

Visual Studies — Preliminary Discussion, 7 Feb 13

For those who were unable to make class last night, here's a brief summary of my opening remarks. My intention was to briefly pull together several threads from the previous discussion and the reading and viewing assignments for the week. The questions raised — what is visual studies, how do we approach it, how do personal experience, philosophy, and science increase our understanding of visuality — will shape our discussion over the next several weeks. The issues, and the questions, should gradually become clearer. So think seriously about these matters, take notes, be patient, and by all means ask questions.

Last week Bobby asked for a definition of "visual studies". I said it was an area of study that draws on visual culture generally, including art history, criticism, philosophy, design, cognitive and social sciences. What I didn't say was how we **practice** visual studies. There are many ways to do it, as you might expect. My approach is both pragmatic and philosophical. I want to understand not only the nature of visual experience, but perhaps even more importantly how it enhances our collective imagination and creative collaboration with one another. It's surprising that after thousands of years of observation, thought, research, and reflection, there are still so many fundamental aspects of looking and seeing that are still mysterious. Oliver Sacks' essay on "what the blind see" expresses, in many ways, a similar sentiment.

Part of the problem is that we don't have access to the deepest and intimate aspects of our own lives. The most common, essential features of our own behavior are hidden from us. Just consider the process of remembering the name of an actor in a favorite film, one you've seen several times. You can form a clear visual image of her — you can see her face — but can't remember her name. The link between what you see and what you can say is not working. The content is missing. You try a series of names, whatever comes to mind, but there's no connection. You can **feel** they don't fit. You wait, and wait. Then, suddenly, totally out of nowhere, her name pops into your head. "Isabella Rossellini!" That's it. But what internal mental process **caused** the connection? You have no idea how it happened, only that you have what you were looking for. You have the "what" but not the "how". The process remains hidden. Some things may be forever hidden from introspection. (Does it ever happen in reverse, that you have the name but not the visual image of the face?)

Neuroscience offers lots of data, hypotheses, and theories about human language and image processing. But science does not provide a full account of how things appear to us — what it is like to see the color of a winter sunset, a color photograph of the winter sunset, the sound of a subway train, the smell of oil paint. (Does anyone smell oil paint anymore?) But if we can't count on introspection for access to our own minds, we must be lacking self-knowledge at a fundamental level. (Add to this recent experiments that suggest decisions are made in the brain before we have the conscious experience of having made them, and the situation gets more and more mysterious. How far does the self extend below our perceptual threshold? [For information on such experiments, see <http://tinyurl.com/3ktu7f3>.])

As we see in Michio Kaku's video on time, which nicely links personal experience to scientific explanation, analogous mysteries, vast hidden phenomena and processes also seem to exist on the cosmological end. In fact, we seem to be positioned in between the bizarre micro-realm of quantum mechanics and the vast macro-realm of relativity theory! It's from this uncertain position that we look at the world.

From here we segued back to theories of visual perception in ancient Greek philosophy (Aristotle), early modern philosophy (Descartes), and twentieth century philosophy (Merleau-Ponty). [See the course handout for more on this aspect.]

We'll pick up the discussion next week with readings from Alva Noe and Brian Greene's video on space.

Timothy Quigley, 8 Feb 13