

What are the benefits and/or limitations of focusing on the visual and visuality in cultural studies?

PROBLEMS AND PERSPECTIVES

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With post-modernism, classic boundaries between disciplines began to dissolve. Areas of overlapping interest such as visual studies emerged as fields of study in their own right to bridge the gaps between complimentary disciplines.¹ However, these newly formulated specialities are capable of permeating multiple fields of study simultaneously. For example, visual studies can examine aspects in relation to art history, aesthetics, culture studies, technology and any other discipline that may overlap with the subject in question in addition to the field's own content; namely the visuality and its perceptual apparatus. This infringement upon other fields has led many academics to question the validity and autonomy of these emergent fields.² For the purpose of this essay, I will explore some of the benefits of focusing on the visuality in cultural studies (ie. The advantages of visual culture as an autonomous field of study) and its limitations.

According to W.J.T. Mitchell, visual culture has been accused of the "liquidation of art as we know it" through the levelling out of artistic and non-artistic images. This democratisation process is believed to abolish the differences between art and non-art. I would point to the fact that art sits within visual culture and is a narrower and very distinct scope of this broader field. Indeed, as Mitchell rightly observes, it allows us to recognise art from popular visual manifestations such as advertising or signage since "identity is always constituted out of difference"³. Careful examination of all forms of visual expressions allows us to identify the visual cues that render an image a mass-culture picture or a distinct art visual (*see Fig. A*).



Fig. A Guy Bourdin, *Fashion Image for Charles Jourdan Shoes*, 1975

Bourdin is often regarded as the first fashion photographer to focus on image making and the narratives within rather than the product to be marketed, thus placing his pictures within the realm of Art rather than advertising.

boundaries that classify it as Art images, but a Visual Culture perspective will recognise the indiscernible nuances since it compares it to all produced images and identify the artistic elements in his photographs.

One of the best illustrative examples for the above argument are the images of the renowned fashion photographer, Guy Bourdin. As a discipline, fashion photography would fall within the circle of advertising and popular culture due to its unashamed marketing objective and overt pursuit of financial gain. However, Bourdin's images were uncharacteristically 'non-commercial' as we see in **Fig. A** since he placed stronger emphasis on the construction of the image and ambiguous narratives in which the product (in this case the Charles Jourdan shoes) was incidental rather than aim for a strong visual of the product. An Art lens would have disregarded his photography all together since it does not adhere to the strict

¹ W.J.T. Mitchell, 'Showing seeing: a critique of visual culture' in *Journal of Visual Culture*, SAGE Publications, London, 2002, pp. 166

² *Ibid.* pp.169

³ Lawrence Grossbery, 'Identity and Culural Studies: Is That All There Is?' in Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay, *Questions of Cultural Identity*, SAGE Publications, London 1996, pp. 94

Another popular fallacy surrounding visual culture is the idea that it “accept(s) without question the view that art is to be defined by its working exclusively through the optical faculties.” Yet, since we agreed that visual culture assumes a broader lens on aspects of visibility, it examines the elements that lay outside the frame of vision; those that have been excluded and interrogates the reasons behind their expulsion. In effect, it examines the process by which the manifested visual element has come to be. As Mitchell notes, it “entails a meditation on blindness, the invisible, the unseen, the unseeable and the overlooked”⁴ and in doing so it “compels attention to the tactile, the auditory, the haptic, and the phenomenon of *synthesia*”. So although it is called visual culture, it deals with aspects that lie outside immediate visual perception.

Another erroneous belief surrounding the study of visual culture is the notion that as a field it reduces the study of art history into a study of images. Mitchell argues against this when he states that it “extends to everyday practices of seeing and showing ... it is less concerned with the meaning of images than with their lives and loves”.⁵ As noted earlier, art is a small constituent of visual culture and thus this broader field surveys images within art history and beyond. More importantly, since it examines the ‘cultural’ aspect of images, it scrutinises their production process, their distribution, their reception and their preservation. For example, whilst art history and aesthetics will scrutinise a Gerhard Richter painting in lights of its historical art movement, the significance of the painter, mode of paint application in addition to the inherent meaning of the painting, a visual cultural examination will contextualise it within the broader historical visual industry, the practice of hanging paintings in residential or institutional outlets, the means by which the painting acquires value and cultural status and the popularity of this form of painting across various times to name a few angles.

Perhaps one of the strongest arguments for visual culture studies is the notion that vision is actually a social construct rather than a natural occurring biological phenomena as Mitchell notes,

“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”.⁶

This idea is best exemplified in the nature of the human *gaze*. Early readings of the *gaze*, particularly in original Lacanian film theory defined it as a visual apparatus that extends the physical function of the eyes allowing us to see the world around. Thus it does not serve another purpose beyond an extension tool.⁷ However, according to Lacan, the *gaze* is a visual perception phenomenon that humans engage in at both the active conscious level and the subliminal.⁸ Therefore, the gaze

⁴ Ibid. pp. 169

⁵ W.J.T. Mitchell, pp. 170

⁶ W.J.T. Mitchell, pp. 166

⁷ Emanuelle Wessels, ‘Occasioning the Real: Lacan, Deleuze, and Cinematic Structuring of Sense’ in Jan Jagodzinski, *Psychoanalyzing Cinema: A Productive Encounter with Lacan, Deleuze, and Zizek* (Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2012) pp. 154. Wessel’s survey of early Lacanian film and apparatus theorists demonstrates that they championed the idea that the camera served as a prosthetic extension to the sight organ; the eyes, and thus limited the definition of the *gaze* to its physical function. In other words, the eyes/camera attend only to the physical attributes of form within an optical field.

⁸ In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XI*, Norton Paperback, USA 1981; reissued 1998, pp.73, Lacan defined the gaze “our relation to things, in so far as this relation is constituted by the way of vision, and ordered in the figures of representation, something slips, passes, is transmitted, from stage to stage, and

functions beyond the physical extension of the visual field by engaging the individual in an intensive cognitive process that crosses different realms of existence.

An idea materialises – once a cognitive internalisation takes place within an individual subject – and the subject's own and personal psychological drives will be manifested in the act of gazing. Lacan had centred the psychological drive on the element of desire and “the appearance of the phallic ghost”, which many feminist critics misunderstood as the sexual male desire that can be partially fulfilled through visual pleasure made possible by the voyeuristic factor available in the *gaze*. However, the gaze cannot be deemed as property of man only or confined to a particular gender, race, ethnic or age group since it is a phenomenon experienced by all human beings that is socially constructed.

In fact, the social construction of this apparent natural visual phenomenon is easily identified when we examine the power dynamics involved within the act. Lacan has argued that the *gaze* “is a property of the object rather than the subject”⁹. The seen, otherwise can be identified as the object, is fully aware of the see'er or the subject looking at it. As Lacan explains, “the pre-existence of a gaze – I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides ... we are beings who are looked at, in the spectacle of the world”.¹⁰ He had stressed on the “pre-existence of the overall field of visibility to the agency of any individual eye looking at the world”.¹¹ Thus, the see'er subject is also aware that it is a seen object at all times.

This act of perception – of being perceived and looked at – from the standpoint of the object demonstrates an active participating role in the undertaking of the *gaze*. According to Kaja Silverman, “the subject might be said to assume responsibility for “operating” the gaze by “seeing” itself being seen, even when no pair of eyes are trained on it – by taking not so much the gaze as its effects within the self”.¹² Mitchell explains that objects and images are not passive since “vision is never a one-way street, but a multiple intersection teeming with dialectical images”.¹³ In effect the image and/or object appear to be visual stimuli that stir the imagination and conjure up notions which makes vision a psycho-social process rather than a basic physiological phenomenon.

In relation to this psycho-social element inherent in vision, we are able to subdue another common fallacy; namely 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”.¹⁴ Both opponents and supporters of visual culture accused the field of existing as only a tool to critique scopic regimes and analyse “the use of advertising, propaganda and snooping to control mass populations and erode democratic institutions”.¹⁵ However, since we established earlier that

is always to some degree eluded in it – that is what we call the gaze” in relation to his theory of the three registers of human existence. He argued that in the gaze “a strange contingency” occurs where the individual operates in both the Symbolic and Real registers simultaneously, where “the drive is manifested at the level of the scopic field”. Early readings of Lacan have often placed the gaze within the Imaginary Register in which the ego is formed and identification occurs.

⁹ David Macey. ‘Gaze’ in *Dictionary of Critical Theory* (Penguin Books, UK, 2001) pp.155. The subject is defined as the active individual engaged in the act of seeing within the *gaze*, whilst the object is defined as the passive individual (or any other form) that is being seen or looked at in the same *gaze*.

¹⁰ Jacques Lacan. *Four Fundamental Concepts* 1998. 72

¹¹ Steven Z. Levine, *Lacan Reformed*, pp. 69

¹² Kaja Silverman. ‘Fassbiner and Lacan: A Reconsideration of Gaze, Look and Image’ in Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Holly and Keith Moxey, *Visual Culture: Images and Interpretations*, (Wesleyan University Press: Connecticut 1994) pp. 274

¹³ W.J.T. Mitchell, pp. 176

¹⁴ W.J.T. Mitchell, pp. 172

¹⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 172

vision is a dialectical concept and the power does not necessarily rest with the see'er (or in this case with the producers of the visual images), we need to recognise it as Mitchell explains "as go-betweens in social transactions, as a repertoire of screen images or templates that structure our encounter with other human beings".¹⁶

In fact, renowned American artist Cindy Sherman has explored this theme on numerous occasions and created hundreds of female characters drawn from "the unlimited supply of images provided by movies, television, magazines, the internet and art history"¹⁷ in front of her camera. Besides her



Fig. B Cindy Sherman, *Untitled 466*, 2008

iconic *Untitled Film Stills* series in which she enacts the classic tropes of female heroines as portrayed by Hollywood during the 50s and 60s, her images in *Society Pictures* and more recently in *History Portraits* reflect on our shared memory when encountering others and our automated social indexing of beings based on their visual manifestation (See Fig. B). Eva Respini observes of Sherman's work, "Rather than explorations of inner psychology, her pictures are about the projection of personas and stereotypes that are deep-seated in our shared cultural imagination".¹⁸

This cultural imagination is indeed shaped by producers of mass media images, but equally, the way we respond to these images (particularly the *Society Pictures*) shape our social field and inform our social interactions as Mitchell states, "these images are the filters through which we recognise and of course misrecognise other people. They are the paradoxical mediations which make possible ... the unmediated face-to-face relations that Raymond Williams postulates as the origin of

society ... an invisible screen or lattice-work of apparently unmediated figures that makes the effects of the mediated images possible".¹⁹

The above are by no means a complete account of all the arguments that merit the existence of visual culture studies. As previously stipulated, it is a much broader field that accounts for all visual manifestations but also for the processes behind the lens (allegorically speaking). Indeed a considerable part is consecrated to the study of images as its opponents continuously remind us, but it also examines the motives and drivers behind our production or 'dis-production' of images: how we interpret these images – almost decoding them as a visual language. The visibility in visual culture extends beyond the physical essence of the visual to include sociology, history, aesthetics, art and much more. As an interdisciplinary study it allows us to see the bigger picture, but that does not mean we abandon the focused fields.

¹⁶ W.J.T. Mitchell, pp. 175

¹⁷ Eva Respini, 'Will the Real Cindy Sherman Please Stand Up?', pp. 13

¹⁸ Eva Respini, 'Will The Real Cindy Sherman Please Stand Up?' in Kate Norment, Jason Best, *Cindy Sherman*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2012, pp.13

¹⁹ W.J.T. Mitchell, pp. 175

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