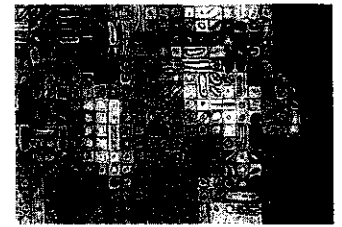


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Practices of Looking
(Oxford U Press, 2001)



Introduction

The world we inhabit is filled with visual images. They are central to how we represent, make meaning, and communicate in the world around us. In many ways, our culture is an increasingly visual one. Over the course of the last two centuries, Western culture has come to be dominated by visual rather than oral or textual media. Even the bastion of the printed word, the newspaper, has turned to images—and color images by the end of the twentieth century—to draw in its readers and add to the meaning of its stories. Images have never been merely illustrations, they carry important content. For example, television, a visual and sound-based medium, has come to play the central role in daily life once occupied by the strictly aural medium of radio. Computers, originally equipped to generate text, numbers, and symbols, have been broadly adapted to generate and exchange more complex visual data. Hearing and touching are important means of experience and communication, but our values, opinions, and beliefs have increasingly come to be shaped in powerful ways by the many forms of visual culture that we encounter in our day-to-day lives.

On the one hand, this shift to the visual promotes a fascination with the image. On the other hand, it produces an anxiety about the potential power of images that has existed since the time of Plato. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, many older fantasies about the power of images seem to have come true thanks to technology. We are presented with a new set of challenges: to understand how images and their viewers make meaning, to determine what role images play in our cultures, and to consider what it means to negotiate so many images in our daily lives.¹

Practices of Looking provides an overview of a range of theories about how we understand a wide array of visual media and how we use images to express

ourselves, to communicate, to experience pleasure, and to learn. The term “visual culture” encompasses many media forms ranging from fine art to popular film and television to advertising to visual data in fields such as the sciences, law, and medicine. This book explores the questions, what does it mean to study these diverse forms together? How do shared understandings of these various forms of visual culture emerge? How does the visual intersect with aural and tactile media? We feel that it is important to consider visual culture as a complex and richly varied whole for an important reason: when we have an experience with a particular visual medium we draw on associations with other media and other areas of our lives informed by visual images. For example, when we watch a television show, the meanings and pleasure we derive from it might be drawn, consciously or unconsciously, from associations with things we have seen in movies, works of art, or advertisements. The experience of viewing a medical ultrasound image might evoke emotions or meanings more typically associated with viewing photographs or television images. Our visual experiences do not take place in isolation; they are enriched by memories and images from many different aspects of our lives.

Despite this cross-fertilization of visual forms, our cultures tend to “rank” different areas of visual culture according to systems of supposed quality and importance. For many decades, colleges and universities offered courses on the fine arts but did not consider popular media such as movies and television to be worthy of serious academic study. Today, in contrast, art historians include photography, computer graphics, mixed media, installation, and performance art among the practices they study. At the same time other fields, some of them new, have taken up a broader range of media forms. Since the 1950s, scholars in the field of communication have written important studies of radio, television, print media, and now the Internet. The disciplines of cinema, television, and media studies, which were instituted in the 1970s, have helped us to consider how movies, television programs, and media such as the World Wide Web have contributed to changes in culture over the course of this century. These fields have established the value of studying popular forms of visual media. The even newer field of science and technology studies has encouraged the study of visual technologies and the use of images in areas outside the arts and entertainment, such as the sciences, law, and medicine. Cultural studies, an interdisciplinary field that emerged in the late 1970s, has offered many ways of thinking about the study of both popular culture and the seemingly mundane uses of images in our daily lives. One of

the aims of cultural studies is to provide viewers, citizens, and consumers with the tools to gain a better understanding of how visual media help us make sense of our society. Looking at images across disciplines can help us to think about the cross-fertilization that occurs among the different kinds of visual media. In the course of reading this book, the reader will encounter ideas drawn from cultural studies, cinema and media studies, communication, art history, sociology, and anthropology.

What is visual culture? Culture has been famously characterized by cultural theorist Raymond Williams as one of the most complex words in the English language. It is an elaborate concept, the meaning of which has changed over time.² Traditionally, culture was thought of as the “fine” arts: classic works of painting, literature, music, and philosophy. This idea of culture was defined by such philosophers as Matthew Arnold as the “best that has been thought and said” in a society, and was reserved for an elite, educated audience.³ If one uses the term this way, a famous work by Michelangelo or a composition by Mozart would represent the epitome of Western culture. Thus, the idea of “high” culture has often been implicit within definitions of culture, with the notion that culture should be separated into the categories of high (fine art, classical painting, literature) and low (television, popular novels, comic books). As we will explore further in Chapter 2, high versus low was the traditional way of framing discussions about culture for much of history, with high culture widely regarded as quality culture and low culture as its debased counterpart.

The term culture, in what is known as the “anthropological definition,” refers to a “whole way of life,” meaning a broad range of activities within a society. Popular music, print media, art, and literature contribute to the daily lives of “ordinary people.” So too do sports, cooking, driving, relationships, and kinship. This definition links the term “culture” to the idea of a popular or mass culture. However, while it expands the idea of what gets to count as culture in important ways, this definition does not fully make clear the focus of contemporary work that understands culture specifically as a meaning-producing process. This means foregrounding the practices of culture.

In this book, we are defining culture as the shared practices of a group, community, or society, through which meaning is made out of the visual, aural, and textual world of representations. Here, we are indebted to the work of British cultural theorist Stuart Hall, who states that culture is not so much a set of things (television shows or paintings, for example) as a set of processes or

practices through which individuals and groups come to make sense of those things. Culture is the production and exchange of meanings, the giving and taking of meaning, between members of a society or group. Hall states, "It is the participants in a culture who give meaning to people, objects, and events. . . . It is by our use of things, and what we say, think and feel about them—how we represent them—that we give them a meaning."⁴

It is important to keep in mind that in any group that shares a culture (or set of processes through which meaning is made), there is always a range of meanings and interpretations "floating about," so to speak, with regard to any given issue or object at any given time. Culture is a process, not a fixed set of practices or interpretations. For example, three different viewers of the same advertisement who share a general view of the world may differently interpret its meaning, based on their respective experiences and knowledge. These people may share the same culture but still subject the image to different interpretive processes. These viewers may then talk about their responses, influencing one another's subsequent views. Some viewers might argue more convincingly than others; some might be regarded as having more authority than others. In the end, meanings are produced not in the heads of the viewers so much as through a process of negotiation among individuals within a particular culture, and between individuals and the artifacts, images, and texts created by themselves and others. Interpretations, then, are as effective as the visual artifacts (such as advertisements or films) that generate them in influencing a culture's or group's shared world view. Our use of the term "culture" throughout this book will emphasize this understanding of culture as a fluid and interactive process—a process grounded in social practices, not solely in images, texts, or interpretations.

Practices of Looking is concerned specifically with *visual* culture, that is, those aspects of culture that are manifested in visual form—paintings, prints, photographs, film, television, video, advertisements, news images, and science images. What separates visual culture from written text or speech? It is a paradox of the twentieth century that while visual images have increasingly come to dominate our culture, our colleges and universities traditionally have devoted relatively little attention to visual media. The fields mentioned earlier notwithstanding, higher learning remains largely a text- and symbol-based curriculum. We feel that visual culture is something that should be understood in an analytical way not only by art historians and other "image specialists," but by all of us who increasingly encounter a startling array of

images in our daily lives. At the same time, many theorists of visual culture have argued that foregrounding the visual in visual culture does not mean separating images from writing, speech, language, or others modes of representation and experience. Images often are integrated with words, as in much contemporary art and in the history of advertising. Our goal is to lay out some of the theories that can help us to understand how images function in a broader cultural sphere, and how looking practices inform our lives beyond our perception of images *per se*.

Since the 1990s, there has been a move among scholars to focus on the study of visual culture across several disciplines. This has come about in part through the expansion of art history into social realms beyond art and through a cultural studies cross-fertilization between such fields as communication, cinema-television studies, and science studies. This has also been prompted by the study of new media such as the World Wide Web and digital imaging in many disciplines. It is essential to much of the interdisciplinary project of visual culture to mark boundary crossings between disciplines. Hence, it is important to understand, for instance, what it means when art images borrow from commercial imagery and advertising sells products through art.

The emergence of visual culture as a field of study has also been the subject of debate and controversy, in particular in relationship to the study of art history.⁵ In this book, we examine a broad range of theoretical strategies for understanding how meaning is produced by and through images in their historical context. Our approach emphasizes less the distinction of art and more its interaction with other aspects of visual culture. It is thus one of the intentions of this book to demonstrate the ways in which art history can use other media as fruitful points of comparison. At the same time, we hope that *Practices of Looking* will offer ways for those interested in mass media to understand the relationship of media images to art. While this book examines many images from the history of painting, it has a particular emphasis on those images that since the mid-nineteenth century have been generated through cameras, such as photographs, films, and television images, and that gain meaning within and circulate among the realms of art, commerce, the law, and science.

This book takes as its distant inspiration John Berger's well-known book, *Ways of Seeing*. Published in 1972, *Ways of Seeing* is a model for the examination of images and their meanings across such disciplinary boundaries as media studies and art history. Berger's work was groundbreaking in bringing

together a range of theory, from Walter Benjamin's concept of mechanical reproduction to Marxist theory, in order to examine images from the history of art and advertising. It is our goal to pay homage to many of the strategies of that book in updating such an approach to visual culture in the contemporary theoretical and media context. The terrain of images and their trajectories has become significantly more complex since Berger wrote his book. Technological changes have made possible the movements of images throughout the globe at much greater speed. The economic context of post-industrial capitalism has enabled a blurring of many previously understood boundaries between cultural and social realms such as art, news, and commodity culture. The mix of styles in postmodernism has aided in producing a context of image circulation and cross-referencing that prompts this kind of interdisciplinary approach.

The approaches of *Practices of Looking* can thus be understood in several different ways. One approach is the use of theories to study images themselves and their textual meanings. This is a primary, yet not the only, approach to understanding the dynamics of looking. It allows us to examine what images tell us about the cultures in which they are produced. A second approach is to look at the modes of responding to visuality, as represented in studies of spectators or audiences and their psychological and social patterns of looking. In this approach, the emphasis shifts from images and their meanings to viewers' practices of looking, and the various and specific ways people regard, use, and interpret images. Some of these approaches are about theorizing an idealized viewer, such as the cinematic spectator, and others are about considering what actual viewers do with popular culture texts. A third approach considers how media images, texts, and programs move from one social arena to another, and circulate in and across cultures, which is especially relevant in light of the escalation of globalization since the mid-twentieth century. This approach looks at the institutional frameworks that regulate and sometimes limit the circulation of images, as well as the ways that images change meaning in different cultural contexts. In these approaches, this book proposes a set of tools that can be used in deciphering visual media, and a means to analyze how and why we have come to rely so heavily on visual forms to make meaning in almost all areas of our lives.

Practices of Looking is organized into nine chapters that are intended to address issues of visual culture across various visual media and cultural

arenas. Chapter 1, "Practices of Looking: Images, Power, and Politics," introduces many of the themes of the book, such as the concept of representation, the role of photography, the relationship of images to ideology, and the ways that we make meaning from and award value to images. It introduces the basic concepts of semiotics, the study of signs, and discusses aspects of image production and consumption that will be addressed in more depth in later chapters. It is one of the central tenets of this book that meaning does not reside within images, but is produced at the moment that they are consumed by and circulate among viewers. Thus, Chapter 2, "Viewers Make Meaning," focuses on the ways that viewers produce meaning from images, and discusses the concept of ideology in more depth. Whereas Chapter 2 analyzes many theories about how specific viewers and audiences make meaning of visual images, Chapter 3, "Spectatorship, Power, and Knowledge," examines those theories that consider an idealized viewer such as the spectator of cinematic and still images. It also addresses the concept of the gaze in both psychoanalytic theory and concepts of power. Here, we examine both concepts of how viewers identify with images, and the ways that images can be used as elements of discourse, institutional power, and categorization. Chapter 4, "Reproduction and Representation," explores the history of how visual technologies have affected ways of seeing. It begins by examining the development of perspective and concepts of realism that accompanied it, and then looks at how image reproduction has changed the meaning of images throughout history, including how these concepts have meaning in the contemporary context of the Internet and digital images. This historical tracing of these concepts is echoed in Chapter 5, "The Mass Media and the Public Sphere," which maps out many of the theories of mass media and the public sphere from their origins, examining the models of mass media that have ranged from propaganda to the idea of the media as a means of fostering democracy. This chapter addresses the question of what mass media means in the current media context of multimedia and cross-media cultural products. Chapter 6, "Consumer Culture and the Manufacturing of Desire," looks at the meanings of advertising images in relation to art about consumer culture. It discusses theories of ideology and semiotics as tools for understanding the strategies used in advertising images to add meaning to consumer products and to speak to consumers in the language of desire and need. In Chapter 7, "Postmodernism and Popular Culture," we look at a range of styles in

contemporary art, popular culture, and advertising that have been defined within the contexts of modernism and postmodernism. We discuss the experience of modernity and its relation to the tenets of modern art, and the relationship between modernism and postmodernism both as philosophical concepts and styles of imaging. Chapter 8, "Scientific Looking, Looking at Science," returns to many of the concepts discussed earlier in the book on photographic truth to look at the relationship of images to evidence and the role of images in science. This includes the meaning of images in legal contexts, the politics of images of the body and the fetus, the meanings created by new medical imaging technologies, and the depiction of science in popular culture. The final chapter, Chapter 9, "The Global Flow of Visual Culture," looks at the ways that images travel in the contemporary context of globalization and diverse media convergence. This chapter examines how images change meaning when they move between cultures, models for thinking about the local and the global, and the role of the Internet and new media in changing the global flow of visual images. The book concludes with an extensive glossary of many terms used in the book. These terms are shown in italics in their first reference within each chapter. *Practices of Looking* aims to engage with a broad range of issues of visual culture by examining how images gain meaning in many cultural arenas, from art and commerce to science and the law, how they travel through different cultural arenas and in distinct cultures, and how they are an integral and important aspect of our lives.

Notes

1. For further discussion of this "pictorial turn," see W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), ch. 1.
2. Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Revised Edition (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 87.
3. Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932), 6.
4. Stuart Hall, "Introduction," in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, edited by Stuart Hall (Thousand Oaks, Calif. and London: Sage, 1997), 3.
5. See in particular the perspectives in *October*, 77 (Summer 1996), 25–70; and Douglas Crimp's response to them, "Getting the Warhol We Deserve," *Social Text*, 59 (Summer 1999), 49–66.

Further Reading

John Berger. *Ways of Seeing*. New York and London: Penguin, 1972.

Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall, eds. *Visual Culture: The Reader*. Thousand Oaks, Calif. and London: Sage, 1999.

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