3. that the hegemony of the visible is a Western, modern invention, a product of new media technologies, and not a fundamental component of human cultures as such. Let's call this the fallacy of technical modernity, a received idea which never fails to stir the ire of those who study non-Western and non-modern visual cultures, and which is generally taken as self-evident by those who believe that modern technical media (television, cinema, photography, the internet) simply *are* the central content and determining instances of visual culture.

4. that there are such things as visual media, typically exemplified by film, photography, video, television, and the internet. This, the fallacy of the visual media, is repeated by both sides as if it denoted something real. When media theorists object that it might be better to think of at least some of these as audio-visual media, or composite, mixed media that combine image and text, the fall-back position is an assertion of the dominance of the visual in the technical, mass media. Thus it is claimed that we watch TV, we don't listen to it, an argument that is clinched by noting that the remote control has a mute button, but no control to blank out the picture.

5. that vision and visual images are expressions of power relations in which the spectator dominates the visual object and images and their producers exert power over viewers. This commonplace power fallacy is shared by opponents and proponents of visual culture who worry about the complicity of visual media with regimes of spectacle and surveillance, the use of advertising, propaganda, and snooping to control mass populations and erode democratic institutions. The split comes over the question of whether we need a discipline called visual culture to provide an oppositional critique of these scopic regimes, or whether this critique is better handled by sticking to aesthetics and art history, with their deep roots in human values, or media studies, with its emphasis on institutional and technical expertise.

It would take many pages to refute each of these received ideas in detail. Let me just outline the main theses of a counterposition that would treat them as I have treated the naturalistic fallacy fallacy, not as axioms of visual culture, but as invitations to question and investigate.

1. The democratic or leveling fallacy. There is no doubt that many people think the distinction between high art and mass culture is disappearing in our time, or that distinctions between media, or between verbal and visual images, are being undone. The question is: is it true? Does the blockbuster exhibition mean that art museums are now mass media, indistinguishable from sporting events and circuses? Is it

really that simple? I think not. The fact that some scholars want to open up the domain of images to consider both artistic and non-artistic images does not automatically abolish the differences between these domains.<sup>12</sup> One could as easily argue that, in fact, the boundaries of art/non-art only become clear when one looks at both sides of this ever-shifting border and traces the transactions and translations between them. Similarly, with semiotic distinctions between words and images, or between media types, the opening out of a general field of study does not abolish difference, but makes it available for investigation, as opposed to treating it as a barrier that must be policed and never crossed. I have been working between literature and visual arts, and between artistic and non-artistic images for the last three decades, and I have never found myself confused about which was which, though I have sometimes been confused about what made people so anxious about this work. As a practical matter, distinctions between the arts and media are ready-to-hand, a vernacular form of theorizing. The difficulty arises (as Lessing noted long ago in his *Laocoon*, see Mitchell, 1987), when we try to make these distinctions systematic and metaphysical.<sup>13</sup>

2. The fallacy of a pictorial turn. Since this is a phrase that I have coined (see Mitchell, 1994: ch. 1) I'll try to set the record straight on what I meant by it. First, I did not mean to make the claim that the modern era is unique or unprecedented in its obsession with vision and visual representation. My aim was to acknowledge the perception of a turn to the visual or to the image as a *commonplace*, a thing that is said casually and unreflectively about our time, and is usually greeted with unreflective assent both by those who like the idea and those who hate it. But the pictorial turn is a *trope*, a figure of speech that has been repeated many times since antiquity. When the Israelites turn aside from the invisible god to a visible idol, they are engaged in a pictorial turn. When Plato warns against the domination of thought by images, semblances, and opinions in the allegory of the cave, he is urging a turn away from the pictures that hold humanity captive and toward the pure light of reason. When Lessing warns, in the *Laocoon*, about the tendency to imitate the effects of visual art in the literary arts, he is trying to combat a pictorial turn that he regards as a degradation of aesthetic and cultural proprieties. When Wittgenstein complains in the *Philosophical Investigations* that a picture held us captive, he is lamenting the rule of a certain metaphor for mental life that has held philosophy in its grip.

The pictorial or visual turn, then, is not unique to our time. It is a repeated narrative figure that takes on a very specific form in our time, but which seems to be available in its schematic form in an innumerable variety of circumstances. A critical and historical use of this figure would be as a diagnostic tool to analyze specific moments when a new medium, a technical invention, or a cultural practice erupts in symptoms of panic or euphoria (usually both) about the visual. The invention of photography, of oil painting, of artificial perspective, of sculptural casting, of the internet, of writing, of mimesis itself are conspicuous occasions when a new way of making visual images seemed to mark a historical turning point for better or worse. The mistake is to construct a grand binary model of history centered on just one of these turning points, and to declare a single great divide between the age of literacy (for instance) and the age of visuality. These kinds of narratives are beguiling, handy for the purposes of presentist polemics, and useless for the purposes of genuine historical criticism.

3. It should be clear, then, that the supposed hegemony of the visible in our time (or in the ever-flexible period of modernity, or the equally flexible domain of the West) is a chimera that has outlived its usefulness. If visual culture is to mean anything, it has to be generalized as the study of all the social practices of human visuality, and not confined to modernity or the West. To live in any culture whatsoever is to live in a visual culture, except perhaps for those rare instances of societies of the blind, which for that very reason deserve special attention in any theory of visual culture.<sup>14</sup> As for the question of hegemony, what could be more archaic and traditional than the prejudice in favor of sight? Vision has played the role of the sovereign sense since God looked at his own creation and saw that it was good, or perhaps even earlier when he began the act of creation with the division of the light from the darkness. The notion of vision as hegemonic or non-hegemonic is simply too blunt an instrument to produce much in the way of historical or critical differentiation. The important task is to describe the specific relations of vision to the other senses, especially hearing and touch, as they are elaborated within particular cultural practices. Descartes regarded vision as simply an extended and highly sensitive form of touch, which is why (in his *Optics*) he compared eyesight to the sticks a blind man uses to grope his way about in real space. The history of cinema is in part the history of collaboration and conflict between technologies of visual and audio reproduction. The evolution of film is in no way aided by explaining it in terms of received ideas about the hegemony of the visible.

4. Which leads us to the fourth myth, the notion of visual media. I understand the use of this phrase as a shorthand figure to pick out the difference between (say) photographs and phonograph records, or paintings and novels, but I do object to the confident assertion that the visual media are really a distinct class of things, or that there is such a thing as an exclusively, purely visual medium.<sup>15</sup> Let us try out, as a counter-axiom, the notion that all media are mixed media, and see where that leads us. One place it will not lead us is into misguided characterizations of audio-visual media like cinema and television as if they were exclusively or predominantly (echoes of the hegemonic fallacy) visual. The postulate of mixed, hybrid media leads us to the specificity of codes, materials, technologies, perceptual practices, sign-functions, and institutional conditions of production and consumption that go to make up a medium. It allows us to break up the reification of media around a single sensory organ (or a single sign-type, or material vehicle) and to pay attention to what is in front of us. Instead of the stunning redundancy of declaring literature to be a verbal and not a visual medium, for instance, we are allowed to say what is true: that literature, insofar as it is written or printed, has an unavoidable visual component which bears a specific relation to an auditory component, which is why it makes a difference whether a novel is read aloud or silently. We are also allowed to notice that literature, in techniques like ekphrasis and description, as well as in more subtle strategies of formal arrangement, involves virtual or imaginative experiences of space and vision that are no less real for being indirectly conveyed through language.

5. We come finally to the question of the power of visual images, their efficacy as instruments or agents of domination, seduction, persuasion, and deception. This topic is important because it exposes the motivation for the wildly varying political and ethical estimations of images, their celebration as gateways to new

consciousness, their denigration as hegemonic forces, the need for policing and thus reifying the differences between the visual media and the others, or between the realm of art and the wider domain of images.

While there is no doubt that visual culture (like material, oral, or literary culture) can be an instrument of domination, I do not think it is productive to single out visibility or images or spectacle or surveillance as the exclusive vehicle of political tyranny. I wish not to be misunderstood here. I recognize that much of the interesting work in visual culture has come out of politically motivated scholarship, especially the study of the construction of racial and sexual difference in the field of the gaze. But the heady days when we were first discovering the male gaze or the feminine character of the image are now well behind us, and most scholars of visual culture who are invested in questions of identity are aware of this. Nevertheless, there is an unfortunate tendency to slide back into reductive treatments of visual images as all-powerful forces and to engage in a kind of iconoclastic critique which imagines that the destruction or exposure of false images amounts to a political victory. As I've said on other occasions, pictures are a popular political antagonist because one can take a tough stand on them and yet, at the end of the day, everything remains pretty much the same. Scopic regimes can be overturned repeatedly without any visible effect on either visual or political culture.

I propose what I hope is a more nuanced and balanced approach located in the equivocation between the visual image as instrument and agency, the image as a tool for manipulation, on the one hand, and as an apparently autonomous source of its own purposes and meanings on the other. This approach would treat visual culture and visual images as go-betweens in social transactions, as a repertoire of screen images or templates that structure our encounters with other human beings. Visual culture would find its primal scene, then, in what Emmanuel Levinas calls the face of the Other (beginning, I suppose, with the face of the Mother): the face-to-face encounter, the evidently hard-wired disposition to recognize the eyes of another organism (what Lacan and Sartre call the gaze). Stereotypes, caricatures, classificatory figures, search images, mappings of the visible body, of the social spaces in which it appears would constitute the fundamental elaborations of visual culture on which the domain of the image – and of the Other – is constructed. As go-betweens or subaltern entities, these images are the filters through which we recognize and of course misrecognize other people. They are the paradoxical mediations which make possible what we call the unmediated or face-to-face relations that Raymond Williams postulates as the origin of society as such. And this means that the social construction of the visual field has to be continuously replayed as the visual construction of the social field, an invisible screen or lattice-work of apparently unmediated figures that makes the effects of mediated images possible.

Lacan, you will recall, diagrams the structure of the scopic field as a cat's cradle of dialectical intersections with a screened image at its center. The two hands that rock this cradle are the subject and the object, the observer and the observed. But between them, rocking in the cradle of the eye and the gaze, is this curious intermediary thing, the image and the screen or medium in which it appears. This phantasmatic thing was depicted in ancient optics as the eidolon, the projected template hurled outward by the probing, seeking eye, or the simulacrum of the seen

object, cast off or propagated by the object like a snake shedding its skin in an infinite number of repetitions (see Lindbergh, 1981). Both the extramission and intramission theory of vision share the same picture of the visual process, differing only in the direction of the flow of energy and information. This ancient model, while no doubt incorrect as an account of the physical and physiological structure of vision, is still the best picture we have of vision as a psycho-social process. It provides an especially powerful tool for understanding why it is that images, works of art, media, figures and metaphors have lives of their own, and cannot be explained simply as rhetorical, communicative instruments or epistemological windows onto reality. The cat's cradle of intersubjective vision helps us to see why it is that objects and images look back at us; why the eidolon has a tendency to become an idol that talks back to us, gives orders, and demands sacrifices; why the propagated image of an object is so efficacious for propaganda, so fecund in reproducing an infinite number of copies of itself. It helps us to see why vision is never a one-way street, but a multiple intersection teeming with dialectical images, why the child's doll has a playful half-life on the borders of the animate and inanimate, and why the fossil traces of extinct life are resurrected in the beholder's imagination. It makes it clear why the questions to ask about images are not just what do they mean, or what do they do? But what is the secret of their vitality – and what do they want?

### Showing seeing

I want to conclude by reflecting on the disciplinary location of visual studies. I hope it's clear that I have no interest in rushing out to establish programs or departments. The interest of visual culture seems to me to reside precisely at the transitional points in the educational process at the introductory level (what we used to call art appreciation), at the passageway from undergraduate to graduate education, and at the frontiers of advanced research.<sup>16</sup> Visual studies belongs, then, in the freshman year in college, in the introduction to graduate studies in the humanities, and in the graduate workshop or seminar.

In all of these locations I have found it useful to return to one of the earliest pedagogical rituals in American elementary education, the show and tell exercise. In this case, however, the object of the show and tell performance is the process of seeing itself, and the exercise could be called showing seeing. I ask the students to frame their presentations by assuming that they are ethnographers who come from, and are reporting back to, a society that has no concept of visual culture. They cannot take for granted that their audience has any familiarity with everyday notions such as color, line, eye contact, cosmetics, clothing, facial expressions, mirrors, glasses, or voyeurism, much less with photography, painting, sculpture or other so-called visual media. Visual culture is thus made to seem strange, exotic, and in need of explanation.

The assignment is thoroughly paradoxical, of course. The audience does in fact live in a visible world, and yet has to accept the fiction that it does not, and that everything which seems transparent and self-evident is in need of explanation. I leave it to the students to construct an enabling fiction. Some choose to ask the

audience to close their eyes and to take in the presentation solely with their ears and other senses. They work primarily by description and evocation of the visual through language and sound, telling *as*, rather than telling *and* showing. Another strategy is to pretend that the audience has just been provided with prosthetic visual organs, but does not yet know how to see with them. This is the favored strategy, since it allows for a visual presentation of objects and images. The audience has to pretend ignorance, and the presenter has to lead them toward the understanding of things they would ordinarily take for granted.

The range of examples and objects that students bring to class is quite broad and unpredictable. Some things routinely appear: eye-glasses are favorite objects of explanation, and someone almost always brings in a pair of mirror shades to illustrate the situation of seeing without being seen, and the masking of the eyes as a common strategy in a visual culture. Masks and disguises more generally are popular props. Windows, binoculars, kaleidoscopes, microscopes, and other pieces of optical apparatus are commonly adduced. Mirrors are frequently brought in, generally with no hint of an awareness of Lacan's mirror stage, but often with learned expositions of the optical laws of reflection, or discourses on vanity, narcissism, and self-fashioning. Cameras are often exhibited, not just to explain their workings, but to talk about the rituals and superstitions that accompany their use. One student elicited the familiar reflex of camera shyness by aggressively taking snapshots of other members of the class. Other presentations require even fewer props, and sometimes focus directly on the body-image of the presenter, by way of attention to clothing, cosmetics, facial expressions, gestures, and other forms of body language. I have had students conduct rehearsals of a repertoire of facial expressions, change clothing in front of the class, perform tasteful (and limited) evocations of a strip-tease, put on make-up (one student put on white face paint, describing his own sensations as he entered into the mute world of the mime); another introduced himself as a twin, and asked us to ponder the possibility that he might be his brother impersonating himself; still another, a male student, did a cross-dressing performance with his girlfriend in which they asked the question of what the difference is between male and female transvestism. Other students who have gifts with performance have acted out things like blushing and crying, leading to discussions of shame and self-consciousness at being seen, involuntary visual responses, and the importance of the eye as an expressive as well as receptive organ. Perhaps the simplest gadget-free performance I have ever witnessed was by a student who led the class through an introduction to the experience of eye contact which culminated in that old first-grade game, the stare-down contest (the first to blink is the loser).

Without question, the funniest and weirdest show and tell performance that I have ever seen was by a young woman whose prop was her 9-month-old baby boy. She presented the baby as an object of visual culture whose specific visual attributes (small body, large head, pudgy face, bright eyes) added up, in her words, to a strange visual effect that human beings call 'cuteness'. She confessed her inability to explain cuteness, but argued that it must be an important aspect of visual culture, because all the other sensory signals given off by the baby – smell and noise in particular – would lead us to despise and probably kill the object producing them, if it were not for the countervailing effect of cuteness. The truly wondrous thing about

this performance, however, was the behavior of the infant. While his mother was making her serious presentation, the baby was wiggling in her arms, mugging for the audience, and responding to their laughter at first with fright, but gradually (as he realized he was safe) with a kind of delighted and aggressive showmanship. He began showing off for the class while his mother tried, with frequent interruptions, to continue her telling of the visual characteristics of the human infant. The total effect was of a contrapuntal, mixed-media performance which stressed the dissonance or lack of suturing between vision and voice, showing and telling, while demonstrating something quite complex about the very nature of the show and tell ritual as such.

What do we learn from these presentations? The reports of my students suggest that the showing seeing performances are the thing that remains most memorable about the course, long after the details of perspective theory, optics, and the gaze have faded from memory. The performances have the effect of acting out the method and lessons of the curriculum, which is elaborated around a set of simple but extremely difficult questions: What is vision? What is a visual image? What is a medium? What is the relation of vision to the other senses? To language? Why is visual experience so fraught with anxiety and fantasy? Does vision have a history? How do visual encounters with other people (and with images and objects) inform the construction of social life? The performance of showing seeing assembles an archive of practical demonstrations that can be referenced within the sometimes abstract realm of visual theory. It is astonishing how much clearer the Sartrean and Lacanian paranoid theories of vision become after you have had a few performances that highlight the aggressivity of vision. Merleau-Ponty's abstruse discussions of the dialectics of seeing, the chiasmus of the eye and the gaze, and the entangling of vision with the flesh of the world, become much more down-to-earth when the spectator/spectacle has been visibly embodied and performed in the classroom.

A more ambitious aim of showing seeing is its potential as a reflection on theory and method in themselves. As should be evident, the approach is informed by a kind of pragmatism, but not (one hopes) of a kind that is closed off to speculation, experiment, and even metaphysics. At the most fundamental level, it is an invitation to rethink what theorizing is, to picture theory and perform theory as a visible, embodied, communal practice, not as the solitary introspection of a disembodied intelligence.

The simplest lesson of showing seeing is a kind of de-disciplinary exercise. We learn to get away from the notion that visual culture is covered by the materials or methods of art history, aesthetics, and media studies. Visual culture starts out in an area beneath the notice of these disciplines the realm of non-artistic, non-aesthetic, and unmediated or immediate visual images and experiences. It comprises a larger field of what I would call vernacular visibility or everyday seeing that is bracketed out by the disciplines addressed to visual arts and media. Like ordinary language philosophy and speech act theory, it looks at the strange things we do while looking, gazing, showing and showing off such as hiding, dissembling, and refusing to look. In particular, it helps us to see that even something as broad as the image does not exhaust the field of visibility; that visual studies is not the same thing as image

studies, and that the study of the visual image is just one component of the larger field. Societies which ban images (like the Taliban) still have a rigorously policed visual culture in which the everyday practices of human display (especially of women's bodies) are subject to regulation. We might even go so far as to say that visual culture emerges in sharpest relief when the second commandment, the ban on the production and display of graven images, is observed most literally, when seeing is prohibited and invisibility is mandated.

One final thing the showing seeing exercise demonstrates is that visibility, not just the social construction of vision, but the visual construction of the social, is a problem in its own right that is approached, but never quite engaged by the traditional disciplines of aesthetics and art history, or even by the new disciplines of media studies. That is, visual studies is not merely an indiscipline or dangerous supplement to the traditional vision-oriented disciplines, but an interdiscipline that draws on their resources and those of other disciplines to construct a new and distinctive object of research. Visual culture is, then, a specific domain of research, one whose fundamental principles and problems are being articulated freshly in our time. The showing seeing exercise is one way to accomplish the first step in the formation of any new field, and that is to rend the veil of familiarity and awaken the sense of wonder, so that many of the things that are taken for granted about the visual arts and media (and perhaps the verbal ones as well) are put into question. If nothing else, it may send us back to the traditional disciplines of the humanities and social sciences with fresh eyes, new questions, and open minds.

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### **Notes**

1. For anyone interested in my previous stabs at them, however, see Mitchell (1995a, 1995b).
2. If space permitted, I would insert here a rather lengthy footnote on the many kinds of work that have made it possible to even conceive of a field such as visual studies.
3. For a discussion of the peculiar distancing between visual studies and cinema studies, see Anu Koivunen and Astrid Soderbergh Widding (2002). Other institutional formations that seem notably excluded are visual anthropology (which now has its own journal with articles collected in Taylor, 1994); cognitive science (highly influential in contemporary film studies); and communications theory and rhetoric, which have ambitions to install visual studies as a component of introductory college-level writing programs.
4. See Crow's response to the questionnaire on visual culture in *October* (1996).
5. For a masterful study of art historical mediations, see Nelson (2000).
6. I am alluding here to a lecture entitled 'Straight Art History' given by O.K. Werckmeister at the Art Institute of Chicago several years ago. I have great respect for Werckmeister's work, and regard this lecture as a regrettable lapse from his usual rigor.
7. For further discussion of the convergence of painting and language in the written sign, see 'Blake's Wondrous Art of Writing', in Mitchell (1994).

8. A phrase that appears in the *October* questionnaire on visual culture.
9. This defining moment had been rehearsed, of course, many times by art historians in their encounters with literary naivete about pictures. One of the recurrent rituals in teaching interdisciplinary courses that draw students from both literature and art history is the moment when the art history students set straight the literary folks about the non-transparency of visual representation, the need to understand the languages of gesture, costume, compositional arrangement, and iconographic motifs. The second, more difficult, moment in this ritual is when the art historians have to explain why all these conventional meanings don't add up to a linguistic or semiotic decoding of pictures, why there is some non-verbalizable surplus in the image.
10. Bryson's (1983: 7) denunciation of the natural attitude which he sees as the common error of Pliny, Villani, Vasari, Berenson, and Francastel, and no doubt the entire history of image theory up to his time.
11. I owe this phrase to Michael Taussig, who developed the idea in our joint seminar, 'Vital Signs: The Life of Representations', at Columbia University and New York University in the fall of 2000.
12. I am echoing here the title of Elkins (1999).
13. See the discussion of Lessing in Mitchell (1987: ch. 4).
14. See Jose Saramago's marvelous novel *Blindness* (1997), which explores the premise of a society suddenly plunged into an epidemic of blindness spread, appropriately enough, by eye contact.
15. See Mitchell (1994) for a fuller discussion of the claim that all media are mixed media, and especially the discussion of Clement Greenberg's search for optical purity in abstract painting. Indeed, unmediated vision itself is not a purely optical affair, but a coordination of optical and tactile information.
16. It may be worth mentioning here that the first course in Visual Culture ever offered at the University of Chicago was the 'Art 101' course I gave in the fall of 1991 with the invaluable assistance of Tina Yarborough.

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