

not of an oscillation between text and history, much less of an adjudication between them, much less of some synthesis of them in some grand Hegelian *Aufhebung*; it consists instead in the exploration of the fundamental incommensurability, yet mutual dependence, of existing disciplinary categories of knowledge.

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Interdisciplinarity and Visual Culture

W. J. T. Mitchell

When I was asked by the *Art Bulletin* to write something about "interdisciplinarity," it seemed like an easy task. After all, I've been editing an interdisciplinary journal of criticism and theory in the humanities and social sciences for seventeen years. I have also been working (along with many others) at the disciplinary fringes of art history, engaged in an interdisciplinary practice called "iconology" (the general study of images across the media) or more broadly "visual culture" (the study of the social construction of visual experience). These practices have surfaced in the convergence of disciplines of art history, literary and media studies, and cultural studies around what I have called a "pictorial turn."¹ This turn runs throughout critical theory, philosophy, and political discourses of identity formation, sexuality, otherness, fantasy, the unconscious; it focuses on the cultural construction of visual experience in everyday life as well as in media, representations, and visual arts. It is a project that requires conversations among art historians, film scholars, optical technologists and theorists, phenomenologists, psychoanalysts, and anthropologists. Visual culture is, in short, an "interdiscipline," a site of convergence and conversation across disciplinary lines.²

The more I've thought about this topic, however, the more convinced I am that calling these practices "interdisciplinary" does not in itself tell us what is crucial about them. The name may be nothing more than a euphemism for something else, a term that permits us to feel good about what we do and to avoid thinking about it too precisely. There is no question that "being interdisciplinary" is a "good thing" in contemporary academic parlance. My impression is that the term emerged in 1970s foundation jargon (especially at the NEH) as a code word for politically or theoretically adventurous work (feminism and women's studies, work in media and mass culture, deconstruction, semiotics, Marxist and psychoanalytic criticism).³ The term had a useful function, then, in making this new work look professionally respectable and safe. It provided a neutral or even honorific rubric, a form of camouflage that rendered it indistinguishable from work that was *not* especially adventurous in its political or theoretical engagements. In these safer forms of interdisciplinarity, one could conduct "comparative" studies of the arts within familiar historicist frameworks,⁴ or apply tested sociological or literary or psychoanalytic or semiotic methods to art-historical problems and be sure of getting results. New readings of works of art would be produced; a way of decoding, translating, deciphering, and describing the visual would be provided. Certainly, if it is good to have a discipline or to be disciplined, it must be even better to have mastered more than one discipline, to "be interdisciplinary."

Interdisciplinarity, in short, is a way of seeming to be just a little bit adventurous and even transgressive, but not too much. It has been around long enough now to seem like a regular professional option, if not itself a discipline, in the structure of academic knowledge. Every up-to-date university in the United States prides itself on its commitment to interdisciplinary research and training. Institutes, councils,

consortia, collaborative groups, and workshops are set up to foster conversations across disciplines. ("Visual Culture" is, as I write, being institutionalized as an interdisciplinary curricular initiative as well as a research area in the American academy; I know of programs and courses at Cornell, Harvard, Rochester, Irvine, Santa Cruz, and Chicago.) When the first question a prospective graduate student asks me about art history at the University of Chicago is, "do you encourage interdisciplinary work?" I know that the category of "interdisciplinarity" is safely institutionalized. The answer had better be "yes." A "no" would be a confession that the institution is sadly behind the times.⁵

This sort of "default" interdisciplinarity has never been of great interest to me. Or at least I've never felt that it was a point of pride to claim interdisciplinarity as a crucial feature of what I (or we) do. My usual reflex, on the contrary, is a kind of escalating shame at the increasing number of disciplines in which I find myself certifiably incompetent.⁶ One can cover this shame with an alibi about philosophical ignorance in which wonder and true knowledge begin (but then, what if you aren't a professional philosopher?). Or one can be perversely shameless and abject, publicly subjecting oneself to the disciplinary punishments of one's more hard-headed colleagues. Anyone who has read the acknowledgments to my last book will know that this has been my general strategy for avoiding both disciplinary and interdisciplinarity responsibilities. When it comes to discipline, my motto has been to get by with a little help from my friends.

My real interest, in other words, has not been in interdisciplinarity so much as in forms of "indiscipline," of turbulence or incoherence at the inner and outer boundaries of disciplines. If a discipline is a way of insuring the continuity of a set of collective practices (technical, social, professional, etc.), "indiscipline" is a moment of breakage or rupture, when the continuity is broken and the practice comes into question. To be sure, this moment of rupture can itself become routinized, as the rapid transformation of deconstruction from an "event" into a "method of interpretation" demonstrates. When the tigers break into the temple and profane the altar too regularly, their appearance rapidly becomes part of the sacred ritual. Nevertheless, there is that moment before the routine or ritual is reasserted, the moment of chaos or wonder when a discipline, a way of doing things, compulsively performs a revelation of its own inadequacy. This is the moment of interdisciplinarity that has always interested me. I think of it as the "anarchist" moment, and associate it with both public and esoteric or professional forms of knowledge. Some critics (Edward Said comes to mind) become interdisciplinary by going public and addressing a readership that is not confined to a single discipline, or

perhaps to any discipline in the academic sense. Others (Jacques Lacan would be a good example) penetrate so deeply into the practices of their discipline that they seem to cause an implosion of its boundaries that sends shock waves into other disciplines and even into various forms of public life.

Everything depends, then, on what sort of interdisciplinarity we are talking about—how it mediates public and professional discourses, whether it aims at reproducing itself in a new disciplinary form or is content to remain an ad hoc or transitional moment. In these terms, I would distinguish three kinds of interdisciplinarity: (1) "top-down": a comparative, structural formation that aims to know the overarching system or conceptual totality within which all disciplines are related; (2) "bottom-up": a compulsive and compulsory interdisciplinarity that is dictated by a specific problem or event; (3) "inside-out": the indisciplined or anarchist moment I have alluded to above. The top-down model dreams of a Kantian architectonic of learning, a pyramidal, corporate organization of knowledge production that can regulate flows of information from one part of the structure to another. It might be exemplified by the yearning of philosophy and critical theory for a utopian convergence of theory and practice, or the dream of semiotics to provide a universal, neutral metalanguage for the study of culture. The bottom-up model, by contrast, emerges on the shop floor, as it were, in response to emergencies and opportunities. Studies in gender, sexuality, and ethnicity, for instance, are necessarily interdisciplinary (given the diversity of relevant approaches and the range of the subjects), but also necessarily disciplinary in their need to carve out professional spaces and mechanisms of collective memory against the institutional forces that tend to squeeze them out or appropriate their energy. Cultural studies might be thought of as the most general form of this bottom-up model at the present time. It has emerged in the American academy as a counter-hegemonic "marketing strategy" for a diverse array of knowledge projects clustered around politics, identity, media, and critical theory. Cultural studies might be thought of as the awful truth that was concealed for so long under the euphemism of interdisciplinarity.

So what does all this have to do with "visual culture" and its relation to art history? How does it fit as an academic formation within the disciplinary and professional structure of knowledge? Linguistics is a discipline; English is a department; cinema studies is a new discipline undergoing rapid professionalization; comparative literature is a field; cultural studies is an academic movement. Art history has been a discipline. So what is "visual culture," this new hybrid interdiscipline that links art history with literature, philoso-

1. See W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays in Verbal and Visual Representation*, Chicago, 1994, chap 1.

2. For a more fully developed discussion, see W. J. T. Mitchell, "What Is Visual Culture?" in *Meaning in the Visual Arts: A Centennial Commemoration of Erwin Panofsky*, ed. Irving Lavin, Princeton, N.J., forthcoming.

3. See Stanley Fish, "Being Interdisciplinary Is So Very Hard to Do," in *MLA Profession 89*, New York, 1989, 15–22. Fish associates interdisciplinarity primarily with "left culturalist theory" (15).

4. On comparative studies in visual and verbal arts, see Mitchell (as in n. 1).

chap. 3. On "comparatism" more generally, see idem, "Why Comparisons Are Odious," in *World Literature Today*, forthcoming.

5. To this extent I agree with Stanley Fish's argument that interdisciplinarity is not just "hard to do," but strictly impossible, insofar as professional canons of knowledge continually reassert disciplinary norms at every stage. I disagree with his conclusion that this impossibility means that it is idle to speak of "authentic critique" or "enlarging the minds" of scholars within the various disciplines. See Fish (as in n. 3), 21.

6. On the stress associated with interdisciplinarity, see Lauren Berlant, "Feminism and the Institutions of Intimacy," unpublished essay.

phy, studies in film and mass culture, sociology, and anthropology? Is it the "visual front" of the cultural studies movement? Is it a new scientism that hopes to construct a linguistics or semiotics of the visual field? A new aestheticism that moves cultural studies away from signs and meaning, and toward sensation, perception, feeling, and affect? Could it be a response to the brute fact (or is it just a received idea?) that the visual dominates our world as never before, the popular formulation of the "pictorial turn"? Is it an academic collusion with or critical resistance to a society of "spectacle" and "surveillance"? What are the limits of a politics of the visual? Should art history expand its horizon, not just beyond the sphere of the "work of art," but also beyond images and visual objects to the visual practices, the ways of seeing and being seen, that make up the world of human visibility? Should art history *become* visual culture?

Needless to say, I can't give fully elaborated answers to these questions, but here are a few intuitions. First, I have to say that I think it would be unfortunate if visual culture were to become a professional or disciplinary option too rapidly, or maybe at all. The great virtue of visual culture as a concept is that it is "indisciplinary" in its tendencies; it names a problematic rather than a well-defined theoretical object. Unlike feminism, gender studies, or studies in race and ethnicity, it is not a political movement, not even an academic movement like cultural studies. Visuality, unlike race or gender or class, has no innate politics. Like language, it is a medium in which politics (and identification, desire, and sociability) are conducted. "Scopic regimes" are not, in my view, the big political threat at the present time.⁷ Images of guns don't kill; guns do. The fantasy that images and visibility are the decisive political forces of our time is, in fact, one of those collective hallucinations that should be a problem for investigation in visual culture, not one of its constitutive axioms. This emergence of a "visual politics" in which the antagonists are visual images (stereotypes, caricatures, misrepresentations, fetishes, and ideological illusions) opposed by heroic, iconoclastic critical theorists ought to remind us of the Young Hegelians Marx parodied in *The German Ideology*: "the phantoms of their imaginations have gotten too big for them. They, the creators, have been bowing to their creations. Let us liberate them from their chimeras, from their ideas, dogmas, imaginary beings under whose yoke they are languishing."⁸

This sort of "liberation" from "phantoms," Marx makes clear, is just as fantasmatic as what it opposes. This is why visual culture, in its more interesting moments, is *not* just the "visual front" of cultural studies (assuming we knew what cultural studies is, where it's going, etc.) Visual culture is too interested in the question of what vision is, too "aesthetic" in its fascination with the senses, perception, and imagination. The rhetoric of iconoclasm that cultural studies inherits from

Marxism, its reliance on linguistic and discursive models, produces a kind of friction with studies in visual culture, which tend to be grounded in a fascination with visual images, and thus to be patient with and attentive to the full range of visual experience from humble vernacular images, to everyday visual practices, to objects of both aesthetic delight and horror.

I don't mean to deny that visual culture is deeply indebted to feminism, gender and ethnic studies, critical theory, cultural studies, and other disciplinary movements. It would not exist without these movements. But it would also not exist without psychoanalysis, semiotics, linguistics, literary theory, phenomenology, aesthetics, anthropology, art history, and film studies, disciplines in a rather different sense, organized around theoretical objects rather than social movements. Visual culture is among other things, a convergence and outgrowth of these two kinds of disciplines, which correspond roughly to the "shop-floor, bottom-up" and the "top-down" models of modern knowledge. But its most important identity is, as I've suggested, as an "indiscipline," a moment of turbulence at the inner and outer borders of established disciplines. To art history, for instance, visual culture is primarily an "inside-out" phenomenon. On the one hand, visual culture looks like an "outside" to art history, opening out the larger field of vernacular images, media, and everyday visual practices in which a "visual art" tradition is situated, and raising the question of the difference between high and low culture, visual art versus visual culture. On the other hand, visual culture may look like a deep "inside" to art history's traditional focus on the sensuous and semiotic peculiarity of the visual. Art history has always been necessarily more than a history of works of art; it has always had to rely on more or less well-theorized models of spectatorship, visual pleasure, and social, intersubjective relations in the scopic field.

The field of literary studies encounters visual culture with a similar kind of ambivalence. It is not quite sure why textual scholars should suddenly be looking at visual arts and media (the historical "accident" that cinema studies is often taught in literature departments becomes relevant here, and needs examination). The ambivalence is compounded when the supremacy of textual theory and notions of culture based principally in the "linguistic turn" encounter a visual or pictorial turn that does not seem reducible to discursive models.⁹ Literary history has always been necessarily more than a history of works of literary art. It has always had to address the whole field of language and verbal expression as a place in which the entire sensorium, most notably the visual, is engaged. An imbrication of the sayable and the seeable, telling and showing, the articulable and the visible (to use Michel Foucault's terminology) occurs at every level of verbal expression, from speech to writing to description,

7. Martin Jay has given currency to the notion of the "scopic regime" in his important writings on visibility. See esp. M. Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, Berkeley, 1993, chap. 3.

8. *The German Ideology* (written 1845–46), in *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, trans. Loyd D. Easton and Kurt H. Guddat, New York, 1967, 404. For a discussion of the "rhetoric of iconoclasm" in the Marxist

tradition, see W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*, Chicago, 1986, chap. 6.

9. See *The Linguistic Turn*, ed. Richard Rorty, Chicago, 1967; and Mitchell (as in n. 1), chap. 1.

10. For a survey of this terminology, see Gilles Deleuze, "The Visible and the Articulate," in *Foucault*, Minneapolis, 1988; and Mitchell (as in n. 1), chap. 2.

figuration, and formal/semantic structure.¹⁰ There is no way, in short, to keep visuality and visual images out of the study of language and literature. Visual culture is both an outer boundary and an inner “black hole” at the heart of verbal culture. Like art history, literary studies encounter visual culture as an “inside-out” form of interdisciplinarity. The difference is that the visual comes to language as a figure of semiotic otherness—the “other” medium or form of expression, the “sister” art or rival in a paragone. Art history encounters visual culture, by contrast, as its own unconscious, a deep and misrecognized self that (like the image of Narcissus) is both attractive and deadly.¹¹

The disciplines that would seem most comfortable with the tendencies of visual culture are studies in film and mass media. Movies and television are simply the most conspicuous, powerful, and pervasive forms of visual culture in our time. Most of the academic programs in visual culture that I am aware of have taken their starting point in film programs, where a strong tradition of theorizing about spectatorship, visuality, and the mass circulation of images seems to find easy application in wider spheres of visual culture, from advertising to everyday life. Unlike art history, cinema studies are comfortable with low or mass culture, and with everyday, vernacular images and visual practices. If visual culture is going to be anything but a redundancy for film and media scholars, then, it will have to pose the sort of boundary questions that produce the indisciplinary inside-out effect in other areas. The first question might simply be one of scope or domain: to what extent can the models of visuality constructed for film be transferred to other media? What are the varieties of visual media and how do film and television fit within them? The second question might turn on the adequacy of vision as the central category: to what extent is visual culture itself a reification of media, a fixation on a specific sensory and semiotic channel at the expense of the multiple senses and codes employed by the so-called visual media? Shouldn't visual culture begin by postulating the imbrication of vision with other senses, insisting on the “audiovisual” and the “imagetext” in order to portray visual media (and everyday visual experience) as a mixed, composite construction?¹² Finally, the most important tension between visual culture and studies in visual media is simply the reminder that visual culture does not begin with the invention of photography, cinema, or television. It is connate with the human species, and flourishes in nonmodern, non-Western, and nontechnological societies. Visual culture's most important contribution to cinema and media studies may finally be its resistance to an exclusive emphasis on modern and contemporary culture. If visual culture needs to be reminded of the acoustic and linguistic dimension by film theory, it may for its own part want to remind film theory that human visual experience from the ancient materialists

through Descartes, Diderot, and Merleau-Ponty has consistently been modeled on the sense of touch, with the figure of the blind man as a central feature or “metapicture” of the visual process.¹³

While visual culture's primary use, then, may be as an “indiscipline,” a site of convergence and turbulence, I don't think that means there are no positions to be staked out in it. I'll conclude simply by summarizing what I think these are. I don't state these positions as a disciplinary manifesto or as my “original ideas.” They are merely my sense of where an already developing interdisciplinary formation is (or ought to be) going in its most productive and provocative moments.

1. Visual culture should be mindful of the different disciplinary histories that have converged in it, especially the dissonance between “top-down” and “bottom-up” disciplines, the friction between knowledge projects that define themselves as politically engaged versus those that regard themselves as politically neutral.

2. Visual culture must resist the temptation to the sort of easy pluralism that would deny any general force to its central concept—the view, for instance, that “there are only different and diverse visual cultures, no such thing as ‘visual culture.’” This is very like insisting that there is no such thing as language, only languages. If there is any foundational postulate to visual culture, it is that vision is a mode of cultural expression and human communication as fundamental and widespread as language. And it is not reducible to or explicable on the model of language.

3. Visual culture becomes an interesting concept only if its constituent terms and their relations are called into question. The grafting of a received idea of culture (from cultural studies or from anywhere else) onto a received idea of “the visual” (from art history, cinema studies, or anywhere else) will produce only another set of received ideas. The point is to let the terms interrogate each other, to negotiate the boundaries between them. What in culture lies outside vision? A great deal; and that is why visual culture must address the relation of vision and the other senses. What in vision lies outside culture? Nothing of any importance is the correct (cultural constructivist) answer. Nothing but a “nature” (optics, ophthalmology, animal vision, etc.) that will be itself revealed as a cultural construction. But this easy answer will not do. The study of visual culture has to resist the constructivist reflex and reopen the question of culture's boundaries with visual *nature*, vision considered as a physiological process, a “drive,” a sensory, phenomenological dimension shared with animals. It is hard to imagine how there could be an “optical unconscious” without this level of automatism, a kind of prosthetic agency in the organ, the

11. I'm thinking here of the Ovidian/Lacanian, not the Freudian tale of Narcissus, in which the hero fails to recognize his reflected image as himself, and falls in love with what he supposes to be the real presence of an “other.” The moral of this tale for art history's relation to visual culture has yet to be worked out.

12. One of the most interesting developments in recent film studies, in fact, has been the emergence of sound as a prominent topic. The work of Marcel Chion and Rick Altman has been crucial here; see also the important

essay by James Lastra, “Reading, Writing, and Representing Sound,” in *Sound Theory/Sound Practice*, ed. Rick Altman, London, 1992. The question of language in cinema has, of course, been absolutely foundational to film theory from its beginnings. On the concept of the “imagetext,” see Mitchell (as in n. 1), chap. 3.

13. The figure of the blind man with a pair of walking sticks is especially prominent in Descartes's *Optics*.

medium, or the image.¹⁴ This nature is one reason that magical images, like the “phantoms” debunked by the Young Hegelians, are so difficult to overcome with “critical thinking.”

4. If culture from the standpoint of vision leads us to one limit (the noncultural as the natural), vision from the standpoint of culture leads us to the invisible, the nonvisible, the anti- and extravisible world that underwrites and accompanies every visual experience. It leads us to the aesthetic boundaries (hearing and touch, principally), and semiotic boundaries (language, speech, the symbolic/imaginary, the imagetext). One of the principal objectives of visual culture is the de-reification of its theoretical object, human vision. The question then would be, how does it come to pass that “the visual” (whatever that means) begins to seem like a totality, a world-view or world-picture? This is partly a historical question about the modern “hegemony of vision,” a question that would go back to the ancient privileging of vision as the sovereign sense. It is also a theoretical question: what must vision be that it can have the sort of cultural status we attribute to it, from the wild overestimation of the power of spectacle and images that characterizes contemporary discussions of media and modernity, to traditional taboos on visual representation? What is it about visual images that makes people want to smash them, or to worship and die for them? Why are archaic “visual perversions” such as fetishism, totemism, and idolatry alive and well in the modern, secular world?

5. The other border of culture that is opened by the visual is the social. Whatever visual culture is, it must be grounded not just in the interpretation of images, but also in the description of the social field of the gaze, the construction of subjectivity, identity, desire, memory, and imagination. The fundamental fact about vision, then, is that we use it to look at other people, not at the world. Social, intersubjective encounters, practices of visual recognition, acknowledgment (and their opposites—misrecognition, mimicry, masquerade, the “evil eye”) would then be the starting point for the study of visual culture; the interpretation of images would be decentered in favor of an investigation of the authority and affect of images. This would lead back, of course, to the issue of overestimation and visual superstitions. The question for art historians in that case would be, not “what do pictures mean?” but “what do pictures *want*?”¹⁵

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14. See Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, Cambridge, Mass., 1993, on the exploitation of visual automatisms in Dadaism.

15. See W. J. T. Mitchell, “What Do Pictures Want?” in *Art History, Visual Culture, and Modernity*, ed. Terry Smith, Sydney, forthcoming.

Mapping Interdisciplinarity

Thomas F. Reese

The present essay constitutes a very preliminary attempt to delineate through time the changing boundaries and tolerances between “disciplinarity” and “interdisciplinarity,” not only in different fields of humanistic inquiry but also in different national theaters of research and pedagogy. To approach the question of “interdisciplinarity,” we ought to begin by defining the nature of “disciplinarity” as a particular class of legitimizing institution that produces a “community of competency.”¹ Indeed, it might be stipulated that interdisciplinarity emerges in direct response to the restrictive covenants of disciplinarity. If the structures of the latter are strong and the boundaries fixed, the strategies to achieve interdisciplinarity require force and are seen as transgressive; if they are weak, most forms of interdisciplinarity are permissively assumed to be natural excursions. In sum, interdisciplinarity has different connotations in different contexts, so we cannot generalize about “its” history. We might more productively focus on the relative permeabilities of disciplinary boundaries in different institutional settings.

Michel Foucault defined the operations of what he called “disciplinary society” and demonstrated the importance of “genealogy” for penetrating its assumptions and claims—writing the history of the present operations of knowledge and presenting an understanding of the disciplinary basis from which most intellectual production begins. As Foucault showed, disciplinary knowledge represents itself as part of a scientific quest to advance general knowledge, even when it simultaneously limits freedom of inquiry.

One of the principles in discipline formation is to privilege certain classes of evidence as the basis of research and to advance theory that specifies the unique character of the nature of change within the particular domain the discipline privileges. For example, in the study of humankind, speech, writing, and man-made objects are defined as distinct realms; indeed, according to Erwin Panofsky, “man-made objects with aesthetic intention” are a separate class from those “with utilitarian intention.”² The definition of the nature of these domains became the basis for the communities and networks of knowledge/power that constituted the discipline of art history in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Once established, a discipline functions as a quasi-corporate voice to deflect criticism from outside its borders and to deflate all claims to the truth that do not win communal support.³ Although academics belong to several communities (discipline, academic profession, university enterprise, and national academic system), the culture of the discipline, especially in the United States, generally has the strongest bonding power because it is often easier to leave the institution than the discipline.⁴ To guarantee respect and secure jobs, there are rigorous methodological initiations in graduate training followed by admission to guildlike disciplinary and departmental structures, where elders demand allegiance to the standards by which they were trained and unambiguous criteria for judgment. Interdisciplinarity is anathema in such segmented regimes of power, because practitioners cannot easily be certified by the tried and true