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### WHAT IS VISUAL CULTURE?<sup>1</sup>

SEEING IS A GREAT DEAL MORE than believing these days. You can buy a photograph of your house taken from an orbiting satellite or have your internal organs magnetically imaged. If that special moment didn't come out quite right in your photography, you can digitally manipulate it on your computer. At New York's Empire State Building, the queues are longer for the virtual reality New York Ride than for the lifts to the observation platforms. Alternatively, you could save yourself the trouble by catching the entire New York skyline, rendered in attractive pastel colours, at the New York, New York resort in Las Vegas. This virtual city will be joined shortly by Paris Las Vegas, imitating the already carefully manipulated image of the city of light. Life in this alter-reality is sometimes more pleasant than the real thing, sometimes worse. In 1997 same-sex marriage was outlawed by the United States Congress but when the sitcom character Ellen came out on television, 42 million people watched. On the other hand, virtual reality has long been favoured by the military as a training arena, put into practice in the Gulf War at great cost of human life. This is visual culture. It is not just a part of your everyday life, it *is* your everyday life.

Understandably, this newly visual existence can be confusing. For observing the new visibility of culture is not the same as understanding it. Indeed, the gap between the wealth of visual experience in contemporary culture and the ability to analyse that observation marks both the opportunity and the need for visual culture as a field of study. Visual culture is concerned with visual events in which information, meaning or pleasure is sought by the consumer in an interface with visual technology. By visual technology, I mean any form of apparatus designed either to be looked at or to enhance natural vision, from oil painting to television and the Internet. Such criticism takes account of the importance of image making, the formal components of a given image, and the crucial completion of that work by its cultural reception.

This volume offers a selection of the best critical and historical work in the past decade that has both created and developed the new field. It is a little different to some other Readers currently in circulation. As the field is still so fluid and subject to debate, it is as much an attempt to define the subject as to present a commonly agreed array of topics. As a result, it does not simply offer latest 'cutting-edge' (i.e. most recent) material, but a mixture of new writing and a reprise of the best pioneering work that has given rise to this field, an understanding of which is often assumed by current literature. After digesting this Reader, you will be ready to plunge into the critical maelstrom and equipped to deal with the unceasing flow of images from the swirl of the global village.

### Postmodernism is visual culture

Postmodernism has often been defined as the crisis of modernism, that is to say, the wide-ranging complex of ideas and modes of representation ranging from overarching beliefs in progress to theories of the rise of abstract painting or the modern novel. Now these means of representation no longer seem convincing without any alternative having emerged. As a result, the dominant postmodern style is ironic: a knowing pastiche that finds comment and critique to be the only means of innovation. The postmodern reprise of modernism involves everything from the rash of classical motifs on shopping malls to the crisis of modern painting and the popularity of Nickelodeon repeats. In the context of this book, the postmodern is the crisis caused by modernism and modern culture confronting the failure of its own strategy of visualizing. In other words, it is the visual crisis of culture that creates postmodernity, not its textuality. While print culture is certainly not going to disappear, the fascination with the visual and its effects that was a key feature of modernism has engendered a postmodern culture that is at its most postmodern when it is visual.

During this volume's compilation, visual culture has gone from being a useful phrase for people working in art history, film and media studies, sociology and other aspects of the visual to a fashionable, if controversial, new means of doing interdisciplinary work, following in the footsteps of such fields as cultural studies, queer theory and African-American studies. The reason most often advanced for this heightened visibility is that human experience is now more visual and visualized than ever before. In many ways, people in industrialized and post-industrial societies now live in visual cultures to an extent that seems to divide the present from the past. Popular journalism constantly remarks on digital imagery in cinema, the advent of post-photography and developments in medical imaging, not to mention the endless tide of comment devoted to the Internet. This globalization of the visual, taken collectively, demands new means of interpretation. At the same time, this transformation of the postmodern present also requires a rewriting of historical explanations of modernism and modernity in order to account for 'the visual turn'.

Postmodernism is not, of course, simply a visual experience. In what Arjun Appadurai has called the 'complex, overlapping, disjunctive order' of postmodernism, such tidiness is not to be expected (Appadurai 1990). Nor can it be found

in past epochs, whether one looks at the eighteenth-century coffee-house public culture celebrated by Jürgen Habermas, or the nineteenth-century print capitalism of newspapers and publishing described by Benedict Anderson. In the same way that these authors highlighted one particular characteristic of a period as a means to analyse it, despite the vast range of alternatives, visual culture is a tactic with which to study the genealogy, definition and functions of postmodern everyday life. The disjunctured and fragmented culture that we call postmodernism is best imagined and understood visually, just as the nineteenth century was classically represented in the newspaper and the novel.

Western culture has consistently privileged the spoken word as the highest form of intellectual practice and seen visual representations as second-rate illustrations of ideas. Now, however, the emergence of visual culture as a subject has contested this hegemony, developing what W.J.T. Mitchell has called 'picture theory'. In this view, Western philosophy and science now use a pictorial, rather than textual, model of the world, marking a significant challenge to the notion of the world as a written text that dominated so much intellectual discussion in the wake of such linguistics-based movements as structuralism and poststructuralism. In Mitchell's view, picture theory stems from

the realization that *spectatorship* (the look, the gaze, the glance, the practices of observation, surveillance and visual pleasure) may be as deep a problem as various forms of *reading* (decipherment, decoding, interpretation, etc.) and that 'visual experience' or 'visual literacy' might not be fully explicable in the model of textuality.

(Mitchell 1994: 16)

While those already working on or with visual media might find such remarks rather patronizing, they are a measure of the extent to which even literary studies have been forced to conclude that the world-as-a-text has been challenged by the world-as-a-picture. Such world pictures cannot be purely visual, but by the same token, the visual disrupts and challenges any attempt to define culture in purely linguistic terms.

That is not to suggest, however, that a simple dividing line can be drawn between the past (modern) and the present (postmodern). As Geoffrey Batchen has argued, 'the threatened dissolution of boundaries and oppositions [the postmodern] is presumed to represent is not something peculiar to a particular technology or to postmodern discourse but is rather one of the fundamental conditions of modernity itself' (Batchen 1996: 28). Understood in this fashion, visual culture has a history that needs exploring and defining in the modern as well as postmodern period. However, many current uses of the term have suffered from a vagueness that makes it little more than a buzzword. For some critics, visual culture is simply 'the history of images' handled with a semiotic notion of representation (Bryson, Holly and Moxey 1994: xvi). This definition creates a body of material so vast that no one person or even department could ever cover the field. For others it is a means of creating a sociology of visual culture that will establish a 'social theory of visibility' (Jenks 1995: 1). This approach seems open to the charge that the visual is given an artificial independence from the other senses that

has little bearing on real experience. In this volume, visual culture is used in a far more interactive sense, concentrating on the determining role of visual culture in the wider culture to which it belongs. Such a history of visual culture would highlight those moments where the visual is contested, debated and transformed as a constantly challenging place of social interaction and definition in terms of class, gender, sexual and racialized identities. It is a resolutely interdisciplinary subject, in the sense given to the term by Roland Barthes: 'In order to do interdisciplinary work, it is not enough to take a "subject" (a theme) and to arrange two or three sciences around it. Interdisciplinary study consists in creating a new object, which belongs to no one.' As one critic in communications studies has recently argued, this work entails 'greater levels of uncertainty, risk and arbitrariness' than have often been used until now (McNair 1995: xi). As visual culture is still an idea in the making, rather than a well-defined existing field, this Reader aims to help in its definition of visual culture rather than present it as a given.

### Visualizing

One of the most striking features of the new visual culture is the visualization of things that are not in themselves visual. Rather than myopically focusing on the visual to the exclusion of all other senses, as is often alleged, visual culture examines why modern and postmodern culture place such a premium on rendering experience in visual form. Among the first to call attention to this development was the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, who called it the rise of the world picture. He pointed out that

a world picture . . . does not mean a picture of the world but the world conceived and grasped as a picture. . . . The world picture does not change from an earlier medieval one into a modern one, but rather the fact that the world becomes picture at all is what distinguishes the essence of the modern age.

(Heidegger 1977: 130)

Visual culture does not depend on pictures but on this modern tendency to picture or visualize existence. This visualizing makes the modern period radically different from the ancient and medieval world in which the world was understood as a book. More importantly, pictures were seen not as representations, artificial constructs seeking to imitate an object, but as being closely related, or even identical, to that object. For the Byzantine Church an icon *was* the saint it represented, and many medieval relics and reliquaries took their power from being a part of a saintly or divine body. The power of such icons was recently demonstrated when Italian firefighters risked their lives to save the Turin Shroud, which is held to bear the imprint of Christ's face.

By contrast, the modern period makes countless reproductions of its imagery that have become indistinguishable from one another in what Walter Benjamin famously called the 'age of mechanical reproduction'. Such visualizing, always common, has now become all but compulsory. This history has many origins

ranging from the visualizing of the economy in the eighteenth century to the development of the diagnostic medieval gaze and the rise of photography as the principal means of defining reality in the early nineteenth century. It has had some of its most dramatic effects in medicine, where everything from the activity of the brain to the heartbeat is now transformed into a visual pattern by complex technology. As this example shows, visualizing does not replace linguistic discourse but makes it more comprehensible, quicker and more effective.

One of the key tasks of visual culture is to understand how these complex pictures come together. They are not created from one medium or in one place as the overly precise divisions of academia would have it. Visual culture directs our attention away from structured, formal viewing settings like the cinema and art gallery to the centrality of visual experience in everyday life. At present, different notions of viewing and spectatorship are current both within and between all the various visual subdisciplines. It does, of course, make sense to differentiate. Our attitudes vary according to whether we are going to see a movie, watch television, or attend an art exhibition. However, most of our visual experience takes place aside from these formally structured moments of looking. As Irit Rogoff points out in her essay in this volume, a painting may be noticed on a book jacket or in an advert; television is consumed as a part of domestic life rather than as the sole activity of the viewer; and films are as likely to be seen on video, in an aeroplane or on cable as in a traditional cinema. Just as cultural studies has sought to understand the ways in which people create meaning from the consumption of mass culture, so does visual culture prioritize the everyday experience of the visual from the snapshot to the VCR and even the blockbuster art exhibition.

Visual culture is a necessarily historical subject, based on the recognition that the visual image is not stable but changes its relationship to exterior reality at particular moments of modernity. As philosopher Jean-François Lyotard has argued: 'Modernity, wherever it appears, does not occur without a shattering of belief, without a discovery of the *lack of reality* in reality – a discovery linked to the intervention of other realities' (Lyotard 1993: 9). As one mode of representing reality loses ground, another takes its place without the first disappearing. The formal logic of the *ancien régime* image (1650–1820) first gave way to the dialectical logic of the photograph in the modern period (1820–1975). The traditional image obeyed its own rules that were independent of exterior reality. The perspective system, for example, depends upon the viewer examining the image from one point only, using just one eye. No one actually does this, but the image is internally coherent and thus credible. As perspective's claim to be the most accurate representation of reality lost ground, film and photography created a new, direct relationship to reality, to the extent that we accept the 'actuality' of what we see in the image. A photograph necessarily shows us something that was at a certain point actually before the camera's lens. This image is dialectical because it sets up a relationship between the viewer in the present and the past moment of space or time that it represents.

However, the photograph was not dialectical in the Hegelian sense of the term – that the thesis of the formal image was countered by the antithesis of photography and resolved into a synthesis. On the contrary, postmodernism marks the era in which visual images and the visualizing of things that are not inherently

visual have accelerated dramatically without there being any clear goal in mind. Perspective images sought to make the world comprehensible to the powerful figure who stood at the single point from which they were drawn. Photographs offered a potentially more democratic visual map of the world. Now the filmed or photographic image no longer indexes reality because everyone knows it can be undetectably manipulated by computers. The paradoxical virtual image 'emerges when the real-time image dominates the thing represented, real time subsequently prevailing over real space, virtuality dominating actuality and turning the concept of reality on its head' (Virilio 1994: 63). Think of the film produced by 'smart' bombs used in the Gulf War, which showed targets being destroyed, only for it later to emerge that they missed as often as any other bomb: what then were we actually seeing in those films? These virtualities of the postmodern image constantly seem to elude our grasp, creating a crisis of the visual that is more than a specialized problem for the traditional visual disciplines.

### Everyday life

The notion of the world picture is no longer adequate to analyse this changed and changing situation. The extraordinary proliferation of images cannot cohere into one single picture for the contemplation of the intellectual. Visual culture seeks to find ways to work within this new (virtual) reality to find the points of resistance in the crisis of information and visual overload in everyday life. To adapt Michel de Certeau's phrase, visual culture is thus a tactic, rather than a strategy, for 'the place of the tactic belongs to the other' (de Certeau 1984: xix). A tactic is carried out in full view of the enemy, the society of control in which we live (ibid.: 37). Although some may find the military overtones of tactics off-putting, it can also be argued that in the ongoing culture wars, tactics are necessary to avoid defeat. Just as earlier enquiries into everyday life sought to prioritize the ways in which consumers created different meanings for themselves from mass culture, so will visual culture explore the ambivalences, interstices and places of resistance in postmodern everyday life from the consumer's point of view.

The (post)modern destruction of reality is accomplished in everyday life, not in the studios of the avant-garde. Just as the situationists collected examples of the bizarre happenings that pass as normality from the newspapers, so can we now see the collapse of reality in everyday life from the mass visual media. In the early 1980s, postmodern photographers like Sherrie Levine and Richard Prince sought to question the authenticity of photography by appropriating photographs taken by other people. This dismissal of photography's claim to represent the truth is now a staple of popular culture in tabloid magazines like the *Weekly World News* as well as more respected publications. Photography operates in such a climate of suspicion that O.J. Simpson's lawyer could plausibly dismiss a photograph showing his client wearing the rare shoes worn by the killer as fakes, only to be outdone when thirty more pictures were discovered. One photograph alone no longer shows the truth. Similarly, some of the most avidly followed television series bear no resemblance to reality at all. Soap operas construct a parallel universe in which the return of a long-lost twin brother is scarcely cause for comment and the death of a

character is not to be taken as any indication that he or she will not return the following week. Soap opera is pure television, to adapt Alfred Hitchcock's phrase, *because* of its unrealistic staging, not despite it. Soap is also perhaps the most international visual format, commanding national attention in countries as disparate as Russia, Mexico, Australia and Brazil. Reality is destroyed daily in hour-long slots across the globe.

Yet the visual is not simply the medium of information and mass culture. It offers a sensual immediacy that cannot be rivalled by print media: the very element that makes visual imagery of all kinds distinct from texts. This is not at all the same thing as simplicity but there is an undeniable impact on first sight that a written text cannot replicate. It is the feeling created by the opening sight of the spaceship filling the screen in *2001: A Space Odyssey*; by seeing the Berlin Wall come down on live television; or by encountering the shimmering blues and greens of Cézanne's landscapes. It is that edge, that buzz that separates the remarkable from the humdrum. It is this surplus of experience that moves the different components of the visual sign or semiotic circuit into a relation with one another. Such moments of intense and surprising visual power evoke, in David Freedberg's phrase, 'admiration, awe, terror and desire' (Freedberg 1989: 433). This dimension to visual culture is at the heart of all visual events.

Let us give this feeling a name: the sublime. The sublime is the pleasurable experience in representation of that which would be painful or terrifying in reality, leading to a realization of the limits of the human and of the powers of nature. The sublime was first theorized in antiquity by Longinus, who famously described how 'our soul is uplifted by the true sublime; it takes a proud flight and is filled with joy and vaunting, as though it has itself produced what it had heard'. The classical statue known as *Laocoon* is typical of the sublime work of art. It shows the Trojan warrior and his children fighting a serpent that will soon kill them. Their futile struggle has evoked the sublime for generations of viewers. The sublime was given renewed importance by Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant, who called it 'a satisfaction mixed with horror'. Kant contrasted the sublime with the beautiful, seeing the former as a more complex and profound emotion leading a person with a taste for the sublime to 'detest all chains, from the gilded variety worn at court to the irons weighing down the galley slave'. This preference for the ethical over the simply aesthetic has led Lyotard to revive the sublime as a key term for postmodern criticism. He sees it as 'a combination of pleasure and pain: pleasure in reason exceeding all presentation, pain in the imagination or sensibility proving inadequate to the concept' (Lyotard 1993: 15). The task of the sublime is then to 'present the unrepresentable', an appropriate role for the relentless visualizing of the postmodern era. Furthermore, because the sublime is generated by an attempt to present ideas that have no correlative in the natural world – for example, peace, equality, or freedom – 'the experience of the sublime feeling demands a sensitivity to Ideas that is not natural but acquired through culture' (Lyotard 1993: 71). Unlike the beautiful, which can be experienced in nature or culture, the sublime is the creature of culture and is therefore central to visual culture.

However, there is no question of a blanket endorsement of Lyotard's reworking of Kant. On the one hand, Kant dismissed all African art and religion as 'trifling',

as far removed from the sublime as he could imagine. To less prejudiced eyes, African sculptures like nail-laden *nkisi* power figures are remarkable instances of the combination of pleasure and pain that creates the sublime, as well as being motivated by the desire to show the unseeable. This example highlights the fundamental challenge for visual studies of learning ways to describe what Martin J. Powers has called 'a fractal network, permeated with patterns from all over the globe'. However, Powers does not simply argue for an all-inclusive worldwide web of the visual image, but emphasizes the power differentials across the network. At present, it must be recognized that visual culture remains a discourse of the West about the West, but in that framework 'the issue', as David Morley reminds us, 'is how to think of modernity, not so much as specifically or *necessarily* European . . . but only contingently so' (Morley 1996: 350). Seen in the long span of history, Euramericans – to use the Japanese term – have dominated modernity for a relatively brief period of time that may well now be drawing to a close. In short, the success or failure of visual culture may well depend on its ability to think transculturally, oriented to the future, rather than take the rear-mirror anthropological approach to culture as tradition.

### What's next?

What is the future for visual culture? In everyday life, the development of the Internet II, Digital Video Discs and High-Definition TV make it clear that visualizing is here to stay. Within the cloistered world of the academy, on the other hand, there are those who have dedicated themselves to ensuring that visual culture is eradicated as a field of study. While splendidly defiant, such attitudes recall King Canute's orders to the tide rather than being likely to succeed. Behind this dismissal lies a pattern of one part of the intellectual elite siding with the avant-garde theories of modernism in alliance with the privileges of the wealthy. For it is noticeable that much of the Marxist and modernist rhetoric often used to critique the idea of visual culture is in fact emerging from the art history departments of Ivy League universities. In a tradition that stretches back to Adorno's dismissal of popular culture in the 1940s, Marxism and conservatism find themselves in a curious alliance, using different languages and strategies to attain the same goal.

Casting visual culture in this light places it in the role of the underdog, which can of course be a very privileged position in academia. So the parallel example of the institutionalization of cultural studies in the United States is perhaps the best place to look for lessons for the fledgling interdisciplinary. After a flurry of excitement in the early 1990s, cultural studies has lost its way, disrupted on the one hand by intellectual crises like the Sokal affair (in which a deliberately fake article on science and cultural studies was successfully published in the journal *Social Text*) and on the other by the energies of many practitioners being consumed by creating syllabuses, exams and reading lists for new degrees in cultural studies. There is unquestionably a crisis of contemporary visuality. The answer to that crisis is unlikely to be found in a reading list. Rather than simply create new degrees in the old structures of the liberal arts canon, let us try to create ways of doing postdisciplinary work.



Visual culture ought not to sit comfortably in already existing university structures. It should rather form part of an emerging body of postdisciplinary academic endeavours from cultural studies, gay and lesbian studies, to African-American studies, and so on, whose focus crosses the borders of traditional academic disciplines at will. The viability of such approaches relies on their continued ability to challenge their host institutions, not in their easy absorption within them. This is why I think of visual culture as a tactic, rather than an academic discipline. It is a fluid interpretive structure, centred on understanding the response to visual media of both individuals and groups in everyday life. Its definition comes from the questions it asks and the issues it seeks to raise. Like the other approaches mentioned above, it hopes to reach beyond the traditional confines of the university to interact with people's everyday lives.

### How to use this book

This Reader may well be used as an assigned text in a variety of classes. It is not, however, conceived as a textbook. For the very definition of visual culture as a field is what is currently at stake. If this book were somehow to act as a fusion of Janson's *History of Art* (1995), Bordwell's *Classical Hollywood Cinema* (1985) and Fiske's *Understanding Popular Culture* (1989) it would have failed. It seeks rather, in the expressive term used by Robert Stam and Ella Shohat in their introductory essay, to be a provocation – to cause new questions to be asked and to force a re-examination of long-accepted procedures. The two essays that follow in this introductory section take this task further in two complementary ways. Irit Rogoff has done much to spread discussion of visual culture both within the Universities of California and London and beyond. In her essay 'Studying Visual Culture', especially written for this volume, she examines the present state of the field and considers how it might progress. Taking issue with the 1996 special issue of the journal *October*, which was highly critical of the very notion of visual culture, Rogoff argues that

at stake therefore are political questions concerning who is allowed to speak about what, which clash with intellectual positions that wish for us all the possibility of engaging with all the texts and images and other stimuli and frameworks we encounter, of breaking down the barriers of permissible and territorialized knowledge rather than redrawing them along another set of lines.

In their intervention, Robert Stam from film studies and Ella Shohat from cultural studies, take a look at visual culture from the outside. Here they offer one means of reconceptualizing visual culture that moves away from the Euramerican progression of realism/modernism/postmodernism to a polycentric, globalized field of study. The need to abandon this Eurocentric modernist version of history is perhaps the greatest single challenge for the emerging practice of visual culture. As Stam and Shohat conclude, the goal should be a 'mutual and reciprocal relativization', offering the chance of 'coming not only to "see" other groups, but also, through a salutary estrangement, to see how [each] is itself seen'.

The subsequent sections carry introductions of their own. Where I have edited selections, material omitted within a paragraph is indicated by ellipses (. . .). The omission of one or more paragraphs is indicated by ellipses within square brackets [. . .] in the middle of the page. My own summary of omitted material is enclosed by square brackets []. I would like to end this chapter by calling attention to the realities that have shaped this book. Once there was a perfect Visual Culture Reader that existed in my mind. Then the need to obtain permissions, combined with the limits of space and budgets, intruded and the result is what you see before you – necessarily imperfect. I have selected material that would spark as many correspondences and points of debate as possible within the frame of the volume. None the less, I think it likely that everyone currently working in one of the visual disciplines will think that there is not enough from their field and too much from the others. While I have tried to make its geographical and temporal coverage as wide as possible, universality was impossible, resulting in some difficult choices having to be made. Let me point to some of the obvious gaps for which there are no intellectual justifications beyond the need to create artificial limits. Although visual culture seems to me to be an aspect of modernity in the widest sense, there is little coverage of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century subjects. In selecting twentieth-century material I have tended to opt for work on post-1945 subjects, while the geographical coverage is weakest in terms of Asia and Oceania. No doubt many other criticisms can and will be made but I hope readers will prefer to enjoy what is included rather than carp over what has been omitted. In each section, the essays and extracts offer a sense of the developing understanding of a particular topic in recent years, interacting both within and without that section. My introductory essays will show how I connect the different contributions without pretending to exhaust their richness. If the book succeeds in provoking passionate argument and dissent, I shall judge it to have been a success.

### Note

- 1 The material in this introduction is taken from the first chapter of my companion volume, *Visual Culture: An Introduction* (Routledge, forthcoming).

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