

## **How has visual culture been defined?**

Visual culture, or visual studies, or visual culture studies, is an academic movement that has coalesced over the last thirty or so years, as the product of an increased self-consciousness about, and belief in, the importance of sight and its correlatives (the visual, vision, visuality) in the workings of cultures.

Prior to being subjected to rigorous critical debate, the term visual culture came into being rather informally, introduced at different times by writers (Marshall McLuhan in *Understanding Media*, Michael Baxandall in *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy*, Svetlana Alpers in *The art of describing: Dutch art in the seventeenth century*) who all meant something slightly different.

Its two constituent terms are in themselves elusive. Raymond Williams is often quoted as saying that the word 'culture' is 'one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language'. Defining what is 'visual' is no less problematic, a term potentially so expansive it becomes meaningless. The phrase has thus proven both usefully and confusingly versatile, and the issue is frequently clouded by the conflation of terms for the object of study with the activity of studying it.

As an academic field, its diversity of origin is matched by its current contested status. Is it a new set of tools with which to analyse traditional forms of 'art', or an opening up of the canon to include all images and representational objects? Or, remembering that it is not only images that are 'visual', and not all art is images, or appreciable only through the eyes, how is the new object domain to be defined? Rather than placing the emphasis on the object, many scholars believe it is instead a question of analysing the subject: how people see, rather than the things they look at. If so, is it then a history of 'scopic regimes'? Such a task, Jonathan Crary has argued, might not need to refer to objects of sight at all, instead drawing upon evidence of conceptualisations of sight<sup>1</sup>. But if the field

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<sup>1</sup> J. Crary, in 'Visual Culture Questionnaire', *October* Vol. 77, Summer 1996, pp. 33-34

is open to discussion of anything that can ‘imprint itself on the retina’<sup>2</sup>, how can this possibly be delimited as a practical area of study?

Could an academic movement that incorporated so many divergent trends still be internally coherent? This leads to further debate about the functioning of academic structures, norms that visual culture, by its very existence, threatens (leading to flashes of academic territorialism). Could visual culture be a discipline unto itself, or an interdiscipline? How is it to be taught? And, finally, what is it to do?

The movement as it stands incorporates a disparate number of works and viewpoints from academics in art history, literature, cultural studies, architecture and others, but whose collective efforts, in spite of their (sometimes vehement) differences, nevertheless add up to form an ‘intellectually available concept’<sup>3</sup>. Discussion about ‘visual culture’ is now well entrenched in academia, even amongst those who dispute its validity.

I would argue there is general agreement that visual culture studies should operate as a practice that critically examines the process of looking. However, it is difficult to be any more specific, as significant differences remain between some of its principal thinkers and practitioners. The texts I have chosen revolve around three major sites of disagreement.

First, its difficult relationship with its primary parent discipline, art history. Is visual culture studies a complementary practice to art history and aesthetics, or should it aim for something more? And if it legitimises all visual objects as equally worthy of study, how is a hierarchy of ‘art’ objects to be preserved?

Second, what is the basis on which ‘the visual’ is separated for examination? Is it legitimate to separate sight from the other senses for analysis, or determine a set of objects as primarily visual? That activity which considers visuality to the exclusion of

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<sup>2</sup> M. Jay, in ‘Visual Culture Questionnaire’, pp.42-44

<sup>3</sup> J. Crary, in ‘Visual Culture Questionnaire’

other perceptive feeds has been termed, pejoratively, Visual Essentialism ('that purity assuming cut between what is visual and what is not'<sup>4</sup>).

Yet it seems obvious that in terms of building knowledge about the world, sight has been crucial: 'seeing comes before words'<sup>5</sup>. However blended with the other senses, it is still possible to argue that 'humans tend to rely on sight more than any other sense'<sup>6</sup>, although cultures may vary in their degree of 'ocularcentrism'.

Sight is equally imbricated in the history of thinking. From Plato to Descartes to Foucault, many philosophers have pondered the relationship between what we see and what we know. But perception and knowledge have proved difficult to separate.

*Knowledge, itself not limited to cognition even if it prides itself on such a limitation, is constituted, or rather, performed, in the same acts of looking that it describes, analyses and critiques.<sup>7</sup>*

It is precisely this embedded-ness that provokes the attempt to denaturalise, to splice ourselves from our ways of seeing. And because of the participation of the subject, conceptions of the subject-object relationship, perceiver to perceived, are at the heart of any visual culture discussion.

Finally, the third contested area is the nature of the relationship between visual culture and (post)modernity. It is a truly modern academic endeavour in relying for its existence on the growing acceptance of interdisciplinarity ('interdisciplinary study consists of creating a new object that belongs to no-one'<sup>8</sup>) as a method of academic pursuit ('it is one among a number of critically engaged means to work out what doing post-disciplinary

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<sup>4</sup> M. Bal, 'Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture', *Journal of Visual Culture*, April 2003, pp.5-31

<sup>5</sup> J. Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books Ltd 1972)

<sup>6</sup> M. Jay, 'Introduction' in *Downcast Eyes: the Denigration of Vision in Twentieth Century French Thought* (Los Angeles: University of California Press 1994)

<sup>7</sup> M. Bal, as above

<sup>8</sup> M. Bal, 'Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture'

practice might be like<sup>9</sup>), and recent thinking in science, sociology, psychology, philosophy: without Freud, feminism and Barthes there would be no visual culture studies.

But it is modern in another sense. Academic thought from the last century prepared the ground with ideas (voyeurism and surveillance, the gaze) that were easily applicable to reflection on the impact and operations of an entirely new side to society that has emerged in recent years: the digital realm. The visual has now seemingly been appropriated as the mode of analysis for the information age, for media and post-industrial societies and for a globalised world, and it is this appropriation that forms one of the central divisions amongst visual culture practitioners.

There is a belief that visual culture studies has come about because of the overwhelmingly ocularcentric nature of contemporary society.<sup>10</sup> So-called ‘visual technologies’ permeate social space, hence the perception that ‘visuality’ is one of the most critical operators of our time. With such ultra-modern phenomena as the digitisation of technology, infinitely replicable images and the pervasive presence of screens, this seems easy to accept. A proliferation in visual technologies must entail a corresponding shift in social patterns and visual practices.

But such an unexamined belief requires deeper evaluation. Are these technologies visual? Is screen culture the same as visual culture? Is increased volume of information the same as increased visuality? What is the difference between images as durable material objects and images as fleeting retinal impressions? And is a retreat to two-dimensional visuality an impoverishing trend to be resisted and countered (as some architects have argued<sup>11</sup>)?

It is perhaps true that the plethora of images in contemporary life has drawn attention to our ways of seeing as meriting deeper understanding. But because its primary driver has

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<sup>9</sup> N. Mirzoeff, ‘The Subject of Visual Culture’, in N. Mirzoeff (ed.) *The Visual Culture Reader* (London: Routledge 2002) 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., pp3-21

<sup>10</sup> M. Dikovitskaya, *Visual Culture: The Study of the Visual After the Cultural Turn*, (Cambridge: MIT Press 2005) Dikovitskaya asserts there is a ‘consensus among scholars that visual studies is brought about by the present condition of our culture in which visuality is centrally important.’

<sup>11</sup> For example, Juhani Pallasmaa in *The Eyes of the Skin*, Leon van Schaik in *Spatial Intelligence: New Futures for Architecture*

been the modern condition, it does not necessarily follow that the object of visual culture studies must *be* the modern condition. Its frequent omission of consideration of earlier periods has been a repeated criticism of the burgeoning movement.

This essay will examine the standpoints of **Michael Ann Holly**, in the *October* 77 questionnaire<sup>12</sup> and as interviewed by Dikovitskaya for *Visual Culture: The Study of the Visual After the Cultural Turn*<sup>13</sup>, of **Nicholas Mirzoeff** in his opening chapter to his *Visual Cultural Reader, 'The Subject of Visual Culture'*<sup>14</sup> and of **Mieke Bal** in a paper for the *Journal of Visual Culture, Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture*<sup>15</sup>. These three scholars have all been instrumental in the emergence and progression of the movement. However they represent quite different positions on how and why visual culture should be practiced, and what, ultimately, it ought to do.

In comparing the three texts, I have read them with four questions in mind. How do they use and define the term? What do they believe to be the 'object' of visual culture studies? Do they take a stance regarding the problem of visual essentialism (or are they perhaps guilty of it)? And finally, if Visual Culture Studies is to have an impact beyond the academic milieu, what should it do?

Holly's position is perhaps the simplest to grasp. An art historian and historiographer interested in the changes in intellectual inquiry into art, she was one of the founding members of the Visual and Cultural Studies programme at Rochester University, the first university course with such a name. Although the other founding members came from Literature and Film Studies faculties as well as art, the 'VCS' programme sits within the Art and Art History department (this is not always the case) and operated alongside it.

As an instigator (a 'revolutionary'), Holly conceives of 'Visual Studies' (her preferred term) as an interdisciplinary endeavour that builds on the innovative heritage of earlier art

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<sup>12</sup> M.A.Holly, in 'Visual Culture Questionnaire', *October* Vol. 77, Summer 1996, pp.39-41

<sup>13</sup> M.A.Holly, interview in M. Dikovitskaya (ed.), *Visual Culture: The Study of the Visual After the Cultural Turn*, (Cambridge: MIT Press 2005) pp193-202

<sup>14</sup> N. Mirzoeff, 'The Subject of Visual Culture', in N. Mirzoeff (ed.) *The Visual Culture Reader* (London: Routledge 2002) 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., pp3-21

<sup>15</sup> M. Bal, 'Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture', *Journal of Visual Culture*, April 2003, pp.5-31

history practitioners, ‘Panofsky, Riegl, Warburg, Dvorak, Wolfflin... that lively epistemological locale’<sup>16</sup>, in order to keep the practice of thinking about art and related cultural practices enlivened and moving forward. She describes it as a ‘hybrid term’, a mix of ‘ideas and works of traditional art with contemporary critical theory imported from other disciplines.’<sup>17</sup>

This is not simply a renaming, but a new field in which to reopen intellectual debates that have become bogged down and obsessed with ‘fact-finding’ in the aging and entrenched discipline of art history. It is easy to see why this position would feel threatening to some art historians. Importantly, she sees the ‘cultural’ milieu as more conducive to supporting ‘ever new questions’, the ‘chaos of contemporary theory’ and ‘conceptual room’ than the historical, where the practice has been ‘constrained...to think in terms of linear time’, to ‘locate (art) historically, to seal its meaning shut.’<sup>18</sup>

Mirzoeff, also trained as an art historian, was an early student of the ‘new art histories’. He is now a Professor in the Art Department of SUNY, but his work emphasises the cultural and political angle to the practice of visual culture. His references to ‘art’ are in fact few. ‘Visual culture’ is his term of choice, which signifies for him a ‘discursive formation’. The presence of the word culture is key.

*By retaining the term culture in the foreground, critics and practitioners alike are reminded of the political stakes inherent in what we do.*<sup>19</sup>

*The Subject of Visual Culture* discusses questions of interpretation posed by the complex operations of new media in a global context. He refers to Marshall McLuhan’s text *Understanding Media* as the first instance of the term in the sense in which he means it.

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<sup>16</sup> Visual Culture Questionnaire, p.40

<sup>17</sup> Interview in M.Dikovitskaya (ed.) p.194

<sup>18</sup> Visual Culture Questionnaire, p.41

<sup>19</sup> N. Mirzoeff, ‘The Subject of Visual Culture’, p.6

It is clear that for Mirzoeff, 'visual culture' is just as much *a name for the discipline as a description of the globalized, media-driven state of the world: we live in a hyper-visual culture. He is concerned at the effects of this condition on the contemporary subject:*

*...the ability of CNN... to bring war to the living room, often on the same monitor used to play first person shooter video games, or to watch videotape or dvd versions of films, is closely linked to the public sanction of war and its empowering, if necessarily transitory, sense of a collective and individual agency.<sup>20</sup>*

This complicated 'intervisuality', according to Mirzoeff, has myriad repercussions (in this example, for the methods of military strategists, politicians and filmmakers) and visual culture should seek to understand, and possibly mitigate, the new subjectivity being created.

Bal was one of Holly's co-founders of the Rochester VCS course, coming from within the Comparative Literature school. She separates 'visual culture' (object) and 'visual culture studies' (discipline), claiming that otherwise it is 'impossible to examine your own presuppositions'<sup>21</sup>. In spite of her formative role in the movement, her paper plays devil's advocate. By dissecting exactly what it can claim as its object, and critically examining the underlying notion of visual essentialism, she attempts to rebuild the idea of visual culture on a more defensible footing.

It becomes clear from a closer reading that much of Bal's criticism of visual culture practitioners appears to be directed at Mirzoeff. The publication dates suggest the article might be read as a direct refutation of many of his 'unquestioned assumptions' in *The Subject of Visual Culture*.

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<sup>20</sup> p.7

<sup>21</sup> M. Bal, 'Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture', p.5

She deconstructs the concepts of vision and culture. She explains what she thinks are some of the practical problems facing the development of visual culture studies (finding new methodologies suited to a new object; resisting the temptation to define new against old, thereby threatening 'everything that has been accomplished' with an academic backlash; how it ought to interact with cultural politics) and sets out some clear goals.

But to return to the beginning, since almost everything has a visual dimension for humans, how do they suggest the object domain be defined?

For Holly, the question is not about 'objects, but subjects – subjects caught in congeries of cultural meanings'.<sup>22</sup> As Bal and Mirzoeff, her tendency is to shift the emphasis of analysis onto the perceiver; it is the response of the perceiver to a specific range of objects ('sites at which discursive formation intersects with material properties'<sup>23</sup>), in this case 'visual representations', that is of interest.

This entails a 'new questioning attitude to the role of images in culture', examining how the subject makes meaning from imagery ranging from 'those of high art... to other kinds of more everyday imagery', analysed 'on the basis of how they operate as visual representations rather than under the categories such as 'masterpiece' and 'created by geniuses' and 'high art vs. low art'.<sup>24</sup> Here she is effectively enumerating qualifying categories of 'thing'.

If visual culture studies is a practice that critically examines the process of looking, its contribution to art history is 'the ability to objectify and reconsider one's grounds of judgement in the process of looking at paintings and sculptures'.<sup>25</sup> She is unconcerned about maintaining a boundary between art and non-art, explaining that 'who is considered great and what is considered a masterpiece are merely culturally determined'. Visual studies (and art history) allow us to 'observe how much such values change over time.'

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<sup>22</sup> Visual Culture Questionnaire, p.40

<sup>23</sup> M. Bal, 'Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture', p.15

<sup>24</sup> Interview in M.Dikovitskaya (ed.), p.194

<sup>25</sup> M.Dikovitskaya, 'Chapter 1: Theoretical Frameworks' in M.Dikovitskaya (ed.), *Visual Culture*



Mirzoeff, although he agrees that visual culture had its beginnings in ‘art history with a little bit of theory admixed’, believes that it has matured beyond that function, and mainly as a result of massive technological, social and cultural changes that have given ‘the visual a pre-eminent place in everyday life.’<sup>26</sup> Famous for opening a book with the provocative sentence, ‘modern life takes place on screen’<sup>27</sup>, Mirzoeff believes that ‘the constituent element of visual culture’s practice is the visual event.’ In contemporary society, the visual event takes place in the network of a ‘complicated, global proliferation of gazes and technologies.’<sup>28</sup>

He opens his chapter with just such an example, taken from the news coverage of the NATO strike on Serbia in 1999, in which a simple switch of logos revealed CNN viewers were momentarily watching Serbia watch America watch Serbia. He believes ‘this little incident’ to have been usefully exemplary in expressing

*the formal condition of contemporary visual culture that I call intervisuality, the simultaneous display and interaction of a variety of modes of visibility.*<sup>29</sup>

Alongside the war on the ground in Serbia, visibility, ‘the intersection of power with visual representation’, was being fought over. Therefore visual culture’s object of study

*is precisely the entities that come into being at the points of intersection of visibility with social power.*<sup>30</sup>

Although it is not entirely clear what the ‘entities’ are that he is referring to, by opening with the Serbian example, and continuing in a similar vein, he reveals that he believes the contemporary situation to be the proper object of the ‘discursive formation’ that is visual culture.

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<sup>26</sup> Interview in M. Dikovitskaya (ed.), pp.224-237

<sup>27</sup> N. Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, (New York: Routledge 1999)

<sup>28</sup> N. Mirzoeff, ‘The Subject of Visual Culture’, p.8

<sup>29</sup> p.3

<sup>30</sup> p.10

*In the first edition of this reader, I argued that visual culture is concerned with visual events in which the user seeks information, meaning or pleasure in an interface with visual technology. This formula bears re-examination, given the rapid pace of change.<sup>31</sup>*

His very definition of visual culture is directly affected by contemporary technological development. This begs the question, to what extent are these contemporary technologies increasingly ‘visual’? To what extent do technological shifts affect the way we think and see, and is it even possible to analyse these shifts contemporaneously?

It must also be noted that screens, ‘visual technology’, the digital realm, purvey a very limited form of image, just as images are only one element of the visual. Such a conception of visual culture leaves little room for the analysis of the visual functioning of, for example, architecture and environments.

Bal begins by addressing the relationship between academic pursuits and their quarry: a discipline ‘lays claim to a specific object’<sup>32</sup>. She identifies the struggle to delimit and define the object – and consequent lack of clarity about the object – as the movement’s ‘primary pain point’. She ultimately argues that a definition of visual culture studies based on some common element of visual objects is an impossible ambition that will ‘only invoke banality’ or the proposal of utterly unverifiable qualities.

Defining the object domain as a collection of objects or entities is part of the problem. She believes the target of visual culture studies is not an ‘object’ at all, but

*the question of visuality:... what happens when people look, and what emerges from that act?... the event and the experienced image...<sup>33</sup>*

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<sup>31</sup> p.5

<sup>32</sup> M. Bal, ‘Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture’, p.6

<sup>33</sup> p.9

*Visuality as an object of study requires that we focus on the relationship between the seen and the seer.*<sup>34</sup>

Thus, ‘the object of visual studies is best not defined in terms of things included, but in terms of what they do.’<sup>35</sup> She deliberately peppers her argument with examples taken from the world of artists, to demonstrate the fact – and counter Mirzoeff’s tendency towards the 21<sup>st</sup> century digital object – that traditional analogue artefacts can participate in ‘visual events’ and legitimately be studied<sup>36</sup>. But she also cites verbal imagery (the common metaphor ‘to be on the map’<sup>37</sup>) to demonstrate that language can equally be an appropriate object.

This is a much more open approach to considering the interaction of visibility and social behaviour, and doesn’t prescribe focussing on a particular historical period or culture. In fact, contemporary visual culture (in its infinite variations) is worthy of study, but as a specific, time-limited visual regime.

*‘Visual regimes constitute not the self-evident frame, but the object to be analysed.’*<sup>38</sup>

And visuality is not a property of an object.

*‘Instead... it is the practices of looking invested in any object that constitute the object domain: its historicity, its social anchoring and its openness to the analysis of synaesthetics.’*<sup>39</sup>

This notion, that ‘vision is inherently synaesthetic’<sup>40</sup> – perception is ‘impure’, rarely dependent solely sight but also experience of touch (hapticity) and the other senses –

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<sup>34</sup> p.14

<sup>35</sup> p.13

<sup>36</sup> See her discussion of Louise Bourgeois, p.15

<sup>37</sup> p.21

<sup>38</sup> p.12

<sup>39</sup> p.11

brings us to the next challenge for visual culture studies, that of the legitimacy of isolating vision for analysis.

There is little in either of Holly's accounts to reveal her thinking about this potentially disruptive idea. But that is partly because she sees visual studies as a complement to art history, as the next iteration of 'the changing intellectual history of art' as a result of incoming 'theoretical initiatives' such as feminism and semiotics.

She is ambivalent about terminology, far more concerned about what her students and academic peers actually do. She even goes so far as to say 'nothing really resides in a name'. Thus, her conception of the new discipline rests only on the concept of visuality. Visual culture, as a 'fractious post-structuralist attention to visual representation'<sup>41</sup> is dependent on the visual to the same degree that art and other imagery are, as objects of study that usually function through the act of being looked at.

She doesn't address the possibility that art may be more than (or even in the case of sound or conceptual art, not primarily) visual. But it is significant here that 20<sup>th</sup> century visual concepts (such as the gaze) underpin the new analysis of representational objects, thus foregrounding the visual in the new art histories.

Mirzoeff is interested in the operation of the gaze outside of the realm of art. He asserts that today, the 'power structures' people are confronted with in their everyday lives 'have become increasingly visual, through not just the internet but television, DVDs, computers, and so on.'<sup>42</sup> Hence the provocation: 'Modern life takes place on screen.' This is understandable in the sense that images – and especially images experienced immaterially through screens – are unique in being experienced primarily visually.

He argues that the 'urgency' of addressing those things he labels as visual 'cannot be fully considered in the established visual disciplines.' The state of the world has

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<sup>40</sup> p.9

<sup>41</sup> Visual Culture Questionnaire, p.40

<sup>42</sup> Interview in M.Dikovitskaya (ed.), pp.226

outgrown art history. Cultural studies, on the other hand, is much better placed to deal with these sociological sorts of phenomena, and so the marriage of ‘the visual’ and ‘culture studies’.

The last element of this point is easily admissible, but his premise – that contemporary ‘power structures’ (or ‘phantoms’<sup>43</sup>) are inherently visual – is less so.

To Mirzoeff, this is a self-evident truth. But if it is not so to the reader, his argument, whilst artfully written (and a little alarmist in places) is confusing. He is not very rigorous or methodical in distinguishing between the aspects of things that are visual and those that are not, labelling as ‘visual’ events and situations and technologies which have many different constituent elements.

For example, in the section headed ‘Visual Subjects’ he discusses the influence of the Information Age<sup>44</sup> on societal attitudes to sexuality and race

*digital culture... seems to have been part of a shift in attitudes to gender and sexuality, but has not resulted in a similar change with regard to ethnicity and ‘race’. It seems that the endless repetition of visual selves has led to a greater degree of indifference as to sexual and gender identity, whilst sustaining ‘race’ in difference.<sup>45</sup>*

In other words, we continue to distinguish by race because we are driven as subjects by hyper-visibility (an effect of digital culture) and race, unlike sexuality, is easily detected by eye.

This surely is only a partial explanation for a phenomenon that in itself may be wholly debatable. Indeed others have hotly disputed this kind of argument. Bal quotes David Rodowick:

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<sup>43</sup> As WJT Mitchell has termed them, in ‘Interdisciplinarity and Visual Culture’ *Art Bulletin* December 1995 Vol. 77 No. 4

<sup>44</sup> Note that we popularly term it the ‘information’, not the ‘visual’ age

<sup>45</sup> N. Mirzoeff, ‘The Subject of Visual Culture’, p.12

*it is misleading to attribute a rise in the currency of the visual to the apparent power and pervasiveness of digital imaging in contemporary culture.*<sup>46</sup>

Similarly, WJT Mitchell has said

*The fantasy that images and visuality 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 axioms.*<sup>47</sup>

It is this assumption – that the internet and its correlatives are ‘visual’ – that seems to most incense Bal.

*Another instance of visual essentialism that leads to gross distortion is the uncritical embrace of the new media, presented as visual... The internet is not primarily visual at all... If anything characterises the internet, it is the impossibility of positing its visuality as pure, or even primary.*<sup>48</sup>

Rather it is the lack of an appropriate intellectual concept with which to characterise the nature of new media that has led to the application of ‘visual’. She proposes

*it would more accurately be described as screen culture, with its particular fugitivity, in contradistinction from print culture, in which objects, including images, have a more durable form of existence.*<sup>49</sup>

The misdirected focus on new media is a symptom of overlooking the ‘profoundly impure’ quality of vision: the bodily senses are ‘mutually permeable’, what is ‘natural’ and ‘culturally constructed’ in vision is hard to separate.

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<sup>46</sup> M. Bal, ‘Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture’, p.10

<sup>47</sup> W.J.T.Mitchell, ‘Interdisciplinarity and Visual Culture’ *Art Bulletin* Vol. 77 No. 4 December 1995

<sup>48</sup> M. Bal, ‘Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture’, p.10

<sup>49</sup> M. Bal, ‘Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture’, p.10

The very concept of 'visual culture' perpetuates the traditional hierarchy of the senses with sight as king, which in fact is a visual regime in itself. Citing other cultures whose categorisations of sensation and perception are very different, she demonstrates that the tendency to prioritise sight is an ideal object of study for visual culture. Building on the idea that the primacy of sight is a gendered, specifically masculine, construct, she speculates that

*visual essentialism – the unexamined isolation of the visual as an object of study – is connected to a gendered body-phobia.*<sup>50</sup>

But is there a way of pursuing visual culture studies without being guilty of visual essentialism? Can the practice somehow be more than self-reinforcing, tautological? She argues, following Claire Pajaczkowska, that it is possible, if analysing 'the visual aspect of a culture – its imagery, signs, styles and pictorial symbols', often being the 'most powerful component of ... systems of communication', as this would permit the analogy between vision and that other semiotic system – language – to be properly explored.<sup>51</sup>

It is in their thoughts on what Visual Culture Studies should aim to achieve that the three find the most common ground: the new initiative is about encouraging critical thinking in the 21<sup>st</sup> century student, and it has political and social responsibilities. Interviewed by Dikovitskaya, Mirzoeff states, 'one of the key tasks of the modern university will be to provide students with the ability to become critical viewers.'<sup>52</sup> Holly, likewise, says rather than producing graduates who are experts in a particular period or school of art, she hopes to produce 'amphibians', independent thinkers 'comfortable taking a variety of perspectives and organising them into new combinations in order to think better about the objects they are studying.'<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> p. 13. On this point, it is interesting to note that it is easier to find female scholars within the 'visual culture' field pursuing a more visceral analysis of objects as sites of meaning (for example, Bal and many of the scholars she cites in this text, much of Giuliana Bruno's academic preoccupations, Angela Rosenthal on blushing and whiteness in portraiture).

<sup>51</sup> p.13

<sup>52</sup> N. Mirzoeff, Interview in M. Dikovitskaya (ed.), *Visual Culture: The Study of the Visual After the Cultural Turn*, (Cambridge: MIT Press 2005), p.228

<sup>53</sup> Interview in M.Dikovitskaya (ed.) p.201

Within the context of her own field she hopes this will lead to ‘new critical initiatives in art history’ that relate the object to wider social phenomena and understanding.

*University education is meant to enable students to think, not to give them answers. They need to learn to argue well, through working on what you like and what you think is relevant, ethically significant, and able to help them, as young people living in the early twenty-first century, think seriously about the role of visual representation.*<sup>54</sup>

Furthermore, these new initiatives will be to the enrichment of art historical study. She sees the pursuit as having been ‘stuck’, since the Cold War, in attribution and fact-finding. Her goal is to re-enliven the art historical enterprise, to help art to continue to make meaning by asking ‘ever new questions about its motives, its creators, its intended audience, its complicit role in power structures.’ The new field of visual culture allows scholars ‘conceptual room’ to address ‘unsettling questions rather than just tacitly reproduce canonized knowledge.’<sup>55</sup>

Angela Rosenthal’s paper on 18<sup>th</sup> Century British portraiture<sup>56</sup> is an ideal example of this kind of practice, one that finds a new explanation for a particular stylistic feature, and contributes to social history through the examination of ‘art’. Examining blushing and the legibility of virtue, and the depiction of white and dark skin, in very traditional British portraiture, she unearths something not only of the 18<sup>th</sup> century mentality about female virtue, but also about the concepts of Englishness and otherness. These portraits reveal British neuroses in relation to empire building and nationality, and the idea of women as protected vessels of ideal English characteristics: the conceptual boundaries of the nation are circumscribed visually.

Holly’s tone is consistently optimistic and confident, probably because she believes the mission to have been at least partially accomplished:

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<sup>54</sup> p.197

<sup>55</sup> Visual Culture Questionnaire, p.41

<sup>56</sup> A. Rosenthal, ‘Visceral Culture: Blushing and the Legibility of Whiteness in 18<sup>th</sup> Century British Portraiture’, *Art History*, Vol 27 No 4 . September 2004



*Over the last decade or so, the wide circulation of the name 'visual studies' and the ideas behind it, have made art history an intellectual pursuit again; the subject is now about ideas.*<sup>57</sup>

Mirzoeff takes the political goal one step further:

*Visual culture is a tactic for those who do not control such dominant means of visual production to negotiate the hypervisuality of everyday life in a digitized global culture.*<sup>58</sup>

An interesting proposition, although it is unclear why he thinks an academic 'discursive formation' could become a 'tactic' for the general populus (presumably the referent of 'those who do not control such dominant means'.)

As an inherently political pursuit, he goes straight to the heart of a political issue: the representation of war (referencing Paul Virilio's assertion that 'war is cinema') through contemporary media and its new kind of subjectivity.

*War is the subject of these images, but it is also a means of creating subjects, visual subjects...*<sup>59</sup>

*The 'media-environment' for war and its cognates in everyday life is the operating arena for a new visual subjectivity. This subjectivity is what is ultimately at stake for visual culture.*<sup>60</sup>

He is concerned at the effect on the individual's sense of identity, speculating that aspects of the new 'media-environment' are undermining the subject's idea of their place in the world.

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<sup>57</sup> p.195

<sup>58</sup> N. Mirzoeff, 'The Subject of Visual Culture', p.4

<sup>59</sup> p.5

<sup>60</sup> p.10

*The boundaries of the visual subject are under erasure from within and without. Today it is possible to feel constantly under surveillance and that no-one is watching at all...*<sup>61</sup>

Slightly ungenerously, Bal characterises this drive to embrace new media as a means of appropriating them for art history, to lend that discipline ‘the connotation of innovation and the cutting edge that it so badly needs.’<sup>62</sup> I suspect Mirzoeff would counter that his concerns have gone beyond modernising art history; that the point, now, is to reveal the political in the visual.

Bal similarly discusses the political purpose of the movement:

*...the mission of cultural analysis, including its visual variant, is to examine how power is inscribed differently in and between ‘zones of culture’...*<sup>63</sup>

But in order to examine the machinations of power, it is not necessary or even advisable to pick overtly political objects, but instead attempt to ‘expose politics within the object’. The analysis of ‘canonical paintings or advertisements’, or indeed the representation of war, is naïve in as much as it is unlikely to have a transformative effect.<sup>64</sup>

As a more appropriate object for study, she suggests the operations of museums, as frequent purveyors of the ‘master narratives’ that visual culture should seek to dislodge.

*(A museum) must not act as the custodian of objects... Ideally, its variable setup and visible curatorial acts problematize the acts of looking and disturb the conventional notion of the transparency of the visible.*<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> p.11

<sup>62</sup> M. Bal, ‘Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture’, p.11

<sup>63</sup> p.18

<sup>64</sup> pp.20-21

<sup>65</sup> pp.14-15

Dislodging ‘master narratives’, for example to explore and explain the bond between visual culture and nationalism, is one of her objectives for the movement, as well as understanding the ‘prioritization of realism’, and the drive to encourage mimesis in the subject; and understanding the motivations of visual essentialism, an initial attempt at which forms a large part of her own text. She suggests that a number of other objectives will emerge from this last, ultimately arguing that the task of visual culture studies is to ‘actively disappear’ visual essentialism.<sup>66</sup> The notion of the visual

*as the superior, most reliable of the five senses, is a cultural phenomenon worth critical analysis.*<sup>67</sup>

She also touches on the concept of Visual Literacy:

*Nor... do we know much about the history and politics of visual literacy. This is the right analogy, not between essences, but between situations in the field of power/ knowledge.*<sup>68</sup>

As a system of communication and representation, there are parallels between the use of words and the use of images. Much more is known about the functioning and systems of languages (linguistics, literary literacy), than that of the, possibly more primal, functioning of images (visual culture, visual literacy). But equally there are clear, intelligible structures to language, much more so than the panoply of ‘visual’ communication.

*Although much is understood about the structure of language, its biological bases and social effects, the history and politics of literacy, education and social privilege, much less is known about the communicative nature and internal structure of imagery.*<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> p.25

<sup>67</sup> p.13

<sup>68</sup> p.14

<sup>69</sup> p.14

To flesh out the non-evaluative and relatively unexplored concept of ‘visual literacy’ seems an obvious ambition for visual culture studies.

As we have seen, the field currently encompasses discussions of art, reflections on the effects of new media and technology, evaluation of scopic regimes, as well as a self-conscious questioning of its own validity. It is likely that it will continue to operate in this diverse manner. However in terms of what it might most usefully do, I would tend to agree with Bal.

Part of me instinctively rejects Mirzoeff’s analysis. Perhaps it is a detection of some ‘gendered body-phobia’. Because it is always worth remembering that however pervasive the screen becomes, however inattentive we become to the rich materiality of the world, we still have bodies, and the functioning of visibility is interesting beyond images. This is not to deny the digital realm might be a valid object of study, but I do not believe it is the quintessential object for visual culture studies.

Rather it is perhaps that belief in itself that merits analysis. Deconstructing visual essentialism – the (it has to be acknowledged) ultra-modern notion that sight and its related concepts can be examined in isolation – stands to produce the most informative revelations regarding contemporary culture and thinking, and in relation not only to the visual.

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