

Introduction

The Concept of Visual Literacy, and Its Limitations

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I chose the expression *visual literacy*, initially in the book *Visual Studies: A Skeptical Introduction*, because its two words compress the common and unavoidable contradiction involved in saying that we “read” images. *Visual literacy* does not avoid that contradiction, or try to improve on it, but starts with the most succinct form of the contradiction itself. Tropes of reading are unavoidable in talk about images, as W. J. T. Mitchell argues in this volume, and *visual literacy* has the virtue of not trying to solve that structural problem. That is the first reason for the title of this book. A second reason has to do with pedagogy. A search of newspaper and magazine databases revealed that *visual literacy* has been in uncommon but intermittent use for over a hundred and fifty years; it has been used to denote low-level, secondary school appreciation, of the sort that enables a student to identify Michelangelo’s *David*. I like that somewhat dusty feel, because it is a reminder that these issues of visuality impinge on undergraduate curricula. Visual literacy, or literacies—the plural will be at issue throughout—are as important for college-level education as (ordinary) literacy, and far less often discussed.

A third and last reason for choosing *visual literacy* is that it is convenient in the absence of anything better. It might be possible to speak of *visual competence*, or *visual competencies*, but that sounds awkward, utilitarian, and prescriptive. *Visual practices* is common but vague. *Visual languages* is so freighted with inappropriate precedents, from Umberto Eco to Nelson

Goodman, that it is practically useless. *Visual skills* is too narrow, because much of what matters here is politics, ideology, and history, as well as skills. Inevitably, and properly, contributors to this volume debate the choice of *visual literacy*. Perhaps it is best just to acknowledge the inbuilt awkwardness that language and usage impose on the subject at hand.

The conference that is revised and expanded in these pages was not the first to put stress on the expression *visual literacy*. Before the spring of 2005 there had been at least four conferences with *visual literacy* in their titles, and at least one undergraduate program with that title. “Visual Literacy: The Power of the Picture” was the name of a session at a conference in January 2004, with John Baldessari, Hani Rashid, and Curtis Wong. A white paper, drawn up to reflect the conversation, defines visual literacy as “understanding how people perceive objects, interpret what they see, and what they learn from them.” That is at least part of a reasonable definition of the field of visuality, although at that conference the discussion centered

que specimen erat. Id. N. D. 5, 52.

161. Videre, cernere, visere, contueri, intueri, spectare, conspiciere, adspicere, contemplari, considerare. Videre, von einer Wurzel mit *ιδεῖν*, sehen, heißt mit dem Gesichtssinn wahrnehmen, cernere, verwandt mit *κρίνω*, perf. vidi, sup. visum, mit dem Gesichtsinne unterscheiden, aus seiner Umgebung Etwas herauserkennen. Beide werden auch vom geistigen Sehen gebraucht, sodaß videre ist a) geistig wahrnehmen, synonym mit cognoscere, b) erleben, c) darauf oder darauf sein Augenmerk richten, darauf sehen, daß mit folgendem Relativsätze, ut, ne. Dagegen cernere = deutlich wahrnehmen, erkennen. Videri = scheinen, wie bekannt, aber cerni (in re, re) sich offenbaren. Visere von visum, in genauern Augenschein nehmen wollen, besichtigen, besuchen aus Neugierde, Wißbegierde, Schaulust u. s. w. Spectare, wiederholt ansehen und 2) dem Verlaufe von Etwas, was aus verschiedenen Einzelheiten besteht, zusehen. Davon tropisch a) spectare aliquid = im Auge haben, b) spectare mit ad aliquid, eo, ut, und andern adverbia loci, = worauf abzielen. Contueri, Etwas nach allen seinen Theilen überblicken, also so von spectare unterschieden, daß der contuens die Theile des Ganzen

¹⁾ Ueber die Uebersetzung von „3. B.“ s. ut, velut, quidem, und vor Allen Seyffert Schol. Lat. 1, S. 180 ff. und II. Capit. v. Exemplum.

The lexica for visuality, vision, and related terms are immensely complicated. A full study of the concept of visuality would have to look into the concept of image, as in Laurent Lavaud’s excellent little book *l’Image*, as well as vision. Here is the beginning of the entry for *videre* and related words, in Friedrich Schmalefeld’s *Lateinische Synonymik* (1869).

on digital media and museology.¹ There is an International Visual Literacy Association, whose touchstones include Colin Turbayne's *Myth of Metaphor* and Rudolf Arnheim's *Art and Visual Perception*.² The association publishes annual conference proceedings and journals, with an emphasis on design and communication. An online conference on visual literacy, hosted by the New Media Consortium (NMC), concluded a week before the conference at University College Cork.³

Dozens of other initiatives come closer to the subject of this book even though they do not use the expression *visual literacy*. There is a design-oriented literature on visual practices, for example, recently centered on Bruce Mau and associated with historian-designers such as Johanna Drucker. Alan Fletcher's massive *Art of Looking Sideways*, an almanac of miscellaneous texts on seeing, is another example; Fletcher is a designer with Phaidon Press.⁴ That literature, I find, is not on topic when it comes to visual studies because it draws on the history of design, typography, and leisure more than on wider cultural practices. Further afield, there are books with titles such as *Practices of Looking*, *Ways of Seeing*, *Ways of Looking*, *Seeing Is Believing*, *How to See* (which is actually an eccentric medical text by Aldous Huxley), *How to Use Your Eyes*, and many others. They do not comprise a field, and some share nothing more than a few common words about vision.

I hope that *visual literacy*, paradoxical and old-fashioned as it is, can be a useful expression for a very pressing problem. The issue at stake in this book is whether or not a university education can be based on images as well as texts. Given the enormous literature on the visual nature of our world—I need only name Mitchell, Nicholas Mirzoeff, Martin Jay, Jean Baudrillard, and Lisa Cartwright to conjure the field—it is amazing that college-level curricula throughout the world continue to be mainly text-based, with intermittent excursions into visual art and culture. The possibility of reconceiving first-year college education so that it works on a visual model is, I think, the most important and potentially revolutionary problem in current curricular theory. It has not even been posed by the field of visual studies, which is still focused on graduate and postgraduate learning. Nor has it been effectively asked by the many freshman courses with titles like *Art Appreciation*, *Visual Cultures*, and *Introduction to the Visual World*, because they mainly keep to the arts and humanities instead of offering a kind of literacy that might serve for the entire university community, across all disciplines. Nor has the question been addressed by freshman cognitive science courses, which remain—in complementary fashion—within the sciences, and make only peripheral mention of the arts.

What is needed is a university-wide conversation on what might comprise an adequate *visual* introduction to the most pressing themes of

contemporary culture. From the 1980s onward, literary studies was engaged in the “canon wars,” debates about what each first-year college student should know in order to be effectively literate. Since then, the literature on literacy has sunk a little into conservatism (as in the work of E. D. Hirsch).⁵ At the time, the issues were live ones: if a student should be aware of Toni Morrison or Frantz Fanon, which authors should be removed from the curriculum to make room for them? Could Plato be pushed aside to make room for Woolf, or Harvey for Kuhn? That kind of ground-floor debate had the virtue of opening the question of what texts, ideas, events, and names should comprise a minimal common language for all undergraduate students. Art, art history, film studies, and other visual fields never really engaged in the “canon wars,” partly because art history could always make room in its massive textbooks for more artists without needing to expel the old canon.⁶

Since the 1980s the rhetoric of images has become far more pervasive, so that it is now commonplace in the media to hear that we live in a visual culture, and get our information through images. It is time, I think, to take those claims seriously. They need to be taken out of graduate philosophy and history classrooms, and brought down the hall to the large lecture theaters where first-year students are taught the things the university thinks are necessary for a general education. It is time to consider the



Many visual literacies are the objects of intense specialization; they typically escape visual studies, but figure prominently in the accumulated knowledge of many fields. How many people, for example, could recognize this as a Southeast European, early Bronze Age potsherd? Or even as a Bronze age object? It is from Durankulak, northern Bulgaria.

possibility that literacy can be achieved through images as well as texts and numbers.

The essays in this book can be read selectively, in sets, depending on your primary interest. The contributions fall naturally into four large groups:

1. *Conceptualization*. Several essays—notably Mitchell's, Peter Dallow's, William Washabaugh's, and Jon Simons's—push the conceptualization of visual literacy. Mitchell's first essay is a nicely done deconstruction of the expression itself. (His second addresses a different audience; *Bildwissenschaft* is a recently resurrected word, with resonance for an earlier generation of German art historians; Mitchell is here responding in part to Horst Bredekamp's interest in a kind of *Bildwissenschaft* as a way forward with visual studies—a way that involves my second category, below.) I am glad that Mitchell's first essay and Simons's both appear in this book, because together they are an excellent account of the limits of the concept of visual literacy: Mitchell's concerns the expression's self-defeating paradox, and Simons's addresses the central problem of the place of politics in images. The two are, in a way, bookends. At the level of abstract analysis, they provide a fair summary of the problems attendant on thinking about the words *visual* and *literate* together. Beyond primary conceptualization, there is a widening field of secondary theoretical sources. Mitchell's and Simons's essays are complemented, in that sense, by Dallow's and Washabaugh's wider range of references—to writers such as Gunther Kress, Theo van Leeuwen, Paul Messaris, Jean-Luc Nancy, William Ray, Bill Nichols, Roberts Braden and John Hortin, Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks, and many others. The open-ended conceptualization of the four papers provides a good picture of the current state of thinking on the subject.
2. *Images outside the arts*. Two essays, Barbara Stafford's and the essay coauthored by Matthias Bruhn and Vera Dünkel, are concerned with scientific and nonart images and ideas. There is a kind of visual studies, practiced mainly in German-speaking countries and in Scandinavia, in which semiotics, technology, engineering, graphs, and science play a far greater role than they do in Western Europe, the United Kingdom, Australia, and the United States. Bruhn and Dünkel work at the Humboldt-Universität in Berlin (where Bredekamp also works), and I invited them to join this volume after the conference in Cork had concluded, because I felt that the book did not adequately reflect senses of *visual literacy* outside of Anglo-American academia. Barbara Stafford's work has long been an independent, innovative project, and her

essay here is part of her current interest in parallels between the most recent neurobiology and contemporary art. It is an example of what can be done with scientific research, and in that sense it complements Bruhn and Dünkel's work, which is part of a project for the study of scientific *images*.

The extension of visual studies into engineering, medicine, science, and other areas beyond the arts is my own particular interest, and it will be developed in another book that began from the same conference, *Visual Practices across the University*. (See the note in the preface.) Even though *Visual Practices across the University* was designed as an integral part of the conference, the present book is a better reflection of the state of the field: the great majority of people who work in and around visuality, visual studies, and visual literacy do not care for the specifics of scientific images, or for visual practices beyond the humanities or outside of popular culture. It is statistically appropriate, then, that this book has only two instances of science. (I am excluding Henrik Enquist's essay for the moment.)

A word, in passing, about the images with discursive captions that are scattered throughout this book. For several reasons, the majority of essays in this book are only sparsely illustrated. Partly that is because some of the authors understandably wanted to avoid long entanglements with the increasingly intractable copyright laws governing images. Several of the authors in this book have also published lavishly illustrated books. But part of the reason for the lack of illustrations is endemic to visual studies, and that raises an interesting and delicate issue. An important strain in visual studies is preeminently conceptual or philosophic, and a number of books on the subject have few, or no, illustrations. That theme is not yet part of the discussion in the field, but I was happy to take advantage of a suggestion made by an editor at Routledge, who said I might send in some extra illustrations to help balance the book. (To give the book the appearance of visuality that readers might expect.) My choices—the pictures with discursive captions, which are not directly related to their places in the book—reflect my own interests in an intensively visual form of visual studies, one that strays well outside art. Those two interests are not representative of the field as a whole, or of any consensus of these authors, so the added images are partly a form of editorializing. (They ended up being my own contribution, more in pictures than words.) Without them, the uneven distribution of images in the book would have been an accurate representation of current writing in both

visual studies and art history: some authors rely on individual pictures and close analyses of them, and others do not.

3. *Politics*. As a general rule, one that has many exceptions, the central concerns of visual studies in English- and French-speaking countries are politics, social construction, and identity: how images shape perception and the self, and how they reflect and project collective and national ideologies. Images as politics, and politics as images, are the direct subject of Simons's paper and the principal concern of several others, including Dallow and Washabaugh. An education in visuality, Washabaugh says, is intended "to enable students to understand, and intervene in, the constructions of race and gender that are mediated by their visual experiences." The underlying assumption might be something like this: our sense of self, both individually and collectively, is made and remade in and through the visual, and therefore it is fundamentally important to learn to understand images as social constructions rather than reflections of reality, instances of aesthetic pleasure, or marketing tools. Visual studies and media studies, in this view, can help to educate people to think and act responsibly in contemporary late capitalist culture.

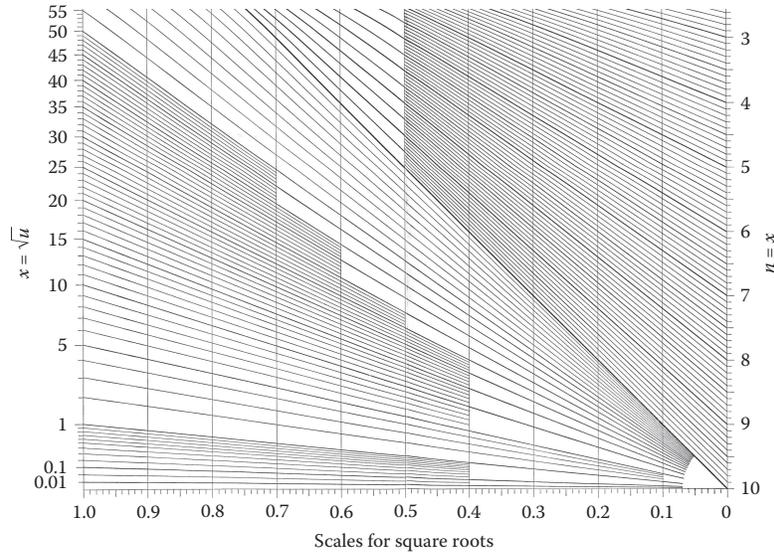
At present, visual studies explores these issues, but does not take them as intrinsic limitations to any wider study. Yet if visual studies is to contribute to a university-wide conversation on visual literacy, it is necessary to question the web of familiar theories that currently entangles the field, and keeps it wrapped in the humanities.⁷ Several essays in this book do that by moving into other fields. Stafford's essay is in this category, and so is Jonathan Crary's. His contribution may not seem perfectly on topic, because it is concerned with several episodes in nineteenth-century visuality, but it is exemplary of work that can move outside the twentieth-century sources that continue to concern visual studies. (Note his resistance to one of the questions from the audience, which tried to pry him away from his subject.)

Two other essays, however, are included here principally to show how much visual studies can offer to the university outside the fine arts. Richard Sherwin's contribution is a signal example of work on visuality between visual studies, art history, film studies, and law. The coincidence of law and criticism has been a concern in humanist scholarship since Stanley Fish's work in the 1980s; but it is only recently that lawyers have become aware of the need to be visually literate in order to win cases. Henrik Enquist's work, done in a hospital in Sweden, is aimed at giving patients the ability

to communicate more fully and effectively with their doctors. That is a common theme in patient care, but Enquist works entirely visually. When a doctor presents a patient with a partly incomprehensible picture of the inside of her body—an image fraught with pain and unhappiness—the patient is asked to respond, not with words, but with images of her own. There are some wonderful pictures here, especially the ones that resulted when Enquist gave patients disposable cameras and asked them to take photographs of the things that made them most happy. They are photos of things that, in other circumstances, might seem fairly bleak or ordinary: refrigerators, televisions, kitchens. But they are the beginnings of a visual dialogue with the intimidating machinery of professional medicine, and by extension with the equally intimidating machinery of visual studies.

4. *Pedagogy*. And finally, several essays are included in this book because they address pedagogic issues in a helpful, practical way. If you are a teacher or administrator, or you are planning an undergraduate program of visual studies, the essays by William Washabaugh and Susan Shifrin are designed to be useful resources. Washabaugh's essay surveys the philosophic bases of the visual studies approach to images (as in topic 1, above), and his essay ends with a list of North American visual studies initiatives, including URLs. Susan Shifrin's essay similarly ends with a survey of North American initiatives in secondary school visual education. Ideally, this kind of work should be made systematic, and expanded to include countries outside the United States. The only way to really understand how visuality can be taught is by comparing programs around the world, and Washabaugh's and Shifrin's essays in this book make a detailed and reliable start. The small amount of research I have done along those lines (in *Visual Studies*) was enough to reveal three, and possibly four, species of visual culture studies in different parts of the world. Each has its histories, which differ from the North American model. (The third book that will come out of the Cork conference, *Visual Cultures*, is a look at the *history* of ideas about visuality and literacy in different countries.)

So, this is a book on the slightly dubious expression *visual literacy*, intended to move visual studies out of its specialization in postgraduate education, and to nourish debate on the place of the visual in the university as a whole. My hope is that in a few years, universities will take up the challenge of providing a visual “core curriculum” for all students. Images are central to our lives, and it is time they became central in our universities.



For engineers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—up to the advent of the pocket calculator—graphical calculation was a necessary skill. Graphs were devised for all sorts of calculations, from hydraulics to concrete manufacture. Recently the history of graphs and quantified images has found its way into visual studies via the histories of science and visual communications, but it is still a minority interest despite the ubiquity of such images. This is part of a graph for calculating square roots, from Joseph Lipka's *Graphical and Mechanical Computation* (1918).

Endnotes

1. I thank Julie Chase, conference coordinator at the Berkshire Conference, for sharing the session's white paper.
2. International Visual Literacy Association, www.ivla.org.
3. New Media Consortium, "NMC Series of Online Conferences," www.nmc.org/events/2005visual_literacy_conf/index.shtml.
4. Alan Fletcher, *The Art of Looking Sideways* (London: Phaidon, 2001). See, for example, Johanna Drucker, *Figuring the Word: Essays on Books, Writing, and Visual Poetics* (New York: Granary Books, 1998); and Bruce Mau, *Massive Change: Institute without Boundaries, 2003* (London: Phaidon, 2004).
5. Among many others, E. D. Hirsch, *A First Dictionary of Cultural Literacy: What Our Children Need to Know* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989).
6. This is explored at length in my *Stories of Art* (New York: Routledge, 2004).
7. The argument is developed in my *Visual Studies: A Skeptical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 105–6, where I suggest (partly rhetorically, but partly seriously) sources such as Giambattista Vico or Jacob Burckhardt might be put in place of some of the more common points of reference.

