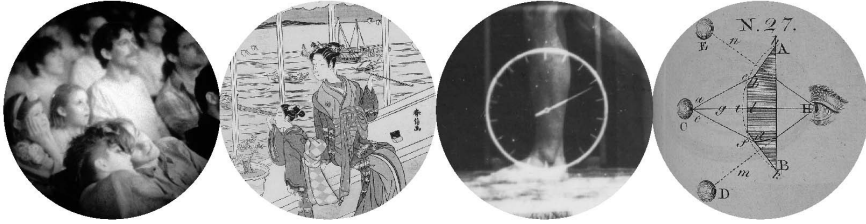


# journal of visual culture

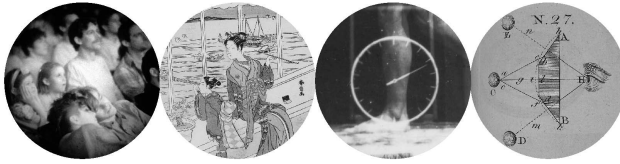
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# journal of visual culture



## Editorial

During the past three decades, there has emerged a wealth of thoughtful, mischievous, exacting and imaginative research and writing on visual culture. We have also seen the same complexity in local and global practices of visual cultural production. The *journal of visual culture* will embrace and extend these encounters while provoking transformations of its own. It will do so by encouraging scholarship that is critically engaged with visual culture from a range of methodological positions, on various historical moments, and across diverse geographical locations.

**The *journal of visual culture* is a springboard.** It will engage with the demands of both new and old ways of handling visibility. The journal will do so by responding to explicitly visual domains such as art, design, and architectural history, film, media, and television studies, photography, new media, and electronic imaging. At the same time it will also draw from and mesh together areas that are less obviously visual, but which are often engrossed in the visual, such as cultural studies and critical theory, philosophy, history, geography/urban studies, comparative literature, and the history and philosophy of science, technology, and medicine.

As such, the *journal of visual culture* is a site for interdisciplinary work that remains sensitive to the challenges that come with such archival curiosity, research and writing. This dialogue on the historical, contextual, theoretical, institutional and interpretive modalities of visual culture – and the formations through which they are manufactured, circulated and encountered – will take on specific and interrelated forms. As a space of convergence, the journal will generate debate, provocation and contestation for subsequent negotiations of visual culture.

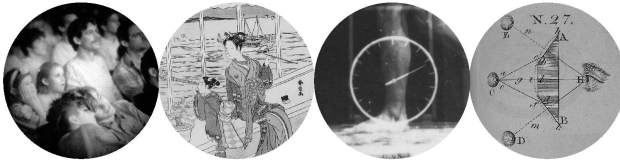
**The *journal of visual culture* is an incitement.** Visual Culture and Visual Studies have a number of genealogies. Part of our task is to trace them. Another part is to help compose the present and future of the critical study of visual culture. The journal has a pivotal role to play in shaping and articulating this, thereby initiating shifts in intellectual, academic and readers' expectations. Is this a utopian endeavour? Perhaps. But, then, we never thought that doing, activating, sounding out visual culture should be anything other than awkward, thought-provoking, captivating.

**The *journal of visual culture* is a laboratory.** It is an experiment in how we think,

research and write the concerns of visual culture – historiographically, methodologically, conceptually, tropologically. The opportunity is available to propose alternative, even eccentric critical thinking, and styles of articulation as they emerge from the concerns of visual culture. We are confident that the articles, debates, interviews and reviews published in these pages will take account of the complex and inter-animating series of relations that exist between history, theory and practice as they emerge through visual and other cultures. This is simply one of the stimulating intricacies with which visual culture presents us.

**The *journal of visual culture* fosters community.** Open to all aspects of visual culture, it offers a home for critical, dynamic, and absorbing thought as it bears upon the local and global contexts of the production, dissemination and consumption of visual culture. The *journal of visual culture* is, then, for academics, scholars, students, and practitioners struggling with the questions, the challenges, and the possibilities of visuality.

# journal of visual culture



## Film and the digital in visual studies: film studies in the era of convergence

Lisa Cartwright

### Abstract

This article examines how the convergence of various media impacts upon the relations between film studies and visual studies. The questions raised are: How did visual studies emerge as a discipline with film studies in its purview? How does the digital, an aspect of late 20th-century visual culture which emerged roughly simultaneously with visual studies, figure into the field? What happens when film studies is embedded in or combined with visual studies? In acknowledging that visual studies is an outcome of and a response to the conditions of media convergence, this article ends by offering a sense of how questions around optical virtuality and medical imaging can make sense of the effects that media convergence is having on the conditions of experience and subjectivity within modernity.

### Key words

convergence • film studies • optical virtuality • visual studies

As the 20th century drew to a close, we were increasingly likely to encounter the cinema through other media – on television, home video, DVD, or the internet. Media and industry convergences of the late 20th century were enacted in the rise of Home Box Office<sup>1</sup> in the late 1970s, the emergence of home video in the 1980s, and the move from digital special effects to digital editing and projection across the last three decades. Web marketing and access to films online accompanied the rise of corporate conglomerates like Disney-Capital Cities-ABC in 1996, synergetic entities vertically integrated across categories as seemingly disparate as entertainment, information, food and nuclear power, and with a formidable global reach. As *New Economist* editor Frances Cairncross (1997) announced, distance is dead in the free-market world where corporations build

brave new markets with the dissolution of the nation-state and the wiring of the Third World.

Convergence of the media raises important issues for those of us in film studies. We find the defining object of our field – film – disintegrating into, or integrating with, other media. Of course, media convergence is not a new phenomenon. Film has never been an autonomous medium or industry. And the potential for global corporate expansion may have been brought to new heights, but was not introduced, by the internet. The film industry's intersections with television, consumer goods (through product tie-ins), the electrical and lighting industries, and even the make-up and fashion industries since the cinema's inception in the late 19th century have all been well documented. The difference in the convergence frenzy of the late 1980s and 1990s is that this phenomenon reached a fullness, a potential, captured in the word synergy, a corporate buzz-word describing the exponential-growth effect that occurs with the integration of media and products – and corporate holdings – across industries. The actualization of science-fiction fantasies of convergence faced fewer technological limitations and a climate in which, to cite US circumstances, federal checks on vertical integration were effectively sidestepped with the waves of media deregulation since the Reagan years and fulfilled in the global free-market mentality of the Clinton era. At the level of the technical, convergence became a qualitatively different entity when computers could support those elements previously limited to the media technologies of film and television: high-quality image reproduction and real-time movement, with the latter still not brought up to the level of the cinema and television.

In the academy, the 1990s wave of media convergence has been paralleled by a teetering of film studies' institutional base as a field of its own. Film studies as a field has been under construction for a mere quarter century, and the cinema itself is barely over a century old. The (debatable) destabilization of a young field was effected in part through the rise of interdisciplinarity as a research and methodological strategy in the late 1980s and 1990s. It was also facilitated by the rise to semi-institutionalization of the interdisciplinary fields of cultural studies and visual studies as logical homes for the study of the medium, the industry and the cultures of film. Film's institutionalization hinged on alliances forged among scholars trained in the traditional disciplines (history, the social sciences, English, the modern languages)<sup>2</sup> over the object film and its social institution, the cinema. As David Rodowick (1996) reminds us, whereas film studies emerged in the 1960s and early 1970s alongside the disciplines of women's studies and Africana studies during a period of economic expansion, visual studies emerged in a climate of scarce resources for the humanities (p. 60). The interdisciplinarity of cultural and visual studies fits the institutional imperative to downsize quite nicely. I return to the economic point in a moment. For now, I want to stay with the emergence of film studies in the post-1968 political climate. Women's and Africana studies programs were founded on a politics of identity and were supported by the advances of civil rights and liberation movements. Gender and ethnic studies have always been marked with their political roots and motivations. Film studies is set apart from these areas in that it is based upon an object of study and not a specific politics or the conditions of subjectivity. Film theory and criticism do have bases in the worker, student and women's movements of the period. But the field of film studies

was founded on other disciplines and imperatives as well, including the historical and philosophical study of film and the cinema. It is harder to tie the discipline to a politics as a motivation for its emergence.

The growth of film studies finds a more apt parallel in cross-disciplinary programs and departments defined by the neutral qualifier *comparative*, as in comparative literature, comparative studies, and a later formulation, comparative arts. As the term *comparative* gave way to *cultural* in some institutions (such as my own, where comparative literature became modern languages and cultures, and comparative arts became visual and cultural studies), film in some quarters came to be tied to the larger rubric of culture. The UK presents a different narrative, where cultural studies is of course an earlier and broader phenomenon than in the US, paralleling film studies' emergence as a field. The visual studies rubric for programs was also introduced earlier and more broadly in the UK than in the US. The term *comparative* had against it (or going for it, depending on one's view) apparent generic neutrality. It implied a degree of similarity among its objects (national literatures, for example). *Cultural* and *culture*, through the terms' associations with the specific disciplinary and methodological orientations of British and, later, American (read US) cultural studies, have a political legacy and orientation that distinguishes cultural studies from the terms' earlier use in anthropology. The two legacies of the terms create some confusion, then, for we can trace in 'visual culture' both ways of thinking the term – the older anthropological way, and the newer cultural studies way.

Film studies, unlike these other categories, invokes in its very name a medium, an industry, and a specific set of material referents that make the field's life seemingly dependent on the duration of those entities. The argument can be made that literary studies has always similarly been associated with the study of particular material objects and has nonetheless survived the emergences and convergences of media, modes of inscription and methods. But the history of print culture has been far longer and more materially varied. New objects and practices including film, television and hypertext have readily been incorporated, as new varieties of text, into literary studies. The shorter and more medium-specific history of the cinema (the social institution), and film (the object) may in fact limit the material scope and hence the lifespan of film studies proper. This abbreviated life distinguishes the field from its more entrenched precedent and parallel – literary studies – and suggests film studies in the narrow sense could go the way of the study of dead languages.

That is, if film studies is really about the study of film. There are two directions I mean to take this caveat. The first concerns the entity, film. If film has become a medium interlocked with, and perhaps soon to be subsumed in, the broader category of digital media, we need to re-conceive where and how we take up film as an object of study. This issue is only partly resolved by the game of renaming the field to correspond to its new objects (film and television studies, film and media studies, comparative media studies, visual studies). We also must examine the interdisciplinary fields where film has migrated and with whose objects and motivations it has converged. The view of art historian Christopher Wood (1996) that 'worrying about the name of the discipline is a pastime for bureaucrats' (p. 70)

made me envious of the complacency those in more stable fields can afford to have with respect to their institutional base. The stakes in naming are high when the objects, methods, or orientations of one's work may not be accommodated within the boundaries of the departmental home's title. Disciplinary naming gives shape to research agendas, canons, and how we enter into intellectual politics, determining our potential to carry on research in certain methodologies and not others, and with certain objects of study and not others. The situation of naming-as-discipline-building raises the questions as to which fields are equipped to support the study of film in its current and future status as a medium, and industry, and a culture? What will film scholars be authorized to study? What will film studies become in visual studies?

The second caveat concerns the degree to which film studies is about film. To put this another way, one of the objects of film study since the early history of the field in, for example, perceptual psychology or the filmology movement, has been the experience of populations or individual subjects with the medium's material and sensory conditions. Film studies has always been as much about the experience and conditions of duration, spatiality, perception, attention and sound in modernity as it has been about film images and texts. This way of thinking about film studies' objects, whether as spectator, observer, audience, community, body, population, or subject, has grounded investigations launched through approaches as diverse as psychoanalysis, phenomenology, social-science audience research, historical analysis of the cinema as social institution, and reception studies. The list of film studies scholars who don't work on film is long. Television historian Lynn Spiegel brought her training in psychoanalytic feminist film theory to bear on television history, producing a history of early television audiences solidly grounded in the film canon without ever taking on film. A more complex example: Anne Friedberg, a founder of a graduate program in visual studies at Irvine, has focused her major research of the last decade on the spectatorial conditions of the gaze and the observer in non-film contexts. Her current project, which considers the window as object and trope (Friedberg, forthcoming), was preceded by a book which traced the existence of a virtual gaze in the public urban spaces of modernity. Friedberg (1993) locates 19th-century modernity's observer in a virtual gaze experienced in the contexts of the panorama, the diorama, and window-shopping. Film theory is the foundation for Friedberg's investigation of the conditions of the *flâneur* and the *flâneuse*; her graduate work was in one of the founding film studies programs. But her object of study is a far cry from the material entity film, filmic images, and the conditions of film spectatorship specifically – except insofar as the latter is one of the contexts in which modernity's virtual gaze also lives. Friedberg's study advances film studies in a way that a study of film and cinema specifically could never have done. Her work allows us to get outside the conditions of film spectatorship to see how other gazes at work at the origins of the cinema shaped the conditions for film spectatorship into the 20th century. She identifies in the virtual gaze of postmodernity the conditions for the gaze that most associate with new digital technologies, giving that gaze its history.

My own work in visual studies began with an investigation of film objects, albeit obscure ones (the early scientific medical films found in the scary basements of hospitals and medical museums). These very objects and the conditions of their

production and use led me to question not only what we had come to accept as the material conditions of film at its origins, but also the accepted prehistory and early history of the cinema as an institution. This study led me to rethink the notion of the film archive as I found films alongside the detritus of medical museum displays and film equipment retrofitted with medical equipment for purposes of visual experiment. This took me into the realm of a gaze that was markedly different from the ones being theorized around popular cinema.

Here I want to return to the issue of convergence. I take media convergence as a given, not because I believe it is a new phenomenon (I do not), but because it is a reality of the late 20th century that coincides precisely with the flux of interdisciplinarity, and the reshaping and downsizing, that transformed the humanities in the 1990s. I accept technological convergence as a premise provisionally in order to move directly into the question of the institutional study of film and also as the broader categories of the digital and the visual. By institutional convergence I mean the vertical integration of disciplines and the simultaneous horizontal expansion of objects of study within a given area. Visual studies is the field that concerns me most in this integration of fields and disintegration of boundaries between objects of study. My questions will be along these lines: How did visual studies emerge as a discipline with film in its purview? How does the digital, an aspect of late 20th-century visual culture that emerged roughly simultaneously with visual studies, figure into the field? What happens when film studies is embedded in or combined with visual studies? Some of these questions will be touched upon in the following pages.

It may be useful for me to explain that my lens for these questions is my job of 10 years teaching film studies in a visual studies program that has grown and maintained privileged support during a period of dramatic downsizing of the humanities at my institution. I am nominally appointed in this program (which has no lines of its own). My primary undergraduate teaching responsibility is to an undergraduate film studies program (also with no lines of its own). In my institution, the film program has a major historical debt to the department of English, where my 'real' appointment officially resides. I will begin my discussion with a reading, through the lens of this particular institutional positioning, of the place of film studies in the infamous 1996 issue of *October* devoted to the concepts of visual culture and visual studies. A detour through this debate allows me quickly to identify some of the problems in thinking film's place in the current milieu of visual studies.

## **Where is film studies in visual studies?**

In 1996, *October* published an issue with a questionnaire-and-selected-responses section devoted to an interrogation of 'the interdisciplinary project of visual culture'. The project, which was launched with four 'questions' (framed as general assertions) about visual culture and visual studies, piqued the interest of those of us at the University of Rochester teaching in the Program in Visual and Cultural Studies. As the only accredited graduate program of its kind in the country at the time, we were eager to see how a field whose development we had fostered would



fare under the scrutiny of scholars across the contributing disciplines. I was surprised to find that the comments of only two film scholars were included in the 19 responses published, and the representation of scholars who work on television and new media was even smaller (one of the film people constituted this category as well). About half of the responses were from art historians. The topics and selected responses were embedded in a set of essays devoted to discussions launched from art history, some of which more fully fleshed out the questionnaire topics' implied criticisms. These criticisms were not only of visual culture as a paradigm and visual studies as a discipline, but of the digital future for which visual studies helps us to prepare.

I want to emphasize that in what follows in this section, my aim is not to insist upon the interdisciplinarity of visual studies as liberating or even intellectually enriching. Rather, I want to make a more pragmatic argument for its necessity as both an outcome of and response to the broader conditions of media convergence (conditions that include technological advancement, global capitalism, and so on). Visual studies is one of the few places from which we can adequately address not only the current conditions of media convergence, but also its long and complex history. (Science and technology studies is another emergent discipline in which I believe this can be done well.) One of the framing topics of the *October* (1996) questionnaire implies that visual studies is complicit with the forces of globalization, the next phase of capitalism, and the disembodiment of the image. 'It has been suggested', the editors of the survey submit, 'that the precondition for visual studies ... is a newly wrought conception of the visual as disembodied *image*, re-created in the virtual space of sign-exchange and phantasmatic projection' (p. 25). This is followed by a claim that visual studies is, 'in its own modest way, produc[ing] subjects for the next stage of global capitalism' (p. 25). My argument will be that visual studies has emerged, along with the disembodied image paradigm, not as cause but as a necessary product of the conditions decry in this passage. The argument against digital media is put forth most clearly in the work of Emily Apter, Susan Buck-Morss and Hal Foster, who will be contributing to forthcoming issues of this journal. I argue against their beliefs that visual studies exists as a necessary venue through which to both historicize and reroute the course of global media culture – a culture that is hardly restricted to the visual but must be accessed through this domain.

But first to address problems with the hypothesis that the collapse of images – their disembodiment and release as free-floating entities in the virtual space of visibility – is best addressed by visual studies because the field is interdisciplinary. The case has been made that interdisciplinarity entails having the tools to analyze the array of image forms that make up the flux of contemporary culture, or that it enriches the discrete areas of study that contribute to visual studies. Keith Moxey (1999), also one of the *October* respondents, has noted that in art history 'a failure to distinguish the study of art from the study of other kinds of images is often used as a criticism' of visual studies (p. 4). He proposes in response to this criticism an embrace of a comparative approach that sees benefit in interdisciplinarity:

Rather than view the rise of the study of varied and often popular forms of image production, one in which art is included in a spectrum of other kinds of

visual products, as a potential threat to art as an institution, I would claim that the value of these visual juxtapositions lies in comparing and contrasting the ways in which the study of each genre, say painting, television, or advertising, makes use of different theories and methods in making meaning. (pp. 4–5)

The comparative approach has served well as the model for programs like MIT's new Masters degree in comparative media, where students train for the corporate workplace as well as for further academic study by analyzing new and old media alongside and in conjunction with one another. Graduates of this program are predicted to serve as critically informed liaisons between media services that have yet to be imagined and those who use these services, if not as industry moles who may use their historical knowledge and critical skills to alter the course of global capitalism's flows. Moxey, however, envisions a history for the comparative approach that would not necessarily ground a practice such as this, but is rather grounded in a kind of disciplinary boundary-crossing that finds its precedents in Warburg, and that locates a strictly art historical genealogy for visual studies. Like Thomas Dacosta Kaufmann and others before him, Moxey begins this lineage with Michael Baxandall (1972) and advances through Svetlana Alpers (1983) and W.J.T. Mitchell (1995).<sup>3</sup> The term's rise is motivated by the concern to relate the production of art to the broader social context, but art stays center.

What are the places of film and media, and the particular evolution of the fields that study them, in this understanding of the development of visual studies as a discipline? Does film deserve its own origins story alongside art history's, with film as its center? (I would be reticent to provide one.) The comparative approach and interdisciplinarity as models of thinking about the field fail to provide an account of the dynamic of power that positions the discipline's constellation of objects and methods, making the art historian's gaze the one internalized among the field's populace. Visual studies, like any other discipline, has its own institutional gaze. The historical fact of media convergence in itself doesn't give us the tools to make sense of the constellation of images and looking practices it produces. Nor does it give us the ability to generate a full complement of genealogies and gazes, with each placing its own medium at the center.

Regarding interdisciplinarity, the *October* (1996) editors gave their respondents a brief genealogy to respond to:

It has been suggested that the interdisciplinary project of 'visual culture' is no longer organized on the model of history (as were the disciplines of art history, architecture history, film history, etc.) but on the model of anthropology. (p. 25)

Film *history* and not film (or cinema) *studies* is referenced as an antecedent to visual *culture*. Visual *studies* is introduced in one of the four 'questions', as an interdisciplinary rubric. In the other three topics, visual *culture* is the object of concern. As Douglas Crimp (1999) has noted in a sustained critique of this debate, *cultural studies*, *visual studies* and *visual culture* are often used interchangeably. Objects of study (visual culture) and areas of research with discrete if intersecting objects and histories (visual studies, cultural studies) are collapsed. My concern

here is with the choice of *history* and not *studies* to describe film as an original discipline and past model. This choice results in some crucial omissions in the evolution of film as a node in visual studies' emergence, and the relationship between film and media study. Unlike art history, film history has never been taken up as a rubric to designate departments, programs, or even a field. Film history is not a discipline in its own right, but names a particular methodology within the discipline of film (or cinema) studies, a field that has always incorporated an array of methodologies. Film history is sometimes posed against film theory in a binary abstraction of the field of film studies, with theory the location of the field's political life and history the realm of everything else. But history is only one of a number of fields of origin for film scholarship along with philosophy, communications, linguistics, rhetoric, English, literature and sociology. All of these fields have contributed to the foundation of visual as well as film studies.

Art history is one field that has supported the study of film prior to and even after the establishment of departments and programs of film or cinema studies, and it tended to support an historical and aesthetic–philosophical approach to film. Sociology and communications accommodated the study of film as well, but in a context that was also receptive to the study of media, television and (later) digital media. Television and digital media are areas that have become subgroups within film studies proper, as reflected in the Society for Cinema Studies' inclusion of them as special-interest areas in conferences and publications. But only rarely have they been taken up in art history – except where art history has transformed into visual studies.

Visual studies is at odds with an older model of art history, in its abandonment of history for an alliance with an anthropological notion of culture that finds its source in cultural studies, as the *October* questionnaire and Foster in the same issue suggest. Visual studies does maintain ongoing allegiances with a political tradition of cultural analysis that can be traced back through two histories rooted in Left and feminist critical theory: cultural studies with its British (and in some cases American) origins in the social sciences and communication, and psychoanalytic film theory. If British cultural studies is to be given the credit it deserves in the institutional emergence of visual studies, though, we should recognize the supporting role not only of anthropology but of communications and sociology, and the methodologies used in those fields, in visual studies' prehistory. Cultural studies early on shed the tight attachment to empirical research models in all of those fields, advancing models of ethnographic research that have been anathema even to politically sympathetic anthropologists. Likewise, psychoanalytic film theory (supported in the fields of languages and literature) is a model both adopted and reconfigured in visual studies. As Crimp (1999) points out, the fact that ethnographic and psychoanalytic approaches have faced off in cultural studies – as in Constance Penley's 1992 critique of Janice Radway's 1984 work on the popular romance (p. 54) – suggests that that field can sustain and thrive in contestation over methodology. Disciplinary convergence does not mean a flattening of difference and a deskilling of its labor force. A case can be made that methodology is in fact subject to internal 'quality checks' that result in more discerning producers. Sociologist Jackie Stacey (1994), the cultural studies scholar whose *Star Gazing* reworked feminist psychoanalytic theory through sociology, is one of the few

scholars who has had the prescience to introduce questions of gender and subjectivity in the discussions of media globalization that have taken place thus far ('Consuming Nature, Embodying Health'). Her willingness to push the limits of methodological cross-analysis has been exemplary. As one of the most crucial visual studies issues for the decades to come, globalization demands attention at the level of subjects and practices and not only within the generic and disembodied terms that the conditions of globalization set up for us. Globalization is a process subject influence and transformation, and is not solely a corporate world vision with its own momentum.

Television, as the model for media globalization as alienating force, requires more attention as we consider the forces of telecommunications and information flow in conjunction with the visual. Whereas film and digital media are mentioned with some frequency in the various commentaries published in the questionnaire, television is discussed tangentially, as specter of the contemporary conditions of media alienation. These references are through, for example, Susan Buck-Morss's (1996) identification of MTV as a form that produces subjects for global capitalism (p. 30) and Emily Apter's (1996) mention of Baudrillard's bleak vision of America as a holographic landscape of flickering screens (p. 26). The absence of television except as specter of late capitalism's threat of further image alienation is curious, given its status as a link between the cinematic culture that dominated the first half of the 20th century and the digital media culture that came to the fore by the century's last decade. Not surprisingly, television studies has tended to rely on the methods of sociology and communications foundational to cultural studies, but it remains marginal to disciplines that shun low culture. Apter (1996) wants to know, will the 'oneiric, anamorphic, junk-tech aesthetic of cyber-visibility find a place in the discipline of art history' or 'will it remain in the academic clearing house of cultural studies' (p. 27)? Dream, junk and distortion evoke for me another historical moment well attended to by art history though – that of Surrealism and all it contributed to our understanding not only of its social milieu but of scientific knowledge and the transformation of knowledge in relation to materiality, experience and psychic life. If what some would call the hyperreal is our moment's surreal, then it would seem that art history would be a logical place for its study. Television, text, content, image and meaning have been overworked in cultural studies, leaving us with little analysis of television's place as an apparatus enmeshed in the production of conditions of materiality, experience and embodiment – the conditions so dramatically altered in the worlds of cyber-visibility.

In dwelling on absences I have yet to address the question of where film comes up in all of this. Tom Gunning and David Rodowick (the two film scholars responding to the *October* 1996 survey) raise the point that film is hardly limited to the sense of sight and the visual properties of images.<sup>4</sup> Gunning, as an historian who has always considered the broader social conditions of the medium in relation to other media and art forms, like Moxey, is quick to note the benefits of interdisciplinarity. But he shifts the discussion from objects of study to modes of experience and perception that unify the field; visual perception is that which also is signified in the 'visual' of visual studies. Gunning cautions that 'the greatest limitation visual studies might occasion would be reifying a division of the senses' (p. 38). Thomas Crow makes an apparently similar point, asserting that 'the new rubric of visual culture ... accepts

without question the view that art is to be defined exclusively by its working exclusively through the optical faculties' (p. 35). Elsewhere (Heller, 1997), he warns of the reduction of art history to a history of images. Rodowick (1996) echoes this point with reference to film:

In the minds of most people cinema remains a 'visual' medium. And more often than not cinema still defends its aesthetic value by aligning itself with the other visual arts and by asserting its self-identity as an image-making medium. Yet the great paradox of cinema ... is that it is both temporal and 'immaterial' as well as a spatial medium. (p. 61)

Rodowick, like Gunning, allows us to move the discussion from image and image-making in emphasizing temporality and (im)materiality. He has his own sustained apparatus for approaching this, elaborated through an earlier essay on the figural, his reading of Deleuze, and his subsequent work on digital culture. I want to use his comment, though, as a segue because, unlike Gunning's note about the senses, it does not swing us from the object to experience, or film object to experiential subject. Instead, his comment hints at the problematic of the relationship between the two in terms of duration and (im)materiality. A number of the *October* questionnaire contributors call for a return to the specificity of the materiality of visual objects – films, paintings, photographs, and so forth – lest we lose sight of the particularity of each category's historical and present function. But the conditions of convergence (which I take as a premise) leave us ill equipped to address not only the material conditions through which we encounter our objects, but our embodied relationships to the equipment and information we encounter in the dynamic. An amusing and obvious side to media convergence and global flows of images is that not only new media and film but works of art from previous centuries are increasingly experienced as global media commodities. We see old paintings reproduced in slides and on the web, on T-shirts and mugs, in blockbuster exhibitions, behind plexiglass shields, and in news accounts of X-ray verification of a work's authenticity and value, as in a rendering of the *Mona Lisa* as a 'first' digital work of art (Figure 1) or as a cross-stitch reproduction bookmark kit of the masterpiece, replete with gilded frame, offered by the company Charles Craft. Museums have never been more popular, but the museum experience has extended to include educational audio and video media.

I hesitate to illustrate these points because they are so trite and their images so cute. They lead me to suggest what is in the end the wrong point about the status of discrete media and of the image under the conditions of convergence. A more significant fact about convergence is that it is not only images themselves, or image types, that are reproduced, reconfigured and freed for circulation as never before in the exploded realm of the visual. We also find that the registers of, for example, the visual and the aural converge in quite a complex way. My example is not the simplistic one of, say, film being also an aural medium, or the museum experience also encompassing touch and spatiality. What I want to get at is better illustrated by, for example, the relationship of sound and image in ultrasound. This is a medium that relies on sound waves we cannot hear to produce mundane graphic and numerical data that are then crunched to render a visual image in the last instance.





**Figure 1** Andrew Patros, close-up of early digital reproduction of the *Mona Lisa* (1965), created at Control Data Corp. Digigraphics Lab in Burlington, MA. [see [www.digitalmonalisa.com](http://www.digitalmonalisa.com), accessed May 2000]

Sound is not in the service of subjective hearing, image does not represent anything in the realm of visibility, except in the most abstract and limited sense. The disintegration of sound, data and image involves a kind of pulverization. We get not the sensorium of the IMAX theatre, with all senses and representational registers in their place, but a re-circuiting of one register of information into another, one sensory experience into another.

Jonathan Crary (1996) begins to get at the problems of focusing on the image as if it were the necessary or primary concern in visibility when he begins his questionnaire response with the following disclaimer:

Admittedly the terms ‘vision’ or ‘visual’ appear in the titles of certain texts I have written and courses I have taught. However, with increasing frequency they are terms that trouble me when I hear them deployed in the expanding visibility industry of conferences, publications, and academic offerings. One of the things I have tried to do in my work is to insist that historical problems about vision are distinct from a history of representational artifacts. (p. 33)

Crary's point is that visual studies has emerged in part because of a collapse of a certain formulation of the spectator, that visual studies emerges exactly as its object disintegrates. He concludes by suggesting that the analysis of this shift would not entail analyzing the technological artifacts and techniques (computer graphics and virtual reality [VR], for example) that are the artifacts of this shift. Rather, we would engage in 'the study of colorless, non-visual discursive and systemic formulations and their mutations' (p. 34).

I want to suggest that to study the apparatus that produces these artifacts – computer graphics and VR – in conjunction with their production and use in a system that enters users directly into the mechanisms of convergence – is precisely to study non-visual discursive formulations. Images and 'visual' experiences are only some of the by-products of the global media industry that has necessitated the field of visual studies. The visual has been late in coming in to the digital. The visual has always been almost an afterthought to the real transfiguring work of globalizing media cultures. Film studies has been one of the few areas of visual studies that has allowed us to get at the preconditions of the medium overridden by too much attention to image and artifact, precisely because film engaged the conditions of immateriality from the medium's beginnings. Film necessitated the interrogation of 'disembodied images' well before art history's objects did. I am not making the argument that film is not just visual but also aural and spatial, but that film has facilitated a certain sublimation, bypassing and rerouting of visual-sensory experience by invoking the virtual. Our experiences with film have prepared us for our experiences with virtual media, allowing us to use images as expedient resources to access dynamics that engage something other than the experience of sight. The obvious visual-ness of the cinema distracts us from the fact that the medium has trained us in a sensory disintegration that makes the virtual possible as fundamentally *not* visual experience.

I route my explanation of this cryptic argument through an analysis of a virtual project, the work and theory of medical researcher Richard Robb (1996). My intention is to demonstrate that this rather phenomenally visual- and image-based project, seen in its historical and projected future contexts, is in the end only marginally concerned with the visual. We need to start with the images, because they are the key entry point into the system Robb works with, though they are hardly its endpoint. The 'gaze' Robb offers us is not a visual dynamic but a relationship that takes us into the realm of representing the mechanisms of physiological and physical behaviors at the level of microscopic anatomy and biochemical systems. Perhaps the role of the spectator as we knew it (figured in the model of visual perception) has collapsed, but the sensory disintegration that ensues from this collapse provides precisely the conditions that support the kind of experience with and through media suggested in Robb's formulation, to which I now turn.

## Optical virtuality

In 1964, Stan Van der Beek and Ken Knowlton at Bell Labs were among a group of computer scientists pushing the envelope of body-image construction on the

computer. Some of the work they produced is documented in a series of films, titled *Poem Field*, made in the mid-1960s. These animated line-renderings viewed from the perspective of the early 2000s and the late 1990s evoke the CAD drawings that cropped up in car advertisements of recent years, the ones that reveal the inner structure of the car in a rotating linear diagram (usually green). The jerky linear body-models progressed from rudimentary sketches to volumetric and fluid mobile forms over the years of their studies. Viewed through the lens of late-1990s medical imaging, it is easy to think of these images as exercises in the direction of the kinds of moving volumetric body simulations that wowed the medical industry in that decade. Like these medical volumetric motion renderings, behind these studies stood many hours of computation and data entry and analysis. They pointed in the direction of the multitude of *Terminator* bodies and medical Visible Humans, but their very unspectacular-ness suggests a different, much less glamorous purpose: an attempt at the computation level to make these bodies perform as bodies. The image – getting it to *look* right – was just a by-product and sometimes even an annoyance. As is known in programming, getting objects to perform right in space can result in distortions of appearance. Images that perform like real bodies sometimes don't look like real bodies look.

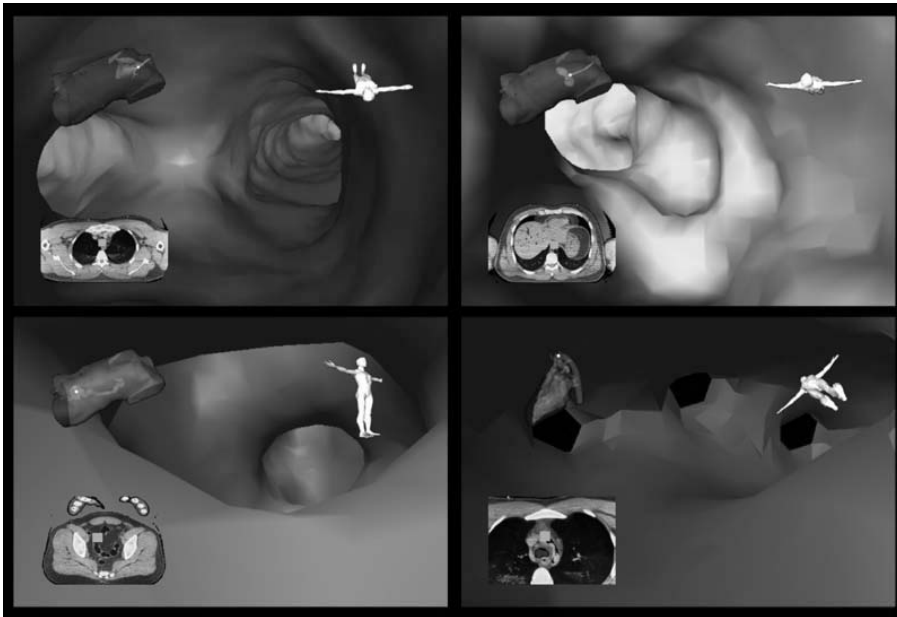
Researchers in the field we have known as medical imaging since the early 1990s widely agree that, if simulation is the goal, organs in the body must not only look realistic, they must *behave* realistically. These are two different, and not necessarily mutually supportive, goals. This move toward an interest in behavior simulation hints at the fact that medical imaging was already dead in the water when the field came into existence barely a decade ago. The objective of the post-visual era is reproducing behaviors and functions, not appearances – but through images nonetheless. (Enmeshing the experience of the observer with the object experienced is another level of convergence within this objective.) Simulated organs and tissue that stretch when pulled, react to gravity, respond to pressure, contract involuntarily, bleed when cut, and re-attach when stitched are the goal of imaging specialists who want to make their entities behave in life-like ways. The goal is to reproduce physiology in the virtual image: movement, systems in process, and so forth. This concept also entails integrating the user's senses, the apparatus and the simulated body, into a system that allows for the user to experience the sensations he or she generates in the virtual body-object: the user must feel that he or she has pressed, cut through, impacted the virtual body-object as if it were real. Altering the conditions of experience to make sight trigger the sensation of touch and spatiality is crucial to this goal. The orientation of sensory experience in this process does not simply shift (from sight to, say, sound and touch) in order to generate the desired experience. The idea is that the image can be a catalyst for other sorts of sensory experiences, in a kind of re-circuitry of the senses. This is echoed in one research group's goal to allow users to feel organs (again in their words) 'deform in their forceps' (Merril et al., 1996: 1). Anatomical form and visual appearance having been conquered and found lacking, physiological or behavioral realism is the new representational frontier into which the image is entered.

Virtual endoscopy will be my point of access into this post-visual domain of 'imaging' science. Endoscopy is the use of fine flexible tubing and minute fiber-optic lenses to enter and acquire visual data about the interiors of organs like the



stomach or the organs of the reproductive system. Virtual endoscopy is the practice of simulating that optical journey. As I'll further explain, virtual endoscopy goes beyond the visual to include other sensory registers. Richard Robb (1996), a researcher at the Mayo Clinic, describes virtual endoscopy as 'the fountainhead of an entire generation of new diagnostic opportunities' – a tall claim for a modality that emerged during an era in which we've seen a profusion of new biomedical imaging systems. Robb lays out what he calls a 'taxonomy for several generations of virtual imaging' (Figure 2). He shows five phases, beginning with the geometric modeling of 3D organ shapes, passing through the representations of physiological and physical behaviors described above, and ending with techniques for simulating microscopic anatomy (of glands and the neurovascular system) and biochemical systems – the simulation of the body experiencing shock, for example.

His plan is useful because it clearly maps out the goal of moving representations (of bodies in this case) along toward becoming not just images of bodies, but simulations at the level of function. A virtual endoscopic procedure at the final level of image representation, Robb (1996) explains, 'might eventually become indistinguishable from the actual patient'. In other words, the experience of the program's user would be not being able to tell whether he or she was working on a real or simulated body. Clearly, in this case, the realism of the simulation depends



**Figure 2** Four virtual endoscopic views of internal surfaces of anatomic models of visible human male, including the trachea (upper left), esophagus (upper right), colon (lower left) and aorta (lower right). Navigation guides provide precise body orientation and both 3-D and 2-D anatomic location of current viewpoint. Richard Robb, virtual (computer) endoscopy. Courtesy of Dr Richard A. Robb, Biomedical Imaging Resource, Mayo Foundation/Clinic, Rochester, MI.

on the user's realistic multi-sensory experience of the simulation as identical to a real body.

It is important to note that, as in any VR system, it is not the simulation that is virtual (or virtually real) in this account, but the experience of the user. While 'spectator' is no longer an adequate term for describing the multi-sensorial experience of the person engaged in VR, user is a more generic and equally inadequate term. It fails to describe what we might call, for lack of a better set of terms, the 'user-computer-object nexus'.

To understand this point about the term *virtual* being linked in most usages to the user not the body simulated, it is helpful to review as well Robb's (1996) account of the concept, which he lays out in detail. The term *virtual endoscopy*, he argues, is not correct. What is commonly meant by *virtual endoscopy* is better captured, he explains, in endoscopic *virtuality*. Whereas virtual means 'possessed of certain virtues' and 'being such in effect', virtuality means 'essence' and 'potential existence of'. Coupled with endoscopy, virtual means 'in effect visualizing the interior of a hollow organ or cavity', while virtuality would suggest 'the essence of visualizing the potentially existing interior of a body' (p. 1). In other words, with the switch to virtuality, the position we typically call the user is lifted out of the vague territory of the virtual. The user's experience is not had 'in effect' (or in the realm of the virtual). It is the body operated upon that is understood to exist in the realm of the potentially disembodied.

Robb's discrimination about terms clarifies an important misunderstanding about what is meant by the term *virtual*, as it pertains to representation or image side of the equation. Virtual medicine is not about treating real bodies in effect, or *as if* they were being treated, in the hazy realm of the virtual. Rather, virtual medicine is the medical professional's (or VR user's) essential experience of treating potentially existing bodies. What is disengaged from materiality is not the experience of the user, but the body acted upon – as representation.

The import of this sense of the virtual is captured in the work of Richard Satava, a 'pioneer' in telepresence surgery, which involves using virtual reality to perform surgery at a distance. Satava distinguishes between artificial and natural VR. Whereas artificial VR is completely synthetic and imaginary (placing oneself inside a molecule, for example), natural VR imagines situations one could conceivably inhabit in one's own body and world. Satava insists that

... the day may come when it would not be possible to determine if an operation were being performed on a real or a computer-generated patient ... the threshold has been crossed; and a new world is forming, half real and half virtual.

This new world is the very same one imagined by Robb in his projection of a near future when a virtual endoscopic procedure might be indistinguishable from one performed on an actual patient. On one level, it is tempting to hypothesize about the position of the spectator in relationship to this new world of the half real, half virtual. In film studies and in visual culture studies, this claim opens up a whole new realm of spectatorship analysis, taking spectatorship out of the realm of the

visual and into a more complexly constituted network of experience. How, we might ask, is the physician situated as a subject in relationship to this new sort of gaze, a relationship with the visual representation that propels the viewing subject into the realm of full sensory experience, and full bodily participation, but with his senses disintegrated and misrouted?

Questions like this signal an important domain, I argue, for visual studies not because the image holds new powers, but because it provides an expedient link into a kind of subjectivity that is quite radically different. If this is a new gaze, it is not one where the visual is terribly important.

I leave my example, having left much of what it suggests undeveloped, in order to return to some of the central questions of this article. I have argued that with media convergence, film studies becomes a study of something else: a different configuration of media, different conditions of experience and subjectivity. I have also argued that film studies has never been about film (the medium, its social contexts, its spectator) alone, but has always been about conditions of sensory experience in modernity. The material conditions of film have left film scholars well prepared to take on questions of the materiality of virtual media and simulation precisely because, as Anne Friedberg's work has shown, the filmic spectator has always been entered into a virtual world that is not limited to the experience of the cinema alone. If the image has migrated into the function of signifying something other than visual experience, it is still the specialist in visual analysis who is best equipped to understand the function of the visual to perform a different sort of work. Film studies is one of the areas of scholarship best equipped to address the conditions that underlie the more spectacular aspects of 'cyber-visibility', precisely because its object has never been solely representation but the conditions of materiality and intersubjectivity that have always structured the field of vision.

## Notes

1. Home Box Office is a US cable network that operates several channels and produces its own programming, largely made-for-television movies and specials. Originally established as direct competition to the film industry, it appealed to cable television viewers' anticipated interest in seeing new film at home.
2. 'Visual Culture Questionnaire' in in-text citations throughout refers to the publication of four 'questions' on the issue of visual culture and responses to them from various scholars in art, architecture, film, government, literary studies and history, in *October 77* (1996).
3. Kaufmann dates the term to 1972, with the publication of Baxandall's *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*, followed in 1983 by Alpers's *The Art of Describing* and (later) Mitchell's 'What is Visual Culture?' (1995). Moxey's own work with Norman Bryson and Michael Ann Holly contributes to this visual studies canon as well.
4. Interestingly, both film scholars chose to consider the term in its institutional contexts before taking up visual culture and the methods of its study on its own terms.

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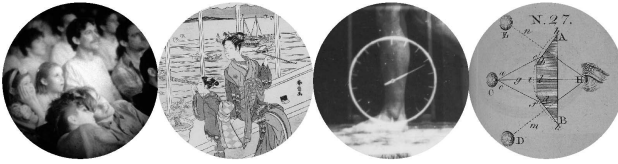
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# journal of visual culture



## The genius of Rome: putting things together

Mieke Bal

### Abstract

The title of the 2001 exhibition 'The Genius of Rome', held in London and Rome, is ambiguous. The curatorial meaning is that the simultaneous presence of painters, patrons and other power brokers during two and a half decades made 'the birth of the baroque' possible. Through a thematic distribution, the exhibition attempts to convey the temporal and spatial convergence implied by the title. One can also take the title to refer to Rome not simply as a location, as a site where things happened to happen, but as a social, institutional and political unit with causal powers. Rome, then, not only houses people of genius; it itself has genius – that of the power brokers of church and state. A third connotation equally active in this exhibition is the individualizing, narrativizing one that leads up to Caravaggio. Through an analysis of the relationship between the title of the exhibition, the idea or concept of 'baroque' and the thematic arrangement of the paintings, the disciplinary distinction between art history, cultural history and visual culture studies is clarified. This article argues that the interdisciplinary study of visual culture is best served when visual culture allows itself to bleed over into cultural history, and the latter allows itself to become self-reflexive to the point of becoming what I have dubbed 'preposterous': an interdiscursive understanding of 'baroque' can de-center, and then, on different terms, re-center, those art works that help us, ourselves, to be 'baroque'.

### Key words

art history • baroque • Caravaggio • concepts • cultural history • curating • exhibition practices • interdisciplinarity

## Art history's visual culturalism

Art historians and curators presenting *baroque* art and visual culture are notoriously reluctant to define the concept central to their work. I share that reluctance. At most,

we get the anecdote of how the name came about – from the association with irregular oyster shells – and the comparison is used derogatorily, and retrospectively. Other attempts to define it are either mechanical datings or evaluative assessments of ‘style’. To avoid the latter pitfalls, Giovanni Careri (1995a) wrote his masterful close-reading of three Bernini chapels without even using the word ‘baroque’, for period or movement labels are more damaging than helpful in understanding a group of art works.

The exhibition ‘The Genius of Rome: 1592–1623’,<sup>1</sup> first shown in 2001 at the Royal Academy in London and later at the Palazzo Venezia in Rome, demonstrates the same reluctance.<sup>2</sup> The word ‘baroque’ pops up, mid-sentence, and the phrase ‘the birth of the baroque’ is clearly the key notion that glued the exhibited works into a meaningful whole: dates and artists together. Yet even the fat catalogue, whose opening essay bears that phrase as its title, fails to come up with a statement on what the newborn looks like. Instead, place and time – Rome at the turn of the 17th century – is the overtly theorized topic. This makes the exhibition, probably self-styled as art-historical, unwittingly, a potential case of those approaches to images today called ‘visual culture’. A short while ago, we would have called this ‘cultural history’. Not that such phrases have magic explanatory power, or that their meanings are clear and fixed; they do not and are not. But for that reason they may help us to understand the implications of a presentation of such a rich and enjoyable group of paintings.

The title of the exhibition, ‘The Genius of Rome’, is wildly ambiguous. Not that it was meant to be, for the explanatory panels and the catalogue are clear on that. The curatorial meaning is: in Rome, at a specific moment in time, the genius of the baroque was born. The simultaneous presence of painters, patrons and other power brokers during two and a half decades made ‘the birth of the baroque’ possible. Of course, the actual organization of the show, in practice limited to painting, cannot convey the diversity of the birth of a cultural concept that took hold of architecture, sculpture, music, philosophy, science, literature, politics and city planning as well as of painting; nor can it be expected to. So ‘cultural history’ can be invoked as a context for this exhibition but does not deserve the status of underlying concept. The same holds for ‘visual culture’. Through an analysis of the underlying principles of the exhibition, I will try to use the title’s ambiguity to suggest why this show inevitably remains ‘art history’.

Even within the first, overt meaning of the title, there is an inevitable shift back to a more traditional art-historical approach. Instead of also representing those other areas where the baroque manifested itself, in an exhibition of cultural history, or probing an ensemble of visual phenomena, in an exhibition of visual culture, the show remains an exhibition of painting. But, through a *thematic* distribution, it does attempt to convey the temporal and spatial convergence implied by the title. By superposing themes onto genres or other art-historical categories – still life, ‘painted music’, landscape, nocturnal scenes (theme) characterized by chiaroscuro (art-historical category), saints between sacred and profane – the notion that, in Rome, artists of genius converged is powerfully laid out. Rome, as a city, ‘had’, or housed, people of genius, whose joint work can retrospectively be recognized as ‘baroque’. A historical geography of painting thus leads to a thematically constructed

exhibition, and cultural history collapses back into a history of art whose premises cannot be questioned.<sup>3</sup>

A second meaning of the title reveals another limitation. Subliminally, one can also take the title to refer to Rome not simply as a location, as a site where things happened to happen, but as a social, institutional and political unit with causal powers. Rome, then, not only houses people of genius; it itself has genius. Given the power of the Catholic church and its counter-reformation ideology, such an interpretation certainly makes sense. But I also argue that to accept it as a given is dangerous. True enough, on the one hand, it helps us to understand that art does not emerge out of the blue, that artists, like other people, are subject to political pressures, and that the horizon of their imagination is limited by what is thinkable, to what the powers-that-be allow the brainwashed mind to foster. This view turns artists into artisans without a vision of their own – a historicist notion that usefully struggles against romantic notions of the ‘artist as lone genius’. But, on the other hand, it also contributes to the naturalization of such power over creativity. This second meaning, I submit, encourages a dubiously uncritical view of political subordination; a repetition, even an unwitting endorsement, of the determinist ideology that those powers had a vested interest in promoting.<sup>4</sup>

But this attempt to historicize the phenomenon of the artist as well as to frame historical aesthetics, while necessary, is also risky. To be sure, artists, then and now, depend on the sale of their work. To please patrons they cannot avoid adhering to the stipulations of the commission, the taste of the day and the politics that reign as a frame within which to work. But, while the old artists all did that, only a handful of them still interest us enough today to be included in this exhibition. The question of aesthetic criteria begs that of power. Simply explaining pictures historically through their commissions may be useful as an account of what happened in the art market – which is why such an endeavour would be close to ‘cultural history’ – but it fails to explain how these pictures end up in an exhibition of this nature *today*. To be truly historical, in the sense of cultural history, the tedious, the failed, the imitative, and the rejected works would need to be included along with one or two ‘great’ works. But we don’t want that. This is ‘us’ – the contemporary public and the art-historian working for us – acting. And a historical project that fails to account for the historian’s position loses its cutting edge as history.

This second interpretation of the show’s title suggests an historical explanation but in fact fails to give one. Instead, it takes our own ‘taste’ for granted while accepting the political powers of patrons as a given, and as implicitly positive – they yielded great painting! – and ignoring, even obliterating, what characterizes the paintings as what we nevertheless assume them to be: works of art. As a result of the repression of our own intervention in the historical material, the view underlying the second interpretation of the title easily becomes a condescending ‘othering’ of historical phenomena. It suggests more tyranny, more constrictive dependency, than we can even perceive, not to speak of explain, for today’s artists, who, post-romantically, are considered free.<sup>5</sup>

A third connotation equally subliminally active in this exhibition is the individualizing, narrativizing one. The genius of Rome, like the Hunchback of Notre Dame, the Phantom of the Opera, or the Murderer of Amsterdam, is a man of



as yet unknown identity who roams around Rome being a genius. The story of the show leads to the discovery of his identity. It is clear who the guy turns out to be – Caravaggio, of course – but it remains interesting to see what this structure of meaning does to the show as a whole. In Rome, the name ‘Caravaggio’ is the main title, and the London title is the subtitle. Caravaggio is not alone; his 15 or so works are surrounded by those of others, among whom are well-known ‘great’ old masters such as Rubens, Annibale Carracci, Adam Elsheimer, Artemesia Gentileschi, as well as many ‘minor’ artists. But most of the sections and essays in the catalogue present Caravaggio as the measuring stick. He is portrayed as both recalcitrant and ‘great’, so that he becomes interesting as an artist by being interesting as a man. His paintings hang in central places and, with the help of juxtapositions and captions as well as their own immanent qualities, outshine the others. This connotation, I contend, reinstates the anachronistic conception of genius against which the exhibition, as suggested in the ‘official’ meaning of its title, argues.

I consider these three meanings of the title rather typical of art exhibitions today, influenced as museal practice is by developments in art history. At first sight, this show could be considered a happy convergence of traditional art history and more recent notions of visual culture. Especially in the version held in Rome, in the city after whose name the exhibition is titled, the siting of early baroque art in the place where it was ‘born’ suggests that visual culture today has a predecessor in visual culture then. Yet, it is here that the name of the Great Caravaggio takes over.<sup>6</sup> But, as my speculations regarding each of the title’s meanings suggest, this exhibition harbours all the ambiguities of such convergences. For, it is, at the same time, a recuperation of traditional dealings with art, as if any new development must be confined to, and framed by, the triple dogmatic underpinnings of the historical consideration of visual artifacts.

Let’s face it: visual culture, when historicized, compels curators to thematics, and thematics, in turn, reiterates categories that were always-already in place. Political power, when seriously brought into the picture, becomes omnipotent, and, as if to comfort us by distracting from that horror, it reinstates what it set out to question. Individualism helps live with dictatorship. Or, in a less paranoid interpretation, it is as if the discipline of art history is *by definition* unable to innovate. As if, in other words, it cannot shed its limiting procedures to frame art, as if it simply lacks the imagination to do so.

I take this exhibition as an occasion to broach a number of issues regarding the relations between visual culture and art history. In this article, my focus is on the art-historical side of the relationship. For now, visual culture is taken in the casual sense of the visual side of culture. In this sense, the domain of visual culture is larger than that of art history. But visual culture also stands for an approach, in which case it is smaller than art history, a branch of the latter so to speak. Saving the intricacies of that situation for a later essay, I here bring in just one of its aspects: the issue of complicity. Taking as my starting point this exhibition, which I enjoyed tremendously – not least because there were so many Caravaggios and, in general, so many ‘good paintings’ – means, also, implying my complicity with what I critique.

Indeed, I include in my considerations why I myself fall for the visual arguments made by the juxtapositions and divisions of the exhibition. Through an analysis of



that seduction, I aim to foreground and locate art history's resistance to change. This critical focus on the tendency to recuperation for the sake of conservatism emanating from the art history upon which the notion of visual culture appears to be grafted, is by no means an attempt to disqualify art history. On the contrary: it is an attempt to prepare the ground for a sceptical view of visual culture as that notion is currently used. For, in a later essay, I will take the opposite focus, and look more closely at the concept of visual culture: at what it entails as a concept, a program of study and an object. There, I will probe the same issues: the tendency to conservatism that, in visual culture studies, takes the guise of certain forms of essentialism.<sup>7</sup>

## Thematic repetition

As I mentioned earlier, the version of cultural history and historical visual culture that is possible in any show limited to fine art is thematic organization. Thematic exhibitions appear to be the only alternative to monographic shows of single geniuses. But three traps lurk there. The first is that the politics of the object can press through the intervention of the curator. The predictably misogynistic interpretation of certain themes – the Magdalene, Judith, or 'powerful women' would be a good example – can be avoided when the theme is pluralized, which is the case here. But the implied theme – the art market during the two decades and the politics that subtend it, as in the second interpretation of the title – overdetermines the choice of works. It has to, because the need to unify, to make the exhibition coherent, requires it. As a result, a second trap is the a-historical reification of any theme. Bringing together works 'on' music – where music is the topic of depiction – cannot be inherently restricted to a period, except in a rather arbitrary cut, which begs the question of periodization. Moreover, such themes reinforce the referential fallacy, impelling a reading for the referent that distracts from the art of painting. The 'music' section of the exhibition, more than any other section, also points to the third problem of thematic shows: the visual tedium of repetition.

But whereas this exhibition has cleverly avoided most of these three negative effects of thematics, it has done so by courting another trap – that of self-serving confirmation. With the apparent exception of the music section, the thematic division of the exhibition overlaps roughly with art history's own genres and categories: Still Lifes and Landscapes, Altarpieces, Saints in history paintings. Such groupings help the public to look at paintings that might be similar if it weren't for the difference between their makers' 'hands'. But a genre-based thematic organization, in addition to bringing the necessary coherence into a section, also stimulates specific modes of looking, thus facilitating art history's most central activity: comparison.

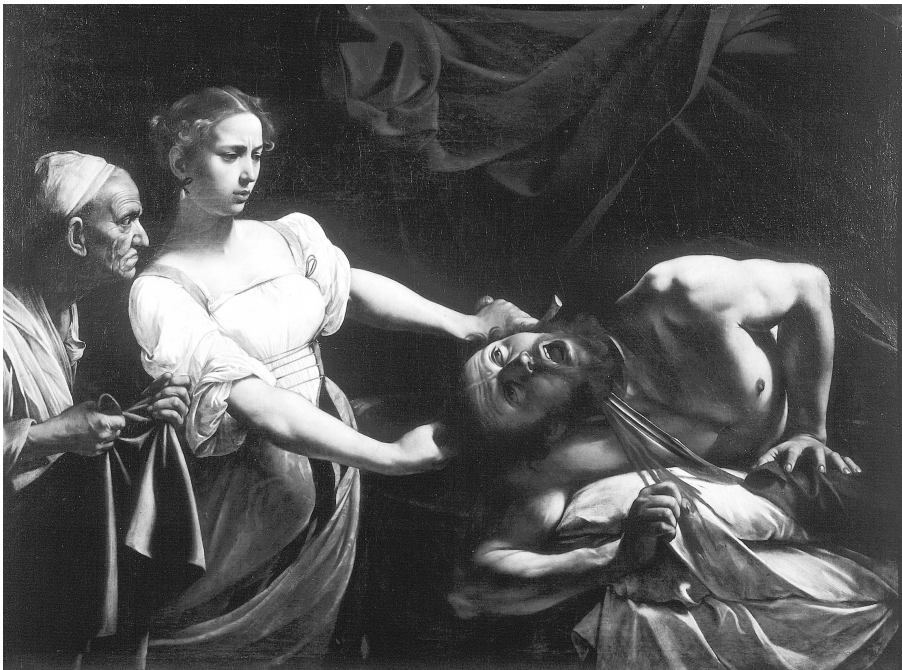
This activity affects the viewer, who is invited, almost compelled, to look then as an art historian would. But in combination with the third meaning of the title – the Genius of Rome being a particular artist – the usefulness of comparison becomes questionable. For comparison serves a particular kind of art history, namely connoisseurship, not an historical understanding of a visual culture from the past. Let me illustrate this with an example from the London show that was avoided in

Rome. The most notorious comparison facilitated here was that of Caravaggio (see Figure 1) and Gentileschi's depictions of Judith as she slays Holofernes (see Figure 4). Having these two pictures in the exhibition offered a wonderful opportunity to take a closer look at this case, made famous long ago by Mary D. Garrard. I will consider it for the implications of, especially, the first and third interpretations of the exhibition's title for the practice of art history.<sup>8</sup>

The catalogue essay – 'Between the Sacred and the Profane' – attempts to clarify the historical issue of the ambivalent reception of primarily Caravaggio's ambiguous saints in counter-reformatory Rome.<sup>9</sup> Espousing chronological treatment, art history's primary dogma, Brown first discusses Caravaggio's *Judith*. She writes two things about it, which I contend to be in contradiction with each other. First: 'Not yet dead he [Holofernes] screams in violent protest, while Judith with complete composure and icy self-determination merely frowns' (p. 292).

Visually, this rings true enough. Garrard based her critical assessment that Caravaggio wasn't interested enough in women on this composure.<sup>10</sup> Brown's remark proves her wrong: Judith's professionalism as a heroine in the service of her nation motivates the depiction of her as 'icy'. But then, Brown's next sentence shows how the discourse contradicts itself, unwittingly endorsing another dogma, that of misogyny: 'Her erect nipples indicate a state of sexual arousal that often occurs at the moment of hysterical violence' (p. 292).

If such referential details matter at all, let me say that women know, as some men



**Figure 1** Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, c. 1599, oil on canvas, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Rome. Copyright Scala/Art Resource, New York.

perhaps don't, that nipples harden under stress due to adrenaline as much as to sexual arousal. There is little reason for favouring the latter explanation over the former. Nor is there much reason to select this tiny bodily detail in an analysis of barely a paragraph, half of which speculates on what Caravaggio may have seen on the streets of Rome. But I am mainly interested in the contradiction between the two sentences: complete composure and icy self-determination seem at odds with hysterical violence. For the latter remark, a source is cited in a footnote. By repeating uncritically what predecessors have claimed, Brown reiterates the sexist collocation of hysteria and women, thus reducing Caravaggio's 'graphic realism' to a near-pornographic cliché.

More disturbing still, the comparison fatally turns Gentileschi's painting from a few years later into an imitation. That her two paintings of Judith slaying Holofernes have scared critics out of their wits, in ways that Caravaggio's has not, has been obvious for a long time.<sup>11</sup> But what is the implication for this comparison, which chronology translates into influence? The differences are articulated on the basis of the earlier work and similarities are foregrounded:

Much of his grisly realism and sexual innuendo is *repeated*, but Abra [Judith's helper] is now a young co-conspirator and the action is more compact and intensified. Both pictures stress the brutality of Judith's actions rather than the more traditional heroic aspects of her courageous deed. (p. 292, emphasis added)

Embedded within two similarities, the differences are relative to the standard, and are not interpreted in themselves, only in degree. What remains unaddressed is the feature that characterizes Gentileschi's painting most profoundly and that bears no resemblance whatsoever to Caravaggio, although it defines the painting's very baroque-ness.

Since Germaine Greer first wrote her early feminist intervention in art history, many have written on the unusual *composition* of Gentileschi's *Judith*, where the scene is so crammed that it is readable only with the greatest difficulty. In this dark and confining hothouse, the scene, centred around the head that emerges from the shoulders that look like thighs, conflates birth, sex and death as the three key moments of confrontation between men and women. Three moments, that is, where women can hold power over men.<sup>12</sup> In fact, no other *Judith* of the immense corpus on this theme, either in Italy – and specifically in Rome – or elsewhere, is remotely comparable with Gentileschi's dramatically staged scene. More than an hysterical exercise in violence, it is primarily an inquiry into the baroque-inflected confrontation of bodies that can no longer be disentangled.<sup>13</sup> Where Caravaggio challenges two-dimensional representation in the left-hand corner of the scene, where the blood spurts forward, but otherwise keeps to the format of the scroll, Gentileschi's work offers a much more radical exploration of three-dimensionality within painting, on the basis of an irresolvable movement between pushing forward and receding backward, which is typical of the most profound philosophical thrust of baroque thought. With the two paintings installed for comparison, and with Caravaggio's earlier date and higher status dictating the direction of the dual assessment, Gentileschi's unique representation is thus flattened out into a lesser

imitation, allegedly sharing the misogyny (wrongly) imputed to the great master, and losing its innovative work entirely.<sup>14</sup>

What I have attempted to show in these remarks is how thematic organization puts an exhibition at risk of triply reiterating art history at its most mechanical. First, by conflating themes with art-historical categories of genre, the reiterative nature of thematics is, so to speak, naturalized; since we know the categories already, they appear to be the only ones possible. Second, the method of comparison is put in place as, again, already naturalized, so that seeing similarities, not differences, is the most ordinary mode of looking. And third, combined with connoisseurial evaluation and chronological reasoning, the comparison reiterates the hierarchies among Old Masters as well as the clichés of interpretation.

Obviously, the catalogue essays and the captions are secondary to the actual display of the paintings. Interestingly, in London the remarks I have just probed fell, visually, on fertile ground. The exhibition's itinerary was strictly regulated. Beginning with monumental pieces, such as Caravaggio's *Madonna of Loreto* (see Figure 2) from c. 1604–5, the section 'The Birth of the Baroque' instated the two paradigms of Caravaggio's painting, sexy naturalism and the theatricality of the *tableau vivant* (most emphatic in the Vatican's *Entombment*, withdrawn from the Rome show), as the mode of reading the themes to follow. Rome as pretext for a reiteration of art history itself. The *Madonna* from the Chiesa di Sant' Agostino in Rome showed pilgrims with dirty feet facing a young woman with attractively crossed feet pushing one knee forward. The two elements of the traditional assessment of Caravaggio just mentioned here a propos the *Judith* – 'grisly naturalism' and sexual provocation – were thus visually foregrounded right at the beginning of the exhibition. This was, of course, not wrong. Both the street naturalism and the play with appealing body shape and surfaces – the *Madonna*'s garment is as sexy as her posture – are Caravaggio trademarks. My point is that the first section, as a preface to the thematic sections, set the entire exhibition up in terms of a thematic that copied categories already known, which, in turn, invited reiterative looking. No surprises, other than the blissful privilege of being in the presence of these great works of art. This multiple reconfirmation of art history's dogmas was an inevitable consequence of the thematic hanging.

### Body art: de- and re-sacralization

The second reading of the exhibition's title – Rome's church as power broker – frames the section on Saints, 'Between the Sacred and the Profane'. Bert Treffers's (2001) essay in the catalogue is a masterpiece of how paintings can be analysed according to this interpretation. On the *Madonna of Loreto*, he has little difficulty ignoring the sense-based appeal of the texture and figuration in this narrative of devotion, from which one is easily distracted by sensual pleasure. The latter appeal is by no means confined to the *Madonna*'s sexy pose and exposed neck, or to her hand clasping the soft flesh of the baby much in the way Bernini's Apollo will squeeze Daphne's, two decades later.

The dirty feet and the buttocks of the male pilgrim turned toward the viewer





**Figure 2** Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, 1604–5, *The Madonna of Loreto*, Sant' Agostino, Rome. Copyright Alinari/Art Resource, New York.

propose a counter-narrative of what I have termed 'second-personhood'. The pilgrim, no less than the Madonna, visually addresses the viewer by these lowly body parts. Treffers seems to find it unnecessary to say a word about this profoundly baroque merging of devotion and sensuality. The subject of the painting is so obviously devotional that a second look at its visual quality is hardly called for. The religious bias – or, if I may say so, in line with Gilbert's more disenchanted view, the religious alibi – of Rome's 'genius' leads Treffers to the practice of what I wish to term, provocatively, an anti-visual iconography. By reducing the pictorial, exclusively iconographic features of the paintings to term-by-term correspondences with specific dogmas dear to specific patrons, the display of the male body in *Entombment*, for example, loses its tactile quality, which, in fact, also had theological relevance.<sup>15</sup>

In line with this iconophobic bias, which espouses an ill-construed period Catholicism, I see, in the exhibition's second interpretation of its title, a rejection and indeed obliteration of the possibilities its conception holds of doing a cultural-history version of visual culture studies. Understanding the way the *Genius* exhibition frames images of saints is perhaps key to understanding how the collapse into art-historical doxa ruins even its own – art history's, that is – mission: to explain art historically. At stake, here, is not the art-historical label but the cultural-historical momentum of the baroque.

I have often marvelled at Caravaggio's 1603–4 *John the Baptist* (see Figure 3), a work I consider as quintessentially 'baroque' as Gentileschi's (but not Caravaggio's) *Judith*, to the extent that 20th-century painters have shown us what the notion of 'baroque' can mean in their responses to this *Baptist*.<sup>16</sup> My heart skipped a beat when I saw it, and this physical reaction makes it impossible to write the present essay 'in the third person', as a critique of the *Genius* exhibition as object. Instead, it makes me part of that object, that exhibition.

The brilliance of this *John the Baptist*, much of which resides in its physical attraction, irresistibly becomes the focal point of attention in the room of the images of saints, at the expense of neighbouring works. In Rome, it hung next to Orzasio Gentileschi's *David*, whose composition reverses Caravaggio's. There, the contrast was really dramatized, since Gentileschi's figure has none of the sensuality emanated by Caravaggio's young male body. By putting the latter obliquely and separately in relation to the rest of the room, it was put on an altar. Perhaps this obvious appeal informed the way it was presented in the caption, as if its almost shocking attraction needed to be redeemed. The caption in London stated: 'His misery is not dogmatic, but immediately identifiable as the most fundamental humanness.... A common suffering soul.'

The tone of this caption, where 'his misery' is assumed to be self-evident, is in blatant contradiction with the visual tonality of the image. In both captions and catalogue, the figure was presented as a melancholic, and his sideways, downward staring glance, barely legible due to the shadow that obscures his eyes, makes that interpretation plausible, that is, if the figure's eyes are the key to reading the image.

But eyes are not always the key. The hanging, in both London and Rome, which made the viewer's eyes meet the boy's crotch, not his face, visually suggested a



**Figure 3** Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Saint John the Baptist*, 1603–4, oil on canvas. Copyright Rockhill Nelson Gallery of Art, Kansas City, Missouri.

different key. Indeed, what is at stake in foregrounding melancholy at the expense of the emphatic sensuality of the image as a whole? I contend that this written presentation four centuries later still labours to satisfy the church officials, as power brokers who need reassurance against the dangers of this visual address. The genius of Rome lies with them, not the painters.<sup>17</sup>

Clearly, this image poses a problem. Why? Let me offer my analysis of it as an attempt to answer that question. Like most Caravaggio paintings, this *John the Baptist* is not narrative in the classical sense of that term when applied to painting – as a representation, ‘in the third person’, of prior events – although it is, of course, figurative. But for the misery to be probable, it ought to be narrative in just that sense. It isn’t. In contrast, it is quite emphatically erotic, although perhaps less obviously sexual than, for example, the 1601–2 *Amor* in Berlin (not in the *Genius*

exhibition). But this more restrained sexuality makes the case for the erotic quality of the work even more compelling.<sup>18</sup> The attraction of the figure in the painting, erotic as it is, is accomplished by means of an effect of waves and folds and texture that totally lacks the inscription of the artist's hand. Instead, the figure comes forward to invite and accommodate the fantasmatic touch of the viewer's hand. The eyes are, at most, secondary in this play of texture.

Instead of the defensive myopic focus on the allegedly melancholy eyes, the totality of the painting responds to baroque aesthetics in ways that convincingly explain why the saints, in this artistic community of Rome at the beginning of the 17th century, had to be erotic instead of being too erotic to be saints. This erotic quality stems from a feature of baroque-ness that is related but not at all identical to Gentileschi's baroque scenography. What we have here is a baroque *texturology*. What can that be, and how does it make the commentator's defensive interpretation futile? In his translator's introduction to Deleuze's (1993) book on baroque philosophy, *The Fold*, Tom Conley sums up what makes baroque forms so enticing:

... an intense taste for life that grows and pullulates, and a fragility of infinitely varied patterns of movement ... in the protracted fascination we experience in watching waves heave, tumble, and atomize when they crack along an unfolding line being traced along the expanse of a shoreline; in following the curls and wisps of color that move on the surface and in the infinite depths of a tile of marble. (pp. x–xi)

The vocabulary here is mostly formal and aesthetic, describing the forms and their infinite expandability. But the aesthetic itself is based on terms that underscore the second person, terms like 'fascination' and phrases like 'we experience'. There is the suggestion of an intimate link between the forms that fascinate and the 'intense taste for life that grows and pullulates'. If that pullulating life is situated on the side of the canvas (the initial 'first person'), and if the 'experience' of forms is situated on the side of the viewer (the initial 'second person'), then the deictic exchange that occurs when this aesthetic 'happens' is itself what initiates and structures the aesthetic.

Caravaggio's work sets the tones of the boy's flesh against, on the one hand, the almost identical hue of the different texture of the sheepskin that traditionally identifies the Baptist, and, on the other, the contrasting value of the overwhelmingly rich, deep crimson cloth, the oversized mantle that takes up more visual space than the boy's body. The most obvious areas in which the eroticism of this work takes hold consist, naturally, of the body and its appealingly young firm skin, and the muscles, just well enough defined to denote masculine vigour without being overdone, as in some contemporary male nudes that come close to resembling anatomical drawings overlaid with painted skin.<sup>19</sup> Total fantasy is bound up with the almost excessive, illusionistic mode of painting, with its subtle iconographic touches of realism. I can only come up with one term for this combination: 'transcendent corporeality' (Bollas, 1987: 82).

Thus, the veins near the elbow, the slightly rough elbow itself and the dirty toenails tell us this is a real boy, as real as the plants at his feet, and hence, that the erotic pull is emanating from an actually touchable body. But this body and its



touchability attract viewers regardless of their own sexual interests. To use Bollas's (1987) description of the 'trisexual': 'This body of desire no longer signifies sexuality but *the memory of gratification*' (p. 84; emphasis added). The attraction thereby exceeds vision and implicates the other senses – specifically touch, but also smell. Eroticism is further 'icono-graphed' through the flesh of the inner thigh that comes forward due to the seated position of the figure, an almost emblematic sign of homoerotic realism.<sup>20</sup> But the 'memory of gratification' evoked by this transcendent corporeality is not specified according to sex, gender, or sexual orientation.

The folds in the animal skin that alternate between fur and leather are cleverly disposed, to suggest, just barely, an icon of the boy's penis parallel to the soft flesh of the inner thigh, a penis thus tantalizingly signified but not shown. And whereas the boy's right leg displays its elegance so as to foreground the muscled calf, which due to the raised foot is stretched out to look longer, the left knee, isolated from the leg left behind in the dark, when seen in a flash, could almost be mistaken for an oversized penis.<sup>21</sup> A flash, that is, of the kind Lacan (1979) describes in *Four Fundamental Concepts*, as the glance that seizes death in the anamorphic skull in the foreground of Holbein's *Ambassadors*; a baroque anamorphosis. The allusion to the Holbein/Lacan case is meant quite specifically. Both the aggrandizing vision of sexuality here and the insight into mortality there are solicited in a specific temporal mode, which is set off against the main line of the story. The deviating pictorial mode – anamorphosis over and against illusionism – sets these elements off as proleptic, as narrated in the future tense. This is one example of how painting manages to inscribe time otherwise than as an artificially constructed diegetic chronology. I also bring Lacan in to suggest that this kind of looking is both historical – anamorphosis and illusionism are period preoccupations – and anachronistic – psychoanalysis is of our time.

But if this iconography *alludes* to a sexual attraction that may be especially homoerotic, the play with folds, substance, texture and light *performs* erotic work, work that does not just inspire fantasy in the viewer as in a third-person novel that strongly encourages identification, but that engages with the viewer in an erotic play.<sup>22</sup> The boy is not the agent of this eroticism; he is one of its parties. In view of the overall eroticism of the work, the handsome face with the casual curls casting shadows on the forehead, the face into whose eyes, teasingly, we cannot look, may serve as a reminder that eroticism happens between people, and that it is based on teasing before yielding rather than on melancholy. But it is the ensemble of surfaces that turns the look cast upon it into a caress. The painted surface dictates how the 'second person' must confirm the first person's subjectivity, the kind of subjectivity it wishes to be produced, and hence, also, how the viewer must be engaged: not as a bare, abstract, theoretical, disembodied retina, but as a full participant in a visual event in which the body takes effect. The second-personhood I am elaborating here, then, is qualified as erotic so as to insure this bodily participation. This bodily participation takes time, and the subject performing it changes through time. This is one definition of an event. The devotional quality of the image is not at all in tension with this. On the contrary: the devotion is qualified as erotic and is helped along by that quality.

This effect of surface as ‘second-personhood’, where erotic attraction becomes devotional, is bound up not with material paint but with the lightest of materials: light. The firm yet tender skin, the fluffy animal fur, the smooth sheepskin, the soft, smooth crimson fabric, the soft curls, the finely articulated plants at Saint John’s feet with their dirty nails, even the smooth bamboo staff he is holding with exquisite tenderness: all these surfaces are produced by different shades of light. Light and shade together thus become the very substance of the painting, which is neither ‘first-person’ in that it does not inscribe the hand of the maker nor ‘third-person’ in that it does not eliminate deixis. Instead, light becomes the very tool of deixis, the optical version of the exchange of touches in erotic contact.

The dialectic between the presence and the absence of light on the skin of painting replaces the pencil to create a design of the figure in the same mode and with the same substance as ‘gives body’ to the figure. Light is used both for drawing and for substantiating the image. In this respect the baroque folds in the crimson cloth become much more than just a theatrical ploy for emphasizing art as artificial, and, in Caravaggio, for emphasizing the studio as the deictic ‘here and now’ of painting. The ‘fragility of infinity’ of folds, due to Caravaggio’s simultaneous appropriation of two-dimensional surface and three-dimensional fullness, envelops Caravaggio’s attractive boy as a metonymically motivated metaphor for the connection between visual attraction and the infinitely touchable body, whose skin is its largest and most intensely feeling sense organ. Light signifies the most tender and slight, yet most thrilling, kind of touch. That Caravaggio is a very erotic painter, as well as a very plastic one, is easily observed. That light is his primary instrument is also well known.

In his superb analysis of Caravaggio’s *Medusa*, Louis Marin (1995) made a case for this baroque painter as primarily deictic. Yet neither Caravaggio’s deictic quality nor his special deployment of light as paint are easily noticed outside the realm of figuration, which was the primary visual language of his time. The innovations he introduced made him a forerunner, an avant-garde artist of his time. If Gentileschi emulated him, it was not by reiterating his interpretation of Judith’s action but by re-deploying his erotically based ‘second-personhood’ in her composition of violence. This is why she did not merely intensify Caravaggio’s composition but rather replaced it with one whose principles came from something else: not from Caravaggio’s composition, but from his anti-perspective materialism.

Baroque matter, as well as the objects comprising it, has profoundly changed, become complicated, since matter is folded twice – once under elastic forces, a second time under plastic forces – and ‘one is not able to move from the first to the second’ (Deleuze, 1993: 9). One way to imagine matter’s double folding is through the allegory of marble: marble’s ‘natural’ veins – the result of a long process over time – and marble’s use in representing folds or veils in sculpture.<sup>23</sup> But, with that change in matter, the status of the subject has also changed. So, inevitably, has looking. What Deleuze (1993) writes in his second chapter ‘The Folds in the Soul’ – a chapter as theologically relevant as it is materialist – is a far cry from the masterful, disembodied, retinal gaze of linear perspective:

We move from inflection or from variable curvature to vectors of curvature

that go in the direction of concavity. Moving from a branching of inflection, we distinguish a point that is no longer what runs along inflection, nor is it the point of inflection itself; it is the one in which the lines perpendicular to tangents meet in a state of variation. (p. 19)

Variation is the key word here. Variation not only in what we can see but also in where we are when we see it, in how, therefore, we are able to see it, as full participants in the event. Variation: the very notion inscribes more episodes, narrativizing as it deflates mastery. Thus, one can even venture to say, it deflates the authority of the Rome church officials.

Deleuze continues:

It [the state in which subject and object meet] is not exactly a point but a place, a position, a site, a 'linear focus,' a line emanating from lines. To the degree it represents variation or inflection, it can be called *point of view*. Such is the basis of perspectivism, which does not mean a dependence in respect to a pre-given or defined subject; to the contrary, *a subject will be what comes to the point of view*, or rather what remains in the point of view. (p. 19; emphases added)

This description of point of view concerns epistemology; Deleuze is elaborating a view of knowledge that is neither Cartesian in its objectivism nor subjectivist in its relativism. But the entanglement of subject and object – which yields an object that is itself entangled in its folds – embraces the reader within the narrative as a variable 'you', who is fully dependent on *and* constitutive of its corollary, the 'I'. It is a view of knowledge that makes knowledge deictic, thereby involving it in the inexorable process of time. This mode of knowledge is so much more productive for the baroque world, and hence, so much in need of promotion over and against the objectifying mode of mastery that its attraction for the 'you' must be made obvious. This, then, is the epistemological importance of *The Baptist's* erotic pull.<sup>24</sup>

Visual embodiments of this model of knowledge abound. Think of anamorphosis. Think of the place of clouds in painting, disruptive as they often are in relation to the very linear perspective they refer to then undermine (Damisch, 1972). Most typically, as baroque texturology, the folds that attract the eye and the touch, and then make them travel up and down their hills and enter and exit their caves, represent this view of point of view, in which the subject is fully engaged in the knowledge that cannot be acquired but needs to be constructed.

This visual embodiment of thought, as I like to consider the *Baptist's* most important feature – its texture as 'second-person' narrative – counters the idea that the church authorities mastered the painter, without ignoring the issue of theology that is of obvious historical relevance. The point I wish to make here is that the second interpretation of the title, and the support it receives from the captions and catalogue texts, has three serious drawbacks, all of which inhere in the regression from a cultural-history approach back to an art-history one. First, it restricts the interpretation to theology as verbal dispute, so that visual imagery can only be 'read off the page' in a term-by-term translation. This is reductive of the visuality of the

art, and hence, of what could make the connection to a visual-culture approach. Second, it posits the powers in Rome as absolute, as if they were not under the influence of the thoughts that filled the air. This is reductive of the 'cultural history' part at stake in this exhibition. Third, it eliminates from consideration the response of viewers today, their physical vulnerability to looking at arousing, enticing and pleasing visual objects. This is reductive of the self-critical element that any exercise in history requires and that must account for visual seduction.

## Caravaggio is ... Caravaggio

The third interpretation of the title turns Caravaggio into the genius of Rome, a lone, controversial figure who stood socially below and artistically above his contemporaries. I don't pretend to question this image. Clearly, the mere fact that I have written about and around this master here makes me a willing victim of the seduction. It would be disingenuous to attempt to organize an exhibition on these 25 years that did *not* make Caravaggio central. The last thing it is important to point out is what the centrality of Caravaggio does to the surrounding works. In terms of my own interests, I have argued how Gentileschi is undermined by this centrality (see Figure 4). She is presented as a follower, one of many.

Her *Judith*, however, shows that she remains an exception: not a stronger genius than her (only slightly older) colleague, but a *different* one, who, like him, had thoughts to offer on what mattered – literally – in 'baroque' culture. Equally baroque, but fundamentally different. To probe that difference – in a comparison based neither on chronology nor hierarchy but on a feature of the culture (in Rome) at the time – would be a step in the direction of a study of a visual, cultural history.

Since Caravaggio is the model for everything else, everything is 'secondary' to him. But there is something Hegelian about such canonizations. For, conversely, the thematic set-up reframes him, subordinating his work to themes, motives, topics. For example, his is the best still-life. As a result, the *Basket of Fruit* that earned him that title, comes to obscure the sexy boy and his address to the 'second person' – with all that entails, as I have argued earlier – who carries a similar basket. There is no room for probing the implications of the combination of the basket's naturalism and the Baptist-like sex appeal. For the *Baptist* is in a different room, differently framed.

Can the label 'baroque' do any good, after all? I once submitted a text on Caravaggio to an Italian editor, who objected to my qualifying art-historical labels. 'Caravaggio is ... Caravaggio,' he wrote, 'Don't try to label him.' The tautology characterizes the discourse of genius: mysterious, great, undefinable. But, given what I stated earlier – that 'baroque' is also better left undefined – nor can the mystery of greatness be defined. As a result, the statement 'Caravaggio is baroque' is just as tautological as the claim 'Caravaggio is Caravaggio'. No wonder, then, that scholars, including the curator and writers of this catalogue, fall back on the first and second interpretations of the title.

When it comes to understanding the limitations of art history as a foundation for this exhibition, and the potential contribution that a concept based on visual culture could have made, the question remains: is the vagueness about the meaning of 'baroque' good or bad? I would like to conclude by submitting that the study of visual culture – here, in its historical guise – can neither unproblematically use, as an art-historical exhibition does, nor simply leave aside, as a purist visual culture approach would probably try, a label such as 'baroque'. Instead, a different intercourse with this notion is necessary to remedy some of the traps of thematics



**Figure 4** Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith Slaying Holophernes*, 1620, oil on canvas, Uffizi, Florence. Copyright Scala/Art Resource, New York.



and one-sided historicism, and to reframe the place of the exceptional 'great artist' – here the genius of Rome.

'Baroque', as art history usefully reminds us, is an anachronistic as well as initially derogatory term. This helps us to avoid naive intercourse with it. Since it is anachronistic, it cannot float around in an exhibition where its 'birth' is celebrated. Derogatory, it resists the celebratory tone that the word 'genius', in all its conceptions, emanates. As a historical qualifier, it fails to account for the period's sensibility and for our contemporary position in relation to it. As a stylistic label, it begs the question of style. Not coincidentally, these problems lead *inherently* to the centralizing of one genius among the Roman locals. As I have argued at length in *Quoting Caravaggio* (1999), defining 'baroque' inevitably reduces 'baroque-ness'. In spite of the obvious fact that this exhibition is a work of *visual* culture, it fails as a project of visual culture study as I see it because it offers no opportunity to understand what the visual objects *do* or *perform* through their 'baroque-ness'. Nor *can* it offer that opportunity as long as it fails to allow the visual objects to interact with the non-visual or less exclusively visual objects of their time.

Probing the reductive implications of the notion of visual culture must wait for another paper. But let me suggest here that the most productive way to go is not to define but to deploy the term 'baroque' – as a (non-)concept in the flexible sense explained by Deleuze and Guattari (1994). There are no simple concepts, they say. This explains the multiplicity of the aspects and possible uses of concepts. The point of these aspects and uses continues to be to articulate, cut and crosscut understanding of an object as cultural process. In this sense, a concept-in-use is like first-/second-person exchange. At the same time, concepts are connected to problems; otherwise they are meaningless. Using concepts just to characterize or label an object means falling back into a practice of typology whose point is limited as well as limiting.

I would go even further than Deleuze and Guattari to propose that concepts – and here, the concept of 'baroque' – are condensed *interdiscourse*, a scrap of discourse that connects things, rather than reduces one thing to another, as in Gentileschi to a pseudo-Caravaggio. I have attempted to make Gentileschi's *Judith* stand out as different from Caravaggio's on her own terms, by drawing attention to its unique proposal of something we can now see as 'baroque'. Now, that is, *after* having seen the results of more than four centuries of painterly experiment and philosophical questioning, political changes and theological shifts. I subsequently attempted to position Caravaggio's *Baptist* as a figure unfettered by Catholic celibacy but profoundly invested in a social and physical, even materialist, form of sensuality that celebrates the body as giving and – precisely – God-given. This, too, is a visual thought we can now recognize for its 'baroque-ness'.

The centrality of Caravaggio in this exhibition remains inevitable and, as a scholar committed to visual culture studies over art history and profoundly attached to Caravaggio's work, I have no qualms about this centrality; indeed, I remain grateful for this rare opportunity to see so many of his pictures together. Rest assured, there is – hopefully – no new censorship on the way. The contribution that visual culture can make to remedying the drawbacks of the title's three interpretations – thematics, the naturalization of power, and the one-man-show – does not necessarily lie in

shifting interest. Rather, as long as visual culture allows itself to bleed over into cultural history, and as long as the latter allows itself to become self-reflexive to the point of becoming what I have dubbed ‘preposterous’ (1999), an interdiscursive understanding of ‘baroque’ can de-centre, and then, on different terms, re-centre, those art works that help us, ourselves, to be ‘baroque’.

## Notes

1. ‘The Genius of Rome: 1592–1623’, curated by Beverly Louise Brown, was held at the Royal Academy of London (20 January–16 April 2001) and then at the Palazzo Venezia in Rome (May–August 2001).
2. This analysis is based on the London venture.
3. The phrase ‘the birth of the baroque’ was emphatically presented on the first text panel explaining the concept of the show. It is also the title of the introductory essay in the catalogue, written by the editor and curator (Brown, 2001: 16–41). The exhibition and catalogue present the situation in artistic Rome in the period before that covered by Yves Bonnefoy (1994) in his book *Rome 1630*.
4. See Treffers’s essay in the catalogue for an example of such a view. Excellent in its research and interpretation, it simply takes the artists’ subordination to the joint pressures of market and politics for granted. For a different view of the persona of the baroque artist, see Careri (1995b).
5. For a critique of art history’s weakness as history, see Bal (1999).
6. This might simply be a concession to the tourist industry, at its height in Rome during the tenure of the show there.
7. ‘Visual Culture’s Vision of Vision’, in preparation (to be published in this journal).
8. Garrard (1989) compares the two paintings, but is too involved in connoisseurship-type criticism and too eager to heroize Gentileschi to see the profound differences between the paintings in other than evaluative terms. See my critique (1996: 289–311, esp. 292).
9. The curator, Beverly Louise Brown (2001), wrote this essay, so we can assume it reflects the concept of the show (pp. 274–303).
10. ‘Caravaggio’s rendering of such *aesthetically imbalanced* types – the female conventional, the male real – is less likely to be explained by Renaissance art theory or Jesuit theology than by the influence of gender on the practice of an artist who happened to be male’ (Garrard, 1989: 291).
11. For example, Slap (1985) and Taylor (1984), both of whose discourses can be qualified as hysterical.
12. Greer (1979) initiated the current interest in Gentileschi’s work, of which the two *Judith* paintings remain the most significant works *qua* baroque.
13. On the use of the Judith theme to explore what defines a single body in a two-dimensional representation, see Bal (in press, Ch. 4).
14. The dates are not that convincing for the influence argument anyway. Caravaggio’s *Judith* is notoriously unclearly dated (1597–1610), whereas Gentileschi’s is dated 1611–12.
15. Steinberg (1983) remains exceptional in its successful attempt to connect iconographic detail, theological niceties and the sensual quality of painting.
16. See *Quoting Caravaggio*, Ch. 1 (Bal, 1999) for the importance of contemporary art for understanding the baroque, and Ch. 6, for a more extensive reading of the *Baptist* through the lens of late 20th-century painting. Some of the following remarks are drawn from the latter chapter.
17. See Gilbert (1995) for a study of Caravaggio based on this view.
18. As Gilbert remarks, the Berlin *Amor* and the *John the Baptist* painting in the Museo

- Capitolino, which Bersani and Dutoit (1997) discuss and which Gilbert (1995) retitles *Pastor Friso* and identifies as Paris, are the only two nudes, the only two full-length male figures, and the only two figures laughing (pp. 5–7). Gilbert seems to be attempting to express a sense of ‘camp’ when he writes the following about the latter: ‘Rather than represent allegory, he would represent a person who plays at enacting allegory’ (p. 7). Although Caravaggio is rightly claimed to be a star in the gay canon, I feel compelled here to use the more general word ‘erotic’, rather than ‘homoerotic’. There is no general reason for qualifying attractive depictions of bodies as either straight or gay, whether the bodies are feminine or masculine.
19. The erotic pull this image exerts on viewers of both sexes and of all sexual orientation can perhaps be understood – although emphatically not *explained* – through reference to what Christopher Bollas (1987) calls the ‘trisexual’ (pp. 82–96). If, for a moment, we see the image as being analogous to the result of what Bollas calls the ‘dramaturgy’ of the dream, then the youth in this painting appeals to viewers through ‘a state of desire [trisexuality] characterized by identification with and seduction of both sexes in order to appropriate genital sexuality by redirecting it into a threesome’s love of one’ (p. 82). A little further on, on the same page, Bollas writes:
 

If the bisexual stance allows identification with both sexes, the trisexual adds to this a libidinally desexualized body, its gender *suspended from the categories of sexual difference in order to be converted into a vessel for a transcendent corporeality*. (p. 82, emphasis added)
  20. The boy’s pose can be read as a nod to Michelangelo, whose *Victory* sculpture from 1527–30 and *Saint Bartholomew* in the Sistine Chapel from 1534–41 not only have the same pose but also show the effect of that pose on the flesh of the inner thigh.
  21. This knee – increasingly strange as time passes – resembles the bizarre, isolated knee in Caravaggio’s *Narcissus*. See Damisch (1996).
  22. For an interesting homoerotic iconography of Caravaggio, see Sternweiler (1993). On the issue of homosexuality in Caravaggio’s biography, see Gilbert (1995). Although it serves a more ticklish purpose, such searches for biographical fact distract from the paintings as much as do the kind of iconographic readings-for-the-dogma I am targeting in this section.
  23. On folds and veils in sculpture as an epistemological questioning of boundaries, see Derrida (1987).
  24. For an extensive discussion of alternative models of knowledge more likely to be socially productive today, see Code (1991).

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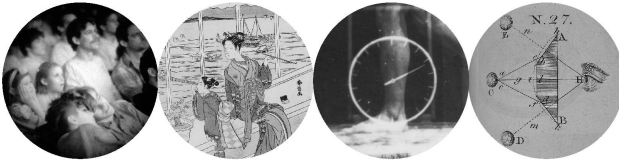


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# journal of visual culture



## Petra

### Alphonso Lingis

#### Abstract

In Jordan there is an ancient site in a hollow opened by ancient earthquakes and now entered through a narrow gorge, where the mountain walls have been carved in gigantic facades. It is one of the most astonishing sights eyes can see. It was created by a Nabatean kingdom of which very little is known. It supplies an experience for a reflection on the ecstasy of vision.

#### Key words

ecstasy • geology • Petra • topography • tourism • vision

## The rift where we were born

You see it. Looking at a topological map, you see this gaping crack in the continent – what unflappable Victorian gave it the innocuous name of the Great Rift Valley? Some 30 kilometers east of Nairobi you see how the high plateau is broken apart; you look down cliff walls so steep that it was German prisoners of war who were forced to finally blast a road down them. On a clear day you make out the equally vertical walls of the other side. From the bottom Mount Kilimanjaro and Mount Kenya sizzled up in volcanic eruptions to their glacier-covered heights. When you get to the bottom, you can see the gorges where the Leakeys found the oldest remains of *Homo erectus*. This was the Garden of Eden where human apes first stood upright.

Further north, the Great Rift Valley splits apart the mountain stronghold of Ethiopia – that highest altitude in Africa. There archeologists found the first quasi-complete skeleton of the human ape they, in an hallucinogenic vision, named Lucy – Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds.

Still further north you see the great fracture filled with water and named Gulf of Aqaba, then the Dead Sea (whose greatest depth at 1312 feet below sea level is the

lowest point on the earth's surface) and further up the Sea of Galilee. But between the Gulf of Aqaba and the Dead Sea a tectonic compression gradually lifted great strata of sandstone and porphyry and finally blocked the Jordan River, and the life of the Dead Sea was choked in the ever-increasing concentrations of bromine, magnesium, iodine and salt. Some hundred kilometers south of the Dead Sea the surface now rose in mountains to 3280 feet.

## The Nabatean city

At the place now called Petra, just south of this high point, an earthquake 30 million years ago split the rock in a serpentine fissure called Siq. You see that countless flash floods of the Wadi Mousa have since carved it to a width of 5 to 10 feet. You enter it between vertical walls 300–600 feet high which reveal the swirling strata of rock, some but a fraction of an inch thick, tinted in astonishing alternations of ochres, reds, blacks, purples, blues. Where the sun breaks through, bright green fig trees cling to the rock walls, offering their fruits to you as to travelers long ago. Looking up, you see the whorls of rock perforated with inner channels which the artistry of the torrential waters have carved, like a gallery of sculpture fashions and styles that marked the succeeding generations of flash floods. How myopic the transcendental lucidity of modern philosophy, of Immanuel Kant who read Hume and declared himself awakened from philosophy's two-millennial dogmatic slumber – realizing that we never see causality, that causality is just an organizational device of the rational mind!

A kilometer down, abruptly, at a bend, your astonished eyes see that another artistry has carved in the wall of the gorge a great facade, six pillars, then above a circular temple whose conical roof is topped by an urn, with pillared semi-pediments on either side, the whole adorned with now defaced sculptures of eagles, amazons, lions and gods in high relief. There is but one room behind, square and unadorned. You learn that experts cannot decide whether it was a tomb, a memorial mausoleum, or a temple; they still call it the Bedouin name: the Treasury. Proceeding on, the gorge widens, narrows and turns, then opens wide between mountainous heights carved with hundreds of cave dwellings and tombs. In a bend, surrounded by tombs on both sides and above, you see hollowed out the perfect half-circle of a vast theater. To your right, you see the mountain wall carved with colossal facades up to 150 feet high, each different. There your eyes climb three colonnaded ramps then back to the recessed columns before a high wall soaring up the mountain. Your gaze fondles a facade whose columns and cornices have melted and the polychrome striations of the rock have turned into wild shot silk. Your look wanders among the four stories of colonnades of a majestic facade that turn the Jebel el-Khubtha mountain behind into a palace. You have entered the city its creators called Reqem.

They wrote an Aramaic language, so we know they were called Nabateans. Their first king was named Aretas I, who assumed power about 168 BC. Their rule extended from Damascus to the Gulf of Aqaba, over the Negev, Sinai, Trans-Jordan and down the Arabian peninsula to Hegra. Thus they controlled trade from Syria to Yemen, from the Nile to the Tigris and Euphrates, and thus from India and via the Silk Road from China. Reqem, accessible only through narrow gorges, was their capital.

Further on, where the mountains are split further apart, you see where the city was built. At the widest point three rivers were conducted by way of tunnels and covered channels to gush forth from a gigantic sculptured fountain. A central avenue paved with granite blocks leads to the central temples; today oleanders, aloes and junipers perfume their ruins. On one side you see the remains of an immense colonnaded market where caravans laid out their spices, jewels, ivories and silks from Egypt, Syria, Mesopotamia, Persia, India and China. Around the market the Nabateans erected their homes. The researchers estimate that the city had a population of 30,000 to 40,000.

You climb the thousands of steps of processional stairways, 10 feet wide, which they carved up the craggy mountains to sanctuaries on the summits. A mile-long flight of carved steps brings you to the greatest of these, now called the ad-Deir. It is but a facade – of a tomb, memorial mausoleum, ritual hall or shrine of a religious order? – its powerful and majestic forms crisp as if fresh from the chisel, astonishingly untinted or weather-stained by its 2000 years there.

The eleventh and last Nabatean king was Rabbel II, 70–106 AD. The Roman troops were now masters of Syria, Judea and Egypt; Rabbel II abandoned Reqem and transferred his capital to Bozrah in the north. In 106 AD, Emperor Trajan annexed what was left of Rabbel II's kingdom to the imperial province of Arabia. When the Roman capital was transferred to Byzantium, small rooms behind the great facades of Reqem were enlarged and turned into Christian churches. An earthquake in 363 and a more severe one in 551 depopulated much of the city. The Arabs conquered the region in 663; the great caravans had found other routes and no longer passed through Reqem. The crusaders occupied and fortified the site briefly in the 12th century. As the centuries passed, the site no longer contained an urban population and was occupied by Bedouin herdsmen. From the departure of the crusaders, defeated by Sala al-Din in 1189, until 1812 when adventurer-explorer Johan Ludwig Burckhardt passed through the gorge in the guise of a Koranic scholar and told of it in his posthumous *Travels in Arabia*, memory of Reqem had been lost in the West.

## The stone artist

Emperor Hadrian visited Reqem in 130 and renamed it Petra Hadriane – and Petra is the name which modern Romacentric historians and the Jordan Ministry of Tourism literature still call it. Yet the name is the right one, for here the artist compulsion moves in the stone itself.

When you see Reqem, you think this is what your eyes were made to see. Your vision is not turned to you, your vision sees nothing of your eyes, so little of your body. Eyes are enfeebled and imprisoned when fixed to the tools and obstacles at hand, to what can be possessed. Eyes are made for the remote things, the grand things, eyes are visionary. You wander the gorge, your vision springs forth into the radiant transparency opened indefinitely toward outer spaces by the sun. Your vision springs forth from you unto the walls of the gorge, seeking the rock, seeking the swirling colors of the rock strata, seeking the facades cut into the walls of the

gorge by the Nabateans, making them visions. Your vision does not bound back to you, does not extract anything from them for you. You are nothing but this ecstasy of vision.

You realize that this transport of vision was what you had not found in all the cities you had gone to, looking at the churches, mosques and temples they had to show you. They claimed to be sacred places, set apart from all profane use, places where the transcendent opens. Instead, how much of man your eyes saw there! The Parthenon, which uses the chthonian force of the Acropolis rock only to elevate for all to see a construction only human geometry could contrive, houses only Athena, deified figure of the Athenian state. How logical that the Persians would destroy it. The gods of feudal churches whose side chapels are mausoleums of robber barons. Burma is overfull of temples; rich people gain merit for their next reincarnation, but especially monumentalize their power, in building yet another.

Looking at these churches, mosques and temples, modern humans have finally convinced themselves that it is the human spirit that creates splendor out of what are only colors, sounds, shapes and material substances. Artist creativity is seated in the human soul, it requires freedom, the freedom to depart from what is given and to create; it only exists in human animals. Humans even convinced themselves that the recognition of beauty exists only in human animals (contriving utilitarian explanations for the plumage of hummingbirds and for the designs of coral fish).

Here there can be no doubt that the grandeur of the gorges and mountains shaped the Nabatean mind. Their artworks are one with and inseparable from the artistry of the rock strata, the floods and the winds. As when the human apes first descended from the trees they stood erect by holding on to the trees until their trunks themselves became trees, as it was the winds and the birds that taught them to sing and to sing with the voices of the winds and the birds, so it was the winds and the rivers that taught them to carve the stone. Caves designed by the river showed them dwellings for their dead and their gods. Everywhere vertical cracks divide the cliffs into blocks; these the Nabateans took as units for their carvings. The dozens of facades they carved into the pitted and wrinkled walls of the mountains reveal swirling melodies of rose, salmon, ochre, saffron, aquamarine, violet in the rock. They did not clear the chaos of the mountain surfaces around them; their most magnificently proportioned facade is that of the ad-Deir, set on a summit, that, in order to see, you have to spiral around the mountain whose cliffs and outcroppings pour down stalactites like a petrified fountain.

On the summits and in the gorges, they revered the great spirit Dushara, he who separates night and day, lord of the world, and al-'Uzza, goddess of love and of fortune, At-Kutba, god of commerce and inscription, and al-Qaum, god of caravans. These supreme forces of the earth were aniconic, represented only as blocks of stone in the form of a truncated pyramid, cube, parallelepiped, cylinder, or hemisphere.

Their most grandiose structures are not buildings, but facades carved on the cliff faces. All that there is to them is spread out before the eyes. Behind them there are, in almost all cases, but cubical unadorned rooms of modes dimensions; one of the grandest facades has no room cut behind it. At the crossroads of Europe, Africa and Asia, their eyes brought back to Reqem all the splendid forms they saw in the public

monuments of great cities from far away. Assyrian, Egyptian, Syrian, Hellenistic and Roman tectonic structures, columns, entablatures and architraves, devised to hold up the massive weight of walls over doors and roofs over places of assembly were here used to merely shape facades on the mountains, snares for the eyes. Facing the mountain wall they had carved with royal facades, they carved a great semicircular theater holding 7000 people where they watched spectacular representations of their own lives. Like that of the Javanese studies by Clifford Geertz, theirs was a theater-state.

## The uses of Petra

In the 4th century BC, Hieronymus of Cardia described the Nabateans as nomads who range their camels and sheep over the desert, neither planting grain nor setting out fruit-bearing trees nor constructing houses. Then the Wadi Mousa gorge captivated them, and for three centuries they built their city and carved the mountain walls. In the centuries since the Arab conquest of 663, Bedouin have inhabited the caves and tombs of the old Nabatean capital during the cold winter months, moving their herds to higher pastures during the long hot season.

Already a band of 40 Christian monks led by Bar Sauma had destroyed the statues of the temples of Petra in 423; now the Muslim iconoclasts defaced the figures carved in relief on the facades. Many of them have been obliterated recently, since the visit of David Roberts who drew them in 1839 (see Figures 1, 2 and 3).



**Figure 1** *Petra – The Eastern End of the Valley*. Lithograph by David Roberts, 1839. Source: The Complete Collection of David Roberts: Lithographs of Petra 1839. Distributor: Al-Ulama.





**Figure 2** *Petra – The Eastern End of the Valley*. Lithograph by David Roberts, 1839. *Source:* The Complete Collection of David Roberts: Lithographs of Petra 1839. Distributor: Al-Ulama.

Yet Petra was for the Bedouin a very magical place. Nearby is the Ain Mousa spring which, according to the Bible, Moses had caused to flow by striking a rock with his rod; it flows still. Petra, the Bedouin hold, was created by the great Pharaoh who pursued Moses out of Egypt, created as a storehouse for his fabulous riches, deposited here by magic. The 19th-century Westerners who tried to penetrate to the city were fiercely repelled by the Bedouin, who suspected them of being magicians who had come to reclaim the wealth of the Pharaoh. Burckhardt wrote that ‘They believe that it is sufficient for a true magician to have seen and observed the spot where the treasures are hidden ... in order to be able afterwards, at his ease, to command the guardian of the treasure to set the whole before him.’ Today you see the goddess at the top of the great facade in the Siq riddled by bullets from Bedouin who hoped to strike the spot from which the treasure would pour.

In the early 1980s the Jordanian government decided to turn Petra into an archeological and tourist area – the Petra National Park. They relocated the Bedouin into a village built outside Petra for them. Archeologists and historians set out to supply an understanding of what, for the visitor, is a spectacle for the pure ecstasy of vision. Comparative archeologists explained that Assyrian, Egyptian, Syrian, Hellenistic and finally Roman architectural elements were shaped here, in this crossroads of caravan routes, into distinctive ensembles. Unlike other Semitic peoples, unlike neighboring Judea, the Nabatean kingdom was not subordinated to a ruling religious ideology. The Nabateans syncretized Zeus, Dionysus, Osiris and Serapis with their Dushara; Aphrodite, Tyche and Isis with their al-’Uzza. As they labored to uncover the debris with which earthquakes and floods had covered the



**Figure 3** *Petra – Al-Khazneh*. Lithograph by David Roberts, 1839. *Source:* The Complete Collection of David Roberts: Lithographs of Petra 1839. *Distributor:* Al-Ulama.

ancient city, the archeologists and historians dug back through Pharaonic legends and long memories of their own histories there with which Bedouin had covered every site. They only succeeded in replacing Bedouin legends with their own speculations. From the start they assumed that the great facades of the west wall were royal tombs, but were able to assign the name of a king to not one of them. For

most they have been unable to this day to decide if they were tombs, funereal mausoleums, temples, or ritual banquet halls.

Out of classifications of the origins of coins, legends on coins and rare inscriptions in stone, and rare mention of the Nabateans by (always partisan) Greek and Jewish writings, the researchers then provide a text for the spectacle. It is all about the names, the kings and queens, the caravan routes. One will say that this kind of text functions to fill in a gap in the text of scientific universal history. But can any history of humans be knowledge for the sake of knowledge? Is not every history written for the present generation, used for its political, economic and social enterprises? Whatever the archeologists and historians determine is popularized in tourist guides. Petra today is for the Jordanian Ministry of Tourism its most important draw. One imposing monumental tomb in exceptional condition has a luxury hotel built over it, and it serves as the bar.

And for those of us who come to see Petra, these texts, these speculations about the kings and the queens and the mercantile empire, function as a screen set in front of our eyes – like the anecdotes about the author function to dissipate the spell of an epic poem, like psychobiographies about the composer function to level the transcendent soarings of Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*. For what Petra has to offer is what our visionary eyes are made for: the ecstasy of vision.

### **The rift to which we are destined**

The city of the living, the homes and workshops and markets, erected on the valley floor, have crumbled down and been covered with rubble and sand centuries ago; what you see are mainly what experts have identified as tombs cut in the mountain walls and the colossal 'royal' facades taken to be tombs or shrines for funereal rituals – entries to the realm of the dead. The great semi-circular theater was carved down in the midst of banks of tombs. 'Strange contrast!' wrote the American theologian Edward Robinson in 1838, 'where a taste for the frivolities of the day, was at the same time gratified by the magnificence of tombs; amusement in a cemetery; a theater in the midst of sepulchers.' All that remains visible then is evidence of the invisible.

How incomprehensible to us has become this belief, old as humankind, that a decomposing cadaver will leap integral and alive again into another world! How strange that peoples of Egypt and Arabia, who daily see every species of animal life die definitively, could have acted on a belief in human resurrection with the inestimable labor that went into the Egyptian pyramids, into these colossal facades here! We think that once our cadavers are put into the rock of tombs, it will disintegrate into the minerals from which it too is composed. Our eyes that are so imperiously, so ecstatically drawn to the rock have an intimation of the destination of our lives, not to another kingdom of life, but to this rock.

We are pragmatic. What we know, Heidegger said, is what we can work out; for us to know what things are is to see how they work. Yet is it not our extinction that is unthinkable? When someone we know dies, we weep: it is impossible that she should be dead. We say over and over again, I can't believe it.

We are positivist. Everything we know in our advanced biological sciences about our organism convinces us that once its neurological substrate is destroyed, our conscious life will be annihilated. But once we try to think this nothingness, try to think: in 10 years, in 10 days, I will be *nothing*, we find the mind cannot think this thought, cannot endure trying to think this thought.

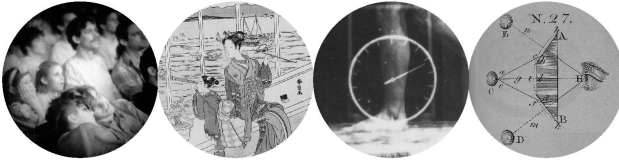
We look at the colossal funereal facades, so laboriously carved to such perfection by the Nabateans, facades behind which there are no buildings, only the immense darkness of inert rock, and our vision is held on a surface behind which there is the unthinkable.

The winds continue to erode the 2000-year-old sculptured facades, flash floods erode the bases of the monuments. In 1896 another earthquake toppled many structures; in 1967 a flash flood in the Siq drowned a group of tourists. The hot sun and the snowy winters are fissioning the mountain surfaces. The winds and water are turning the precision-cut lines of the facades into abstract works of art. Even if the scientists will one day decide to spray some protective coat on the sandstone mountains, one day the winds, water and sun will have effaced the last trace of human intention from the great gorge. The mountains will pursue their delirious artistry.

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# journal of visual culture



## Ned Kelly by any other name

Anne Marsh

### Key words

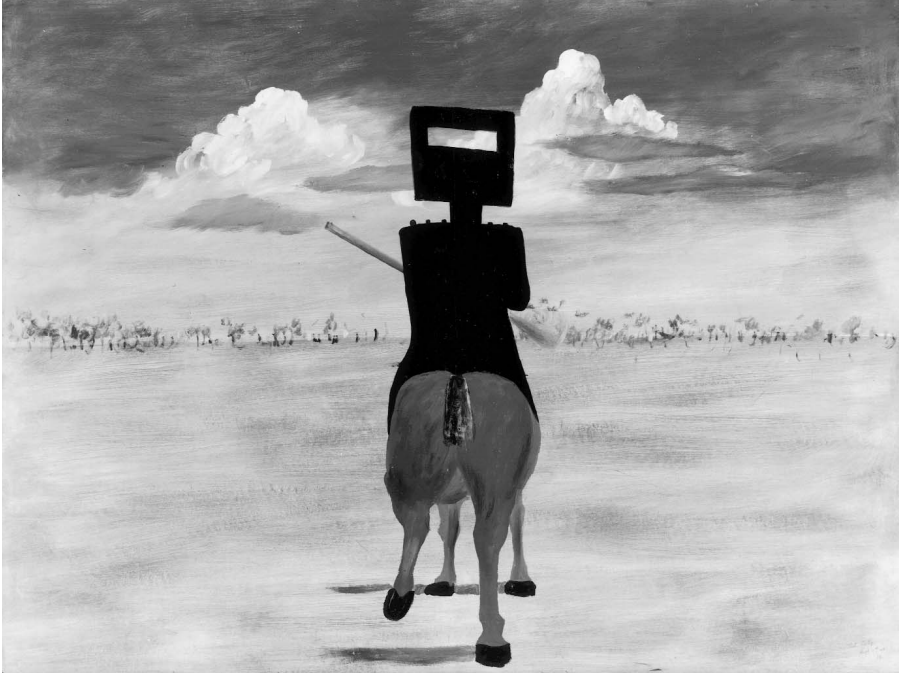
Australian art • Australian literature • Ned Kelly • Olympic Games • Sidney Nolan • visual culture

The Opening Ceremonies of the Sydney Olympic Games (2000) once again underlined the stature of Ned Kelly as an Australian national icon. Kelly, as bushranger and pioneer of a failed republic, has always captured the cultural imagination of a nation (Jones, 1995: 223, 228).<sup>1</sup> In Australian folklore he is often equated with Robin Hood because he stole from the rich to emancipate the poor but he probably has more in common with the North American, Jessie James, who like Ned Kelly rode the boundaries of a frontier culture.

Traditional art historians will probably discount the spectacle of the Sydney Olympic ceremonies as popular culture or kitsch. Conventional semioticians, following the early works of Roland Barthes, will seek to unveil the ideologies behind the Kelly myth. Masculine stereotypes will be revealed as analysis revolves around the assertion that 'myth is depoliticised speech' (Barthes, 1973: 142–5). Fire-cracking guns, emitting blazing ejaculations of fireworks, will delight the Freudian imagination as psychoanalysis is brought to bear on representations of the Kelly gang.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, ironically, the ways in which the Ned Kelly legend was represented at the Games owed more to art and literature than to popular and mass media which are usually criticized for propelling kitsch into culture. In fact one could argue that Ned Kelly was canonized by high/avant-garde art in the 1940s. And it is this image of Kelly, in his poorly made armour, within a brilliantly harsh landscape, that redeemed the rebel outlaw and turned him into an *Australian Son* (Brown, 1956[1945]). It was Sidney Nolan who first created the abstract figure of Kelly in his armour, astride a wonky horse, with a flimsy rifle (Figure 1). Nolan turned Kelly into a visual icon that all Australians understood even though many of





**Figure 1** Sidney Nolan, Australia 1917–1992. *Ned Kelly*, 1946. Enamel on composition board, 90.8 x 121.5 cm. Gift of Sunday Reed 1977. © National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.

those Australians were not schooled in abstract art and hardly knew what expressionism was. When Nolan painted his pictures of the Kelly story in 1946–7 he said, in a letter to the art patron John Reed, that there was a ‘lingering sense of outrage among people in parts of the northeast’ (Nolan, 1947, in Sayers, 1994: 9). Many people in the region sympathized with the police who had been killed by the Kellys at Stringybark Creek in 1878. In the 1940s Australia was a profoundly conservative culture which surprisingly gave rise to an energetic avant-garde. Sidney Nolan was one of the key figures of this avant-garde movement and he insisted that these opinions about Kelly needed to be corrected. He argued, in 1947, that: ‘Kelly was not half rebel, half criminal, he was a rebel reformer’ (Nolan, 1947, in Sayers, 1994: 9). Dan Kelly, Joe Byrne and Steve Hart died a violent death at the Glenrowan Hotel on 28 June 1880. The iron armour, fashioned from common working ploughs, did not save the Kelly Gang. Kelly’s campaign for a republic failed in a bloody shoot out and although he survived he was taken to prison, tried and later hanged in Melbourne Jail on 11 November, 1880.

In the Olympic ceremonies Ned Kelly was cast, through the eyes of Sidney Nolan, as a national hero for a global audience. Kelly gained much of his current status as a visual icon through the representations of an avant-garde artist (Haese, 1981). Nolan’s imaging of Kelly was part of his greater plan to mythologize



the Australian landscape so that it would resonate in the cultural imaginary. Nolan's landscape is bright and abstract but most importantly it is peopled. It tells a story. There is a certain irony in this, one which the rebel Kelly may not have appreciated. Nolan, knighted by an imperial (m)other, the Queen of England, did more than any other artist to consolidate Ned Kelly, the outlaw, in the cultural imagination of a nation. The relationship between high art, popular culture and folklore is intricate and it impacts on history so as to fragment the 'true' story of Ned Kelly.

I am interested in the Kelly phenomenon as it becomes public spectacle and a popular trope in Australia's national history. I want to leave art history on the margins and look at the ways in which the avant-garde intercepts with vernacular culture, folklore and the cultural imaginary. I am interested in the ways in which the methodologies of visual culture might be brought to bear on this subject. I want to argue that Kelly becomes the (m)other of a nation, a phallic mother to be sure but also a queer (m)other. I want to suggest that Ned Kelly is a psychoanalytic ghost who stalks the Australian cultural imaginary. Ned Kelly by any other name: not the name of the father but the name of another: the (m)other of a nation. A (m)other in drag.

Fifty years after Nolan painted the Kelly series, Peter Carey won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for his book *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2000), a book that is indebted to the Kelly historian Ian Jones who wrote *Ned Kelly: A Short Life* in 1995. One of Jones's major contributions to history was to recognize the importance of a letter written by Kelly and his mate Joe Byrne. Due to Jones' reputation as a Kelly scholar, the letter finally ended up in his possession and now the Jerilderie letter is in the collection of the State Library of Victoria.<sup>3</sup> Carey, whose novels are characterized by psycho-social plots, is quick to punctuate his book on Kelly with references to transvestism.<sup>4</sup> In the early pages of his lengthy novel, Carey inserts the transvestite story through the supposedly true hand of Kelly and his mate Joe Byrne. The novel is constructed around the Jerilderie letter, each chapter opening with a museum-type catalogue summary of packaged bundles of manuscript.

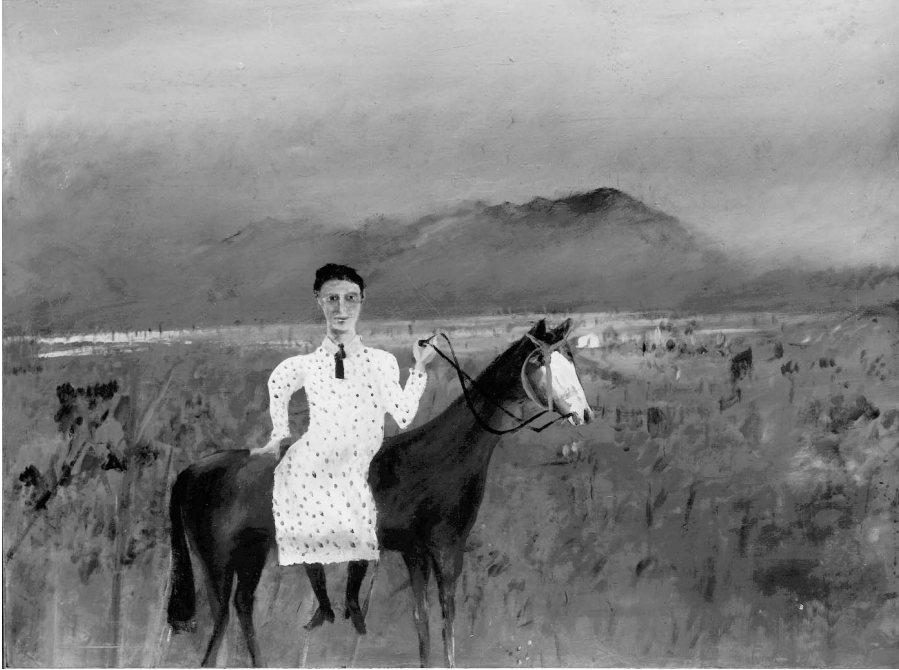
### PARCEL 1

#### His life until the age of 12

NATIONAL BANK LETTERHEAD, ALMOST CERTAINLY TAKEN FROM THE EUROA BRANCH OF THE NATIONAL BANK IN DECEMBER 1878. THERE ARE 45 SHEETS OF MEDIUM STOCK (8" X 10" APPROX.) WITH STABHOLES NEAR THE TOP WHERE AT ONE TIME THEY WERE CRUDELY BOUND. HEAVILY SOILED.

Contains accounts of his early relations with police including an accusation of transvestism. (Carey, 2000: 3)

The transvestite story recurs throughout the novel and effectively queers the text. This queering of the Kelly gang is also apparent in the opening ceremonies of the Sydney Olympic Games and it is documented by Sidney Nolan in his painting *Steve*



**Figure 2** Sidney Nolan, Australia 1917–1992. *Steve Hart Dressed as a Girl*, 1947. Enamel on composition board, 90.6 x 121.1 cm. Gift of Sunday Reed 1977. © National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.

*Hart Dressed as a Girl* (1947). Nolan's image of Steve Hart shows the bushranger dressed in a spotted dress riding side-saddle. He gazes directly at the spectator, his body a mixture of masculine and feminine gestures (see Figure 2). Nolan read everything that he could about the Kelly Gang, including the official police records which document Hart's transvestism (Sayers, 1994: 9). Elizabeth McMahon says that: 'Legend has it that Hart's horsemanship was such that he won the Greta races wearing feminine garb and riding side-saddle, as he is posed in Nolan's painting' (McMahon, 1997: 375).

Kelly was executed in a hangman's noose because he rebelled against the laws of the colony and tried to unite the poor selector farmers against the 'squattocracy'. In Australia, in the early 19th century, the squatters assumed property rights over Crown land. By the 1850s they had become a wealthy and legitimate 'squattocracy' and they began to dominate the upper house in parliament (Davison et al., 1998: 605). In the 1860s, as a result of popular unrest, the Selection Acts were passed. This legislation allowed free selectors to settle on Crown land occupied by the squatters but the selectors had to pay for their land and make improvements to it (p. 579). Needless to say the squatters rallied to protect their own interests by buying 'dummy runs', usually stretches of fertile land with water. Although the Selection Acts were propelled by democracy, they failed to break the squatters' monopoly and popular unrest continued throughout the following decades.

Ned Kelly was part of this poor man's revolution: his loyalties were to family, friends and republican sympathizers. His ancestry and history were steeped in the mythology of the Irish rebellions against the British. In Australian folklore Kelly became an icon because of his loyalties and his history. A wild horse thief and bank robber who ran a small gang of felons who stole from the rich and called upon the poor to rebel against their oppressors, Ned Kelly was also a violent man who wrote rhetorical declarations and manifestos. *The Declaration of the Republic of North-eastern Victoria*, some of which is included in the Jerilderie letter, states quite forcefully Kelly's hatred for the colonial law:

Any person aiding or harbouring or assisting the police in any way whatever ... will be outlawed and declared unfit to be allowed human burial. Their property either consumed or confiscated and then theirs and all belonging to them exterminated off the face of the earth ... I do not wish to give the order full force without giving timely warning but I am a widow's son outlawed and my orders *must be obeyed*. (Kelly, in Jones, 1995: 224)

This violent side of Kelly has been transformed through literature, art and folklore. The violence of his rhetoric has been softened as the bushranger has been written and imagined as a national figure. In the Olympic ceremonies of 2000, 120 years after Kelly was executed by the colonial police, Australia is, once again, engaged in debates about a republic. As the then current Prime Minister, John Howard, looked on, a team of choreographers underlined the republican cause. They achieved this by using humour, myth and a queer aesthetic to deconstruct conservative opinion. John Howard is a royalist and many Australians believe that he effectively thwarted the republican referendum of 1999 by framing the question on the ballot in a complex way so that 'ordinary Australians' (one of his favourite terms) were confused and afraid. The result was that the referendum for a republic was defeated, albeit by a slim margin. Thus the Kelly sequence at the Olympic ceremonies was a kind of deconstruction where myth was used to politicize a public ritual.

The Kelly sequence was part of *The Tin Symphony* choreographed by Ian Cooper, John Frolich and Paul Crabowski with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra. The *Symphony* opened with Captain Cook at the helm of a tall ship propelled by a series of bicycles resembling the old penny-farthing. Shortly after Cook had rounded the Olympic Stadium, dozens of Kelly figures, dressed in the armour made familiar by Nolan's abstract paintings, rushed into the Stadium with rifles blazing fireworks (see Figure 3). A screen in the distance projected Nolan's *Ned Kelly* in full armour astride his horse whilst the orchestra dressed in Nolan/Kelly style played an Irish jig.<sup>5</sup>

The picture chosen from the series of 27 paintings is titled *Ned Kelly* (1946). Nolan, who was also a poet, provided narrative captions to all of the pictures. For this particular image the caption reads:

We rob their banks

We thin their ranks



**Figure 3** Ned Kelly figures at the opening ceremony of the Sydney Olympic Games, 2000.  
© newspix.

And ask for no thanks

For what we do (Nolan, 1947, in Sayers, 1994: 30)<sup>6</sup>

Sidney Nolan enters the Kelly stage in the 1940s and redeems Kelly as a national hero. The avant-garde artist was interested in Kelly and what he could do for the landscape. The artist respected the rebel and his symbolic contributions to Australian culture, including his writing, saying 'he was a rebel reformer. That is why he got into language – he did something about the world' (Nolan, 1947, in Sayers, 1994: 9).

Kelly purposefully entered the symbolic world of language. He understood the power of the written word and its historical status. The bushranger left two lengthy letters that would be analysed and decoded by the generations that followed. Yet despite the urge for recognition, this symbolic drive of the father, Kelly came to understand Steve Hart and his queer transvestism. In Peter Carey's *True History* (2000), Ned Kelly says:

At 1<sup>st</sup> I thought it were Kate and Maggie then the front woman passed into the full sunshine and it were Dan he had been absent only 3 days and now he were wearing a bright blue dress his face blackened from ear to ear. Behind him come the smudged lipped culprit Steven Hart. (p. 224)

The issue of transvestism haunts Carey's *True History* as a kind of queer punctuation. Initially Ned Kelly reacts in a stereotypical way, revealing a homophobic character. His first reaction is to give the transvestite gang members a

good beating; however, he comes to understand that wearing a dress can have advantages. To dress as a woman would create an illusion when the gang was on the run. The law would be duped. It is a profoundly postmodern story where masquerade is used to destabilize the forces of the law. In Carey's novel, 'true history' is a fiction and the masculine stereotype is deconstructed by a queer presence. The same can be said for the Kelly sequence at the Olympic ceremonies. Kelly becomes queer through the abstract painting of Sidney Nolan who turns Kelly's rough armour into a symbol of rebellion and creates a visual narrative that includes Kelly's transvestite mate. Nolan makes Kelly queer through his formal abstraction – the simplification of the armour as a black box, a mask – and through the series of Kelly paintings. The Kelly paintings really need to be seen as an installation with each painting relating to the other. In this viewing experience it would become obvious to the spectator how Nolan transforms Ned Kelly's gang into a kind of camp pantomime. There is a certain irony in the performative aspects of Nolan's paintings and Carey's novel. Both Nolan and Carey got their information about Steve Hart's transvestism from the official police records of the time (McMahon, 1997: 375). The painter and the novelist both decided to focus on the transvestite incidences, underlining the idea that there is truth in fiction but stressing that the 'truth' in fiction is often the least expected 'truth'.

The queering of the Kelly myth, made explicit in Nolan's paintings and Carey's novel, has gained popular acceptance in Australian contemporary culture. The sign of the acceptance of transvestism is probably best demonstrated by the 1994 film *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, where a group of drag queens make an epic journey from the city to the harsh interior in a bright pink bus. The signature image from the film is of one of the drag queens standing on top of the bus wearing a flamboyant gown and feather boa. This image was used in the closing ceremonies of the Olympic games and it was accompanied by various references to the now internationally acclaimed Sydney Gay Mardi Gras which attracts millions of tourist dollars into Australia's party city every year.

Although it may seem that the image of cross-dressing is a contemporary phenomenon, art historians are quick to note that the queering of national myths has its roots in the 19th century. Elizabeth McMahon (1997) argues that cross-dressing presents a kind of fluid identity a 'transport across discrete categories of classification' (p. 375). In other words cross-dressing can be used as a strategy to deconstruct the binary opposition explicit within conventional gender identities. In McMahon's opinion the recurrence of transvestism in Australian visual culture represents an unstable identity, 'a sense of displacement and exile' (p. 375). However, the cross-coding of transvestism can also be interpreted as a performative strategy that refuses binary definition. In other words, a hybridity of identity and culture is embraced so that the binary is destabilized.

Ned Kelly's ghost haunts the cultural imaginary: the amoured son, with bushrangers in drag, races through the high plains of north-eastern Victoria, trying to escape colonial law. This queering of Australia was apparent elsewhere in the Olympic ceremonies as the Australian cultural imagination used irony and humour to deconstruct national myths. In many ways the Olympic ceremonies presented to the

world Australia's postmodern psychology; one which camps it up to queer the scene. Ned Kelly – a national legend – thus becomes the high camp (m)other of a nation.

## Notes

1. According to Ian Jones, Ned Kelly planned to incite rebellion amongst the selector farmers as the culmination of an ongoing campaign to establish a republic in the north-eastern section of the state of Victoria.
2. The Kelly Gang was actually quite a small team consisting of Ned and his brother Dan Kelly and their two friends Joe Byrne and Steve Hart.
3. The State Library of Victoria has a dedicated Ned Kelly website which includes a digital copy of the original letter in Joe Byrne's handwriting:  
<http://www.slv.vic.gov.au/slv/exhibitions/treasures/nedkelly/kelly1.html>; also  
<http://www.slv.vic.gov.au/slv/exhibitions/treasures/jerilderie/jerilderie1.html>.
4. Other novels include *Illywhacker* (1985), *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988), *The Tax Inspector* (1991) and *Jack Maggs* (1997).
5. Needless to say Kelly never wore his armour on horseback, it was far too heavy for a horse to bear.
6. According to Sayers, who is an authority on the Kelly pictures, Sidney Nolan read all the literature available in the State Library of Victoria on the Kelly Gang, including the reports on police conduct, Max Brown's *Australian Son: The Story of Ned Kelly* (1956[1945]) and J.J. Kenneally's *The Complete Inner History of the Kelly Gang and their Pursuers* (1945[1929]). From reading these books, the artist devised his captions for the pictures.

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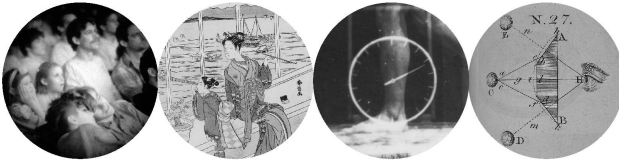
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# journal of visual culture



## Visual studies as media studies

### Mark Poster

#### Key words

media studies • transculture • visual studies

Visual studies, I propose, is most productively conceived as media studies. While there are excellent reasons for promoting visual studies as a problematic and as a field of study in its own right, I suggest it is best understood as part of a broader domain of the cultural study of information machines. Already visual studies is emerging as an important area of study. The initiation of this journal is one indication of the change. Academic programs in visual studies such as those at the University of Rochester and the University of California, Irvine are another. Readers in visual culture are beginning to proliferate; one edited by Nicholas Mirzoeff (1998) and another by Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall (1999) collect an impressive array of essays. At this crucial moment in the formation of the discipline of visual studies it is imperative to pose questions that promise to open the field in the most productive manner.

Certainly there are problems with the term 'visual culture'. When one attempts to define it or give it coherence, difficulties immediately emerge. Nicholas Mirzoeff, for example, begins his justly celebrated *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (1999) with a statement that betrays the issue: 'Human experience', he writes, 'is now more visual and visualized than ever before ...' But surely this cannot be so. Does it mean that we use our eyes more than in the past? I think not. Does it mean that we translate experience from other senses into the visual one? Again I think not. The measure of distance in the Middle Ages was often 'translated' from numbers into visual expression. A standard of measure in certain villages was how far one could see a red bird in a forest. To the people of the day who used this expression, the distance it designated was something quite specific, as useful as saying a certain expanse is 50 yards. In the expression, oral language deploys visual markers that define spatial relations. The visual was rendered in and through the non-visual. Moreover, the example clearly suggests that, in the Middle Ages, certain forms of

visual acuity were far more highly developed than today. It is therefore not the case, as Mirzoeff contends, that today humans are somehow more visual; rather we are only in different visual regimes from those of the past.

The great difference in visual regimes between ourselves and our ancestors from the Middle Ages concerns the spread of information machines in the present. It is not so much that we render visual the non-visual – think of the visual fantasies of spirits in the Middle Ages – but that we employ information machines to generate images and, as Virilio argues, to see. As the new field of visual studies develops, I urge that we not make the mistake of textual studies in the age of print: to disavow the material form in which the cultural object is received. Instead I propose that visual studies acknowledge the material form of its objects and in so doing conceives itself as part of media studies. In this way, visual studies avoids the need to proffer claims of uniqueness about contemporary visuality and also bypasses the equally noxious suggestion of the autonomy of the visual, as subject or object.

With regard to this second problem – the autonomy of the visual – I note the importance often given in the case for the study of visual culture to contemporary or postmodern forms of visuality. The argument often hinges, as it does in Mirzoeff's (1999) text, on the spread of forms of the visual through film, television and new media. What often gets elided in these discussions, however – in the case of film since the early 1930s and television from the beginning – is sound accompanied by the image. (Even in the era of the silents, the absence of sound in the image was 'corrected' by the live music.) The forgetting of sound in visual culture is a grievous error in my view. When a distinguished film studies scholar gave a lecture on Hitchcock's *Psycho* at my campus in the early 1990s, showing the shower scene clip, she failed to mention the extraordinary sounds from the Bernard Hermann score without which, I submit, the scene would lack most of its fascination.

The difficulty today of the term 'visual' is far more serious than it has been in film studies. New media integrate sound, text, still and moving images in a digital field determined by the capacity of information machines. D.N. Rodowick (1996), in his illuminating contribution to the *October* questionnaire on visual culture, insists rightly on the need to introduce the term 'audio-visual culture' because 'Our era is no longer one of images and signs. It is defined, rather, by simulacra.' The issue at stake is profound, as Rodowick shows, because the shift to 'audio-visual', or, in my preference, media, disrupts the foundational system of binaries that restricts visual studies – idea/matter, form/content, time/space, and so forth. Media studies insists on the materiality of the field in a manner that helps to avoid earlier ontological constraints. It opens the field of study to differences within regimes of visuality from the standpoint of the new media or simulacra or virtual, reconfiguring our understanding of past visual cultures. It allows or even promotes the study of machines that see alongside visual regimes of classic art history without necessarily privileging either. I contend that, properly understood, the juxtaposition of an original Vermeer painting with a virtual copy viewed on a computer screen benefits the comprehension of both images.

The dissemination of information machines alters basic attributes of culture. Humans and machines, in a potentially planetary arena, mix and intermingle to form new cultural objects and experiences. The category of media studies, I

contend, offers the best rubric for exploring visual culture in a manner that opens the field to the most troubling and provocative questions that face us in the present context. When media are fundamentally changing, as they are now, it behoves those of us concerned with visual culture to pose the questions in the broadest possible way. With media interacting with one another in unpredictable ways (one media such as the internet absorbing radio, film and television, while television absorbs the internet and film), with new technologies expanding existing media (fiber optic cables, new compression algorithms, wireless information transmission), with information machines taking on more and more human faculties (voice recognition, translation programs, sight capabilities of global positioning systems, expanded digital storage capacity) and so many unforeseeable possibilities on the horizon, we must theorize and study empirically visual culture accordingly.

These changes may be theorized in relation to the digitization of cultural objects. As text, sound and image are digitized they are placed in homogeneous code of electrons and light pulses. In earlier centuries, combining text, sound and image in cultural objects was either impossible or very difficult to achieve yet it is becoming the rule for digital media. Decades ago artists experimented with installations in which movements by audience members initiated computer selected sounds and images, for instance. With digitization, multimedia becomes the norm. To isolate the visual in this context becomes increasingly awkward and arbitrary, though it certainly remains possible. Digital media, then, invite a complex mixture of cultural forms.

But they do more than that. Digital media alter the relation of subject to object that characterized earlier epochs of visual culture. Globally networked computers, as the medium of culture, intensify the thickness of the mediation to the point that (human) subject and (cultural or visual) object no longer stand in the same relation to one another. None of the figures of the subject, be they that of creator or of audience, work in the same way as in the past. None of the figures of the object – printed book, painting, film, etc. – work in the same way as in the past. Kant's disinterested contemplation, Wagner's total artwork, Brecht's estrangement effect, Barthes' readerly text, romanticism's artist as genius, the Old Regime's artist as artisan, expressionism's action artist, and so forth – all are put into question when the medium itself is both subject and object, when digital media tear at the boundaries of the knower and the known, artist and consumer. In the digital medium, the art object becomes 'open content', available for material transformation as it is perceived and the relation between the artist and the viewer easily are reversed, cancelled and combined. The emphasis of cultural production shifts, in the domain of globally networked computing, to the medium itself, away from both the artist and the work. Or perhaps it would be better to say the shuffling of the terms leads to a complex apparatus in which the medium, the artist and the audience are articulated together in intricate combinations. In digital culture it perhaps makes no sense to isolate the virtues or faults of either the artist or the art object.

If I am right about the emergence of a new cultural landscape by dint of the digitization of text, sound and image, then the study of visual culture is best serviced by being recast into media studies. In that context, the visual might still be

studied at times in its own terms. But it would also be open to comparative and historical work that would include a definition of the limits of each medium in its concrete articulation. One could then understand a visual subject of say the 17th century as one who develops vision in relation to oil painting and hearing in relation to early baroque music. One could inquire into the specificity of such a cultural subject, comparing it with contemporary subjectivation in a multimedia environment, thereby understanding each in relation to the other. The tendency found too often to privilege either might be curtailed in favor of a sensitivity to cultural difference, engagements between cultures, and even what is nowadays called transculture. Without needing to surrender anything from the traditional methodologies of art history, film studies and other disciplines of cultural objects, a new media studies might open the frame to a history and theory of the trace, one that could make sense out of the line drawings in caves of our most ancient ancestors as well as the cultural forms that emerge from globally networked computers.

These remarks are of course no more than suggestions, perhaps to some provocations, intended to open a discussion more than to establish a position. At this early moment of the institutionalization of visual cultural studies what is needed, I believe, is an exploration of as many avenues of work as possible, a putting into discussion of as many perspectives as possible. I offer these short reflections in that spirit. Perhaps the *journal of visual culture* would benefit from a usenet group on the internet to extend the printed page into an asynchronous discussion of a different sort.

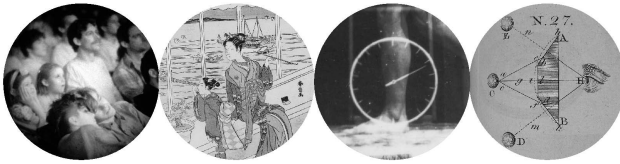
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## Of optimal views and other anxieties of attending to the beautiful and sublime

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### Abstract

A meditation on how intrusions of self-consciousness alter, upset, or interrupt aesthetic experiences. The focus is on the impulse to identify optimum moments in sunsets, fall foliage, etc., and possible explanations for this urge to identify the optimum. Then follow, by various associations of ideas, discussions of the anxieties of the expert who fears he is no longer moved by great works, to the general anxieties of properly attending to great art in museums, primarily the anxiety of when you can declare yourself 'released' from further homage. The large theme is how full immersion into the aesthetic experience is threatened to be undone by some aspects of the aesthetic experience itself, and then if not by that, by other anxieties about playing our roles of appreciators of beauty properly.

### Key words

aesthetic experience • anxiety • beauty • essentialism • posing • self-consciousness • sublime

I hear a finch sing. I do not worry whether I am hearing the best song a finch ever sang; I do not worry about what moment is the optimal moment in his song. I simply enjoy it, even though it has distracted me from writing this sentence. Now let me look at a sunset. I am instantly drawn to its beauty. But something frustrates me. I worry that at the moment I am looking at it, it is not at its optimal beauty. Was it more beautiful two minutes ago, or will it be more beautiful in a few more minutes? Will I be confident that I will recognize the moment of its greatest beauty? And how do I know that should it be more beautiful now than it was a minute ago, it won't be more beautiful still in a few more minutes? And if I entertain that thought, won't it prevent me from appreciating the present moment as the best if indeed it turns out to be the best? And though the recollection of that moment will be sweet,



it will be sullied by the knowledge that I somehow did not appreciate it fully when it happened but rather let it get by me.

What I experience is a sense, not so much of loss, but of something less momentous, more like the knowledge that I have bungled it yet again; nothing as focused as self-castigation, just a sense of disappointment at my inability to lose myself in the moment and not succumb to ranking things by their relative merit. This anxiety also affects relations with others in your environs; when the people you called outside to bask in the sunset seem unimpressed, you find yourself getting timidly self-justificatory, saying things like: but you really should have seen it a few minutes ago.

Why should I care about being able to recognize the optimal moment as long as the present moment has its beauty, its undeniable sublimity of expanse of horizon, shape of cloud and color of light? Am I not drawn to it precisely because of its beauty right now? What is the compulsion to want to recognize the moment of optimality? It does not seem to have anything to do with the difference between the beautiful and the sublime. Could it be something as trite as Lacanian lack and loss yet again? Or is it even, as I suspect, yet more trite – the intrusions of self-consciousness miserably mucking up an idealized notion of unmediated experience and being? It can't be about loss and the unachievability of gratification in the psychosexual sense, because the problem is not precisely about the unattainability of the pure object of desire. The optimal will have been observed and at times recognized, just not at the precise moment I am watching it. And sometimes I know that this particular moment is indeed the exact moment of perfection, but I will also recall that I have had that recognition before only to have been proven wrong. A worm of doubt still gnaws at the root of the experience. Inevitably, too, the true recognition of a moment's supremacy sufficiently disrupts the moment to signal that it has just passed.

Evanescence is not the cause of the anxiety either, though it is often part of the set of conditions that gives rise to it. Mutability or transience is surely responsible for much of the sense of wistfulness and melancholia that accompanies interactions with fragile beauty and even the not-so-fragile sublime, but it is not the fact of evanescence, of death and decay, that impels the desire to ascertain the best moment amidst the flux. The rate of mutability surely figures in the mix, giving a greater sense of urgency to making the decision when the changes are taking place rapidly – less time for sunsets, more for picking the perfect moment in the opening of a rose. Nor is it a matter of the more precise melancholy of the fading of the light and the conventional symbolism of the drift toward darkness, for the same problem occurs, though, I suspect, less intensely, at sunrise, where instead of fading to black with its predictable anxieties, we end in the brightness of yet another day, with its predictable anxieties of a less uncanny kind. The problem also occurs in the spring when the blossoms drop and in autumn when the leaves fall. Damn, if only those maples would hold on another week until the elms change color; these species never manage to coordinate their loss of leaves quite to my satisfaction. The anxiety seems to be usual enough that one need not feel perversely self-tormenting for troubling about such things; the Weather Channel has thus taken to reporting the peak weekend for fall foliage and spring blossom.

Our young children generate a similar anxiety. Were they cutest at eight months, twelve months, eighteen months, or two years? By the time you figure it out, if you ever do, they will have turned into humans and are no longer all that cute. Leave it to game theorists to identify an analogous situation they call ‘Select the Highest Ordinal Value Problem’, which we experience more mundanely as the marriage dilemma: is she or he the best I can do, or did I already blow it by passing on Mary or John, or should I hold out for some future Megan or Zack? And yes, not surprisingly, game theory has an answer, though by the time you have found it life will have passed you by and Megan or Zack will have taken up with someone else.<sup>1</sup> Those who believe in the resurrection of their bodies face a tough decision too. Which body do you get on Judgment Day? Surely not the diseased one you died with, but then which one? The best one, you say? And just what one was that? Your perfect smooth-skinned infant body, your gloriously cute toddler body, your finally acne-free young adult body? But suppose you were fat then? Or hadn’t yet had your nose fixed? Maybe it will be the body you had when the most attractive person who ever desired you desired you; but what if he or she wanted you for your mind or your money? Do not dismiss this as a non-problem. Not only did the best-body problem occupy many a theologian (Bynum, 1995: 96–100), but we struggle with the same question in our own lives in a less grand fashion when we are forced to choose one photo of thirty for our picture in the yearbook.

The problem of ascertaining and appreciating optimality when it occurs is not a problem with all art or all aspects of nature. Growth and decay often figure in the most salient instances of the problem, though they do not define it, as the example of selecting a photo for the yearbook suggests. A present and simultaneous array of similar options will also generate the problem, as long as we perceive that the thing being represented generates non-identical representations. Selecting from a present array, however, has its own special anxieties. We are given second, third,  $n$  chances, to get it right and that is the problem; so rather than the anxiety of the sunset passing us by and eluding us forever, we are instead forced to endure the non-evanescence, the adamant durability, of our own indecisiveness. We find ourselves as annoying as we found the person we dined with the previous evening who was unable to make the simplest choice from the menu. But the core problem is more than just the difficulty of choosing. What I am after is a certain anxious compulsion to select the best instance (in a time sequence) or instantiation (in an array of representations) and how that compulsion generates certain kinds of self-consciousness that complicate and sometimes interfere with aesthetic immersion. Moreover, we seem to want to deny that we are so possessed as if to do so were not proper public discourse, as if such an admission were impious, neurotic, competitive, a sign of a truly fallen nature at war with its own pleasure, at war with beauty itself.

I said *anxious* compulsion. That helps to distinguish it from the passionate homage we pay to movies and songs when right after seeing or hearing them we discuss where they rank among our favorites. But such thoughts do not disrupt the experience and should they occur during it they do not undermine but enhance it. ‘God, this might be the best movie I have ever seen’ is a different kind of interruption than questioning whether this is the prettiest moment of the sunset. The average person’s experience of a song or a film is not as likely to generate a sunset-like anxious compulsion.

Some qualifications are in order, for I would be guilty of exaggeration were I not to make them. Not all experiences of sunsets or fall foliage are ruined by the intrusion of the optimality question. Sometimes we do lose ourselves in the overall experience, because the effect of other senses helps us out, providing a kind of soundtrack, as when a songbird provides a suitable accompaniment to the setting sun, or a kind of touch-track as when the temperature suffuses us with warmth, or a kind of feeling-track, as when we are lovingly accompanied, or a kind of smell-track as when the air is scented with flowers, or a kind of taste-track, as when the sunset benefits from good food and drink. Or when we are surprised by looking out of a window and not expecting the glory we see (but then we often curse ourselves for not having looked sooner, though that can be counterbalanced by feeling grateful that we looked at all). There are also times when the worry about the best moment does not linger long enough to ruin the experience. It just passes quickly, overborne and driven out by the present pleasure. Sometimes the concern about the highest and the best is not felt as an intrusion or distraction at all, but as part of the awe, as when we compare this sunset favorably with the one or two others that have seared themselves on our memory. I admit all of this.

Experts, we will touch upon them later, suffer the burden of expertise, which means having to make constant critical judgments, whether listening to songs or watching a film, and then figuring out how to let that enhance their experience rather than subvert it or interrupt it. But there is no special expertise in observing a sunset. We are all amateurs and thus need not fear that our taste prefers glaring reds and pinks to subtler purples and grays. But when it comes to movies or songs, even non-experts suffer the fear of feeling foolish for the quality of their taste, as when your knowledgeable friend, over for a visit, peruses your CD collection and swallows hard, wondering, you suspect, how he could maintain a friendship with such a vulgar soul as you.

Let me claim then that for the normal non-expert consumer of sunsets, film and songs, a song will not present the 'anxiety of optimality' with the same frequency as a sunset, though different performances or interpretations of the same song will; a performance of a song recorded live will have to compete against our love of the studio-produced version. Nor will films generate the anxiety that sunsets do. To be sure, we may speak of parts we preferred to others, but we do not feel the compulsion to identify the best scene in the movie, the best notes in the song. The sunset challenges us to figure out how to epitomize it, whereas the song and movie have titles that epitomize them for us. Notice too the sunset problem largely disappears when looking at a snapshot we took of it; we soon forget whether that was the best moment or not, having decided that if we kept the picture it was good enough. I said *a* snapshot. If we take a number of them we reproduce the problem as to which epitome is the best.<sup>2</sup>

The impulse to select the optimum also seems more pressing when picking out the most beautiful than when picking out the most ugly. We seldom are troubled by hierarchies of ugliness; ugliness, much more than beauty, has a way of engraving itself indelibly on our consciousness in its most 'perfect' instantiation. It is a perverse feature of our capacity for conferring attention that ugliness, especially when it also disgusts, is many times more arresting than beauty. The brief moment

of ugliness that mars an otherwise attractive face haunts us and threatens always to undermine any complete sense of delight in that person's beauty we might take in the future. The startlingly deformed person sticks in the mind more than the startlingly beautiful. Can it be that horror and disgust are more memorable and climactic than worshipful contemplativeness? Or is it that so much of our consciousness seems to be guided by a perverse Gresham's law, as Swift and many others have noted:

For fine Ideas vanish fast,  
While all the gross and filthy last.<sup>3</sup>

From whence the compulsion to choose? The problem with autumn leaves and the sunset, though not the selection of the photo for the yearbook, is that they have many features of a narrative. They have a beginning, a middle and an end. The sunset is something of an imperfect narrative in the tragic style, the dawn an imperfect narrative in the comic style. We are fairly confident about beginnings and about endings, but the middle is the source of the imperfections; there is no suspense or plot development, unless ... unless we play the obsessive game of optimality I am talking about: that is, ascertaining the moment of climax, worrying about knowing when it is about to happen and when it is happening and when it has happened, all without a musical score to help us out.

Determining the climax in this kind of game involves making an aesthetic judgment, about which moment in a series of them is the best moment, the high point toward which everything else was building, and from which we will be gently let down in the fade out. But narrative doesn't force the climax of the plot to have to be the most stunning moment aesthetically; the climax is a function of plot, not a function of beauty, or the sublime. I can think of nothing as sublime in *Hamlet* as the opening scene when the approaching Bernardo anxiously asks Francisco, the watch he is about to replace, 'who's there?'; Longinus (1985: ch. 9), in his essay on the sublime, finds it, not in middles or ends, but in Genesis, at the beginning: Let there be light. But the narrative we impose on sunsets or fall or spring is different in that the story is only an aesthetic one. The plot is about the progress of beauty, and that means that a judgment of the most sublime or most beautiful moment will coincide with the climax of the 'plot'; without that judgment the plot makes no sense.

The anxiety about the optimum, however, is not an aspect of our relation to the sublime; not, in other words, a function of that sense of worshipfulness and wonder that certain kinds of limitlessness prompt, that sense of awe we experience when witnessing fearsome evidences of nature's power or human performance at its limits. It seems rather to have several sources. One seems to be a fear of indeterminacy. It just may be we have no way of knowing the best because we have no theory of what the best should be. Does it mean only that it feels like it's the best? If I demand more than a mere feeling, what would I be expected to take into consideration? Surely I should not have to make calculations about relative humidity, particulate pollution, but I might feel I should be making judgments about the best way the clouds might move and re-form, experiencing hopes and

disappointments as they shifted propitiously or clumsily, about sight lines given the surface landscaping, and about color variability in relation to the types of cloud mass. And by the time I weighed all the elements and variables I might come up with two or three different moments that all had their perfection. I begin to fear that these perfections are incommensurable, that there may be, oh no, more than one optimal moment, each optimal by some different set of criteria, with no clear metacriterion to rank the various optima.

If we are going to allow more than one perfect moment in the same sunset, isn't that just a cop-out? I distrust my recourse to a belief in incommensurability as a kind of moral laziness. Not that good things don't come from accepting multiple standards for determining the good and the beautiful: tolerance, for instance. So maybe it is just about apples and oranges, each moment wonderful in its own way; and though I see some point in praising the benefits and sometimes the richness of diversity, I still find myself drawn to the ranking game. Something urges many of us to want to know who won, not deeming it satisfactory merely to applaud a large group asked to stand up and take a bow for their above-average performance. We want to know more than who made the playoffs; we want to know who won them.

Isn't it though that we are anxious to make sure we can identify the best moment so we know when to mobilize all our energies of appreciation, both in the sense of discernment and in the sense of thankfulness?<sup>4</sup> Wanting to know the optimum is the desire to appreciate fully. My anxiety about it is the form my homage to the scene takes; it is a refusal to deem it trivial; it shows it matters to me. It is thus a form of respectfulness. The concern to locate the optimum is also engaging in the critical process, which itself bears a complex relation with pleasure: criticism can enhance the pleasure of the scene, be pleasurable in its own right, and also be frustrating as hell. Though my anxiety about the optimum may be experienced as an interference now, won't the consequences of that interference help rather than hinder a full and intelligent appreciation not only of the scene, but of one's own appreciation of the scene?

This may be, I admit, too self-serving a view of the matter. There is another way of looking at it that is less attractive and does not quite ring false: it proves me merely compulsive in the anal neurotic style, miserly of spirit. Mine turns out to be the mindset of someone worrying about the timing of an investment. Do I buy today or tomorrow, or did I blow it by not buying yesterday? Instead of a desperate attempt to be great minded by seeking the highest and the best, the compulsion is just as likely evidence of small-mindedness, a concern not to be bested.<sup>5</sup> My obsession is an extension to the beautiful and sublime of the kinds of hierarchization we cannot help but impose on our own social settings. Who's the coolest, the smartest, the best looking, the most worthy, the worst, the ugliest? Did I get a better office than she did; am I higher in the pecking order?

Shift gears for a second. It has been fashionable for some time in the humanities to argue for various species of cultural and historical relativism. A programmatic anti-essentialist may experience a twinge of anxiety that his experience of natural beauty suggests he is in the very presence of some essential grandness that generates culture rather than is generated by it. Am I awed by that mountain view, our anti-essentialist wonders nervously, because my culture makes me see the mountains

this way or because culture, like I seem to be, is helpless before the grandness of the view? But then, he counters, what is it that makes the mountains on average more sublime than the plains, or the sea more sublime than Lake Superior? We can predict, knowing the culture, the likelihood of which member of these pairs will be considered more scenic than the other. Were not the Alps often viewed well into the 19th century as jagged deformations of nature? And if someone were led blindfolded to Lake Superior would he know it was not the ocean? You cannot see to the other side of either one and, like the sea, Superior is in constant roil and its waves can rip apart ocean-going vessels. Sure, the salt-free spray is a give-away, but that is no longer an issue of visual beauty. Doesn't our knowledge of maps influence our decision? The cachet of the sea and the coast, in the US at least, is fraught with all kinds of pretensions that would deny to those in the middle of things any access to culture or beauty, unless it be in the form of mountains. That is why I distrust those who claim too much for salt spray since I suspect that some of what they like about it is the proof that it provides that they are on the coast; olfaction is needed to save their culturally imposed ranking system for the sublime. Is there really anything inherently more beautiful about a mountain than the plain, about the sea than Lake Superior? If the flat infinite expanse of the ocean makes it why can't the flat infinite expanse of the plains? There are ugly mountains too, and ones that are just plain kitsch, that are no more sublime than a field of wheat, with the wind stirring the fields into iridescent waves stretching as far as the eye can see.<sup>6</sup>

To medieval and early modern people, the anti-essentialist continues, mountains were barriers preventing trade as well as being home to frightful wildmen who terrorized the plains below. The sea, on the other hand, was no barrier at all, and its traversability besmirched its beauty, for the sea threatened invasions of other kinds of wildmen in longships or galleys. Those on the shore and the plains had less sense of communing with the beauty of sea and mountains than defending against the awful people who used them as launching pads for rape, plunder and murder, whose fearsomeness did not make them sublime or awesomely beautiful, though their ships might have been. Fear for our lives has a way of pushing our attraction to the beautiful and sublime well off center stage.<sup>7</sup> We have, as Kant (1952) says, to 'see ourselves safe in order to feel this soul-stirring delight' (p. 262).<sup>8</sup> The perception of beauty in the fearful, as Kant and others have pointed out (Burke, 1958: I.7), requires our safety and well-being, even quite a bit of acculturation, to appreciate. In other words, we cannot really be afraid, except in a kind of virtual way,<sup>9</sup> if we are going to be moved aesthetically. The appreciation of beauty and the sublime are dependent in some nontrivial degree on pacification and reasonable security, on political and social order, on a sense of well-being. The incredible lethal beauty and awesomeness of a volcano or tornado or jet fighter is usually apparent to most of us safely on film, and those of us who have actually witnessed them still worry first about getting to a safe place from which to indulge our awe, or in the case of the jet fighter, of making sure it is either friendly or in an air show. A soldier is more likely to indulge his sense of the sublime at the vast array of his own ships behind him, than of the enemy's array in front of him.

But then the anti-essentialist wavers: when I gaze upon those trackless mountains, though I am not afraid in the least, I am not really feeling all that secure either, nor



do I have a sense of well-being, precisely because I am not quite sure of my response, nor of the mountains; I am awash in self-consciousness, even cultural consciousness, wondering if the Vikings found the mountains coming down to this fjord at sunset sublime, or merely looked at them as barriers to be sailed around and at the setting sun as a practical indicator of tomorrow's weather. I am finding it hard to believe they did not experience it – 'Sophocles long ago/ Heard it on the Aegean' (Arnold, 1994, *Dover Beach*, lines 15–16). Is there not something precultural about the sublimity of the fjords? Our anti-essentialist is now even unsurer that his anti-essentialism isn't more a pose than a real commitment.

There are other sources, more generalizable, of self-consciousness in the face of the beautiful or sublime, just as sufferable in a museum looking at a famous painting, as when dealing with sunsets or fall foliage. With art we have the added anxiety as to whether we are enjoying it properly. For a painting this means enjoying it intelligently, whereas the intelligent enjoyment of a sunset seems less a matter of the essence of sunsets than of the essence of our own response to beauty. We wouldn't think someone a philistine who said that when it comes to sunsets he just sits back and enjoys them, any more than we would blame him had he demanded nothing more from an orange blossom than that it smell like one. Had he confessed that he found smelling flowers troubling because he didn't know at what nanosecond the sensation was best we would think him nauseatingly over precise, or just plain nuts.

But with a painting one knows there are experts out there who could tell you so much more about it; you may even be one of them, and still you are not sure your appreciation is the finest appreciation possible. You could still do better. You start to feel vaguely deficient for not knowing more, or if you do know more, for needing a boost to make you feel the power like you once felt it 'naturally' or like you are supposed to feel it, for though your knowledge may have increased and the sophistication of your appreciation with it, the cold fact is you suspect that the painting moved you more when you were younger and knew less. Or are you just playing the role of the melancholic, deriving more pleasure from false modesty and self-doubt than from any misremembered prior ecstasy? You have reason to believe that your prior ecstasy might be misremembered. You know it is not beneath you to have repressed the memory of your anxieties as to your ignorance when young, which you could dredge up if you wanted to, and that your recall of the earlier ecstasy is in fact something of an invention fashioned more for the purpose of casting doubt on your present experience. But that is not fair either, for the memory of that prior ecstasy is a pleasurable memory, and it has served you well, when it flashes upon your inward eye. So what if a purer ecstasy was in fact constructed later as part of the process of remembering a laundered prior one?

But what of the anxiety of the expert who finds he is not loving *Othello* as much the twenty-fifth time as he did the second? Here is a kind of inverted sunset problem. *Othello* is a rock. It is the same words each time, but *you* have changed, to say nothing of critical fashion, and you suspect neither have changed for the better; so when was it that you were the most attuned to it? The first time, or after you read it with more knowledge, so that you really only managed to read it for the first time on your tenth time? Will you ever be able to re-experience the mind-boggling awe

you once experienced? Recapturing or reproducing all the excitement of your best experience with a particular fixed object often puts you to a kind of parasitical appreciation, piggybacking vicariously on the joy you see others experience when they first discover it, especially when as parent, friend, or teacher you introduce them to it. Without that last proviso their pleasure may simply cause you chagrin, as when you suffer the view of the young in one another's arms. Yet, your pleasure is more than just witnessing their pleasure, for you find yourself re-experiencing your original zeal because you work yourself up trying to convince them to feel the power. But you need the other person in order to *feel* the greatness of the work again; the odds of feeling that kind of exultation in solitude get longer and longer.<sup>10</sup>

The socialization of appreciation then can work great wonders, but it can also produce petty miseries. If others are present one cannot help but be aware of their reaction, not just to the object to be appreciated but also to your watching of it. They will be judging, you feel, whether you are being a proper appreciator. Your reputation for having a soul, for having taste, for being a worthy object of love, and for not being either a pompous prig or a hopeless philistine, are in some way engaged. There is competition even in the watching of a sunset, let alone a painting where the competitiveness is more clearly the case. And though the others may not be in fact judging you, you suspect they are, because you are certainly judging them. If you are not, it is because you deem them unworthy of being judged.

Even the movies don't succeed entirely, though it is dark, in making us unaware of how others may be judging our watching. Surely this is the case regarding laughter at the would-be funny parts. It takes a very good joke, and they are quite rare, to make us laugh when we are alone, but put us with others and it takes very little to make us laugh on cue. When we say laughter is contagious what we often mean is that we feel obliged to join in when others do or connect with them by initiating a laugh when we feel it is expected. And we cannot help but feel just a little silly, and sometimes quite cowardly, when we find ourselves laughing because it is demanded, especially if we are laughing too heartily, which in this case means only heartily, heartily itself being precisely what is *de trop* in this situation. The contrary situation of being hung out to dry can even be more unnerving, as when one finds oneself the only laugher, no one caring to join in, even to save you out of kindness. A slim chance exists that we may take pride in getting the joke that others are too dim to understand; but maybe it is we who are lacking refinement and the paranoid among us may wonder if the non-laughers are colluding in not joining with us, getting ready instead to stone us for some unspeakable crime we just committed.

There is also a certain obligatoriness in the awe and admiration we give to the sublime and to simple beauty too. Some of the obligatoriness is the very experience of the sublime itself, as when the awesomeness and splendor render non-obedience to its wondrousness impossible. But there is also the obligatoriness of being properly appreciative of those things we are supposed to appreciate, and that often provokes resistance and a desire to mock or desecrate. If we fall right in line and admire what is admirable we can feel like a camp follower, but no more than we would feel like one if we made typically avant-gardiste gestures of rebellion and resistance. No path has not been well trodden in this domain, in which the distinctly unconventional is totally conventional, all empty spaces having been well colonized

for quite some time. The pretensions and self-satisfactions of the avant-garde have succeeded in giving the charm of authenticity to simple philistinism, though philistinism itself can come in varieties ranging from naive to studied, and its charm has a very short half-life.

The issue of obligatoriness works differently for the sunset or for a painting than it does for *Othello*. How long are we supposed to stay looking at the Vermeer, or at the sunset? Pass along too quickly and we are disrespectful, linger too long and we look phony, trying to pose as if we were communing oh so deeply, disgracing ourselves almost as badly as people do who pray in unseemly places. With *Othello* you know exactly how long you need attend to it. You know when it is over. And you can think about it whenever you desire in packets of time of various duration later. But no one expects you to watch a whole sunset, just enough of it not to be disrespectful to nature. You are allowed to take glimpses and make an appreciative comment or shake the head in admiration; in fact the appreciative glimpse and complimentary headshake is one way of avoiding the anxiety of the optimal moment that continuous attention plagues us with.

When we look at the Vermeer there is more anxiety as to when we can declare ourselves properly released from having to attend to it.<sup>11</sup> The painting stubbornly stays there, available to be admired or studied until the museum closes or until your companion urges you to move on in no uncertain terms. When can you say, 'ok, enough' and feel you have paid proper homage? The answer is, of course, 'it depends', which is what makes for more anxiety in facing a sunset or a painting than in facing a song or a literary work.<sup>12</sup>

The problem of release is especially acute in certain social settings. It is the exhausting demand made upon us to admire someone's new home, or garden, or collection of butterflies.

Leave it to the always-insightful Jane Austen to capture the sentiment:

That [Fanny] should be tired now, however, gives me no surprise; for there is nothing in the course of one's duties so fatiguing as what we have been doing this morning: seeing a great house, dawdling from one room to another, straining one's eyes and one's attention, hearing what one does not understand, admiring what one does not care for. It is generally allowed to be the greatest bore in the world, and Miss Price has found it so, though she did not know it.

'I shall soon be rested,' said Fanny; 'to sit in the shade on a fine day, and look upon verdure, is the most perfect refreshment.'

After sitting a little while Miss Crawford was up again. 'I must move,' said she; 'resting fatigues me. I have looked across the ha-ha till I am weary. I must go and look through that iron gate at the same view, without being able to see it so well.'

Edmund left the seat likewise. 'Now, Miss Crawford, if you will look up the walk, you will convince yourself that it cannot be half a mile long, or half half a mile.'

‘It is an immense distance,’ said she; ‘I see *that* with a glance.’ (*Mansfield Park*, ch. 9)

Have you not also experienced the small shame of having felt more for a photo or reproduction than the thing itself? Nature is often at its best in postcards or nature documentaries. When we see the actual scene, we are more at the mercy of distraction and the pressure to make the best of the opportunity that we suspect we are in some way being held responsible for. We are not to waste such an opportunity and that niggling sense that we have wasted some, if not all, of it prompts a bit of self-blame, a fleeting moment of self-contempt. The postcard avoids the sunset effect we have been talking about. The postcard gives us an image of static beauty that presents no issues of whether it was the best possible view of the scene. The worry does not arise; because it is just a postcard we can release ourselves from it without anxiety, and then too we trust that it was produced with all the inducements of the tourist business to make sure it is an enticing representation.

When *en scène* we are not quite sure we are positioned for the best possible view, with the best light, in the right season, to say nothing of the vexation of bodily discomforts and the insects who claim the outdoors as their own. We are determined too that the kids better really enjoy it since we paid a small fortune to bring them to Norway. But at least now one can blame one’s own failure to feel exactly the awe and delight one counted on feeling on the kids, which may be why it was a good idea to bring them along. When we have paid money for the view the pressure is on to get our money’s worth – felt ever the more keenly because we have to make up for the kids’ lack of interest – and that complicates the pure aesthetic experience with yet another distracting intrusion, another demand upon us to perform or else.

The other disadvantage is that the scene, when it looks overwhelmingly superb, perfect in every way, often suffers for looking just like a postcard. Suffers? The postcard (or the nature documentary) can’t help but be a reference point, a standard we erect to orient and gauge our aesthetic judgments of the scene. We are quite pleased to find that the scene matched the postcard, that the expectations it raised were met. We also seem almost bent at times on knowingly sacrificing the present moment to make sure we get a good photo of it or hurry back to a souvenir shop to peruse their collection of postcards, deferring the appreciation of the present to a more tranquil appreciation of an epitomized version viewable at whim in the future. I am being unfair. The photo could just as well be an homage to the grand moment just lived, an effort to memorialize it. But taking the picture often ensures a less than optimal experience as we fumble with the settings, wait for people to get out of the way, puzzle over which is the best segment of the panorama to settle on; and the photo can have the unpleasant effect of diminishing the positive memory of the experience if it in fact turns out not to reflect the exquisiteness of the setting adequately. Though a mediocre photo works well enough to reproduce a very active memory of the original experience the first time it is viewed, it becomes less able to do so as the event recedes and the photo itself becomes more and more the primary source for the memory.

Memory also acts like a postcard in those scenes and paintings we actually revisit in the flesh. The memory sets a standard by which we judge the present and sets up

various interferences with the present experience that are a frequent theme in poetry and novels. Good memories, as I noted earlier, may be especially good because you have selectively forgotten all the anxieties that attended the remembered experience. This may be a kindness memory's malleability offers us, but it is a mixed blessing, for it helps ensure that the present will seldom match up to the imagined past. Stonehenge moved me when I first visited it like I never thought it would; the sheer size of the stones, the unfathomability of transporting them and raising them up given the available technology, the uncanny perfection of the way some were knocked over and how perfectly they fell, looking significantly more sublime in perfect disarray than had they been preserved in their original glory. So I dragged the family to it for a return visit, telling them that it surpassed all PBS<sup>13</sup> specials, all postcards, and this was a recommendation indeed because they are well aware of my preference for reading about places rather than seeing them, or for watching them on TV rather than dealing with the people and the clumsy changes of position necessarily incurred when visiting them in the flesh. I was expecting to be moved again myself; I was disappointed. No surprises there. It looked so much smaller, and I could not decide from which point of the circle it looked most like Stonehenge. What was the optimal point from which to view it – the sunset problem in space rather than in time. And what was 'most like Stonehenge' to mean?

The second trip made me doubt the authenticity of the first trip. Had I really been moved by it to the extent I recalled, or was my memory constructed to have made the first trip worth it, a self-deception concocted to avoid the self-contempt of having wasted the opportunity to be moved? Was it that the memory, in Wordsworthian predictability, was the experience to cherish, not the actual provision of the raw material of the experience? And what was my present experience, but a reassessment of my prior experience which now too must suffer for having played its part in ruining the second trip.

Not just natural beauty or the sublime suffers the postcard effect. The museum brings you face-to-face with grand paintings you've seen in books and on the big screen in your introductory art history class. Sometimes the real thing wins and not just when it is bigger. The Vermeer is even more amazing for being smaller than you imagined and you discover that it has a luminosity that is beyond reproduction, while some grand paintings don't live up to the gasp you emitted when they flashed up on the screen more than thirty years ago. Such moments had all the elements of surprise: a darkened room, the big screen, the feeling you were finally getting educated and cultured. In the museum you have to deal with the crowds in addition to the painting, the annoyance of having your view blocked, the concern you are blocking someone else's, the fear you may be looking foolish as you try to figure out how precisely to look appreciative and awed without looking pretentious. And then too you suffer feeling foolish for worrying about looking foolish, feeling that you may look more foolish to be so concerned about the figure you cut when no one in the room is watching you; you are playing before an audience of one, unless you are really misbehaving or are the best looking woman in the crowded room.

You know this, yet you still worry, especially about when you can declare yourself released from the painting. That is a matter between you and the painting. The problem is exacerbated in a museum because not just the painting you are looking

at is making demands on your worshipfulness and attention, but all those other masterpieces housed in the same building, in the same room, are getting impatient and insisting you attend to them. It is not only your companion who wants to move on; the pictures are asserting their demands too. Then, when the day is done, we discuss which work moved us most, which leads to which is the best, the most perfect. And we are right back to a version of our sunset game.

The reader may well be tempted to dismiss this as a highly personalized neurasthenic account, not worthy of being generalizeable. Sure, there are people, you will say, who are this agonizingly self-conscious, and we will even grant the author that many of us have experienced similar sentiments in some settings. But most of us do not find sunsets as agonizing as you would make them, nor the appreciation of beauty as fraught with constant self-defeating self-monitoring as often as you claim. A good number of us do go to museums and are wholly absorbed, not giving a damn about what others think, other than looking around occasionally to see if we have been taking up the best viewing position too long. Others of us know we are posturing and love the posturing, love any offense it may give, or any status we may achieve. Posturing as an appreciator can put us in the proper mood to be pleased and to appreciate; it helps mark the moment as an appreciative one and what is so wrong with that? Others of us like the fact we are in Florence or New York or Paris or Madrid and love that what it means to visit those places is go to the museums they are famous for. So where, we say, do you get the right to use 'we' with such a presumption of authority? If you can be so anxious about a sunset, how can you be so complacently unanxious about claiming universality for your inner states?

I can only allege that the sensibility and anxieties described in this article look typically Western, and not all that untypical and it seems confirmed in a negative kind of way by various Eastern philosophies that are centered on the desperate effort to train our spirits out of experiencing reality the way I have suggested we, or many of us, often do. The competitive non-satisfiable sensibility that informs this essay is the *eminence grise* of Buddhism, the sullied sensibility that must be overcome and exorcized. Unmediated unself-conscious immersion into the beautiful, if not into the ugly, is often something that has to be worked at, struggled for, or, if we are lucky, achieved as a gift of grace.

### Acknowledgements

What often passes for empirical research in the humanities is running one's thoughts by colleagues, friends, and kin: I thus owe a major debt of gratitude for the ideas and datapoints provided by Annalise Acorn, Gloria Claro, Anne Coughlin, Daniel Halberstam, Don Herzog, Kathleen Koehler, Bridget McCormack, and Ted McGuinness.

### Notes

1. The game is also called 'Select the Most Beautiful Woman (Man)'. The goal is to select the best, most beautiful, most qualified, etc., in a series of 100. The rules allow you to see the objects sequentially; once you pass on one person you cannot go back. The mathematics of the game says the player should let 38 go by and then pick the next best one who is more beautiful, qualified, etc., than the first 38 (Raiffa, 1982: 80).



2. This does not preclude the kinds of comparisons a film or a play explicitly asks us to make as in the film *Run Lola Run* (1999) where various iterations of the same events are presented seriatim.
3. 'Strephon and Chloe', vv. 233–4 (Swift, 1967: 525).
4. Issues of indifference, incommensurability, and indeterminacy are standard fare in rational choice theory. Indifference doesn't figure here given the compulsion to identify the optimal; incommensurability we distrust as a cop-out; indeterminacy might be what we have to reconcile ourselves to though we suspect that it just may be a matter of identifying our own preferences and has nothing to do with objective standards of beauty or sublimity. It is about analyzing our own inner states, not the aesthetics of sunsets. But we are reluctant to admit this since it seems to disparage the object.
5. This is exactly the understanding that underground man comes to; see generally Dostoyevsky, *Notes from the Underground*, esp. part 1.
6. Edmund Burke (1958: II.2) specifically addresses the point and claims that the plains are not sublime like the sea because the plains do not generate terror. But to Laurence Sterne, 'there is nothing more pleasing to a traveller – or more terrible to travel-writers, than a large rich plain' (*Tristram Shandy* 7.42). The terror of having nothing to write about, however, is not the kind of terror that engenders the sublime, even though sublimity may leave us without words.
7. Contrast the fear generated by a beautiful human object of desire, where the fear is of humiliation not of death and plunder. It is our appreciation of that beautiful person that generates the fear. But this is a very different kind of appreciation than aesthetic appreciation, which according to Kant should be disinterested. That is exactly what my appreciation of the beauty of someone I desire is not.
8. We also need, says Kant (1952), sufficient moral and cultural development to have access to the pleasures of the sublime. To the simple soul or the primitive the power of nature is merely a source of terror. 'So the simple-minded, and, for the most part, intelligent, Savoyard peasant ... unhesitatingly called all lovers of snow-mountains fools. And who can tell whether he would have been so wide of the mark, if that student of nature had taken the risk of the dangers to which he exposed himself merely, as most travelers do, for a fad, or so as some day to be able to give a thrilling account of his adventures?' (p. 265)
9. The special aesthetic emotion engendered by horror film is not really fear either, though it is strongly felt, and perhaps all the more strongly for benefiting from the knowledge that nothing really is at stake.
10. Adam Smith (1976) observes, 'When we have read a book or poem so often that we can no longer find any amusement in reading it by ourselves, we can still take pleasure in reading it to a companion; ... we enter into the surprise and admiration which it naturally excites in him, but which it is no longer capable of exciting in us' (part I: 1.2.2).
11. Special thanks on this issue are owed to Annalise Acorn.
12. This oversimplifies an anxiety people have been known to experience about whether they have been puzzled and moved to sufficient thought by having just read or seen *Othello*.
13. Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) is the educational and arts public television channel in the US.

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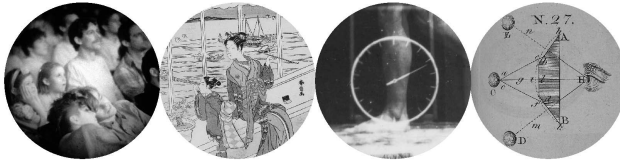
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# journal of visual culture



## That visual turn

### The advent of visual culture

**Journal of Visual Culture (JVC):** While *The Dialectical Imagination* (1996), *Adorno* (1984), and *Force Fields* (1993) – to name but a few of your earlier works – touch upon questions of aesthetics and/or vision in passing, it is not until *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (1994) that you attend to matters of visibility in a more sustained manner. Why this passage from intellectual history and critical theory to what we might call a critical intellectual history of visual culture or a cultural history of vision?

**Martin Jay (MJ):** The work that links the two projects is, in fact, *Marxism and Totality*, the history of Western Marxism I published in 1984. In that work, I noticed that hostility to the concept of totality was often accompanied by skepticism about the possibility of a totalizing gaze, a God's eye view, of the whole. Sartre and Merleau-Ponty were its main critics, but Adorno also challenged the spectatorial premises of what he called 'peephole metaphysics'. Althusser as well, from a very different vantage point, had linked ideological mystification with the persistence of Lacan's mirror stage. It then became gradually clear to me that questions of philosophy and social theory, as well as those pertaining to the position of the critical intellectual, were closely related to the privileging of vision in Western thought. I did not, however, anticipate how varied and pervasive the critique of that privileging had been in French thought until I began my research.

**JVC:** In 'Visual Culture and its Vicissitudes', your contribution to *October's* watershed 'Visual Culture Questionnaire' of 1996, you present yourself as an intellectual historian interested in discourses about visibility. Here, you suggest that advocates of visual culture have extended its scope not only beyond the traditional concerns of art history, but also further than what W.J.T. Mitchell called the 'rhetoric of images' to include, and I quote you here, 'all manifestations of optical experience, all variants of visual practice' (p. 42). In writing this, you claim that visual culture's democratic impulse, its sense of inclusivity, can happily and comfortably investigate anything that can 'imprint itself on the retina', including, you say, non-retinal ingredients such as the 'optical unconscious' (p. 42).

First, I'd like to ask you how serious you were in making this last claim at that time.

That's to say, what does it mean for visual culture to be democratic? What are the advantages and the dangers too? It certainly seems the case that your generosity towards visual culture is tempered. If I hear this dissatisfaction – your wryness – correctly, then I'm in accord with it. I worry – putting aside the accusations of ahistoricism often directed at writings bearing its name – that visual culture is too habitually caught up in a form of political correctness that makes it impossible for it *not* to be democratic. I'm wondering if you, like me, are concerned by the restrictions in this that limit what it might be possible for visual culture to become, to do.

**MJ:** By democratization, I simply meant the growing willingness to take seriously as objects of scholarly inquiry all manifestations of our visual environment and experience, not only those that were deliberately created for aesthetic effects or have been reinterpreted in formalist terms (as was the case with, say, so-called 'primitive' ethnographic objects by aesthetic modernists). Although images of all kinds have long served as illustrations of arguments made discursively, the growth of visual culture as a field has allowed them to be examined more in their own terms as complex figural artifacts or the stimulants to visual experiences. Insofar as we live in a culture whose technological advances abet the production and dissemination of such images at a hitherto unimagined level, it is necessary to focus on how they work and what they do, rather than move past them too quickly to the ideas they represent or the reality they purport to depict. In so doing, we necessarily have to ask questions about the viewer as well, thus the value of Benjamin's notion of the optical unconscious recently resurrected by Rosalind Krauss, as well as the technological mediations and extensions of visual experience.

The danger in such an indiscriminate levelling, of course, is the loss of an ability to make distinctions among different kinds of images and experiences. Traditional art history with its canonical restrictions still has a lot to teach us about the ways in which optical virtuosi, those with the gifts and training to explore and extend the limits of visual experience, transcend the conventions of their visual environment and open up new worlds for our eyes. I am still enough of a follower of Adorno to want to maintain the vexed distinction between genuine works of art and derivative kitsch, high and low, avant-garde and academic art, at least as a way to avoid the promiscuous reduction of everything to the same level of cultural significance.

**JVC:** As an enthusiastic reader of philosophy as well as history, do you think that the recent ethical turn, if I can call it that, characterized by the writings of, amongst others, Jacques Derrida, Alan Badiou and Simon Critchley, and the extensive re-discovery of Emmanuel Levinas that underpins it, will have an impact on visual culture? Should it? Has it already? Will this ethical turn assist and advance the ethical imperative of visual culture, or is it already part of the problem that people identify with visual culture's democratic impulses? How can, say, a concern for hospitality, nourish the thinking, writing and practices of visual culture?

**MJ:** In the critique of the reifying power of the gaze, most extensively explored in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, there was already a powerful ethical moment, which was given added impetus when feminists like Luce Irigaray and Laura Mulvey stressed its gendered character. The Jewish emphasis on hearing as opposed to the Greek stress on sight, which Levinas tied to the relative importance

respectively of the ethical and the ontological in each tradition, increased still further the ethical stakes in discussions of visual culture.

Perhaps the real task these days is not so much to rehearse these now familiar connections, but rather to probe the ways in which the sense of ‘looking after’ someone is just as much a possibility as ‘looking at’ them in *le regard*, and ‘watching out for someone’ is an ethical alternative to controlling surveillance. I remember very well a conversation I had in the mid-nineties in Berlin with the poet Allen Ginsberg about the ‘gaze of the Buddha’, in which he demonstrated for me the non-dominating, benign way in which looking takes place in that religion. Perhaps it is time to look for comparable examples in traditions a bit closer to home.

## Questions for the academy

**JVC:** In particular ways, Visual Studies very clearly emerges specifically out of disputes in recent art history, film studies and cultural studies, born of questions, often historiographical in nature, of politics, ethics and practice. At stake are the vital matters of democracy, recognition, identity, inclusivity and difference to name but a few. How much of this is of Visual Studies itself, rather than adopted from elsewhere? That’s one question. Another is this: How much do these preoccupations of Visual Studies jar or confirm, in your experience, with the more wary accounts which suggest that the field of study is first and foremost an administrative contribution to the further professionalization of academia and academics, a chance for some to make an academic and commercial profit from what otherwise might primarily be an intellectual matter? That’s to say, is Visual Studies any more than rhetoric, in the most straightforward sense of that word?

**MJ:** No new field emerges full-blown without debts to what preceded it. We shouldn’t be surprised to find it borrowing some of its methods and concerns from neighboring or antecedent disciplines and intellectual formations. There are furthermore perennial questions, such as those you mention, which need to be addressed again and again, no matter in what idiom or with what tools of analysis. So I am not really troubled by the parasitic nature of much of what passes for Visual Studies. From new combinations, however, potentially new answers can follow, so it remains to be seen how fruitful the institutionalization of the new field will be. As for professionalization itself, I am not cynical in a priori way about the careerist and even commercial exploitation of visual culture. Those of us who earn our livings by inhabiting established fields, which can pretend to have always existed rather than being themselves products of historical struggles for legitimation, have no right to look down on emerging formations, which are compelled to be more forthright in their attempts to gain respectability and recognition.

**JVC:** In ‘Vision in Context: Reflections and Refractions’, your introduction to the collection co-edited with Teresa Brennan entitled *Vision in Context: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Sight* you say that the volume includes a ‘welter of competing interpretations of the meaning and implications of vision and visibility’ that don’t ‘provide a sovereign overview’ (p. 10). I too support the need for Visual Studies to be richly varied and for it to offer rival accounts, explanations,

speculations. It's imperative that it not be reducible to one dominant model. My question then is how you think this lack of a sovereign overview is both a strength and a weakness.

**MJ:** To argue for a single dominant approach seems to me problematic in the extreme in any intellectual endeavour. What, for example, would the result be if we were to have only one way to make sense of that extraordinary thing we call 'language', or to assume that all languages were somehow subvariants of a single ur-model? Would we get rid of, say, hermeneutics or grammarology or ordinary language analysis or structural linguistics or sociolinguistics, all in the name of one master discourse? Making sense of visual experience demands no less a willingness to tolerate different, sometimes complementary and sometimes contradictory, approaches. Certain questions are perhaps more fruitfully addressed by one approach than another, but we can always think of new questions that demand fresh analytical tools.

### The experiences of practice

**JVC:** Your work is testament to the value of melding, working with and through the confluence of the historical and the present. Such a convergence makes it possible to account for and direct our thinking towards the indeterminacies that are made available by re-definitions, competing interpretations, meanings, and so on, when it comes to practices of looking, or reading, or doing history. Much of your research and writing over the last 30 years has been tied to this kind of complex historical and philosophical convergence as it takes place in and can be drawn out from the concerns of German and French thought, of intellectual history. Your work on Adorno, Benjamin and the Frankfurt School, and *Downcast Eyes* – on vision in 20th-century continental thought – is testament to this. Your most recent work seems to be directing its gaze onto a specifically American genealogy. I'm wondering about the reasons for this shift, and its implications.

**MJ:** My current project, which examines the discourse of experience in modern theory, necessarily has an American component because of the extraordinary attention paid to the concept by pragmatists like William James and John Dewey. But anyone who is interested in 20th-century European thought has to recognize that the Atlantic has become a very narrow body of water (sometimes, in fact, much narrower than the English Channel!). That is, the current of ideas that went largely from Europe to America in the 18th century and much of the 19th – with some exceptions like Poe and Emerson, who had an important influence in Europe – began to become a reciprocal flow in the early 20th century. Pragmatism itself is an example, as figures like Bergson, Schiller and Papini learned a great deal from James. Works like James Kloppenberg's *Uncertain Victory* (1988) have shown us how integrated the Western intellectual world already was by the 1880s. By the time of the intellectual migration from Nazi Germany, much of the most creative thought in Europe was in exile in America and elsewhere, and when it went back, either through personal returns or intellectual exchanges, it was powerfully changed by its experience abroad. The well-known shift of avant-garde art's centre of gravity from Paris to New York reinforced this tendency. By the time Richard Rorty was finding



parallels between Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida and Dewey, the old distinctions between American and European thought were in large measure overcome.

Or to put it differently, a complicated process of creative misreadings of different national traditions and idioms is now going in both directions with enough vigor to undercut any simple notion of center and periphery (a point that would be complicated still further, if we acknowledge the global cross-fertilization of ideas outside of the NATO cultural region). As an American intellectual historian of mostly 'European' ideas, I recognize that I come to them with the prejudices of my formation, but I also understand that my formation is always already filtered through ideas that have a European accent. So I guess it was only a matter of time before I was compelled to read a little more seriously in American sources and compare the results with what I had learned from a lifetime of reading European ones.

**JVC:** A question about experience: in *Downcast Eyes* you are already attending explicitly to the *experience* of vision. For instance, you consider questions of natural visual experience, the art of describing, the optical unconscious, scopic regimes, enLIGHTenment, the optics of temporality, epistemological vision, phenomenological perception, glances, gazes, spectacles, and so on. And you consider these questions as experiential or phenomenological rather than theoretical questions per se.

Your forthcoming book continues to be concerned with the question of experience. As a thinker for whom experience has played such a central role – in your preoccupation with intellectual history, the study of culture, and the matter of the visual – how do you think that this new book will impact upon our understanding of the necessary difficulties of experiencing something called visual culture?

**MJ:** *Songs of Experience*, as the new, still unfinished book will be called, focuses on the discourses about experience in European and American thought rather than on something that one might directly call experience itself. Its goal is to clarify the assumptions that underlie our appeal to experience, whether they be in epistemological, religious, aesthetic, political or historical terms. It also seeks to understand the attempts made by many 20th-century thinkers to revive a more robust and all-encompassing notion of experience, often one that transcends the traditional subject/object dichotomy. To the extent that the eye is implicated in one way or another in virtually all of these modalities, I hope that by increasing our sensitivity to the historical complexities of the concept of experience itself, we will become more aware of how mediated our visual experiences are by the discursive contexts in which they appear.

**JVC:** As historians of visual culture, how do we respond to the events of Tuesday 11th September 2001 and its aftermath?

**MJ:** It is perhaps too early to draw definitive conclusions from the events or even to begin talking about their 'aftermath'. That is, the war they initiated, and I'm afraid that is an accurate term to use to describe what is now happening, is a long way from being over. Having said that, I would only add that one immediate result is that the long-standing assumption of much cultural studies, visual or otherwise, that the hegemony of global capitalist culture must be 'subverted' or 'transgressed' in

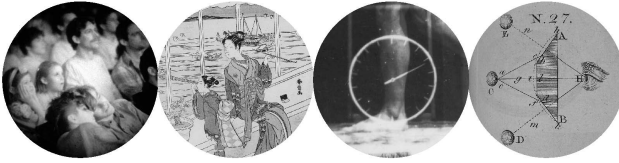
the name of a more progressive alternative is now very hard to maintain in its naive form. Insofar as the hijackers hijacked the vocabulary of anti-globalization for their own not very progressive ends, it is necessary to recognize a new political/cultural landscape in which some of the old conventional wisdom no longer holds. I was at a conference a short while ago at the University of California, Davis on 'Visual Worlds' in which radical artists using media like the internet to produce acts they had once called 'cultural terrorism' were beginning to engage in a painful rethinking of more than just their rhetorical strategy. This is not to say that the chilling warnings of what has come to be called 'patriotic correctness' in the United States against any form of dissent should be heeded, just that it is no longer possible to revert to the late 20th-century premises of cultural studies, which in any case were beginning to get a bit too stale and predictable.

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# journal of visual culture



## Preface to the book *A Skeptical Introduction to Visual Culture*

James Elkins

Last year members of the editorial board of the *journal of visual culture* were asked for brief statements about the state of the discipline. My contribution, which follows, was framed, Borges-fashion, as the Preface to an imaginary book. In the months since I submitted the Preface, I have begun to think more seriously about actually writing such a text. Further ruminations, along with sketches for chapters, are on my website, [www.jameselkins.com](http://www.jameselkins.com).

### Key words

Adorno • art history • Greenberg • Kant • Lacan • Marx • visual culture

This is a contrarian book, even a perverse book. It can serve as an introduction to the study of visual culture, but it is not a textbook in the ordinary sense. I teach courses in a program called ‘Visual and Critical Studies’, and I read the same texts as colleagues who teach film studies, cultural studies, interdisciplinary studies, media studies, and postcolonial theory: but I find myself increasingly skeptical of the tenets, methodology, assumptions and promise of much of the new scholarship. I’m not skeptical in the way a conservative defender of old hierarchies might be, and I certainly don’t align myself with the disciplinary divisions that mark the 1996 *October* survey. Rather I am skeptical of some of the directions in which the new scholarship grows, especially those that rip visuality free of its moorings in history and theory. Looking at the currently available textbooks on visual culture I began to feel that what is needed is a preface to the whole enterprise, one that can prepare students to ask questions of the material they are about to encounter. This book is intended as that preface or, in Kant’s term, prolegomenon. As in Kant, this is not an argument in favor of any particular theory or configuration of disciplines, but an assessment of the field intended to make it more difficult. What I have in mind is a set of open-ended readings aimed at showing that some of the most transparent concepts are actually obdurate and opaque, and that some of the most ubiquitous sources – the Benjamins, the Lacans – are firmly fixed to their times and places and

not always amenable to the uses to which they are currently put. With these readings in hand, I hope students can go more confidently and less optimistically into their chosen field.

Chapter 1 asks 'What is Visual Culture?' It is odd, on the face of it, that it is necessary to ask this question given the number of courses and books on the subject. Studies of visual culture have been around long enough that it is no longer sufficient to say that they can't be defined because they are new. On the other hand, it was never enough to claim that visual culture is ill defined *by nature* because it is interdisciplinary. Interdisciplinarity is not an obstacle to self-definition. Visual culture has come to seem undefinable by nature because it is both interdisciplinary and – supposedly – new.

Given this kind of confusion *about* the level of confusion, it is helpful to try describing the field in terms of what it studies. In that case, visual studies is predominantly about film, photography, advertising, video and the internet. It is primarily not about painting, sculpture or architecture, and it is rarely about any media before 1950 except early film and photography. Visual culture might seem at first to be the study of popular art, but it also includes recent avant-garde art (Hans Haacke, Barbara Kruger, the Guerrilla Girls) which is not at all popular in the way mass media are. Visual culture can include documents (the visual appearance of passports, bureaucratic forms and tickets) but in general it sticks to art and design – it does not encompass engineering drawing, scientific illustration or mathematical graphics.

Thinking of visual culture this way shows its particular perspective: it is written by people conversant with contemporary avant-garde art, who are also interested in popular art and design. It would be possible to imagine a discipline of visual studies that kept to technological, scientific and 'informational images' such as  $x$ - $y$  graphs; or a discipline that kept to popular culture and omitted Cindy Sherman and other art-world figures. (The first of those nonexistent disciplines would study *more* images than visual culture does.) Visual culture is therefore a particular slice of the sum total of visual production, not the study of visual products in general. It follows, for example, that visual culture has its distinctive politics and institutional limitations.

It also follows that visual culture cannot be productively described as a kind of inquiry that follows the leveling of high and low art. A common starting-point in books and essays on visual culture is the claim that high art and low art have become inextricably mixed, so that the values that were once accorded to high art can no longer guide the new inquiry into visual culture. Often in such passages the names of Greenberg and Adorno are mentioned, if only to identify them with concepts that are no longer in force. Older concepts such as the avant-garde, originality, ambiguity and difficulty are rejected, and it is implied or claimed that it's now possible to study kitsch, avant-garde art, fine art, low art, outsider art and mass media, all together. The problem with that kind of opening move is that the new and ostensibly level playing field becomes uneven whenever authors prefer original examples over unoriginal ones, or difficult objects over easier ones, or ambiguous artworks over ones with more straightforward meanings. All such choices are driven by the unacknowledged and ongoing dependence on concepts of

the avant-garde that derive from writers such as Greenberg and Adorno. Chapter 1 concludes with a series of case studies, showing how different writers on visual culture handle the claim that high and low art are commingled, and how their writing continues to bear traces of the critical apparatus that was developed to account for high art and modernism. There is no solution to this problem, because interesting writing in visual studies depends on versions of ideas (such as the avant-garde, the value of difficult art, the value of novelty, the value of complexity and ambiguity) taken from Adorno and Greenberg, and studying that dependence cannot expunge the debt. (As an example: why write about Benetton advertisements, unless it's because they are more ambiguous, innovative and complex – in short, more strongly modernist in Adorno's discourse – than other ads?) But writers can become more self-aware about the unresolved contradictions built into the new field.

Chapter 2 is 'A Brief History of the Study of Visual Culture'. It seems to me that visual culture as it is currently practiced depends on a specific and sometimes shallow sense of its own history. Marx is mentioned, and so is Walter Benjamin; but the history of writing about the visual elements of culture is much broader, and current work can be enriched – and made more challenging – by awareness of that past. The de facto family tree of visual culture has a trunk labeled 'Foucault', or 'Foucault and Benjamin', and roots that reach down to Marx. The full genealogy goes deeper. It begins with 15th-century antiquarian studies, which were carried out by people interested in a whole range of the detritus of the past – ancient clothing, ancient urban spaces, ancient coins and medals and cameos, ancient military equipment. In the 19th century, under the influence of Leopold von Ranke, historians such as Jacob Burckhardt began studying the sum total of the products of past cultures. Burckhardt's evocations of Renaissance Florence, for example, are intensely visual even though they are not illustrated; he even described aspects of private life, an interest that is usually ascribed to 20th-century historians – including such things as men's hose, cosmetics, upholstery, perfume and jewelry. In the 20th century, that kind of historical writing was carried forward by historians such as Mario Praz, who are not included in visual culture because they wrote about past centuries. Even this deeper genealogy is still Western – largely because the West invented the discipline and still educates its practitioners. Outside the West, there are many possibilities for genuinely different practices: Indian philosophies of visuality, Japanese senses of place and time, and so forth. At the moment, however, those histories are objects of scholarly study and not models for the discipline itself. Eventually visual culture might want to embrace its full history and even experiment with non-Western ways of writing the history of visual practices.

Chapter 3 is also a question: 'What Are The Primary Concepts that Drive Visual Studies?' In this chapter, I examine two indispensable sources: Benjamin and Lacan. If it were possible to make a citation-index search of footnotes in visual studies papers, those two authors, together with Foucault and Marx, might account for a large fraction of the references. Chapter 3 is especially contrarian because my interest in Benjamin and Lacan is in their *uniqueness*. Their books are mines for quotations and working concepts, and they provide jumping-off places for arguments that go in many different directions: but I find that if they are read slowly enough, and if enough of their texts are taken into account, they can be idiosyncratic to the point of uselessness.

Benjamin tends to be imagined as the author of theories of the aura, of mechanical reproducibility, and of the 'dialectical image'. Yet his thoughts on those subjects are ambiguous and unclear, even – so it seems – to him. A generation of scholars has not yet succeeded in producing a satisfactory account of what the 'dialectical image' meant to Benjamin, but it is clear it was associated with feelings of nostalgia, suffocation, isolation and torpor that most scholars do not share when they study popular culture. Benjamin's writing is full of *affect*: intense emotion, tightly constrained by his bibliophilic habits. When the affect is boiled away, Benjamin is quotable, but what kind of foundation does that provide?

Analogous observations can be made of the famous passages in Lacan that treat the gaze: they are prodigious pages, but not amenable to the schematic doctrines that they have been asked to support. Lacan's thinking, as he represents it in the texts of the seminars, is elliptic, poetic, allusive, often non-rational and knowingly partly self-contradictory – so that when he is at his best, as he is in the passages on the gaze, he is furthest from the systematizing and clarifying efforts of later scholars. Chapter 3 is a kind of warning: the sources visual culture uses are not always sturdy or sensible foundations for current practice.

Chapter 4 is called 'A Critique of Hybridity': it is a consideration of the current interest in cultural locations, practices, identities and objects that are hybrid, mixed, marginal, Creole, transcultural, postcolonial, liminal, meta-, para-, quasi-, or otherwise impure and ambiguous. It is not an exaggeration, I think, to say that the majority of essays in the humanities have as their primary methodological orientation an interest in complexity and ambiguity. Perhaps the commonest rhetorical strategy in current scholarship is to demonstrate a state of unexpected complexity or a pitch of ambiguity that cannot be reduced to simpler schemata. In the realm of politics, cultural studies and visual studies, the interest in complexity and ambiguity focuses on hybridity. The current generation of scholars interested in those subjects produces papers that explore the twilight spaces between colonialism and postcolonialism, between national identity and globalism, between the dichotomy of the genders, between individuality and collectivity. If there is an analytical limit to these interests, it is the assumption that the *demonstration* of hybridity is sufficient: the idea is often to work upward from known states and dichotomies which are relatively pure, toward a sufficiently interesting and complex impure state. Hybridity then becomes the leading term of the analysis – the one that describes whatever condition is of interest – so that differences between historically specific hybrid states are not always adequately theorized. There are also logical difficulties in studying hybridity, because the ambiguous states tend to provide the definitions of the pre-existing pure states. Bhabha's work is perhaps the most resourceful on the subject of hybridity, but his special interest in layered, paradoxical formulations of hybridity – often involving multiple sources and theoretical approaches, all pressed into service simultaneously – occasionally hinders the study of *individual* forms of hybridity.

Chapter 5 is 'A Brief Critique of Multiculturalism'. It can be said that the major theorists of multiculturalism and postcolonial theory do not work in an identifiable middle ground between cultures, but in what Derrida has called 'the age of psychoanalysis'. Freud and especially Lacan provide the ultimate ground – the



Western ground – for adjudication, so that the texts are set in an interpretive sequence whose final moment is Western. The chapter is a look at such issues in three scholars: Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak and Slavoj Žižek. In Žižek’s books, Marxist doctrines tend to be explained in Lacanian terms, but the opposite is seldom true, and it is interesting that Žižek does not imagine that asymmetry as a critical issue. Spivak analyzes Indian and Western concepts in Freudian terms, and has so far not theorized the effects of that imbalance. (Her most recent book, the massive *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, ends with a theory of asymptotic approaches between cultural discourses, a theory that is itself embedded in Derridean and Lacanian concepts.)

Chapter 6, ‘The Concept of Visual Literacy’, concerns another of the foundational themes of visual culture, the notion that the past hundred-odd years have been the most visually literate period in history. We see more images per month or per year, so the argument goes; we can also process more images per minute or second. Theorists who advocate that view, such as Baudrillard, offer the prospect of a new form of literacy that would inevitably call for its own discipline. Against that theory are at least two others. One has it that the 20th century was also a profoundly nonvisual century, which developed most of its key concepts without direct recourse to visuality. (The argument is found mainly in Martin Jay’s work.) Another would say that even though we do possess something like a Baudrillardian virtuosity in comprehending images, we lack the kind of literacy that would allow us to comprehend more complex images. (The argument is partly Barbara Stafford’s.) Complex images were more common in Western culture from the Renaissance to the early 19th century. They have largely vanished from mass media, visual communication and graphic design, and are rare even in the fine arts – producing generations of speed-readers who can only read simple sentences. The differences of opinion on visual literacy are central for visual studies because writers interested in digital arts, the internet and cyberspace often take a version of Baudrillard’s theory for granted, which cuts them off from the broader historical senses of visual literacy. And whenever there is talk of visual literacy, talk of the canon is not far behind. The canon itself has a sufficiently bad name that people do not want to address it, but visual studies produces a canon simply by repeatedly citing the same works. From Barthes’s take on the Eiffel Tower to the ubiquitous reproductions of certain photographs by Nadar, Julia Cameron, Nan Goldin and Robert Capa, visual studies *is* building a canon even if it is not acknowledged as such. The chapter ends with a provisional list of the canon and an assessment of the kind of literacy it implies.

The closing chapter is also a question: ‘What Does Visual Culture Teach?’ It is not always apparent what the ‘take-home’ value of visual culture is. Discussions of Cindy Sherman or Catherine Opie confirm the complexity of representations of gender: but are they *lessons* in gender, or *examples* of things known in other contexts? Analyses of the media treatment of Diana’s death demonstrate the complicity of media in the creation of a global information network: but are the pictures themselves *new information* about globalism, or are they *instances* of phenomena that can be found in other settings – including nonvisual theories of globalism? The question of the final chapter is the *purpose* of the study of visual culture. First, visual culture studies could be performing the Marxist service of

unveiling the false consciousness inculcated by the media and by government and corporate control. Alternatively, visual culture studies could be contributing to the Hegelian notion that the writing of history should be concerned with the description of the *Zeitgeist*: the new scholarship would be adding to the history of art by creating a fuller account of the sum total of cultural production. Those are general possibilities, and they subsume a number of more specific purposes, such as the Foucauldian enterprise of the 'archaeology' of power (which is consonant with the Marxist purpose), and Jonathan Crary's project of telling the history of kinds of visual attention in relation to conditions of capitalist production (which has elements of Marxist and Hegelian theory). At some point it is necessary to ask: *why* are we constructing this new discipline? Is it for empowerment? And if so, how will that work? Whose will it be? Against what structures of knowledge? Or is it for a fuller sense of culture? And if so, what culture? For whom?

Consider for example the use of Marx. Marx's texts are clear, but seldom clearly followed – especially by academics who do not take his political engagement seriously. The purpose of a typical analysis in visual studies (say, a reading of Calvin Klein ads) is to reveal the kinds of consumers that the image-makers have posited and helped to create. The result of a good analysis is a newly awakened sense of the kinds of *unawareness* that are necessary to make the image work. In Marxist terms, the end result for a student of visual culture is an unmasking of the 'unhappy consciousness': the once 'unconscious' bourgeois consumer becomes a more self-aware consumer. A student in a visual studies class who may have initially wanted to buy Calvin Klein clothes and be like the women in the Calvin Klein ads now understands how the ads produced her desire. The problem with this, from Marx's perspective, is that it is an incomplete revolution. The student has become skeptical of one particular kind of bourgeois consumer: but now she responds to *other* advertisements and uses *other* criteria to choose her clothing. Visual culture has shifted her a small distance within her class – a distance equal to the difference between the clothes she wore when the course started, and the clothes her instructor wears. (The instructor is presumably aware of the assumptions that drive the Calvin Klein ads, but she has to buy her clothes somewhere, and her choices are not independent of advertising. In my experience the teachers are dressed a little more *haut-bourgeois* than the students.) This is essentially the criticism of visual culture leveled by Rosalind Krauss and some others involved in the *October* questionnaire on visual culture. As Jameson would say, consumerism is in the unconscious of visual studies, which prevents it from thinking through its relation to Marx.

I end the book with an Epilogue, subtitled: 'Why Does Visual Studies Seem Easy?' Too often, studies in visual culture are susceptible to the same hackneyed question that plagued the Abstract Expressionists: 'My six-year-old could do that.' It's not that six-year-olds can write visual theory, it's that the results often seem immediately self-evident. The political and institutional critiques in visual studies can seem transparent: it is not surprising, for example, to see the complicity of the media in the outrage and mourning over Diana's death. New and unsuspected information tends to come from *nonvisual* ancillary documents – for example the knowledge that Dr Gross, who is pictured in Eakins's *Gross Clinic*, performed a gender-changing operation. In those cases, new information is produced, and it is

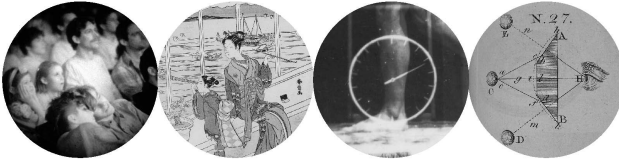
not self-evident. But don't the new data about Dr Gross just work to confirm existing constructions of gender? Does it matter that transgender identity can be confirmed in Eakins? And since the transgender operation is not visible in the painting, what does the new information have to do with the *visual* work of visual studies – with the business of attending to the image itself? Images, in visual studies, are too often either immediately self-interpreting or stand-ins for information that is nonvisual. The discipline has yet to come to terms with that problem.

The book I am imagining would work to make things harder for visual theorists. I think of it as a stumbling block – or better, a weir: something to slow up the torrent of self-confirming cultural interpretation that continues to pour from universities everywhere.

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# journal of visual culture



## The ABC of visual culture, or a new decadence of illiteracy

Alexander García Düttmann

### Key words

image • philosophy • vision

### Impromptu

What does visual culture mean? Visual culture means that a culture is based on images rather than on concepts, or that images have become predominant within a particular culture and have replaced words, or that the impact of quickly moving and changing images has obfuscated the visual aspect of writing and reading and has assimilated vision to touch. Visual culture can also mean that vision should be cultivated in a given culture, or that the cultural creation of a framework for vision should itself be made visible, as should the cultural mediation of the images which appear by virtue of such a framework. Whilst the first definition amounts to a series of statements, descriptive or evaluative, factual or critical, the second definition implies a task, possibly one set by the shifts acknowledged in the first definition. Both definitions, however, seem to entail the possibility of linking vision and culture. What if, in order to have an impact on the eye and constitute itself as an object of vision, an image had to pierce through the framework of a given culture and interrupt the cultivation of the visual field? In the light of this question, the saturation of the senses with images would belong to the same space as the visual education of an individual, a group or a people. They would indicate opposite poles of visual culture in general rather than an experience that would exceed or precede the literacy and the illiteracy of a culture of vision. Adorno's claim that watching a film has a stupefying effect on the spectator can be understood in terms of a conservative or a progressive critique of culture, but it can also be interpreted as pointing towards the gap which separates vision and image from cultural illiteracy and cultural literacy, a gap magnified by the lenses of the cinematographer which prompt a reduction of distance and expose the eye to the object. Does Benjamin not

compare the cameraman to a surgeon who operates on the eye? It seems necessary to distinguish between the decadence of illiteracy triggered by the cultivation of vision, and the decadence of illiteracy provoked by the hegemony of the image. It seems necessary to distinguish between the decadence of illiteracy which manifests itself in a challenging and deliberately chosen attitude towards society, and the decadence of illiteracy which establishes social conformism by way of a generally accepted simplification: after all, there is reason for assuming that, given the degree of specialization required in each case, it is less demanding to apply some previously gained knowledge to a painting, a video installation or a film than to a piece of music. But it seems also necessary to distinguish between these forms of decadence and the decadence of illiteracy brought about by the forgetting or the dissimulation of a stupefying effect which is the only trace of the resistance an image offers to culture and cultivation. Perhaps the attempts of painters to attain a certain purity of colour, expressed for example in the mystical or sublime quality of monochromes, testify to the necessity of such distinctions. In marking a limit of vision, they remind the viewer of the fact that, regardless of the definition he or she may find most convincing and accurate, visual culture must posit a link between culture and vision if it is to prove somehow meaningful, and that therefore it must also take on a blinding and ideological function.

Kant argues that all simple colours are beautiful inasmuch as they are pure. Is there not a similarity between the judgement of taste and the illiteracy induced by the prediscursive impact of the image? The contemplation of the beautiful object perpetuates itself. This continuous dwelling in the immediate presence of what appears to be beautiful is of a reflective nature and not of pragmatic interest. It has neither a cognitive nor a practical import, as if the subject immersed in such contemplation were blissfully content with remaining enclosed in the stupidity of a tautology. To be sure, the judgement of taste is still a judgement, a free relationship to the object which does not presuppose the beauty of this object as a quality yet to be determined. It may not be a mere cultural achievement, but it needs culture and it cultivates the mind, alerting the subject to the purposiveness inherent in the pleasure it experiences. However, it is also true that the very purity of the experience and the causality which allows the pleasure taken in the beauty of a single object to persist undisturbed, turn the relationship Kant analyses into something stupid and illiterate, as it were, into something which, devoid of any conceptual determination, cannot lead straightforwardly to an enlightening intellectual progress or progression.

In an essay from 1930 entitled 'The Decadence of Illiteracy', which in many ways could be regarded as a negative counterpart of a film Buñuel made in 1933, *Las Hurdes*, a denunciatory document of the barbarism of illiteracy prevailing in a remote region of rural Spain, the Spanish poet José Bergamín praises the cinematograph as an 'admirably illiterate invention', and opposes the spiritual culture of illiteracy to a culture of the letter, to a culture which, as a result of its lack of faith, comprehends everything analytically, in letter rather than in spirit, and thus reveals itself to be both dead and deadening. The culture of the letter divides and destroys the totality of all things. 'Poetry', Bergamín (2000) says, 'is the form integral illiteracy assumes because it integrates everything spiritually.' Hence, if the opposition between a literal and a spiritual culture is radicalized and transformed into an unsolvable tension between culture as such and an illiteracy which is neither

the mythical characteristic of an originary state of nature nor the product of a specific cultural process, to maintain that there is something irredeemably stupid about an image, and that visual culture originates in a denial of this very stupidity, is to maintain that an image is always the image of everything and thus of nothing, and that culture always signals a loss of faith. By definition, visual culture has no faith in vision and substitutes the intelligence of analysis and the management of images for an unjustifiable and ungraspable stupidity, for an illiteracy which differs ever so slightly from the habit of stupidity, or from the illiteracy generated by the cultural hegemony of the image, in that it does not solidify and fall prey to its own decadence.

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# journal of visual culture



## Obscure imaginings: visual culture and the anatomy of caves

Mark A. Cheetham and Elizabeth D. Harvey

### Abstract

This article speculates about the theory and practice of visual culture by examining the potent linkages between the figure of the cave and the making of images. Because the cave functions as a signifier for the artistic imperative, an endorsement of art history's place in cultural representation and also as a mythic beginning point in the Western hegemony of the visual, its figuration carries within it a set of suppositions on which the visual depends but which are rendered subservient or effaced in the genealogy of visualization. We focus in particular on the creation of Alexander Pope's grotto and on a comparison between Robert Smithson's and Ana Mendieta's evocations of the cave.

### Key words

caves • Ana Mendieta • Alexander Pope • Robert Smithson • visual culture

Representations of animals on the walls of caves at Altamira, Lascaux, or other paleolithic sites are conventionally taken as the collective signs of disciplinary origin for art history, signifiers that represent the beginning of cultural consciousness. Compressed into a presumed moment of primal visuality,<sup>1</sup> such likenesses are often used to register how ancient and transcultural the impulse to make art is; they are imagined as a record of an originary moment in human creativity. Philosophers can also trace the beginning of their speculations to the cave, Plato's vivid allegory of image, shadow, and light in the *Republic* (1941 [c. 400 BC]).<sup>2</sup> Yet the significance of the cave as source, whether disciplinary or representational, is not limited to the fields of study it defines but permeates culture generally. In contemporary literature and film, for example, we continue to witness this preoccupation. In Michael Ondaatje's (1992) novel *The English Patient* and in the 1996 film based on it, finding the desert cave becomes central to the romantic narrative.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, there is a crucial detail from the novel that the film omits: not only is the cave a burial site, but when Almásy makes love to the corpse, it becomes



a scene of necrophilic exchange. This moment evokes a tradition of the cave as passage to the underworld, the place where ghosts are encountered, and this commerce between the living and the spectral shadow becomes, as we shall see, crucial not only to the history of the cave as image but also to the problematic of visual representation it figures.<sup>4</sup> Our juxtaposition of cinematic cave art with its paleolithic prototype is not designed to contrast the 'real' with the contrivances of Hollywood, however, since Almásy – who discovered these cave pictures in 1933 – was an historical person.<sup>5</sup> What this comparison underlines is both the highly provisional and constructed nature of the cave as origin and its frequently contentious political existence. We will not be looking at the cave as an archetype, an element of iconography, or as a natural origin. Rather, we will investigate it as a trope – both visual and discursive – that is embedded in a series of discrete historical and cultural discourses, including archaeology, literature, art history, medicine, geology and mining. This figure points, on the one hand, to a set of material practices and their epistemological assumptions, and on the other, to a series of theoretical ideas concerning the making of images.

The power of image-making encoded in the figure of the cave and its recurrence as a site makes it an ideal place through which to speculate about the theory and practice of visual culture. Because the cave functions as a signifier for the artistic imperative, an endorsement of art history's place in cultural representation, and also as a mythic beginning point in the Western hegemony of the visual, its figuration carries within it a set of suppositions on which the visual depends but which are rendered subservient or effaced in the genealogy of visualization.<sup>6</sup> Visual culture is not exclusively visual or even always visible. We argue that the cave as a figure has buried within it a material history and an augmented corporeal or sensory legacy, which mitigate against the ocularcentric tendency to transcend historical specificity and geological and somatic materiality. Luce Irigaray (1985) offers a powerful critique of Western culture's visual bias which relies, she asserts, on Plato's myth of the cave. She reconsiders the cave, claiming that its occluded material and feminine aspects are the subterranean undergirding of a patriarchal metaphysics. Julia Kristeva (1996) hypothesizes the existence of what she calls a sensory cave which, although inaccessible to cognition, seems to form a deep layer within the human psyche and is associated with the production of art and literature. As natural formations, human constructions and images, caves are necessarily interior, hidden, obscure and, paradoxically, also the sites where visibility is created. As we argue with reference to Robert Smithson's (1996) deconstruction of Platonic hierarchies, artists and theorists struggle with this paradoxical legacy, reproducing caves as projections of inspiration or of the mind itself and constantly interrogating the dialectic it encapsulates between interior and exterior, between materiality and transcendence, between the seen and the unseen.

Why does the cave powerfully embody the notion of beginning and interrogate the nature of the image? Its liminal position, its placement between inside and outside, makes it both a dangerous and privileged passageway between worlds or systems of representation. The cave was, for example, often a space for the reception of prophetic utterances (think, for instance, of the many representations of the Ear of Dionysus in Syracuse, Sicily). In early modern medicine, the anatomist opened the interior cavities of the body, rendering its secrets accessible to the eye (vividly

presented in Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Joan Deijman* [1656], which is itself a reflection on the hollowed-out torso in Mantegna's *Dead Christ* of c. 1480).<sup>7</sup> Sleep, dreams and memory have frequently been imaged as caves, a kind of mythological prefiguration of psychoanalysis, which tries to understand the human subject through recourse to an always fugitive and incompletely accessible prehistory. The physical and psychic are thus simultaneously points of exploratory delving and sites of eruption and discharge, manifested in the body's reproductive processes and in the various expressions of the imaginary. This paradigmatic double perspective, gazing into the interior and looking outward from the inside, functions again in the practices of mining and geology. Caves are the initial entrances through which we extract wealth from the earth as well as the passageways to its mysteries.<sup>8</sup>

Explorations of what we will call 'interiority' in the West, whether psychic, anatomical, or geological, frequently take place in a real or projected interior space and recurrently in caves. A central example is the theorization and ubiquitous use of the camera obscura in Europe from the 16th to the 19th centuries.<sup>9</sup> Descartes, Locke – with his 'dark room' of understanding', which he describes further as a 'closet, wholly shut from light, with only some little openings left, to let in external visible resemblances, or some idea of things without' (*Essay on Human Understanding*, II xi 17, cited in Crary, 1990: 42) – and others repeatedly likened the camera obscura to the mind and therefore saw this technology as a model of human perception. If the mind is imaged as a cave, then it would follow that the camera obscura was in fact nothing less than a frequently portable version of Plato's cavern. The reconstruction of the cave as a privileged site of display allows *The English Patient* to participate in a long tradition of fabricating caves or grottoes as 'natural' sites of wonder and exhibition (the synthetic grottoes of Duke Francesco I de Medici and Isabella D'Este's Palazzo Ducale were used for this purpose). Pliny, for example, in his *Natural History*, calls the 'museum' 'an artificial imitation of a cave' (cited in Miller, 1982: 18); we can surmise that the cave and grotto are part of the pre-history of the museum as we've known it since the late 18th century. In multiplying examples of the cave, however, there is the danger of producing a transhistorical taxonomy. To avoid such an elision of the specifics of time, place and culture, we now turn to the theoretical and corporeal anatomy of the embodied cave.

### **The cave of sensory memory**

Feminist philosopher and psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray (1985) troubles Plato's formulation of metaphysical order in her reinterpretation of the myth of the cave in *Speculum of the Other Woman*. She would have us revisit the metaphorical space of origin both to resist the primacy of vision Plato endorses and to explore the maternal imaginary, the repressed underside of Western philosophy that is represented by Plato's cave. For her and for us, implicit in this linkage of cavern and art-making are buried assumptions about human interiority, gender, the autonomy of art and the psychic primacy of image making. Luce Irigaray contends that the exit from Plato's cave is a repudiation of the maternal body and of materiality in general, a foundational metaphor that becomes as she puts it 'a silent

prescription for Western metaphysics' (p. 243).<sup>10</sup> Her description of the metaphor of the 'inner space, of the den, of the womb or *hystera*, sometimes of the earth' (p. 243) invokes a heritage that joins the dissection of the body, the exploration of its cavities and the investigation into the aetiology of disease or death, with the examination of the earth's interior. This tradition is evident in classical medicine (Hippocrates and Galen, for instance), and the analogy is pervasive in early modern anatomical treatises and literature, which speak repeatedly of cranial caves, the caverns of the ears (Francis Bacon's description of the ear as a 'sinuous cave' [*Sylva* Sect. 282]), and especially of the female pelvis as a grotto or cave. The famous allegory of the female body as garden in Edmund Spenser's epic-romance, *The Faerie Queene* (1981[1596]), for instance, draws on this legacy in its depiction of the Mount of Venus at the center of the garden. The mount is covered with shrubs and bushes that exude aromatic resins, and underneath lies the aperture to a rocky cave, an obvious allusion to the female genitals.<sup>11</sup> The figure of mining as a rape or violation of the earth's maternal body is a frequent one, apparent in literature from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to Milton's fallen angels in *Paradise Lost* mining the earth in order to build Pandemonium. The analogy helps explain the illustrations in such early modern anatomy texts as Vesalius's *De Fabrica* (1543) and Gérard de Lairesse's *Skeleton Emerges from the Grave* (1685), which typically situate the corpse in a landscape, often near ruins, and at times emerging from a grave or crypt. The settings of these anatomical illustrations provide an analogy for understanding the human body as an architectural or telluric microcosm, alluding in the process to an epistemological investigation of the body's interior that is simultaneously threatening because of its intimate familiarity and also distanced by virtue of the analogical linkage, which renders it universal and 'other'. The poignant sense of this anatomical exploration of interiority is apparent in a series of 18th-century wax models of dissected bodies from La Specola in Florence (Poggesi, 1999). These models at once expose the interior 'secrets' hidden by the coverings of flesh and paradoxically suggest in the languid, almost rapturous poses, the continued presence of a seemingly conscious being in the corpse from whom all awareness must necessarily be extinguished. The linkage between the exposed bodily cavity and consciousness thus seems to be expressed by the emotion the flayed figures, the *écorchés*, evince, as if exploring the interior of the body could lead to the center of the mind.<sup>12</sup>

The idea of an anatomical locus or deep-seated psychic mechanism for primordial impulses is one that has been theorized by Julia Kristeva, the Bulgarian born linguist and psychoanalyst. In *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984), Kristeva uses a term that becomes crucial to her theories of language and meaning: the *chora*, which she derives from Plato's *Timaeus*. Plato uses the *chora* in his description of cosmic generation as a way of explaining how the Forms are incorporated into the material world (p. 48A). Whereas for Plato, the *chora* is only incidentally gendered, however, Kristeva's use of the term is closely allied with her definition of the semiotic realm, which is in turn linked to the maternal body and to a temporal moment in the life of the child that precedes entrance into the Symbolic, the realm of language. In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva sets out to define the semiotic, which she does initially through recourse to its etymological senses of mark, trace and precursory sign (p. 25). The *chora* is the process by which

significance is constituted (p. 26), and Kristeva's explication of it thus, as she puts it, 'opens up within the subject' the 'scene of pre-symbolic functions' (p. 27). This scene is, in temporal terms, an early stage in the child's development, and it is, as Kristeva reminds us, governed by the maternal body, which is 'the ordering principle of the semiotic *chora*' (p. 27). The semiotic irrupts continually, manifesting itself in gaps and discontinuities in language, in gesture, in laughter, rhythm and music, and in color (pp. 26–8).<sup>13</sup>

The ideas of the semiotic and its cognate term, the *chora*, remain important throughout Kristeva's career, evolving to its most explicit articulation in Kristeva's (1996) study of Proust, *Time and Sense*. She turns there to a discussion of the relationship between language and sensation, and more specifically still, to the question put by philosophers as to the status of sensation: is a sensation a thought (p. 234)? She answers this query through a critique of Plato's parable of the cave. She suggests that the shadows that the prisoners see dancing on the wall of the cave are the '*symbols of sensory experience*', and yet if the captives leave the cave, they will be blinded by the sun. They must learn to create an intermediate reality that is 'neither sensory illusion' nor an inaccessible truth, but 'a mathematical construction of forms providing a path toward true knowledge' (p. 234). What the prisoners learn, then, is that the senses provide false information, and we have all since Plato therefore 'found ourselves in an *aporia of sensation*' (p. 234). Kristeva turns from this Platonic dismissal of sensation to the case of autism, a psychological enigma that allows her to posit the existence of another cave, one that is, as she puts it, 'more profound and inexpressible than Plato's' (p. 234). This anterior chamber, what Kristeva calls the sensory cavern, is without symbols; it exists prior to language and is constituted by 'lived experience' that has not been given a form through signification (pp. 234–5). This cave is, she suggests, both 'ubiquitous' and 'irreducible to language' (p. 235), for, far from being specific to autism, it is 'an essential part of the psychic apparatus' (p. 235). The sensory cavern is, put in the simplest terms, an archaic substratum within the human psyche that lies beneath and behind language and that can be rendered accessible through 'perversion, art, or psychoanalysis' (p. 235). Indeed, this cavern is prior even to memory; it is what Kristeva in another moment calls 'this camera obscura', an archaic trace of a moment before the 'I', was differentiated, when it was still fused with 'a not-yet *other*' (p. 238).

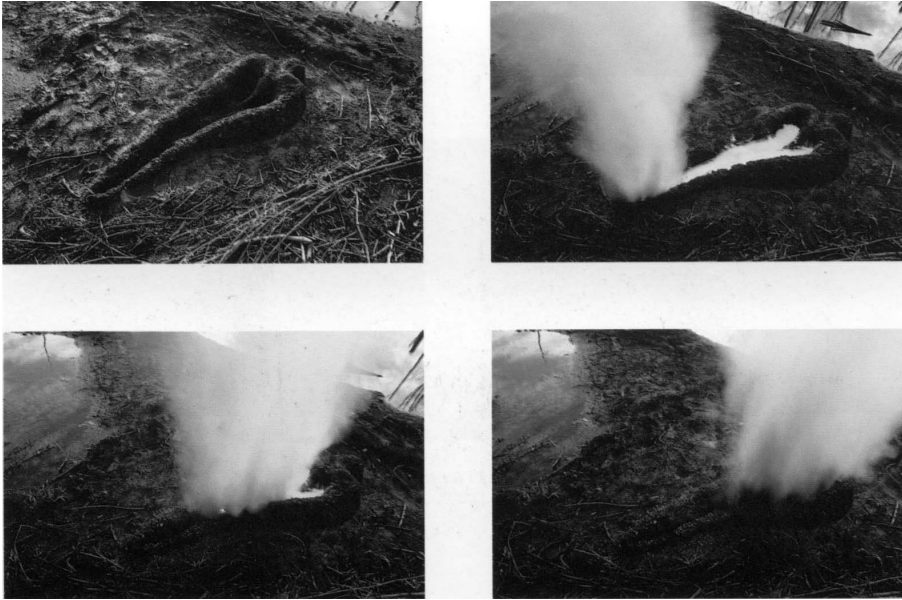
What would it mean for a female artist to confront rather more directly the conjunction between the cave, sensation–signification, and the maternal body? We want to try to answer that question in specific terms by turning to a group of works by Ana Mendieta, a Cuban-American artist, who died in controversially violent circumstances in 1985. Mendieta was both a figurative and literal exile, because she was sent from the country of her birth, Cuba, to the US in 1961 after Castro's declaration of Cuba as a socialist country (Blocker, 1999: 50). She and her sister were put in various foster homes and orphanages, and their mother did not join them in Iowa until five years later. Mendieta's work has been analyzed in terms of this exile and her eventual return in 1981 to the maternal/national body from which she had been separated when she was 12, and there is strong logic to seeing the sculptural works that she created in 1981 in those terms. These works, entitled the *Rapestrian Sculptures* (from the Latin 'inscribed in rock'), are a series of 10 female

figures that she carved into the walls of two remote caves in Jaruco State Park near Havana (Clearwater, 1993: 11). That the interior of one of the caves is red reinforces the association with the interior of the maternal body, as does Mendieta's own statement that the carvings represent a 'return to the maternal breasts' (p. 130). The figures are Taino creation goddesses, and there has been a tendency to read the carvings as essentialist, as references to a universal maternal presence. In contradistinction to this interpretation, we now consider Mendieta's *Rupestrian Sculptures* and her *Silueta* series in relation to the Kristevan anterior cave, which figures irrecuperable origin, and to Irigaray's call to represent the unsymbolizable mother–daughter relationship. Mendieta's art uses caves in ways that rewrite the Platonic myth. She simultaneously invokes the materiality of the earth and the female body, which are anchored in the specificity of a particular political and historical matrix, and underscores the fragility of matter, which is subject to erosion by weather and time and conveyed to us in the spectral form of photographs.

Mendieta draws on the legacy of the Taino, the pre-hispanic native people of the Antilles (Clearwater, 1993: 12) as a kind of double gesture, both as return to the deep, almost obliterated history of her own homeland and as a recognition that this cultural 'point of origin' is a reconstructed past. Little knowledge remains about the Taino people; what there is was collected in the journals of Ramon Pané, a friar who sailed with Christopher Columbus in 1493, on his second journey to the Antilles (Clearwater, 1993: 12). But the journals were lost and are known only through an Italian translation, so that rather than representing some kind of recoverable originary moment, this body of myth and the identity of the people who created it are ghostly vestiges, available through intermediaries and as a record of an absence. The caves themselves are palimpsested with the history of colonization and political strife: they were the refuges for the Indians who hid from the Creoles, for the black slaves who escaped from plantation owners, for the Creoles who sought to elude the Spanish, and for the communists who were pursued by the capitalists (Blocker, 1999: 102). The caves are hollowed into the side of a cliff, and their purposeful inaccessibility as works of art is a crucial feature of their meaning. As Charles Merewether (1996) has astutely argued, Robert Smithson's work, which was known to her through her teachers at Iowa, was an important source of inspiration for Mendieta. Smithson's early fascination with Mexico in 1966 and his use of art to present a critique of society shaped her own artistic practice, but the influence that may be even more important to our understanding of her work is his theory of the 'non-site', a place once occupied by something but which is emptied in the wake of its excavation or quarrying. This entropic landscape is marked by loss, exile, eviction (Merewether, 1996: 114), and it is in this sense of vestige and loss, rather than a sense of reunion with the national or maternal body, that distinguishes both the *Silueta* series and the *Rupestrian Sculptures*. The *Silueta* series, performance pieces that are also recorded on film, register the trace of a body on the earth, so that Mendieta's form is imprinted in the landscape in the empty outline of hollowed space or ashes, a shadow of a disappearance, a burial without a body (p. 114). One of the *Silueta* series, which Mendieta performed in Mexico in 1980, inscribes a silhouette of Guabancex, the Taino goddess of the wind, in the earth and burns it, leaving the outline etched in ashy residue (Figure 1).

This is the same figure that Mendieta carved into the rock of a Cuban cave in 1981





**Figure 1** Ana Mendieta, *Untitled* (from the *Silueta* series), 1980. Earth and gunpowder *silueta*, Iowa. Courtesy of the Estate of Ana Mendieta and Galerie Lelong, New York.



**Figure 2** Ana Mendieta, *Rupestrian Sculptures: Guabancex (Goddess of the Wind) and Itiba Cahubaba (Old Mother Blood)*, 1981. Carved cave walls executed at Escaleros de Jaruco, Jaaruco State Park, Havana, Cuba. Courtesy of the Estate of Ana Mendieta and Galerie Lelong, New York.

(Figure 2), and the repetition of the figure, first as a mutable silhouette and then as a barely accessible form cut into rock, seems to underscore its evanescence. The *Rupestrian Sculptures* are given to us both as photographs of the cave sites and as a series of 10 photographic etchings Mendieta made of the cave sculptures, and for most viewers, they exist only in these images, shadow versions – like the images from Plato’s cave – of a reality that eludes us, that has disappeared. Roland Barthes reminds us of the ghostly nature of the photograph (Merewether, 1996: 115), and these images, then, are phantom vehicles for a history of a disappeared people, both the political refugees and the native culture whose narratives of origin are set in these caves. Just as Irigaray suggests that women’s fundamental condition is dereliction, an exile from an ontological dwelling place, so too do these caves become places of exile and abandonment rather than sites of metaphysical habitation and identity. Mendieta’s photos are assembled in a black cloth box, and the beige tonality of the etchings evokes archaeological illustrations in early texts of lost civilizations (Clearwater, 1993: 18, 20). They are a symptom of what Mendieta calls the ‘deculturation’ of indigenous peoples, a process that was for the Taino Indians genocide and what is for the so-called ‘under-developed’ peoples of the 20th century a deracination, an uprooting of a national culture for the purposes of exploitation (Blocker, 1999: 40). The sense of exile, the preoccupation with burial and birth, and the powerful use of ashes or other residues that characterize Mendieta’s works are not only political and national, of course, but profoundly feminist. The bodies that populate her pieces are female, and the *Rupestrian Sculptures* feature such mythical figures as Guabancex (the goddess of the wind) or Itiba Cahubaba (Old Mother Blood) or Mother Earth, who died giving birth by Caesarean section to quadruplets who went on to populate the world (Clearwater, 1993: 13–4). If, as Kristeva suggests, the anterior cave is a psychic phenomenon that underlies both culture and the psyche, that has disappeared from memory and exists only in traces, ghostly vestiges, that is associated with a powerful, consuming and often abjected maternal body, then we may begin to understand the photographic traces of Mendieta’s cave sculptures in these ways, as a choral remnant, a remnant from a forgotten past that is only incompletely accessible.

## Mining images

If, as we’ve claimed, caves of various sorts frequently and paradigmatically generate images through their articulation of interiority, it seems important to consider in some detail the long tradition of creating artificial grottoes (see Miller, 1982). The term ‘grotto’ – from the Latin ‘crypta’, with its associations of veneration and antiquity – is tied to the function of caves as burial sites.<sup>14</sup> For the ancient Greek and Latin poets, caves were magical passageways between worlds, transitional meeting places of the divine and quotidian planes of existence. They were transformative microcosms of the metamorphic essence of the world order. The construction of grottoes arose from this ancient speleolotry; we see examples as early as that at Hadrian’s Villa, built outside Rome in the second century. As we noted earlier, Renaissance practice made explicit a combination of Pliny’s description of a cave-like place for the muses – a museum – with the later sense of the museum as a site in which to display curiosities and works of art. The very



construction of artificial grottoes appears to be an act of replication analogous to image making. In the 1720s, inspired particularly by the classical literary evocations of caves and grottoes, Alexander Pope – poet, landscape architect and translator of Homer – extended this tradition by forging his elaborate grotto at Twickenham, upstream from London, into nothing less than an organism for the creation of images. The greatest earth-artist of recent times, Robert Smithson, envisioned a project that both inherited and offered a critical revision of the grotto conventions elaborated by Pope. In his 1971 ‘Cinema Cavern’ project, Smithson proposed to build an underground movie theatre in an excavated cave or mine, a space that would reveal for its captive audience the Platonic assumptions governing the creation of the image.

Pope’s grotto forms part of a large garden project at his estate just west of London. Designed as a subterranean passage, in the overall scheme, the grotto served to link the garden of Pope’s country home with its river front along the Thames, a considerable challenge topographically, given that a roadway intervened. In a drawing of c. 1725–30, most likely by William Kent, we can discern the entrance to the grotto and even see the Thames beyond, marked by a passing boat. Pope’s first version of the grotto was in part a *Wunderkammer* – containing various rare rocks and shells, as we know from a contemporary inventory – and in part an inspirational if nostalgic escape to a supposed nymphaeum.<sup>15</sup> Rugged though it must have been, it was a decidedly textual place, a poet’s refuge.<sup>16</sup> We see its outlines in a sketch by Pope himself, dated January 1740 (Figure 3). This diagram is as much evidence of Pope’s ongoing plans for his creation as it is a record of its extant properties. While we see that it contains a spring, for example (top right), we also see Pope’s questions about its evolution. ‘What proper for a natural roof?’ he asks (top left). Pope put these and many other queries to his friend and physician, Dr William Oliver of Bath. Almost a year after this plan, Pope produced another illustration. It shows the results of visits and discussions with Oliver: a much enlarged grotto that moved away from – or at least added layers on top of – the earlier product of his literary imagination.

A sense of Pope’s new claims for the experience of his grotto can be felt when we relate his own written account to the second plan and to a diagram from 1785 by Samuel Lewis (Figure 4). Clearly Pope drew inspiration from these surroundings. Two contemporary sketches (attributed to Kent, but perhaps by Dorothy Boyle, Countess of Burlington), show him writing in his grotto. Pope relates that he liked to use the lamp seen in these images in order to enjoy the unusual effects its light made as it glanced off shells and minerals. Related effects, even the image of the Thames, were produced by the mirrors he placed in the ceiling of the main corridor. Most extraordinarily in our context of caves, interiority, and the fabrication of images, however, is Pope’s vivid likening of his grotto to a camera obscura: ‘When you shut the Doors of this Grotto’, he wrote in 1725, ‘it becomes on the instant, from a luminous Room, a *Camera obscura*; on the Walls of which all the objects of the River, Hills, Woods, and Boats, are forming a moving Picture in their visible Radiations ...’ (Brownell, 1978: 255).

What Pope orchestrated and could control for his own pleasure and revelation, inside his cave, was the reduplication of the picturesque effects of his garden, its



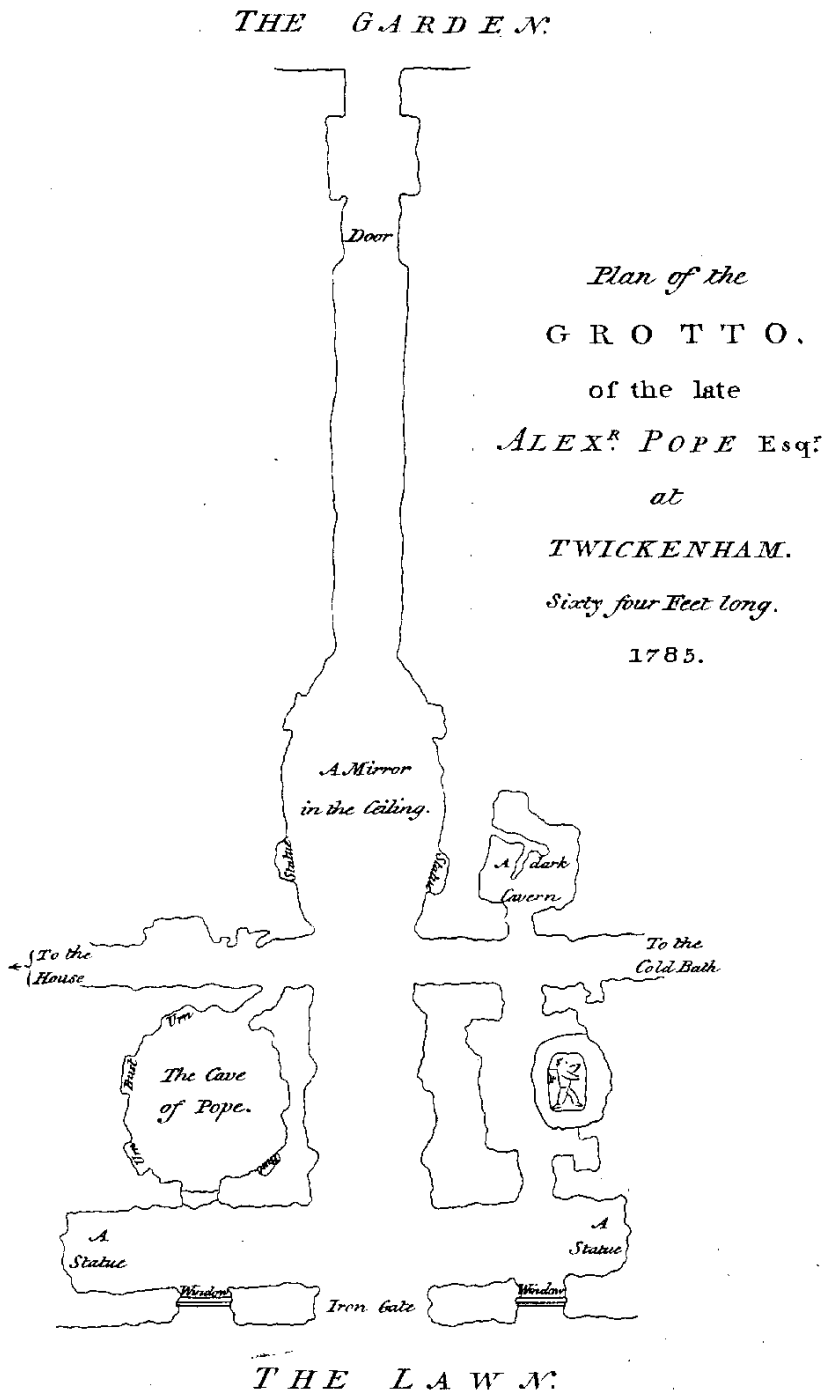
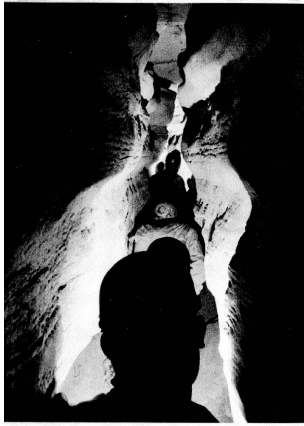


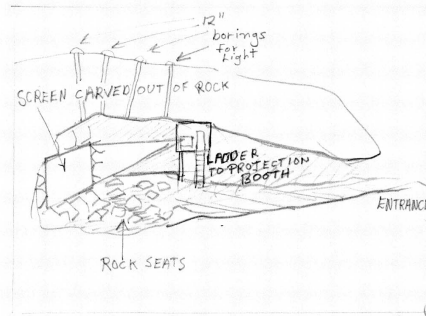
Figure 4 Pope's Grotto by Samuel Lewis, 1785. Courtesy of the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames Local Studies Collection.

Towards the Development of a Cinema Cavern  
 or the movie goer as spelunker R. Smithson 1971



11. Many spelologists believe that the total length of passages in the cave system in Flat Ridge, Kentucky, is the greatest in this country. COURTESY: SPORTS ILLUSTRATED, PHOTO BY ROBERT HALLM

← Movie goer  
 as  
 spelunker



Natural Cave or Abandoned Mine  
 (hypothetical) Truly "Underground"

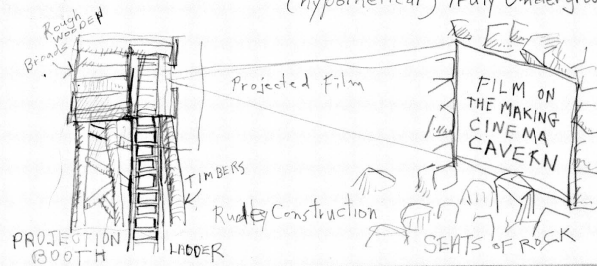


Figure 5 Robert Smithson, *Towards the Development of a 'Cinema Cavern'*, 1971. Pencil, photograph, tape. Collection of the Estate of Robert Smithson. Courtesy of the James Cohan Gallery, New York.

question takes us back to Pope's rebuilding of his caverns in 1740. Simply put, he renovated his classical nymphaeum to resemble a mine. In 1739 and 1740, Pope visited quarries near Bath. At this time he began to discuss the redesign of his grotto with Oliver. Oliver in turn enlisted the help of his relative, the reverend William Borlase of Cornwall, a geologist and natural philosopher.

Borlase and Pope corresponded and Pope eventually ordered all sorts of materials from Borlase – many tonnes of Cornish rock, as would be found in local tin mines. These supplies Pope arranged, as Borlase directed, to 'make the Place resemble Nature in all her workings' (Pope in Brownell, 1978: 262). Of course this sentiment alludes to Ovid's famous dictum that a grotto should seem to be 'wrought by no artist's hand' (*Metamorphoses* III: 157–6; Mack, 1969: 58). Nonetheless, by October of 1740, Pope's Twickenham grotto very much mirrored mines described in Borlase's later *Natural History of Cornwall* (1748). Instead of the curiosities he displayed earlier, Pope was now clear that he wanted to see and appreciate authentic minerals, not those foreign to the area or merely impressive to the eye. He made this explicit in orders for materials and in his famous verse description of his earth work, the *Verses on the Grotto* (1741), where he lauded the golden-age possibility that one could 'eye the Mine without a Wish for Gold' (Mack, 1969: 69). Classical allusion and nostalgia had, to some extent, been supplemented by scientific truth and the understanding afforded by contemporary viewing – an understanding, we would suggest, of how both images and the earth itself are created within a grotto where the contrived 'mixture of realities and imagery' was manifestly visible.

Is there an unbridgeable span of time and cultural difference separating Pope's grotto and Robert Smithson's vision of a cinema cavern in 1971? Pope and his Augustan world of classical allusions and mining technology were unconcerned with the ecological implications of their environmental meddling, but like Smithson, Pope did dwell purposefully on how images come to be made with light ... in the dark. He was concerned with the movement of images in his grotto and the effects he created mixed reality and appearance in a thoroughly Platonic manner. Here is his description of his sketch for this project (Figure 5):

What I would like to do is build a cinema in a cave or an abandoned mine, and film the process of its construction. That film would be the only film shown in the cave. The projection booth would be made out of crude timbers, the screen carved out of a rock wall and painted white, the seats could be boulders. It would be a truly 'underground cinema'.

Smithson was an inveterate researcher, always scouting new sites for his planned alterations to and installations in the landscape. For the underground cinema, he visited many mines. His remarks about a descent into a copper mine in British Columbia add detail to our understanding of his cavern cinema and to its comparison with Pope's grotto.

I remember a horizontal tunnel that bored into the side of a mountain. When one was at the end of the tunnel inside the mine, and looked back at the entrance, only a pinpoint of light was visible. One shot I had in mind was to



**Figure 6** WITASALO, Shirley, Canadian, b. 1949. Black and White, 1986. Oil on canvas, 167.9 x 213.5 cm. Gift of Alison and Alan Schwartz, 1997. Courtesy of the artist and the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. Photo credit: Carlo Catenazzi.

move slowly from the interior of the tunnel towards the entrance and end outside. (Smithson, in Hobbs, 1981:185)

The interior space described here is understandable as a lateral camera obscura or perhaps a pinhole camera. If Smithson had completed his film of the construction of his cinema, he might have included in it this shot towards the light. One can imagine beginning in near darkness and seeing the light fill more and more of the frame, in effect, loosening one's chains, turning around, and walking right out of Plato's cave (Plato, of course, would never have had an artist lead one out of the metaphysical shadows). He would have inverted the slow zoom in Michael Snow's famous film *Wavelength*, which was first shown in early 1967 in New York. Whether or not Smithson had this film in mind, like Snow, he seemed intent on filming his own most fundamental sense perceptions and aesthetic predilections.

Smithson (1996) goes on to say that 'in the Cayuga Rock Salt Mine under Lake Cayuga in New York State', site of a project he realized in 1968, 'I did manage to get some still shots of mirrors stuck in salt piles' (p. 185). Gary Shapiro (1995) has written that 'Smithson's entire Cayuga project can be seen as a parody of the Platonic myth of the cave as well as of Plato's conception of art as a mirror' (p. 95). These Cayuga mirrors constituted one of Smithson's signature 'non-sites', his brilliant invention for pointing towards the complex and never exactly corresponding mirror relation between nature and art, a dialogue at once profoundly abstract and irrefragably material. In this project, mirrors that were normally blind because of the mine's darkness were balanced by Smithson's installation of other mirrors on piles of salt in the Cornell gallery space. He liked the fact that mirrors produce images without human control, but of course he also intervened by placing these image machines in nature. Mirrors and non-sites are productive of what Smithson (1996) called 'refuse', that unmanageable Derridean 'remainder' between mind and matter. 'My work is impure', he wrote, 'it is clogged with matter ... it is a quiet catastrophe of mind and matter' (p. 194). Mirrors for Smithson explicitly 'reconstruct one's inability to see' (p. 130) and cannot, therefore, be false and subject to Socratic correction, as Plato intended with his parable of the cave. For Smithson, too, the artist is unable to lead us out of the shadows.<sup>17</sup>

## Endings: mirror caves

Pope's placement of a mirror in his grotto returns us to the conjunction of vision and the cave that Luce Irigaray (1985) makes central to *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Some critics have suggested that the structure of her book – which begins with Irigaray reading Freud, engages in the central sections with such Western philosophers as Plotinus, Descartes, Kant and Hegel, and concludes with Irigaray's extended consideration of Plato's parable of the cave – is itself a reversed temporal vision, a mirror image. When we recall that *speculum* is both the Latin word for mirror and also the instrument used to examine the interior cavities of the female body, we can see how cave and mirror may converge in her analysis. She is explicit in her cave imagery, for in 'Plato's *Hystera*', as she entitles this section, she employs the Greek word for womb, a body cavity, a disavowed source in and of the



maternal body. She makes much of the perspective of sight, and the privileging of sight over other sensory data, especially tactility, a tendency that subtends the ocularcentrism of Western metaphysics. Irigaray offers a critique of Plato's myth, which, she argues, is based on a metaphor that converts female body into cave, a metaphorization that is itself a replication, a copy (p. 279). Mirrors are like eyes, for they break up and refract vision. Multiplication of the image substitutes for human generation and obscures the material base of maternal reproduction. Irigaray understands Plato's cave as a metaphorization of this movement, a replacement of cave by the visual, or, as she puts it: 'Thus a bony cavernous socket encloses the eye' (p. 254). For her, the eye and thus vision are always in the cave. What Irigaray would have us do is to re-enter Plato's cavern and see it not through the speculum or Pope's mirror, but rather with Mendieta's and Smithson's sense of disappearance, as imbued with the loss upon which Western metaphysics – with its imperative to exit from the cave, which in turn guarantees the illusion of representation as a truth – is built. We may want to repress or stop up the return to the cave as source, but Irigaray instructs us in a different kind of looking, to the silver behind the mirror, to a view of the cave's interior.

The contemporary painter Shirley Wiitasalo gives us an image that crystallizes this reversal. Her laconically and ironically entitled painting *Black and White* (Figure 6) from 1986 has us look out from the interior of one cave, across a space, and into two others, which in their binocularly evoke Irigaray's bony eye socket. We gaze, in other words, from the mouth of a cave into the hollow eye-sockets of a skull, as if we are inhabiting the trope of the cranium as cave, as if we are looking into a face of death that is simultaneously an allegory of vision. The painting is peopled with three figures: one looks, as we do, into the double-eyed caves; a second is positioned at the entrance to the right-hand 'socket', with body turned, as if gazing back at the first figure (a kind of mirror image); and the third is crouched in the space between the caves. Although exposed in the white glare at the centre of the painting, the third figure is not allowed the vision such light should make possible, for Wiitasalo has masked the eyes. A figure of blindness that casts a shadow that it cannot itself see is thus situated at the intersection of these gazes. By representing seeing simultaneously from multiple perspectives, *Black and White* interrogates the metaphysics of vision inherited from Plato's myth of the cave. The anthropocentricity of Wiitasalo's image insists, like Irigaray and Mendieta, on visibility's embodiment, on implicating us in the inevitable mortality of our own gaze. The painting pulls against the stark dichotomy of its title, the words moving beyond the strict formalism they would seem to connote to gather colloquial or social associations such as distinctions of judgment or racial division. The entrance to the cave in the immediate foreground is composed of intricate shades of grey, and the velvety texture of the pigment provides a sense of tactility that mitigates against the hegemony of the scopic. The liminal staging of all three figures, as well as our own position of looking, which is poised at the cavern entrance, situates this allegory of vision in a 'grey area', a metaphysics of liminality and mutability that refuses simple binaries or transcendence.<sup>18</sup> For Smithson, too, art in the cinematic cavern serves to remind us of our *inability* to see. Or, as Wiitasalo suggests, all vision takes place in an intermediate zone, the space between sight and consciousness (looking from the outside in) and the darkness of origin (from the inside out).

## Acknowledgements

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## Notes

1. Whitney Davis (1996) provides a detailed reading of art history's investments in the prehistoric. Conkey (1995) has written about the problems with the term 'Paleolithic art'.
2. Plato's attempt in Book VII of the *Republic* to liberate the prisoners from their metaphysical servitude by leading them out of the cave questions the status and source of all imagery. The impulse to escape from the cavern establishes an almost hegemonic hierarchy of the mental (the Forms) over the visual and material (the shadows or Appearances). The cave thus operates at once as a source for, and as a reflexive interrogation of, this process of imagining in general. Of the many important readings of Plato's allegory of the cave, one of the most challenging is Kaja Silverman's in *World Spectators* (2000).
3. The search for the cave is the occasion of Katharine Clifton and Lazslo Almásy's meeting; the discovery of the delicate swimming figures painted on its subterranean desert wall prompts Katharine to reproduce these images. It is the site where Almásy leaves the injured Katharine when he goes for help in 1939 after their plane crashes, and the place to which he returns to retrieve her dead body three years later.
4. Michael Ondaatje's most recent novel, *Anil's Ghost* (2000) examines the connections between caves, representation and interiority in even greater detail. Caves – and their corollary associations of origin and interiority – are the central structuring image or metaphor in *Anil's Ghost*, which is set in Sri Lanka from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, a period of violent political upheaval. The novel's central character is a young forensic anthropologist named Anil Tissera who, like Ondaatje himself, was born in Sri Lanka but was educated and lives in the West. At the behest of the Centre of Human Rights in Geneva, she returns to her birthplace to investigate the political killings that are ravaging the country. The epigraph to the novel is a fragment of a Sri Lankan miner's song, and the book is prefaced with a memory of Anil's work with a forensic team in Guatemala, which involved both the excavation of a mass grave and the forensic examination of those buried within it. This kind of investigation, adjudicating political atrocity and/or genocide by searching for hidden burial sites, is an increasingly frequent feature of global politics; we need think only of the recent excavations in Kosovo and the political interpretations of them to realize the frequency with which this image of mass disinterment occurs. A feature of the systematic political killings of the 20th century is the concomitant impulse to erase the memory of the dead, to excise any trace of their existence. The causalities of these circumstances are rarely accorded the finality of death; they are, rather, the 'disappeared', who haunt, by their very absence, the survivors. Ondaatje's novel is densely peopled with these ghosts, family members and friends, who are buried in the memories of those who outlive them. The bits of information that are collected in the Civil Rights Movement office in Sri Lanka record snippets of reminiscence: a name, a date, the moment of disappearance. These fragments are then juxtaposed with the discovery of various mass graves, which no sooner uncovered lead to more killings. As Ondaatje says:

There had been continual emergency from 1983 onwards, racial attacks and political killings. The terrorism of the separatist guerilla groups, who were

fighting for a homeland in the north. The insurrection of the insurgents in the south, against the government. The counterterrorism of the special forces against both of them. The disposal of bodies by fire. The disposal of bodies in rivers or in the sea. The hiding and then reburial of corpses. (pp. 42–3)

The ghosts of these dead are buried but refuse to stay buried, as if the earth cannot contain the secrecy of their death.

5. Lazslo Almásy's expedition to North Africa is documented in a book still available in German (Almásy, 1997). The Cave of Swimmers does exist, though its exact position is contested by archaeologists and the site was inaccessible for political reasons when the film was made.
6. See Martin Jay (1993), who provides an important study of the discourses of visibility and the denigration of vision in French 20th-century theory and culture, and Jonathan Crary's (1990) provocative book, which examines the relationship between vision and the observer in 19th-century culture. Both Jay and Crary employ an encompassing sense of the visual that includes the discursive and both interrogate the historical hegemony of visibility. In his forthcoming book, *Philosophical Phantasms*, Gary Shapiro challenges Jay's notion of the ocularcentric.
7. For discussions of visibility and early modern anatomy, see Sawday (1995) and Hillman (1997).
8. The extraction of the earth's riches from mines and psychological investigations of the human subject take place conspicuously in caves, for example, Louis-Léopold Boilly, *Portrait of a Woman*, 1805–06. In images such as Giovanni Battista Piranesi's *Di Due Spelonche* (1764), the classical references to the ancient world and the economic priorities of mining are overlaid visually. Geological exploration and anatomical investigations converge in illustrations that frequently position corpses in natural landscapes, sometimes near caves or grottoes, as in Jan Wandelaar's, *Outermost Order of Muscles, Back View*, c. 1747. Burial scenes such as Caspar David Friedrich's *Grave of Arminius*, 1813, or the exploitation of the cave as site of religious meditation, as in Giovanni Bellini, *St Francis in the Desert*, c. 1480, also engage the reciprocal double perspective, the entrance into the earth and the trope of inspiration from an inner realm.
9. See Jonathan Crary's (1990) discussion of the camera obscura. He says that the camera obscura is 'inseparable from a certain logic of interiority; it is a figure for both the observer who is nominally a free sovereign individual and a privatized subject confined in a quasi-domestic space' (p. 39). At the same time, the camera obscura functions 'to sunder the act of seeing from the physical body of the observer, to decorporealize vision' (p. 39).
10. For a discussion of the many comparisons between Irigaray and Kristeva, see Lynne Huffer (1998: 160, n. 8). There is an obvious similarity between Irigaray's 're-vision' of Plato's cave and the Kristevan *chora*. However, Judith Butler (1993) strenuously argues for the distinction between them. She asserts that whereas Irigaray resists the identification between the *chora* and the feminine – for Irigaray the very impossibility of figuring the feminine constitutes it 'as the impossible yet necessary foundation of what can be thematized and figured' – Kristeva accepts the collapse of the *chora* into the maternal (pp. 41–3). Huffer follows Butler's lead, going so far as to script a parodic dialogue about caves between Irigaray and Kristeva. Huffer contends that Kristeva makes the *chora* a maternal space and that furthermore, it is constructed according to psychoanalytic structures of the individual psyche. According to Huffer, the political dimension of Plato's *chora* is transformed by Kristeva into the solipsistic psychic space of the individual subject, translating the movement of choral space into stasis, and producing a freedom without ethics (pp. 89–95). Both Butler and Huffer object to Kristeva's putative nostalgia for the maternal, her apparent homophobia, and her

'imperialist' impulses. Neither consider the 'sensory cave', as we do here. We argue that the sensory cave is an extension of Kristeva's original theorizing of the *chora*, and its interest lies less in its linkage to the maternal body than to a sensorium that underpins the scopic regime. As we suggest in our juxtaposition of Kristeva with Ondaatje and Mendieta, the sensory and emotional realm to which Kristeva alludes does not preclude a strong linkage with politics and ethics, as her comments on autism in *Time and Sense* or such works as *Powers of Horror* demonstrate.

11. Spenser (1981[1596]: 3.6, 43–8). Ondaatje (2000) also uses this analogy in an erotic reminiscence in *Anil's Ghost*: 'He would move down the bed, kissing her brown hip, her hair, to the cave within her' (p. 169).
12. The tension between death and consciousness that is represented by the anatomical wax models seems to figure in an important way both the process of forensic dissection in *Anil's Ghost* and the workings of political and personal memory. The first corpses that Anil examines in Sri Lanka are recently dead, fresh enough, we're told, still to be someone (p. 13), to have an identity, a history. Anil's job is to determine the cause of death; she is paired with Sarath, a Sri Lankan archaeologist, whose passion is the distant past he customarily studies, but this work is literally displaced by the political forensic investigation he undertakes with Anil. In the process of moving the results of a recent dig, sixth-century findings from a sacred grave for monks near Bandarawela, Anil sees a piece of bone that is obviously more recent. Her curiosity incites Sarath to get a permit to explore the Bandarawela caves, and in the back of one of those recesses, they unearth a skeleton that was clearly 'not prehistoric' (p. 50), but rather, a murder victim who had been buried, exhumed and then buried again inside the sacred cave. The investigation into the identity of the skeleton, whom they name Sailor, occupies Sarath and Anil for the rest of the novel, and it is an exploration that leads them into Sri Lankan history, into their own memories, and into Sailor's past. The clues to his identity turn out to be hidden in the bones, buried in the habits of standing or squatting that ultimately reveal his most recent occupation to have been a miner, a worker in the gem pits (pp. 179–80). He would have crouched in the four-foot high dark tunnels with his arms stretched above him, seeking in the mud and silt walls the jewels deposited there, and this posture is then imprinted on his skeleton, a permanent memory of the hazardous misery endured by those who extract gems from the earth. Cave, mine, burial and autopsy all hold the clues to his identity, and to the government's attempt to obliterate the memory of his existence.
13. The cave is thus closely associated throughout *Anil's Ghost* with the function and nature of recollection, for they are the repository of Sri Lanka's own cultural and national memory. The central section of the novel narrates Anil and Sarath's journey to visit Palipana, the blind archaeologist and epigrapher who had helped reclaim Sri Lankan archaeology from the Europeans. Palipana lives in the Grove of Ascetics, a ruined sixth-century monastery that is part forest and part cave, a sanctuary where history is embedded in and inscribed on the rock around him. The novel is obsessed with memory of other sorts as well: the characters are all burdened, at times driven mad, by their memories. Anil's friend Leaf is diagnosed in the course of the novel with Alzheimer's disease, an affliction that erases personality as it destroys memory, and memories of the past – Anil in Arizona, Anil's failed marriage, her lover – intrude themselves throughout the narrative, as if past and present were superimposed, the present drawing continually on this hidden archive of past experience. Anil remembers a moment in her medical training in England when, cutting tissue away near the base of the brain, she sees a small knot of fibers composed of nerve cells (p. 134). Her professor calls it '*Amygdala*', the dark part of the brain, a place that houses 'pure emotion', anger and fear in particular. The nature of these emotions seem complexly linked both to the body and also to memory, but whether these memories are ancestral, familial, or personal can only be speculated on by medical science.

14. To a remarkable extent, *Anil's Ghost* figures a series of connections among caves, the making of images and politics. A long passage suggests the complexity of these associations:

There are images carved into or painted on rock – a perspective of a village seen from the height of a nearby hill, a single line depicting a woman's back bent over a child – that have altered Sarath's perceptions of his world. Years ago he and Palipana entered unknown rock darkensses, lit a match and saw hints of colour. They went outside and cut branches off a rhododendron, and returned and set them on fire to illuminate the cave, smoke from the green wood acrid and filling the burning light.

These were discoveries made during the worst political times, alongside a thousand dirty little acts of race and politics, gang madness and financial gain. War having come this far like a poison into the bloodstream could not get out.

Those images in caves through the smoke and firelight. The night interrogations, the vans in daylight picking up citizens at random. That man he had seen taken away on a bicycle. Mass disappearances at Suriyakanda, reports of mass graves at Ankumbura, mass graves at Akmeemana. Half the world, it felt, was being buried, the truth hidden by fear, while the past revealed itself in the light of a burning rhododendron bush. (pp. 156–7)

Sarath's most revered teacher was Palipana, who, late in his career, retired to the seclusion of a cave region in the countryside because of a scandal surrounding the veracity of his purported discovery and translation of certain ancient national texts. In the passage just quoted, Ondaatje moves us rapidly from the wonder of an archaeological discovery in the first paragraph, through what seems to be a starkly contrasting contemporary period of political wrongdoing, and then to what becomes characteristic of the novel, a frightening and disorienting concatenation of ancient images and the recent atrocities that share in the caves' remoteness. What this section offers, midway in the novel, is a reflection on the theme of the interpenetration of past and present in versions of truth and in images. Sarath's recollection of his findings in the caves with Palipana thus forms part of his struggle with the main event of the narrative: Anil's discovery deep within a cave of the body of a casualty of the political turmoil, a murder victim disguised by being buried with much older human remains. Anil and Sarath must not only unearth who the deceased is, but more significantly, each must decide what the forensic and political 'truth' of their revelation means, to themselves and to the Sri Lankan authorities.

15. While Pope's grotto is not unique in its display of geological findings, it does, more than any other site from this time, explicitly combine the literary and philosophical interest in caves with the new science of geology. A good comparison is the artificial grotto at Hawkstone Park, Shropshire, where, in the 1790s, sandstone cliffs apparently mined for copper during Roman times were further excavated and then decorated with shells and minerals.
16. For a discussion of the connections between Pope's grotto at Twickenham and his literary caves, see Miller (1982) and Mack (1969).
17. In *Anil's Ghost* (Ondaatje, 2000), caves are sites where time is expanded through memory and where it is also potentially compressed by the physical propinquity of otherwise disparate entities, for example, of Sailor's skeleton and those of much older individuals.
18. *Anil's Ghost* (Ondaatje, 2000) is, finally, also preoccupied with this sense of vision, registered in Palipana's blindness, and even more strikingly in the ancient ritual of painting eyes on the statue of the Buddha. The eyes must be painted at dawn by an artisan whose back is to the statue, and he must thus work with his arms over his head

(like the gem miner) and look into a mirror, an acknowledgement perhaps that human vision, unlike the Buddhist gaze, is always only a reflection.

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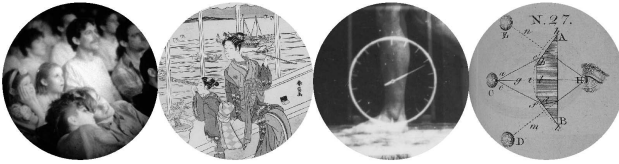
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# journal of visual culture



## Events

Over the course of the next two or three years, something will emerge from this section of the *journal of visual culture* by way of an implied discussion of the meaning of an *event*, and the forms of an *appearance*. This may be as an active, perhaps autobiographical, but certainly perplexed positioning of a self or an avatar, in relation to a world haunted, dreamed, observed, heard, thought and choreographed by Visual Culture.

## The Jewel-Bearing Tree (reissued)

‘I do not want the Other to speak of you.’

At once salacious and silly, the rustling of the crowd, and its murmurous feet, suggested a kind of fantastic fortune. I have banged my head. There is fine blue light, and relation. Refulgent ardours and absent kisses. And, in this, mention is made of a relief at the freedom from the responsibility of meaning. Entirely, I am burned away.

Ecstatic disorientations of this kind, non-toxic, and instances of the uninvited recollection of fragments by others, have long proved their worth to those with a waged interest in the visual culture of places. Plural, and by equal measure seductive and illuminating, such visualized constellations of somatic, temporal and sentimental figures have played a part in articulating novel cultural objects of novel cultural interest. And, as formulations of the as yet unobserved, they have often been constructed as important features of powerfully reasoned arguments which bring political and cultural liberty, interpretative probities and the predictive coherence of historical archives, into relation.

The shorthand citation of such individuals as Walter Benjamin, Frantz Fanon or Maurice Merleau-Ponty in exemplary justification of this, may not help that much in the end. They may mislead. These are figures that have been enormously influential exponents of the types of thinking that have contributed to the precipitation of Visual Culture as a field of study which hopes to preserve for itself a condition of ongoing emergence and intellectual re-situation. They have been practical advocates of both the importance of such kinds of creative–cognitive

inventions, and the sometimes unexpected forms of language and conception that may be thought appropriate to them. The writing of a series of suspected selves in relation to a proposed event, historical, archival or otherwise, has been the prized feature of their work. Unfortunately, the related force, the desire to manage the provenance of intellectual typologies, has isolated them. And, it may be that the very exemplarity of these heroic characters detracts too much from the impression that experimentally ecstatic invention is more common and pervasive a habit than appearances suggest.

One of the things shared by these critical avatars is a permissive delight in their own perplexity at appearances; a delight that is tempered by an engaged and salutary refusal to allow that perplexity to dilute to a trivially euphoric mysticism. That kind of mysticism is addressed precisely in a disinclination to allow anything to inherit the insidiously dumbfounding prestige that is supplied by paradigmatic status. Where Visual Culture exists as a mode of engagement which first refuses paradigms, that refusal has evinced a preliminary and paradoxical questioning of expected primary dependencies on the appropriate visual metaphor. The conjuring of milieus and presences, the animation of surfaces, temporalities and spaces, the descriptive invention of subjects, each of these things, for Visual Culture, have been approached as instances specific of *events*; figured as problematics and incapable of being reduced to a set of competent disciplinary normatives.

In the middle of 1999, Nick Crowe was invited to make a millennial comment. Perhaps uncomfortable at a politics of prediction, the request led to his release, online, of this rendition of blissful, sleepy flight: *y2k: The Relationship between Faith and Technology* (see <http://nickcrowe.net/y2k>). Produced with a set of intended allusions in mind, it had a brief life. It made its remarks and then retired to the archives. Nick Crowe's decision to reissue the piece during late September this year, seems to compose something like a purchase on an event. He has said that he thinks that the piece may now have a new repertoire of meanings, that he cannot himself imagine them, that they belong to others, but that he knows that he is implicated by them.

This reprising gesture may be regarded as a device. A kind of desiring mechanism. Crowe has willingly pitched *y2k* into a world of new interpretations where an armature, which both bore and associated its original allusions, appears to have been barged aside by an irresistible morphology of menace and invasion. But, far from fully. Never as innocent as it appeared, the quiet green light of *y2k*, the rate and the arch idiosyncrasy of its musical accompaniment, all seem to be caught less now in a suggestion than a question: what does this write on the visual world, ever so fleetingly, and does that world answer? Something, some previous order, has clearly been dashed away from it. Even if the work was originally a little shy of that something, now it cannot but remind that once it was about something else. Always will be.

The reissue of *y2k*, is a lure; drawing out some new forms of meaning (contextual, historical, maybe) and the nature of their varying confidence in their own interpretative authority. But, simultaneously reminding of and resisting the referential moment of its own production, *y2k* may also appear now as an invitation to others to question the charmlessly muscular singularity of its currently preferred

revision. The conversation on minor themes, the departments of smells and the choreography of smoking habits, the ambiguities of listening and the politenesses of migration, all of which profoundly and variously inform Visual Culture as points of apprehension of the meaning of the visual, can all be convinced to inform the grander allegorical quiz proposed by the reissue of *y2k*. In this, Crowe's is an inspirational and glamorously insolent gesture; inviting and then declining the psalm-shod offer of a place in consensual global stability, just at the moment it makes its performative appeals to a contemporary *zeitgeist*.

The kinds of generous subjective address and temporality invited by the conjugation of location and appearance, such as those proffered by Crowe here, hint at the nature of the constitution of events. They reflect on the place of a person's situation in them. A conversation about the theoretical and poetic means by which this is achieved, and why this kind of engagement is important, is the aim of the collected contributions to the future of this *events* section of the *journal of visual culture*.

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## Subtle Structure Research

Darius Miksys was born in Lithuania in 1969. He received an education from the Vilnius Academy of Art, graduating from the Department of Painting in 1995. And then? He has been working for the advertising agencies *NPA*, *Kredo R.*, *Impro* and *Aketa*. He is running a company of his own, *Technomama*. His ambition, it appears, is not focused on being an artist. His attention is not focused in the way required for producing works of art. And yet he is reluctant to renounce that freedom to *do different things* that art seems to be safeguarding. Darius Miksys does take part in art events, but he always approaches the exhibition space from an oblique angle. Perhaps he is too pragmatic, in the sense that his practice is often so closely tied up with the practicalities that surround him. Perhaps he is not pragmatic enough, in the sense that it is sometimes not practically possible for others to share his practices with him.

One of his ideas was to go to the video rental counter in his local Vilnius supermarket, ask the attendant to recommend him a film, and then watch that film. This enactment of trust in another person's judgement was at the same time an exercise in sociological mind-reading, an attempt at determining the current cultural preferences of randomly selected people around the 'author'. It is tempting to describe these video viewings as an example of *inverted artmaking*. The action had no elaborated agenda, no centre of gravity, no main character, no strategy for visibility. It was repeated every day for a fortnight or so. Nobody, apart from Darius Miksys, the various shop attendants and perhaps a few of their closest friends, knew about it. There were no results, and no documentation to prove that the action actually took place.

In December 2000, Darius Miksys attended the *Parapsychology Fair at the Vilnius Sports' Palace*, together with the critic Raimundas Malasauskas (it was he who first told me about the secret video project). The two of them posed as visitors of the event, asked some indifferent questions of various participating professionals and received some cunning, muddled or downright stupid answers. There were fortune-tellers, soothsayers, aura photographers and of course representatives of the Moscow-based conglomerate *Gamma Seven* selling their immensely successful *aktivator* and *neutralizator* gadgets. (These flat, pocket-size plastic cases, allegedly containing tangled 'Archimedes' spirals' of very precious metals and providing full protection from all kinds of 'negative energy', were devised by researchers who used to work for the Soviet space programme). There were delegates from the *International Academy of Frontal Problems* and specialists in *Subtle Structure Research*.

There were no results this time either, only a video tape as an *aide-mémoire* of these inexplicable goings-on. At one point, Miksys strayed into the vast conference hall that is the centre-piece of the Sports Palace, an early-1970s concrete and glass structure with a flamboyantly curved roof. (From the outside, it looks a bit like a giant grey tongue.) Aimlessly, his camera recorded a presentation by a moustached healing expert, who read out this *Solemn Pledge of the People's Healers of Byelorussia*, 'adopted unanimously by a small group of dedicated friends, on a candle-lit evening I will *never* forget, as long as I live':

I, a People's Healer who understands my People's Healer's mission as the duty to Heal my People, am prepared to dedicate the entire Gift entrusted to me and the entire Power of my Talent to the People – serving my Neighbour, bringing Him Light and Goodness, easing His Suffering and Pain.

Never, under no circumstances, will I put my gift at the service of Evil, use it to satisfy my own longing for Glory or for other selfish purposes. I swear to always, in all situations in Life, uphold the Honour and Dignity of Healing and to strengthen its Authority.

As a True People's Healer, I adhere to the following:

Not harming the Sick;

Receiving the Sick as Spiritual Brothers in Need of my Help;

Being selflessly Honest and Pure of Soul and Body;

Being Patient, Open-minded and always prepared to help the Suffering;

Preserving and safeguarding the Dedication to my People.

Now, if this filmed sequence by Miksys is not exactly a *work of art*, perhaps it could have fitted into the supposedly wider and looser framework of *visual culture*? But is there really anything particularly *visual* about it? We may read Miksys's tape as a subversively non-visual commentary on the visibility of the thriving parapsychology subculture in today's Eastern Europe. We may even wish to interpret the inclusion of the healers' pledge (delivered in Russian) as ironic 'ready-made discourse' provided by the cameraman – on, say, the subject of the artist and

his role in society. From an oblique angle. But in the end we have to rely on a verbatim *quote* transcribed from the footage in order to say anything at all about this ‘project’ or indeed to stimulate our readers’ imagination in the direction we wish it to take.

Darius Miksys’s reluctance to become a real artist and present proper works are understandably irritating for some fellow artists, and off-putting to some curators, who tend to see unformatted statements as lacking in *justification through form*. But perhaps they should also provoke some soul-searching by writers and theoreticians. What is the appropriate usage *today* of the basic vocabulary used in this and many other texts (*artist, work of art, art project, art event, visuality, visual culture...*)? Is the desire to maintain definitions for these notions not merely a reflection of a longing for coherent discourse *in writing*? How do the theoretic disciplines actually deal with the less-than-neatly-defined *practices* that co-exist with any discourse? On the other hand, perhaps the discipline of visual culture should be more than an arena for *creative writing*, which prefers as its raw material the kind of ‘open’ fictions provided by Miksys to those already packaged and sealed as artworks? And, as it tries to realize the Benjaminian dream of creating higher-level text out of nothing but lower-level text quotes, does theory not risk reducing itself to a form of elite entertainment, to become one of the few surviving instances of *l’art pour l’art*?

**Anders Kreuger**

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## Lost and Found – A Modicum of Dignity

What a vision of ... riot the thought of Margaret Cavendish brings to mind!  
... What a waste that the woman who wrote ‘the best bred women are those whose minds are civilest’ should have frittered her time away scribbling nonsense and plunging ever deeper into obscurity and folly till the people crowded round her coach when she issued out. (Virginia Wolf, 1929)

Shame on you child/ The way you dress/ The state of you/ Oh what a mess/  
Your hair is natty dread/ Your shoes are Ted/ And you yoused to be a Skinhead ...  
When you look in the mirror/ Do you see yourself?/ Do you see yourself?/  
In the magazines/ When you see yourself/ Does it make you scream? (Poly Styrene, 1978)

When I’m doing a show people ... expect this kind of drunken wild kind of maverick woman ... But I’m not ... on the night of the opening I am looking magnificent and splendid in my fantastic Westwood gown. I am gracious. I am meeting lots of people and I’m really totally there and totally good at what I do. And these curators say, you know, I never expected you to be like this. And I said yeah, but I am Tracey Emin I am. This is why I am because I’m really good at what I do ... I’m genuine. (Tracey Emin, 2001)

An Emin opening. A night of ducking and diving through London's East End art scene, propelled by free white wine and vodka. It follows a familiar descent. Weaving along those same Hoxton streets the morning after, you might find yourself wondering, whatever happened to your dignity? What prompts this unnerving self-consciousness as you wince and twitch in the sunlight? Standing in the street amid the detritus of the night before, blushing as you notice your own disarray, you might even wonder how, on this site, could dignity be possible. Here, perhaps of all places, how might that arcane term concern creativity?

If it is to be more than a retreat to 'a room of one's own', dignity involves certain modes of deportment in the public sphere, where creativity may enter through social and artistic practices. Virginia Woolf, fortified by the material essentials she saw as prerequisites for female creativity, sought escape through the poised formalism of her literary art from the 'damned egotistical self'. This involved an occasionally almost transcendent articulation of struggle against those strictures of Edwardian decorum that were the backdrop to her own psychological turmoil. And, in the various tropes of social interaction associated with the mythology of the East End, dignity might be recognized in the networks of communality formed through equally recognizable codes of borrowed conduct. There are ways of 'doing the business', respects paid to personal style in the suited figure of the East End gangster, coloured by homosocial bonding that, laced with the threat of violence, verges on a homoerotically fastidious dandyism. Nonchalance, avant-gardist irreverence and off-the-cuff blagging are modes of deportment most readily associated with the contemporary image of East London as a creative milieu.

In the artistic scene that emerged on this site, shifting the geographical coordinates of the metropolitan art scene as it did so, entrepreneurship and DIY autonomy came to the fore. These attributes morphed into an anti-intellectualism that injected an element of play into creative practices as coterie of producer/consumers forged their own social networks, bypassing the established art market and its institutions. Dignity in this milieu might well be associated with the bubble of pomposity that yBa 'attitude' popped with such youthful élan. Hailed as a 'feisty corrective' to the smooth management of 'Creative Britain' attempted by New Labour, Tracey Emin has made the inversion of every protocol of feminine decorum so dear to middle England central to her creatively performative processes. She has worked through a rhetoric of deportment that attempts both to exorcise shame and to elicit pathos in the public sphere. Her personal traumas and drunken acts of 'transgression' are the stigmata she offers as proof of her 'genuine' emotional and cultural authority.

During the 1990s, the melange of fine art, fashion and advertising associated with the yBas often invoked and reconfigured some of the radical gestures with which successive generations of the avant-garde have aimed to smash the illusions of capitalism. Poly Styrene may be regarded as such an avant-gardist precursor. Like Emin, she creatively figured the disgust that bodily fluids may engender in an audience; quite literally expressing the angst of punk as a mode of creative carriage and political demonstration. Almost from its inception, and with a deal of knowingsness on the part of its makers, this was appropriated into a youth market where the force of its rage quickly dissipated in cycles of consumption. Perhaps of all the yBas, however, Emin colludes in the British Art spectacle with the least

ironic ambiguity; seemingly naïve and abused, yet readily co-opting herself into commercialism, media promotion and the celebration of high art institutions. Zeiss beer sponsored Emin's 30th birthday party, an event that closed 'The Shop' she ran in Bethnal Green with a puff of avant-gardist panache. *Fuckin' Fantastic at Thirty and Just About Old Enough to Do Whatever She Wants* alluded to the freedom from social responsibility offered by anachronistically adopting a playfully child-like, if troubled, irreverence. Ads for the former punk couturier Vivienne Westwood now show Tracey dishevelled, confused in the gutter, the words 'Emin for Westwood' appearing like the graffiti scratched into the paintwork of a public convenience.

An urban stance may be made to act as a counterpoint to the commercial mediation of social interaction and aesthetics. Advertising, like certain art practices, apparently unscripted and dependent upon the participation of the viewer, increasingly works both as an 'event' and by incorporating radical gestures. Desire, which is something the image of Emin's ego seems desperate to embody, provoked by some *punctum*, is mediated by signs that systematize that desire in a metonymic process of deferral.

The ideal political ego promised in advertising recedes into the different surfaces of the city, on the pages of magazines, on billboards, screens and the more marginal forms of communication that are assimilated into the branding of consumer goods – viral graffiti, flyer and sticker campaigns, for instance, or the very gestures, deportments and modes of address adopted by the young iconoclasts whose movements through the city such fragments register. Zones of intensity for the individual, experienced as revelatory moments of urbanity, break routine and prompt a certain self-reflection. This, in the 'We Are You' of recent, spray-stencilled viral advertising campaigns, could be precisely where the Emin ego exists, at the surface of Hoxton. And, if consumption is not to be the only index of creativity in social and artistic practices, then imbuing the nuances of such deportments, gestures and forms of address with reflective composure may be necessary for conducting social interaction with a modicum of dignity.

Is this what the image of Tracey Emin addresses with her veiled attachments to situationism? Rather than seeking to uphold or retrieve lost ideals of community based on ties of fraternity or authenticity, can creativity still usefully be seen as a means of striving towards the more dignified interpersonal relations of friendship? Henri Lefebvre spoke of a 'right to the city', and described it as a right 'to appear on all the networks and circuits of communication, information and exchange'. In the liberated city, it is something created not inherited – a 'right in the making', because social practice is always, in both psychological and societal terms, a process of moving into something different. This would be a form of sociability that leaves the desiring subject open to the Other in the search for a pure loving relationship. Such a state has been described as reconciling the traps of a child's narcissism and hysterical love, a totalitarian form of absolute faith that fills the constitutive lack within the subject through sublimating the individual to a select community.

We might draw on the distinction between, on one hand, the narcissistic search that Cicero advocated for a 'true friend' who is an 'ideal double ... the same but improved' and, on the other, Aristotle's notion of friendship, in which the 'act of



loving' is more important than being loved. Aristotelian friendship, however, is not a one-way street. It involves a 'time of reflection' to determine whether the virtue of loving is reciprocated by the friend. With this, a certain model of dignified civility becomes a striving for social justice that begins within the subject and the ways in which that individual encounters others. Jacques Derrida has said: 'the properly political act or operation amounts to creating (to producing, to making, etc.) the most friendship possible'. Could it be that an 'event', like an Emin opening, might describe a transformation within the subject and the public sphere, where deportment involves suffusing 'creativity' with dignity in order to allow indifference to grow to friendship and love? In an 'act of loving' and reflectiveness, then, it perhaps becomes possible to detach dignity from specific accoutrements, exquisite turns of phrase, sanctuaries of elite refinement, and to find it lodged exactly in what remains inscrutable about Tracey Emin.

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