

Visual Culture/Visual Studies: Inventory of Recent Definitions

Visual culture works towards a social theory of visibility, focusing on questions of what is made visible, who sees what, how seeing, knowing and power are interrelated. It examines the act of seeing as a product of the tensions between external images or objects, and internal thought processes.

Hooper-Greenhill, Eilean, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*, London: Routledge, 2000, p. 14

I think it's useful at the outset to distinguish between visual studies and visual culture as, respectively, the field of study and the object or target of study. Visual studies is the study of visual culture.

Mitchell, W.J.T., "Showing seeing: a critique of visual culture", *Journal Of Visual Culture*, 2002, Vol 1(2), p. 166

Visual culture is the visual construction of the social, not just the social construction of vision.

Mitchell, W.J.T., "Showing seeing: a critique of visual culture", *Journal Of Visual Culture*, 2002, Vol 1(2), p. 170

In short, a dialectical concept of visual culture cannot rest content with a definition of its object as the social construction of the visual field, but must insist on exploring the chiasmic reversal of this proposition, *the visual construction of the social field*. It is not just that we see the way we do because we are social animals, but also that our social arrangements take the forms they do because we are seeing animals.

Mitchell, W.J.T., "Showing seeing: a critique of visual culture", *Journal Of Visual Culture*, 2002, Vol 1(2), p. 171

Vision has played the role of the sovereign sense since God looked at his own creation and saw that it was good, or perhaps even earlier when he began the act of creation with the division of the light from the darkness.

Mitchell, W.J.T., "Showing seeing: a critique of visual culture", *Journal Of Visual Culture*, 2002, Vol 1(2), p. 174

In particular, it helps us to see that even something as broad as the image does not exhaust the field of visibility; that visual studies is not the same thing as image studies, and that the study of the visual image is just one component of the larger field.

Mitchell, W.J.T., "Showing seeing: a critique of visual culture", *Journal Of Visual Culture*, 2002, Vol 1(2), p. 178

Is 'visual culture' a discipline?...It is certainly not the province of art history. On the contrary, it has emerged primarily because that discipline has largely failed to deal with both the visibility of its objects – due to the dogmatic position of 'history' – and the openness of the collection of those objects – due to the established meaning of 'art'. To take visual culture as art history with a cultural studies perspective (Mirzoeff, 1999: 12) is to condemn it to repeating the same failure.

Bal, Mieke, "Visual essentialism and the object of visual culture", *Journal Of Visual Culture*, 2003, Vol 2(1), p. 5

Any attempt to articulate goals and methods for visual culture studies must seriously engage both terms in their negativity: 'visual' as 'impure' – synaesthetic, discursive and pragmatic; and 'culture' as shifting, differential, located between 'zones of culture' and performed in practices of power and resistance.

Bal, Mieke, "Visual essentialism and the object of visual culture", *Journal Of Visual Culture*, 2003, Vol 2(1), p. 19

First, with a perspective that stands at a distance from art history and its methods, visual culture studies should take as its primary objects of critical analysis the master narratives that are presented as natural, universal, true and inevitable, and dislodge them so that alternative narratives can become visible...

Another important task of visual culture studies is to understand some of the motivations of the prioritization of realism... This shows the real political interests underlying the preference for realism. It promotes transparency: the artistic quality mattered less than the faithful representation of the achiever. The authenticity required has an additional investment in indexicality... The third, and perhaps most important, task of visual culture studies – the one where the previous ones join – is to understand some of the motivations of visual essentialism, which promotes the look of the knower (Foucault) while keeping it invisible.

Bal, Mieke, "Visual essentialism and the object of visual culture", *Journal Of Visual Culture*, 2003, Vol 2(1), p. 22

The study of the structure and operations of visual regimes, and their coercive and normalizing effects, is already one of the defining features of 'visual culture' as distinct from traditional art history; and to the extent that this is so, it is an area in which sites and occasions for cultural analysis, resistance, and transformation are bound to proliferate and multiply, in tandem with the regime's own expansive tendencies.

Bryson, Norman, 'Visual culture and the dearth of images' in "Responses to Mieke Bal's 'Visual essentialism and the object of visual culture'", *Journal Of Visual Culture*, 2003, Vol 2(2), p. 232

Visual studies, visual culture, image studies, Bild-Anthropologie, Bildwissenschaft: the unnamed field is expanding very rapidly, and it is growing differently in different parts of the world. German Bildwissenschaft, as that term is used by Horst Bredekamp (forthcoming), refers to an outward expansion of art history's resources to encompass the full range of images. Bild-Anthropologie, the title of a book by Hans Belting (2001), is an experimental blending of anthropological, philosophic and art-historical concerns. In Mexico City, visual studies is growing from semiotics and communication theory. In Copenhagen, visual culture is a combination of American art history and English cultural studies, with a near absence of French influences. Visual culture, postcolonial studies, film studies, and cultural studies are blended in courses in places as far-flung as Bergen, Taipei, Delhi, Buenos Aires and Bologna (Elkins, forthcoming). Given the multiplicity of classes, courses, departments, names and languages, it is effectively impossible to keep track of the emerging genealogies of the discipline – if that is what visual studies, as I will call it, turns out to be.

Elkins, James, 'Nine modes of interdisciplinarity for visual studies' in "Responses to Mieke Bal's 'Visual essentialism and the object of visual culture'", *Journal Of Visual Culture*, 2003, Vol 2(2), p. 232

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.

...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.

...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.

Elkins, James, Preface to the book *A Skeptical Introduction to Visual Culture*, *Journal Of Visual Culture*, 2002, Vol 1(1), p. 94

...the struggle of trying to interpret Benjamin's arcades project leads to the development of a visual methodology. Even we mere mortals who are no Benjamin-type geniuses can learn from him a visual method of theorizing. That's what method is, a set of tools that can be used by other people. It is the strong part of Benjamin's work from a philosophical (as opposed to literary) point of view. If it were purely a case of the genius Benjamin writing wonderful things, then we wouldn't be able to enact and re-enact the methodological possibilities that his work makes available. Benjamin's texts visualize ideas. He is clearly fascinated with images. But the visual metaphors he creates, that so impress us with his literary brilliance, are never simply metaphors. They are also objects in his world.

Buck-Morss, Susan (in conversation with Laura Mulvey and Marquard Smith), *Globalization, cosmopolitanism, politics, and the citizen*, *Journal Of Visual Culture*, 2002, Vol 1(3), p. 328