From the *Pictorial Turn* to the Embodiment of Vision

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Abstract
The purpose of this paper is to map out the semiotic, cultural-historical and ideological discourses that constitute the theoretical framework of the study of visual culture, and to anchor the problem of response in an underlying phenomenology of perception. The article argues that the strong cognitive-emotional responses that images generate are indicative of the corporeal conditioning of aesthetics, which places the entirety of visual discourse into an anthropological perspective.

Keywords
visual culture, phenomenology of perception, semiotics, corporeality

(Old-New) Concepts

In the introductory chapter of his book *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, Nicholas Mirzoeff sums up the reasons for the establishment of visual culture as a distinct field of study:

> One of the most striking features of the new visual culture is the growing tendency to visualize things that are not in themselves visual. Allied to this intellectual move is the growing technological capacity to make visible things that our eyes could not see unaided, ranging from Roentgen's accidental discovery of the X-ray in 1895 to the Hubble telescope's "pictures" of distant galaxies. […] In other words, visual culture does not depend on pictures themselves but the modern tendency to picture or visualize existence.[1]

Barbara Stafford goes even further and describes the transformation of academic practices:

> The history of the general move toward visualization thus has broad intellectual and practical implications for the conduct of and the theory of the humanities, the physical and biological sciences, and the social sciences – indeed, for all forms of education, from top to bottom.[2]

In a similar fashion, Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright observe in *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* that visuality "characterizes our age, because so much of our media and everyday space is increasingly dominated by visual images."[3] In accordance with the arguments of these prominent theorists, by now it has become a truism to say that over the past few decades, visuality, the proliferation of images and the emerging cultural influence of visual (or "new") media have attracted increasing attention in literary and cultural studies alike. The presence of the visual and the influence

1 Nicholas Mirzoeff. *An Introduction to Visual Culture*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1999) 5.

2 Barbara Stafford. *Good Looking: Essays on the Virtue of Images* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996) 23.

3 Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 370.

of the exciting interdisciplinary field of visual culture, alternatively referred to as visual studies or visual literacy[4], have been addressed and put to theoretical and analytical use in the interpretation and description of everyday cultural practices. In close connection to this and with the expansion of literary studies into cultural studies, the critical discourses addressing questions of art and artifact have necessarily changed as well. The common feature of the sometimes disjunctive approaches was their attempt to counterbalance the alleged hegemony of textuality and to provide an alternative to a basically linguistic paradigm that has dominated the interpretative discourses within the humanities since the inception of structuralism and post-structuralism.

The word "alternative", however, suggests an inadvertent reiteration of the age-old image-word dichotomy. Throughout the history of culture, image and word have often fallen subject to a hierarchical ordering and have been thought of as competing, rival modes of representation. Even the language used to describe the interrelationship between words and images has been stigmatized since it draws extensively on the ideological construct of power and the vocabulary of political discourses: the use of words like rivalry, struggle, hierarchy, dichotomy and contest indicates the persistence of the rhetoric of the "ut pictura poesis" tradition in which the underlying concept of language allows for the verbal mastery of the visual field, where language ultimately envelops vision. As W.J.T. Mitchell writes, "pictorial images are inevitably conventional and contaminated by language" and, given the nature of the subject-matter, we are forced "to conceive of the relation between words and images in political terms, as a struggle for territory, as a contest of rival ideologies."[5] Later, in *Picture Theory* Mitchell reaffirms the formal incommensurability of the "signs or media of visual and verbal expression" and states that

> [t]he 'differences' between images and language are not merely formal matters: they are, in practice, linked to the differences between the (speaking) self and the (seen) other; between telling and showing; […] between words (heard, quoted, inscribed) and objects or actions (seen, depicted, described); between the sensory channels, traditions of representation, and modes of experience.[6]

Mirzoeff seems to echo Mitchell's ideas when he observes that "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."[7]

Radical as Mirzoeff's claim may be, it does not only indicate the frustrations of the art historian over the "absolutization" of language and textuality but is also symptomatic of a paradigm shift in the course of philosophical thinking, which Mitchell calls "the pictorial turn" in *Picture Theory*.[8] Mitchell traces back the roots and early variations of this shift to the semiotics of Charles Peirce and to Nelson Goodman's meditations about the "languages of art." In Mitchell's opinion these treatises of the visual become significant when they "explore the conventions and codes that underlie nonlinguistic symbol systems and […] do not begin with the assumption that language is

4 Cf. James Elkins. "Introduction: The Concept of Visual Literacy, and its Limitations." *Visual Literacy*. Ed. James Elkins. (New York: Routledge, 2008) 1-11.

5 W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology.* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986) 43.

6 W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory.* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994) 5.

7 Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture*. 6.

8 Mitchell. *Picture Theory*. 11.

paradigmatic for meaning."[9] He also reads Derrida's "grammatology" as an enterprise that accentuates the visual/perceptual conditioning of textuality; as an intellectual maneuver that eventually de-centers "the phonocentric model of language by shifting attention to the visible, material traces of writing."[10] Foucault's strong emphasis on the breach between "the discursive and the visible, the seeable and the sayable"[11] is not only a determining feature of the pictorial turn, but is also constitutive of a reflective disjunction between the verbal and the visual. Finally, Mitchell concludes that this disjunction also derives from an elemental "iconophobia," an anxiety that characterizes our relations to images and, more importantly, our responses to them. This anxiety also implies that, in the end, we are unprotected against the power of images. Consequently the status of the image moves back and forth between "a paradigm and an anomaly."[12]

The pictorial turn as such is therefore a paradox: the image has gained, at least in Mitchell's view, unprecedented power, or at least managed to overwhelm the cultural space of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, we must not forget that the fascination with images has always been accompanied by an inverse emotional and intellectual tendency. "What is specific to our moment is this paradox."[13] In fact, ten years after the publication of *Picture Theory* Mitchell dedicates a whole book to the "lives and loves," the demands, needs and desires of images. In *What do Pictures Want?* he explores how images can trigger intellectual, emotional and even somatic responses in their viewers. But in *Picture Theory* his primary goal is to demonstrate that beside the textual paradigms of hermeneutics, rhetoric or post-structuralism which conceive of (and read) the world ultimately as a text, there has been an urgent need for a paradigm in which the linguistically conditioned semiotics -- the textual aspects of signification -- is complemented by a conceptual model of image and visuality. Such a "theory" would be based on the insight that human experience and cognition are much more dependent on the visual domain in an era that has spawned advanced technologies of creating and storing images (let alone the exploitation of mechanical and digital reproducibility) than they have ever been in the history of Western culture. Therefore Mitchell tries to develop a "picture theory" (or more appropriately, a theory of pictures) by arguing for a "postlinguistic, postsemiotic rediscovery of the picture" and for the "realization that spectatorship may be as deep a problem as various forms of *reading* […] and that visual experience or 'visual literacy' might not be fully explicable on the model of textuality."[14]

Ironically, the establishment and academic canonization of a field of study necessarily relies on specific forms of textuality. Every discipline generates (eventually historical) narratives of its own, which are continuously overwritten through reflections on the objects and methods of research. The historical narratives of a discipline work as paratexts to the narratives generated within the discipline, and undermine attempts to identify the object of study and delineate the relevant methods and goals of research. Visual culture is no exception. At the same time, recent meta-discourses of the field, the primary objective of which has been to determine and delineate the position of the study of the visual within the humanities in general and within cultural studies in

9 Mitchell. *Picture Theory*, 12.

10 Ibid.

11 At this point Mitchell admits to alluding to the interpretation of Foucault in Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, trans. ean Hand (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988) 47-69.

12 Mitchell, *Picture Theory*. 13.

13 Mitchell, *Picture Theory*. 15.

14 Mitchell. *Picture Theory*. 16.

particular, have made it obvious that "visual culture," in its eminent form, reaches beyond the limits of the philosophical and art-historical paradigms that were used to address phenomena of vision. It seems, that visual culture, or the study of the visual, does not (and cannot) simply entail a strict and close study of a more-or-less plausibly definable subject-matter. The interpretation and critical evaluation of images necessarily brought about the need to interpret and critically evaluate the forms they take or the techniques and media which surround their production and, in close connection to this, to interpret and critically evaluate the practices of observation, the observer, and, most importantly, the psycho-physiological implications of seeing.

As a result, it has become obvious that the delineation of the place of visual culture with respect only to the status of the image and the pictorial sign as opposed to the status of the text and the linguistic sign would be an oversimplification of the subject-matter. Following this, one would simply reduce the study of the visual to the reiteration of yet another institutionalized discourse about modes of representation and signification. Such a reduction runs the risk not only of leaving the socio-cultural, cognitive and psychological implications of representation without reflection but also of retaining a position where perception is described as a passive process, working through separate senses independent of each another – a position hardly defendable on the basis of contemporary neurobiological research.

In fact, also the name "visual culture" might occasion several misunderstandings. Does it signify a distinct academic discipline the purpose of which is to critically evaluate visual phenomena or does it, in a more natural move, refer to a cultural paradigm where culture is described as primarily dominated or, at a minimum, approached, through the visual? As Mitchell argues,[15] it would perhaps be better to surpass the paradigmatism of traditional disciplinarity in favor of a much more natural pragmatism, and speak about "visual literacy" in the same sense as we talk about computer literacy or internet literacy.

This would mean expanding the concept of the visual so that it signifies, apart from the more or less established academic discourses, a set of skills and practices we use to acquire and disseminate knowledge and experience through a vast variety of activities that are connected to the visual and that range from artistic creation to news media to the use of images and the application of imaging technologies in science. Either way, it should be taken into account that even though it is the humanities that consider the significance and impact of the visual from a cultural perspective, by the originally interdisciplinary nature of vision and the visual, the study of visual culture is not exclusively a discipline of the humanities.

As Mieke Bal argues, an "essentialist approach" to visual culture seems to be at odds with its own endeavor.[16] The so-called "objects" of study range from conceptualizations of the image as 'outside' object, or mental construct, to the artistic and scientific renderings of vision, from the technics of the visual to the media through which it is mobilized. Each object can be approached through a variety of methods (and with an eye on a variety of goals), which are, in return, interconnected on various levels of inter- and multidisciplinarity. Barbara Stafford offers perhaps the most plausible criticism of the essentialist approach. She claims that

15 W.J.T. Mitchell. '"Visual Literacy or Literary Visualcy?" *Visual Literacy*. Ed. James Elkins. (New York: Routledge, 2008) 11-14.

16 Cf. Mieke Bal. ''Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture." *Journal of Visual Culture.* Vol 2(1) (2003) 13.

> [v]isual literacy is a temporal construct, rising or falling with the cultural and scientific assumptions and values of a given period. Currently, in the humanities, however, it rests on implicit views of perceptual processes and of the perceiving mind that are far from up-to-date and that, surprisingly, remain anachronistically Lockean.[17]

Consequently, in trying to subvert such anachronisms, the study of the visual has to adhere to the cultural and scientific circumstances surrounding the construction and dissemination not only of images but also of discourses and meanings. The conceptualization of the image, for instance, in a strictly philosophical approach, rests on epistemological grounds and is linked to the phenomenology of perception. But, by the same token, the phenomenology of perception is also reliant on cognitive-semiotic, psycho-physiological and neurobiological considerations of how the selection, filtering, categorization and rearranging of external stimuli are associated with the events of the mind.[18] In other words, both phenomenology and cognitive science intertwine with the domain of visual culture broadly defined.

The mingling of visual culture and new media provides solid grounds on which it is possible re-contextualize the corporeality of vision with respect to its relation to the growing technological consciousness that characterizes the history of visual culture. It seems that the underlying technical imperative at work in the production and dissemination of meaning in new media is also constitutive of the entire perceptual - and conceptual - framework of the "scopic" itself, and generates its own meta-discourses in science as well as in art. As a result, critical trends in the study of visual culture have recently taken interest in the position and configuration of the human body. Many of these approaches rely on the implications of cognitive neuroscience, psychoanalysis or social anthropology, whereas others draw on studies of mediality or the various technologies surrounding the proliferation of corporeal images (and, retroactively, images of corporeality) in science and art. The phenomenology of perception, at the same time, necessarily runs into the problem of subjectivity. Forcibly sustained binarisms such as the subject-object dichotomy or the image-picture disjunction further complicate the theoretical embedding of the field. The artistic output of the poet and visual artist Elizabeth Goldring, who herself lives with a visual impairment, provides an example of practice for the underlying technologization of both perception *and* art. Goldring is a Senior Fellow at MIT's Center for Advanced Visual Studies where her research projects include visualizing the loss of her own eyesight and participation in the development of the "seeing machine" (the Scanning Laser Ophthalmoscope or SLO) to aid those in the same predicament. Goldring uses the machine to enable the visually impaired to read visual poems, and to experience architectural space by utilizing a virtual environment software. She also relies on the machine in creating a unique form of visual art she calls *RetinaPrints*, which are images of objects Goldring sees through the machine, superimposed over the images of her own damaged retina.

Goldring's *RetinaPrints* and other applications of the machine demonstrate that vision ultimately takes place in a "field of the visible that is haunted by the spectre of

17 Barbara Stafford. ''The Remaining 10 Percent: The Role of Sensory Knowledge in the Age of the Self-Organizing Brain." *Visual Literacy*. Ed. James Elkins. (Nwe York: Routledge, 2008) 32.

18 Cf. Stafford. Ibid.

technology."[19] It always presupposes an apparatus that can be manipulated. The prosthetic functions of the apparatus can also be described in terms of corporeality: the image created, manipulated, projected and eventually framed by the apparatus is inexorably inscribed onto the body. The inscription of the image, at the same time, is only attainable as différance that protects from the amalgamation of the apparatus and the body and retains the integrity of the body proper. The visual, therefore, would also be intertwined with considerations of the production and dissemination of signs and meanings, with an underlying bio-social semiotics where the recognition of the sign (or trace) becomes more and more dependent on the techniques of perception.

Violence, Aesthetics and the Power of Images

The "power" of the image, and the preoccupation with the wide range of emotional, cognitive and somatic responses to images pose a series of questions about the phenomenology of perception in the visual domain. The starting point for the discussion of this issue is what we might call, paraphrasing Mitchell, "the surplus value of violence" in the visual world. Mitchell's argument is the following:

> It is possible to imagine, I suppose, certain objects that would be seen as objectionable "on their own," without some form of representation or presentation to call attention to them. Excrement, garbage, genitals, corpses, monsters, and the like are often regarded as intrinsically disgusting or objectionable.[20]

The question remains: are images considered violent on the basis of some objective conditioning, or they are violent because we, as spectators, see them that way? A ready and easy way to overcome any form of violence attributed to images is denial and rejection: if we do not see them, they do not exist. The problem, unfortunately, is much more complicated. Violence, at all times, comes with a context. The gaze brings it into life, or, using less metaphysical wording, the interpretation of violence is culturally coded – it comes in a frame: it is violent because we think it is, we learned to consider it and recognize it that way. Mitchell is interested in testing out what happens when the cultural codes of violence are de-constructed, in the most eminent sense of the word: deconstruction does not necessarily mean destruction (though his discussion of iconoclasm accentuates the extremities of response as well), but a form of showing the other of violence through inscribing it, re-writing it, putting its codes into a different context.

Gilles Deleuze approaches the impact of the image on the grounds of the phenomenology of perception, and uses the term "affect" to describe the agency of the image, or "the quality of power" attached to its impact on the viewer.[21] David Freedberg in his *Power of Images* provocatively describes the primeval reactions to the making and reception of images in terms of sex and affection: "People are sexually aroused

19 Joanna Lowry. ''Performing Vision in the Theatre of the Gaze." *Performing the Body/Performing the Text.* Eds. Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson. (New York: Routledge, 1999) 273.

20 W.J.T.Mitchell. *What Do Pictures Want?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) 125.

21 Gilles Deleuze. ''Chapter 6 The affection image" *Cinema 1 The Movement-Image.* (London: The Athlone Press, 1986) 87-102, especially 95-98.

by pictures and sculptures."[22] Freedberg's approach builds around the historicity of response, and focuses on historically emphatic, and therefore, archetypical forms such as consecration, votive practices, meditation and contemplation, fetish and arousal, iconoclasm, idolatry, as well as on the historicity of such dichotomies as representation and reality, or verisimilitude and resemblance. Nevertheless, the subject-matter he chooses and the method with which he inscribes it into a historical context point to the latent mystification of the interdependence of images and corporeality in art history. Freedberg writes:

> My concern is with those responses that are subject to repression because they are too embarrassing, too blatant, too rude, and too uncultured; because they make us aware of our kinship with the unlettered, the coarse, the primitive, the undeveloped; and because they have psychological roots that we prefer no to acknowledge.[23]

Freedberg's plastic example explicates the image of the body as it appears in a picture. Not the appearance of any kind of body, but a body the image of which is capable of inducing arousal in its viewers. Although Freedberg's argument is sexually oriented and inscribes the psychopathology of the body into our percepts, the general thread of his argument underscores a cognitive transposition that occurs between the real and its image, the image of the body and the positing of its "actuality," a kind of internalized otherness. As Freedberg explains, arousal unveils an underlying "cognitive relation between looking and enlivening."[24] It is not difficult to trace the introjection of the corporeality-paradigm in Freedberg's logic; in the act of looking the "image-ness" of the image is temporarily suspended or bracketed:

> Once we perceive the body as real and living (or once we wish to perceive it as real and living, or to reconstitute forms with some such result), we invest it with life and respond to it accordingly. When, mutatis mutandis, we find ourselves responding to an image as if it were real, it seems at that moment no mere signifier but the living signified itself. […] The issue is not one of context, since to claim this much is not to attempt to achieve terms of definition for what is or is not seen to be lifelike, or real, or living in particular cultures or contexts. It is rather to suggest that there is a cognitive relation between looking and enlivening.[25]

In one of his recent books W.J.T. Mitchell takes a very similar position. By mobilizing the (Lacanian) categories of desire and the surplus value of desire, he proposes a basically anthropomorphic handling of images. His "objectionable subjectivizing" of images touches upon the question of violence in the chapter entitled "Offending Images."[26] Mitchell portrays violence as operating in two directions: either it springs from the image

22 David Freedberg: *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response.* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989) 1.

23 Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response.* 1.

24 Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response.* 325.

25 Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response.* 325.

26 Cf. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) 125-145.

and affects the viewer, or it characterizes the viewer's response and is directed at the image. Though Mitchell identifies radical iconoclasm as the extreme of this violence, I would argue that the apparently much more peaceful forms of response such as turning one's look away, or turning one's back on the "face" of the image are also intelligible as indirect manifestations of violence. Kristeva describes a very similar type of response when she talks about the sight of a corpse as the example par excellence of the abject.[27] The corpse creates repulsion or disgust because we subconsciously empathize with the victim, and in the sight of the body we recognize it as similar to our own body, we project our own experiences of corporeality onto it and internalize its fragmentation as if it were the fragmentation of the body proper. As far as the viewers' responses are concerned, there is practically very little difference (if any) between the physiological factors of fascination and repulsion. Both are strong emotional responses.

The consequences of these considerations for the study of the corporality of vision are obvious. Spectatorship ultimately envelops the trauma of the real. With regard to the relationship between spectatorial response and the power of images Brigitte Peucker observes: "[c]ognitive and phenomenological approaches to perception alike tell us that spectatorial affect is real even when it […] not reality that produces it."[28] Peucker's words also provide a possible explanation why one may feel compelled to turn their back on the image. That could be the result of many factors, from aesthetic disappointment to ethical or ideological conviction to more prosaic causes such as fear or disgust. I am also thinking about the more violent drives these actions repress: turning the look away eventually undoes the image by cancelling out its visibility – not the material existence of the image, but its ability to affect. Turning away eventually undoes sight and brings onto the viewer a blindness that prevents them from communicating with the image. And yet, even these responses are unable to cancel out the presence of violence and the power of the image. Even the self-inflicted blindness becomes the "invisible" trace of the spectacularity of violence to which it responds. Refusing to look, though promising to undo violence, only accentuates its power. And in this respect there is no difference between destroying the image or refusing to look at it. The ultimate act of iconoclasm may undo, destroy, annihilate the picture, the object, the material manifestation, but never the image.

Violence is consequently not objective. It is in the subject. The mobilization of ethical categories would inadvertently lead to the transcendentalization of aesthetics, and, consequently, of the whole concept of corporeality. It is important, therefore, to bear in mind that viewers' responses do not necessarily coincide with the prevailing concepts of aesthetic, and the study of the aesthetic is not necessarily limited to the construction and dissemination of value judgments. The scrutiny and the cultural and ideological (re-)contextualization of the perceptive and (psycho-)analytical implications of truth and cognition are of much greater importance. Such an aesthetic, however, runs the risk of imposing upon itself a hermeneutical constraint by regarding the artistic representation as normative, and, consequently, it fails to realize that the manifestation of art, at least from a phenomenological perspective, intertwines with various forms of corporeality. It is the implementation of the body proper in the cognitive processes that eventually makes art possible. To ignore the corporeal conditioning of aesthetics, therefore, means to detach it from its underlying anthropological perspectives.

27 Cf. Julia Kristeva. ''Approaching Abjection" Trans. Leon Roudiez. *The Portable Kristeva*. Ed. Kelly Oliver. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997) 229-263.

28 Brigitte Peucker. *The Material Image.* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2007) 1.

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