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Chapter Nineteen

Situating Visual Culture

Sally M. Promey

In conversations and classrooms in universities and colleges all over the United States, interest in "visual culture" is running high. "Things seen" have moved from more marginal positions to center stage of scholarly exchange and investigation, even in fields traditionally occupied with words rather than images. Academics in many disciplines – from history to anthropology, sociology to art history, American studies to literature and languages, art criticism to gender and women's studies, religious studies to psychology, and film studies to philosophy – are focusing attention on some aspect of visual culture. When viewed from the vantage of the mid-1990s, so remarkable was this redirection of energy that W. J. T. Mitchell, a scholar of texts and pictures, characterized the "explosion of interest in visual culture" as a "revolution" in higher education (Mitchell 1995a: 7).

At least to some degree, the pervasiveness and magnitude of concern have been functions of media-saturation in the present age. Among rather newly privileged visual forms, photography, film, television, the internet, and related or supporting visual technologies have ranked high. The proper subjects of investigation have also included graffiti, tattoos, broadsides, posters, advertisements, maps, book and newsprint illustrations, cartoons, pornography, festivals and parades, as well as painting, sculpture, and architecture, and images seen with an interior "eye" like the products of visionary experience and imagination. To the proverbial question, "But is it art?" the answer would have to be: sometimes, and for these particular audiences, and under these specific historical and contextual circumstances.

For many scholars of visual culture, including those principally invested in "vernacular visuality," interest in "fine" or "elite" or "high" art is not necessarily diminished by this expansion of subject, but fine art no longer defines the set of parameters marking out legitimate avenues of investigation (Mitchell 2002: 247). Aiming to operate outside the hierarchies of taste and value resident in fine art, a visual culture approach views these hierarchies as social constructions, themselves the legitimate objects of scrutiny as artifacts of Western culture, bound in time and place to particular moments and audiences. "What visual culture denies, then, is not a discourse of art but rather a definition of art" (Holly & Moxey 2002: xv). "Masterworks," for example, remain an appropriate visual cultural subject of study, but visual culture's approach foregrounds historical analysis and critique of the systems of valuation and

canon formation that secure their cultural capital *as* masterworks in a particular time and place. (In this case the gendered term of appraisal – *master*works – as well as other historical measures of "value" would elicit investigative attention.) The scholarship of visual culture, furthermore, while acknowledging and analyzing distinctions between and among different visual and artistic forms, discourages the rigid or premature separation or partitioning of one sort of visual experience or production from another.

From Mitchell's 1995 perspective, the new study of visual culture constitutes not a discrete scholarly discipline – a coherent branch of knowledge or learning with fairly fixed institutional locus and apparatus – so much as a "hybrid *interdiscipline*" (Mitchell 1995b: 541, italics added). This relatively fluid framing of the field, its subject, and its practices asserted for the study of visual culture an apparently permanent in-betweenness in disciplinary situation. A decade later this in-betweenness endures, anchored by the disciplinary inter-location remarked by Mitchell as well as by a healthy lack of consensus about nomenclature and about what, precisely, visual culture is and what its study entails.

Internationally, a multidisciplinary set of possibilities for the study of visual culture has inflected its programmatic sources and institutional homes. In England the study of visual culture carries its heaviest debts to cultural studies; in France, and elsewhere in continental Europe, semiotics and communication theory have figured most prominently. The scholarship of a small constellation of European individuals exercises considerable authority. A core list would surely include the works of Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin, Guy Debord, and Michel Foucault. In the United States, where the study of visual culture originated in, and in relation to, the discipline of art history, a modest-sized group of scholars is principally engaged in theorizing the field – and many more have contributed to its practice (Elkins 2003: 9–14). Six authors whose recent publications have been especially helpful in navigating the shifting American terrain include, in addition to Mitchell, Margaret Dikovitskaya (2005), James Elkins (2003), Michael Ann Holly and Keith Moxey (2002), and David Morgan (2005).

Visual culture remains an unsettled field of investigation. Discussion and debate about the term and its claims focus on three closely related questions. First, what nomenclature or terminology most accurately describes the interests and activities of those who study visual culture? Second, what is the disciplinary status of this entity called visual culture? And third, what is its subject of study?

Nomenclature and Terminology

In scholarly conversation there are moments when it seems critical to coin new terms, to invent new categories and vocabularies, to find new spaces, to describe and make possible the study of subjects obscured (deliberately or accidentally) by earlier definitions and approaches. Sometimes these new terms achieve intellectual clarity and popularity very rapidly; sometimes they begin rather quietly, taking up residence in the scholarly literatures and discussion almost unnoticed, inserting themselves into self-conscious academic awareness only over time. "Visual culture" made its first appearances in this latter, more circumspect manner, initially carrying with it only

some of the meanings it now asserts. A brief historiographic account will help to provide context for this discussion of the selection and significance of terms.

Caleb Gattegno's *Towards a Visual Culture: Educating through Television* (1969) represents the term's first documented use in a manner at least distantly relevant to its current configuration (Walker & Chaplin 1997: 6, n. 2). Three years later, art historian Michael Baxandall employed "visual culture" in *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (1972: 141). He did so as a means of articulating his notion of a social historical "period eye" (ibid. 29) or "cognitive style," by which he meant the skills and categories of interpretation, the "model patterns and the habits of inference and analogy" that belong to perception in a particular moment and place (ibid. 30). By the time Baxandall's disciplinary colleague Svetlana Alpers extrapolated on this subject with respect to seventeenth-century Dutch "visual culture" in her *Art of Describing* (1983), and certainly by the mid-1980s, ideas and approaches that would loosely coalesce around the study of visual culture were beginning to occupy considerable air space as topics of discussion in some quarters of the academy.

In the mid-1980s and early 1990s, for many scholars in the discipline of art history and elsewhere, choosing to situate "visual culture" as the subject of study promised to infuse new vitality into the examination of images and objects and thus to refocus and refine both interdisciplinary and disciplinary inquiry. Initially the novel constellation represented a moment of intellectual liberation in at least two ways: first, it suggested the possibility of moving beyond the overly formalistic and obsessively high-cultural dead-ends that many, within art history and outside it, believed to hinder much contemporary art historical investigation; and second, it offered a viable alternative to exclusively text-based analyses in other disciplines that were, just around this time, appropriating the modifier "visual" to specify this newly important aspect of their own disciplinary inquiry: visual anthropology, visual geography, visual sociology, or visual archaeology, for example.

In the 1950s and 1960s, and for a variety of often political and ideological reasons, art history's set of methodological possibilities had focused largely on formalist aesthetics and connoisseurship, with their watchwords of genius, innovation, quality, and "transcendence." Though this had not always been the case, during these two decades the practice of art history sustained relatively little real interaction with other disciplines. Formalism, characterized by its close attention to the "purely" visual and material qualities of works of art, effectively divorced art objects from cultural and social practices and contexts.

Beginning in the 1970s with new social histories of art, and increasingly in the 1980s with the "cultural turn" (see Bonnell & Hunt 1999), scholars insistently reintroduced questions of context and interpretation and provided an opportunity and even necessity for more intimate art historical engagement with developments in other fields. In particular, the influential cultural anthropological works of Clifford Geertz reasserted a fundamental orientation toward discerning meaning in art and other products of human culture. It was in this context of disciplinary openness and exchange that the term "visual culture" came into usage as a proper subject of scholarly investigation. As has become increasingly clear (Holly 1984), however, this moment represented a return to interdisciplinarity in art history rather than a new engagement. As Mitchell observes, early art history

> was closer to what I call visual culture, as can be seen in the work of [Alois] Riegl, [Erwin] Panofsky, and Aby Warburg. The Warburg school of art history was interested in general iconography and in nonartistic modes of representation. Panofsky also made it clear that in order to study iconology one has to go beyond the masterpieces and engage with vernacular forms of visual representation like cinema. [Ernst] Gombrich was a pioneer of visual culture in his resolute insistence on studying "everyday seeing" and the psychology of visual perception. So visual culture in some ways comes directly out of a certain tendency in art history . . . Many of the more ambitious art historians have always been interested in areas beyond the traditional boundaries of the fine arts. (Mitchell quoted in Dikovitskaya 2005: 240–1)

From its beginning, the growing scholarly interest in visual culture and the move in the academy toward its study had special significance for Americanists, including scholars in the young discipline of American Studies (the work of John Kasson, Joy Kasson, and Karal Ann Marling, for example, figured importantly here). The academic embrace of visual culture offered new legitimation to the arts of colonial America and the United States, objects that had failed to measure up on an earlier scale of valuation geared to European high-cultural standards. The simultaneous emergence of the newly positive climate for American art and material histories and of academic interest in visual culture was not simply coincidental. The same preoccupations with formalism, connoisseurship, innovation, and quality that had hampered much "traditional" art history had created especially formidable barriers for the study of American arts. In broadening attention to the full range of pictures and images that people make and live with, investigations of visual culture facilitated scholarly examination of things American. This inclusiveness rendered visual culture an easier and earlier match for Americanists, who breathed a collective sigh of relief when the new constellation of visual culture opened a way out of the Eurocentric "quality" impasse.

As a descriptive label, the term "visual culture" was applied to a particular configuration of intellectual commitments, many of them already emerging even before the term came into use. Important among these were inclinations toward an interdisciplinary approach, a focus on everyday practices, and a reconceptualization of the cultural geography of "margins" and "centers" (Promey 2003: 593). The multiplicity and hybridity represented in visual culture's ascendancy have continued to characterize its practice. In selecting the modifier "visual," most scholars meant to signify the field's engagement not just with images and objects – George Roeder's "things seen" (1998: 275) – but also with culturally and historically specific ways of seeing and modes of representation – and in relation to peoples as well as the things they produce (Brown 2004). In choosing the subject "culture," these scholars also indicated a commitment to the constructed nature of experience, to understanding the ways people make their worlds and make their worlds work (see Bryson et al. 1994: xvi, xxix). The adoption and application of the name "visual culture" modifies not just what historians and other scholars look at but also the ways they construe these subjects and the questions they ask of them. Visual culture is not just a subject matter, but also the shape of scholarly inquiry in relation to it.

Scholarly nomenclature with respect to visual culture is still unfixed, often imprecise or inconsistent across authors or even within a single author's work. For Margaret Dikovitskaya "visual culture" and "visual studies" are one and the same thing

(Dikovitskaya 2005: 1). Mitchell, on the other hand, has preferred the phrasing "visual culture" to "visual studies" because he wishes to communicate his commitment to the subject's "contructedness, its symbolic and imaginal formations" (Mitchell in Dikovitskaya 2005: 243–4). David Morgan (Morgan 2005: 32) agrees with Mitchell and others in foregrounding the "constructivist emphasis" and also in subtly shifting the punctuation from artists and objects to *practices* of image production and reception (Promey 1993, 2005; Morgan & Promey 2001; Mitchell 2002). In Morgan's recent study, "visual culture is what images, acts of seeing, and attendant intellectual, emotional, and perceptual sensibilities do to build, maintain, or transform the worlds in which people live." For Morgan, "the study of visual culture is the analysis and interpretation of images and the ways of seeing . . . that configure the agents, practices, conceptualities, and institutions that put images to work" (Morgan 2005: 33).

Mitchell and Elkins would like the study of visual culture to expand beyond the humanities (Elkins 1999; 2003: 7), to embrace, for example, scientific images, topographical charts, and mathematical figures and graphs. Elkins recommends the "study of visual practices across all boundaries." Mitchell is likewise committed to "the general study of images across the media" (1995b: 540). Elkins explicitly distances himself, however, from Mitchell's anthropological understanding of culture, where visual culture is "the study of the social construction of visual experience" (Mitchell 1995b: 540). Elkins, while he uses "visual culture," "visual studies," and "image studies" as synonyms, prefers "visual studies" precisely for its divorce from Mitchell's anthropological constructivist models. Elkins argues that, "It is exactly that apparently unconstricted, unanthropological interest in vision that I think needs to be risked" (2003: 7). More recently, Mitchell has adopted the term "visual studies" to signify "the study of visual culture," thus distinguishing the subject of study – visual culture – from the practice of studying it (Mitchell 2002: 232; Herbert 2003: 452). The yoked term "visual culture studies" also enjoys some currency (e.g., Todd 2005: 13).

Disciplinary Status

Some scholars of visual culture (Herbert 2003: 452; Mirzoeff in Dikovitskaya 2005: 225) ideally imagine disciplinary standing for their subject. Indeed, the development of a number of near-disciplinary and proto-disciplinary structures, like academic programs and curricula and the publication of textbooks, readers, and an historiographic dissertation gives substance to their claims (e.g., Bryson et al. 1994; Jenks 1995; Mirzoeff 1998, 1999; Dikovitskaya 2001). It is presently the case, however, that the study of visual culture in North America most often finds its place as an "interdiscipline"; and that many practitioners are satisfied with this arrangement (see, e.g., Morgan 2005: 27). The conversation is still fluid enough that the various contributors to most edited single volumes on visual culture represent fairly distinct points of view. One recent example (Holly & Moxey 2002: ix–x) both maintains and refutes the notion of a teleological genealogy of disciplines concerned with visual matters and labeled "aesthetics" (eighteenth century), "art history" (nineteenth century), and "visual studies" (twenty-first century). "Is it [visual culture] a field at all or simply

a moment of interdisciplinary turbulence in the transformations of art history, aesthetics, and media studies?" asks Mitchell (in Holly & Moxey 2002: 231).

Though very few would assent to an actual merger with any single established discipline, most agree that visual culture operates as an interdiscipline while maintaining special relations with art history. These familial connections are marked, on the one hand, by art history's prior expertise in and claims to the study of "visual" dimensions of human creativity, experience, and practice; and, on the other hand, by the critique of art history implicit for many in the early formation and configuration of visual culture. In defining a new arena of investigation and new investigatory rubrics and questions, the study of visual culture took aim at "traditional" art history's preoccupations with style and subject matter, with artistic genres and aesthetic hierarchy, with the elevation of "masterworks" and with the focus on "art" itself. It is important to remember, however, that art historians themselves most frequently leveled this critique; it came from within the discipline even more insistently than from without.

In the United States, as the study of visual culture sought to locate itself on an academic institutional map defined by disciplinary boundaries and practices, it landed for the most part on territory at the interface of art history and something(s) else (literature, history, film studies, or anthropology, for example) – and always at the meeting point(s) of at least two disciplines. At the University of Chicago in the early 1990s, Mitchell organized an undergraduate course in "Visual Culture" as a revisionist enterprise in conversation with the art history department's introductory "Art 101." The new course was "not an introduction to the history of art but rather an introduction to the study of visual culture, the way people see the world, how they mediate the world through various forms of representation, and how images come into being, how they circulate." Mitchell, whose own doctoral training was in the field of English literature, set out to teach a kind of visual inquiry with conceptual recourse to art historian Joshua Taylor's classic *Learning to Look* (1957). "Suppose you ask yourself the question," Mitchell suggested, "'How do I learn to look?' without restricting it to painting or sculpture" or other fine art forms (interview with Mitchell, 2001, in Dikovitskaya 2005: 242). Undergraduate courses in visual culture have proliferated over the last decade and more.

While Mitchell is generally credited with offering the first undergraduate course in "visual culture," in the years prior to the introduction of this course other scholars had raised similar questions. Some were in active dialogue with Mitchell on this subject. In the mid-1980s, University of Chicago art historian Linda Seidel had already used Taylor to some of the same ends in her own teaching of Art 101. At the time, Seidel was a participant in the interdisciplinary Laocoon Group of faculty and graduate students for which Mitchell was an organizing figure. For some decades, moreover, the University of Chicago's degree-granting interdisciplinary graduate committees (the Committee on History of Culture, for example) had made possible the study of subjects located "on the margins" of two or more disciplines, facilitating the study of visual culture in the years before formal consolidation of the subject.

The two earliest graduate programs in the study of visual culture adopted "visual studies" as a formal descriptor of their activity. Both also took shape in relations of some intimacy and complexity with the discipline of art history. The Graduate Visual and Cultural Studies Program at the University of Rochester (1989) and the

Graduate Program in Visual Studies at the University of California, Irvine (1998), began in academic institutional contexts of limited or diminishing resources for art history. Rochester supported an undergraduate art history program, but not graduate study in the discipline. The Visual and Cultural Studies graduate program is currently housed in the art history department at the University of Rochester. In its genesis, UC Irvine's visual studies program represented a creative regrouping after the California state system turned down a proposal to establish an art history graduate program. In neither case does this background make the study of visual culture any less compelling, nor interdisciplinarity any less desirable from an intellectual perspective. It does, however, significantly complicate the institutional situation and explain some of the turf wars over visual culture, and especially its institutionalization. The defensive tone and posture of the 1996 "Visual Culture Questionnaire" and the responses to it that appeared in the journal *October* are best accounted for in some relation to this "competitive" context.

To return to the matter of disciplinarity, according to Margaret Dikovitskaya, who interviewed Rochester and UC Irvine faculty in 2001 for her dissertation and the book it became, *Visual Culture: The Study of the Visual after the Cultural Turn* (2005), the Rochester program uses interchangeably the terms "visual culture" and "visual studies" and situates the subject that the terms represent as an "interdisciplinary research field" rather than a disciplinary constellation. The UC Irvine faculty, in contrast, understands "visual studies" to describe "the academic discipline that studies visual culture" (ibid. 97), offering an early disciplinary version of Mitchell's more recent interdisciplinary arrangement of the two.

To summarize, it might be said that in the American academy and among other things "visual culture" is what happened in and to art history after the cultural turn. The prefatory pages in the 1994 *Visual Culture* volume edited by Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Holly, and Keith Moxey state this position quite explicitly: "visual culture" is a product of applying contemporary theory to the discipline of art history (Bryson et al. 1994: xiii). Some have construed art history to be a subdivision of visual culture. Others see the study of visual culture as operating entirely within the domain of art history, with visual culture constituting a new subset of scholarly practices within the older discipline. Still others construe "visual culture studies" or "visual studies" to represent a discipline of scholarly endeavor all its own. Mitchell's "interdiscipline," where visual culture is always engaged in some interstitial relation between disciplines, seems most closely to describe the current situation. Art history, in large part because of its own history of expertise in the analysis of visual form, expression, communication, and exchange, is often one among the disciplinary conversation partners.

Subjects of Study

The activity of framing what qualifies as the subject of study is fundamental to scholarly investigation. In the last 25 years, visual culture has constituted a new subject of study, or at least a new way of configuring the subject of study. As with many fields, new and old, the study of visual culture sustains mutual, sometimes contradictory, definitions and understandings. Though no real consensus has emerged, and though

definitions proliferate, there are several discernible directions in scholarly practice. Each frames and characterizes visual culture differently. Together they provide four ways of identifying and parsing the subject of study; together they address both "representational practices" and "modes of observation" (Schwartz & Przyblyski 2004: 7). None stands entirely alone for the whole. All have fluid boundaries with respect to the others. Each intersects the other at various points, has implications for the other, enlivens and enriches the other. Each shares the commitment of cultural studies to issues of power and identity, especially as concerns race, ethnicity, gender, and sexualities. The important study of the visual construction of race, for example, takes place within each of these categories of scholarly practice. The four overarching dimensions of current visual culture studies include the history of images; the study of visuality; the history and theory of representation; and investigation of "hypervisuality" in contemporary media and experience.

The *history of images* as a description of the subject of study, articulated in contrast to a *history of art* by Bryson et al. (1994: xvi), accentuates both terms: history and images. Scholars pursuing this approach to the study of visual culture are concerned with images, and their relations, in historical time; they deal with the past as well as the present. This trajectory for visual culture studies might be seen to include most art history within its expanded purview. The rationale for this approach is fairly straightforward: while not all images are art, all art objects present as images of one sort or another. From this perspective, the histories of art and of images seem perfectly compatible, but the visual cultural expansion of the subject of study decisively tempers and delimits "the art historical taste for the exceptional and unique, rather than the quotidian and broadly representative" (Schwartz & Przyblyski 2004: 6). Perhaps because of its apparent continuities with respect to earlier historical scholarship, this category of research and publication has received relatively little attention in the explicitly visual cultural literature. Generally speaking, this latter focused body of writing has invested more energy in theorizing the study of visual culture than in tracking and interpreting visual practices over time (see Elkins 2003: 34–7, on the presentist bias in historiographies of visual culture). Despite relative lack of attention from those charting the rise of the study of visual culture, the scholarship of the history of images is rich and diverse. Some important recent works include Joshua Brown, *Beyond the Lines: Pictorial Reporting, Everyday Life, and the Crisis of Gilded Age America* (2002); Rachael DeLue, *The Struggle of Vision: George Inness and the Science of Landscape Painting* (2005); Patricia Johnston, *Seeing High and Low Seeing: Representing Social Conflict in American Visual Culture* (2006); Anthony Lee, *Picturing Chinatown: Art and Orientalism in San Francisco* (2001); Michael Leja, *Looking Askance: Skepticism and American Art from Eakins to Duchamp* (2004); Richard Meyer, *Outlaw Representation: Censorship and Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century American Art* (2002); David Lubin, *Shooting Kennedy: JFK and the Culture of Images* (2003); David Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* (2005); Kirk Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves* (1997); and Ellen Wiley Todd, "Photojournalism, Visual Culture, and the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire" (2005).

Visual culture scholarship in this historical vein not only embraces new sorts of images but also, and importantly, poses new questions of its expanded subject, shifting and augmenting the locus of inquiry along the way. Scholarly practitioners trace

the histories of not just pictures and visually designed objects, but also their reception over time, what people *do* with objects and images, the ways people understand, interpret, and use them, think and speak about them, organize and categorize them. Studies of this sort encourage avenues of scholarly interrogation that facilitate highly textured encounters with images and objects and their social and cultural work, their engagement with lived experience in practice, performance, and ritual. This notion of the "work" that images do has been usefully explored by a number of scholars (e.g., Freedberg 1989; Bryson et al. 1994, esp. pp. xvi and xxix; Morgan & Promey 2001; Roeder 1993, esp. p. 286; Morgan 2005; and Promey 2005). It historicizes, contextualizes, and reconfigures earlier critiques of utilitarian and instrumental value as well as philosophical notions of aesthetics as a domain of transcendence and disinterested reflection. Interest in the work of images in human life-worlds helps to account for the fact that some of the earliest deliberately visual cultural scholarship in the American field is emphatically interdisciplinary, exploring the work of images as it falls under rubrics generally assigned to such other subjects as, for example, religion or consumerism or both, and race, ethnicity, gender, and sexualities (see, e.g., Promey 1993; Bogart 1995; McDannell 1995; Schmidt 1995; Morgan 1996; Bloom 1999; Doss 1999; Smith 1999).

A second substantial category of visual culture scholarship directs attention away from the object and its immediate relations, towards visuality, opticality, the physiologies of perception, and ways of seeing. In this rendering, visual studies exceeds the boundaries of most past art and image histories (works by Rudolph Arnheim, John Berger, and Ernst Gombrich constitute obvious exceptions here) in the sense that it invests in the "biological and cultural processes that render our visual experience comprehensible" (Holly & Moxey 2002: xiv). Jonathan Crary's studies (1990 and 1999) of the activities and situation of the observer and theories of spectatorship figure prominently here, as does a widespread interest in relations between visuality and emerging technologies. John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1972), Norman Bryson's *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (1983), Hal Foster's *Vision and Visuality* (1988), Martin Jay's *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (1993), James Elkins' *The Object Stares Back: On the Nature of Seeing* (1996), Ian Heywood and Barry Sandywell's *Interpreting Visual Culture: Explorations in the Hermeneutics of the Visual* (1999), and Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright's *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* (2001) contribute to this literature. Given that ways of seeing are products of acculturation, and that visuality is "a cultural practice of everyday life" (Mitchell 1994: 20) that implicates artifacts of various kinds, this second version of visual culture studies is closer to the first, more object-oriented, category of histories than might initially seem to be the case.

If the first approach to visual culture has more to do with "visual" objects and the life-practices they engage or provoke, and the second sets its sights on visualities and ways of seeing, the third focuses attention on the history and theory of representation. Here, for example, the more historically minded work of Robert Blair St. George on a multimedia "poetics of implication" in colonial New England and the more theoretically inclined publications of W. J. T. Mitchell number importantly. The "expansion" of the field of study in this third category has to do with the incorporation of not just images but texts, the imagination (in the sense of "pictures" produced

in the mind's or soul's eye), and even perhaps other signifying "marks" and traces like sounds and smells. When scholars talk about a "pictorial turn" (Mitchell 1992) or a "visual turn" (Jay 2002) in everyday life and in contemporary scholarship, they are engaging systems of representation.

In 1994 Mitchell expanded the definition of his pictorial turn, locating pictures as a "point of peculiar friction and discomfort across a broad range of intellectual inquiry." At the juncture Mitchell charted, pictures claimed a place at the center of "discussion in the human sciences in the way that language did: that is, as a kind of model or figure for other things (including figuration itself) . . ." (Mitchell 1994: 13). Mitchell's pictorial turn is a "postlinguistic, postsemiotic *rediscovery* of the picture as a complex interplay between visuality, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies, and figurality. It is the realization . . . that visual experience or 'visual literacy' might not be fully explicable on the model of textuality" (1994: 16, italics added). Instead of concluding that all images are texts to be read, a fair assessment now seems to be that all texts are images to be seen. Conceptually, however, this "move" suggests a thought pattern that might most usefully be considered additive rather than substitutionary, introducing the opportunity to hold both ideas together, to toggle quickly back and forth between them as well as to consider the two possible sets of relations as sequential developments. This approximates, in fact, what Patricia Crain claims for letters in *The Story of A*: "As an object of representation, the alphabet is an androgyne, moving back and forth between text and image" (2000: 7). Mitchell wishes to assert the same kind of motion for relations between the "social construction of the visual field" and the "visual construction of the social field" he posits as its conversation partner (Mitchell 2002: 238). It is important to note that Mitchell's pictorial turn is a "rediscovery"; his shift "is a trope, a figure of speech that has been repeated many times since antiquity" (ibid. 240).

The scholarship of Nicholas Mirzoeff charts a fourth use of "visual culture," this time as a contemporary transnational mass-media phenomenon. Mirzoeff's visual culture position accentuates genealogical relations with film and digital media studies. Human existence today, he argues, is characterized by an apparently unlimited proliferation of images under which modern/postmodern living is essentially subsumed. This accounting situates this sort of "hypervisual" culture as a synonym for contemporary life itself: "Modern life takes place onscreen. . . . In this swirl of imagery, seeing is much more than believing. It is not just a part of everyday life, it is everyday life" (1999: 1). Visual culture here depends not on objects, images, or pictures but on the "modern tendency to picture or visualize experience" (1998: 6). Mirzoeff's position is linked to his sense of a "massive cultural change arising from the development of digital technologies, which has given the visual a preeminent place" in daily living (Mirzoeff in Dikovitskaya 2005: 225). In this rendering, visual culture becomes the "study of the hypervisuality of contemporary everyday life and its genealogies" (2003: 7). While the focus on "everyday life" would seem to add up to a democratization of interests, David Morgan (2005: 29) points out that Mirzoeff's position (re-)inscribes a new sort of aesthetic avant-gardism in its presentist emphasis on the disruptive break with the past represented in modern and postmodern hypervisuality. Postmodernity, for Mirzoeff, stands apart as a period when meaning is most fundamentally created in pictures rather than in written words (1999: 3–4).

In response, Mitchell moved to clarify the distinction between Mirzoeff's position and his own "pictorial turn." For Mitchell, the

> pictorial or visual turn, then, is not unique to our time. It is a repeated narrative figure that takes on a very specific form in our time, but which seems to be available in its schematic form in an innumerable variety of circumstances. . . . The mistake is to construct a grand binary model of history centered on just one of these turning points, and to declare a single "great divide" between the "age of literacy," for instance, and the "age of visuality." (Mitchell 2002: 241)

Location/Relocation: Whither Visual Culture?

Scholarly terminologies are time-bound. They offer ways out of conceptual difficulties inherent in earlier constellations and then play differently constraining roles when the configurations shift. The politics of the "new" (and the consequently "newly old") is only one of the engines that powers this dynamic. Terms are part of a conversation; ideally their availability furthers study rather than confining or directing it. As new terms take shape and come into currency, there are equally moments when the limitations of those terms and categories become obvious, when the agendas they chart become inadequate, when the horses scholars had hoped to corral elude capture. Though it would be premature (not to mention naïve) to consider discarding the nomenclature of "visual culture," it is not too soon to reflect on the label's terrain and to identify just a few of the problems with its present location.

Visual culture, as an "alternative" to older forms of image studies like art history or aesthetics, suggested in the moment of its coining an expansiveness that promised intellectual and material escape from more restricted configurations of the visual subject and the hierarchies constructed around it. The focus on the *visual*, however, introduced a constraint of its own. Constance Classen calls this constraint the "visualist regime of modernity" (1998: 1); Thomas Crow draws attention to "modernism's fetish of visuality" (Crow in "Visual Culture Questionnaire," 1996: 35). The question of how to successfully investigate "visual" practice when vision might be most fruitfully approached as fully engaged in a rounder human sensorium is a matter that deserves attention. From the perspective of human being and activity, images do not exist apart from objects, practices, and performances that invoke or involve a range of sensory experiences. While imagination, memory, and other cognitive functions may abstract pictures from such moorings, images-in-time are part of the larger fabric of things that tangibly circulate within human life-worlds and in relation to human bodies. The study of visual culture in the United States has so far proved more adequate to the experience of pictures passing by in visual profusion, than to the multisensory operations of designed and manufactured objects/images and human encounters with them.

The split in the American academy between visual culture studies and material culture studies can be ascribed to different institutional and disciplinary genealogies. The two take shape independently but also in opposition to each other in a manner that is arbitrarily and institutionally determined. The division, moreover, serves to reinvent old sensory hierarchies, to reinforce an imperialism of the eye, lifting the

visual from the richer constellation of human senses and claiming for "sight" a higher plane in relation to the "lower" senses of smell, taste, and touch, with hearing occupying a middle register (Classen 1998: 10). Classen further points out that "men have traditionally been associated with the 'higher,' 'spiritual' senses of sight and hearing, while women have been associated with the 'lower,' 'animal' senses of taste, touch, and smell" (ibid. 6). Conventional sensory genderings, such as these, and racialized ascriptions to sensory codes further complicate the situation for visual culture and its claims to democratic expansiveness. Speaking of visuality and the "visual" in visual culture requires attention to materiality and sensory reception, and their social, political, and cultural construction, as well.

The *culture* in visual culture, furthermore, has also produced its own limitations by tending in some directions rather than others. "Visual culture" might well have elicited studies broadly and deeply sensitive to transnational concerns and *cultures* (plural) within and without national borders; it might well have produced work that regularly thinks across geographic and chronological boundaries in new ways. Instead, with some exceptions, visual culture studies have largely concerned Western modernity and especially mechanically reproduced imagery (photography, film, the internet, and their respective genealogies). Surprisingly, "visual culture studies" has brought little illumination thus far to such charged and inadequate historical categories as "folk" art in the United States, a label initially applied as nineteenth-century European elites, in the midst of imperialism and colonialism, were inventing their own rural, ethnic, and geographically provincial cultures as the "primitive within."

Finally, much of the theoretical visual culture literature to date has been preoccupied with situating its subject within or without art history (the sort of "is it or isn't it" debate that this essay has itself engaged). While these efforts to discern and define the substance of visual culture studies are useful in some ways, they seem rather futile in others. The problems stem in part from the rhetorical use of disciplines as though they were static phenomena. Mitchell, for example, maintains that "art history is not sufficient because it is focused – quite appropriately – on the history of art" (Mitchell in Dikovitskaya 2005: 240). Disciplines, however, like scholarly terminologies, are in constant process of refinement and change. Few art historians, for their part, would agree that art history is now exclusively occupied with "art," or consumed by questions of style and iconography, or indeed that it ever was. Disciplinary shape is moving and indefinite: there never was *one* art history any more than there is *one* visual culture. Disciplines exist in fairly fluid relations with their most immediate conversation partners; visual culture has been a constant and creative conversation partner inside and outside art history's boundaries for some 25 years.

In the introduction to their recent *Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture Reader*, Vanessa Schwartz and Jeannene Przyblyski propose "interdisciplinarity as the best roadmap for how visual culture studies and the history of visual culture will be written in the future. Likewise . . . visual culture studies is constituted less by its topical repertoire and more to the degree that it produces a discursive space where questions and materials that have been traditionally marginalized within the established disciplines become central" (2004: 4), and where disciplinarity itself is subject to interrogation (see also Herbert 1995: 539–40). Importantly, situating visual culture studies as an interdiscipline usefully focuses attention on the degree to which it is a *relational* enterprise, calling its various constituencies to provide space for exchange.

This interdisciplinarity also has the distinct advantage of locating the subject(s) of visual culture "in between" other things. Considered from this perspective, visual culture occupies a fluid discursive domain of interactions among artifacts, viewers, sensory perceptions, and contextual worlds. Relational models of vision and culture invite research built around strategies of multiplication and accumulation rather than simple replacement or substitution. The scholar of visual culture is challenged not so much, for example, to shift concern away from objects and images and toward visual practices as to attend, rather, to practices *and* visual artifacts, *and* their producers *and* processes and contexts of production, *and* viewers and audiences, *and* ways of seeing and interpreting things seen. Together, these provide a more faithful picture of the range of human interactions with images and objects in daily practice and experience. Visual culture, while unsettled, is ideally situated to elicit this highly textured scholarship of visual and material life-worlds.

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Chapter Twenty

Material Cultures

J. Ritchie Garrison

In 1839 Godey's *Lady's Book* published a bit of light fiction titled "A Reverie." As the story opens, a woman visits the home of an acquaintance and discovers that the mistress is away. Ushered into a drawing room to wait, she rests on a soft ottoman and falls into a half slumber during which she dreams that the various items of furniture in the room argue over their relative importance to the household. One by one, they talk about their distinct purposes in the family's cultural life. Some complain about their misfortunes – the carpet whines that it has to support everyone and is always getting walked on. Other more favorably situated furnishings express pride of place. The center table claims happily that "my mistress sets a great deal by me, and leans upon me very much," and the solar lamp observes that "when my master sits down of an evening to read his papers, he never pretends to see into the writer's meaning without bringing the matter to me." Masked by the light-hearted punning and inverted reality is a critical set of dilemmas for material culture scholars: to what extent can objects be treated as cultural texts, and how do we assay their meaning in the absence of their words?

The basic questions concerning material culture are easily articulated: why do things look the way they do, how did they get that way, and what do they mean? The answers prove more difficult, and require an exploration of various personal, institutional, and disciplinary approaches to material culture as they have evolved over the past two centuries of American history.

Material Culture Studies before the 1960s

Contemporary scholars of material culture are indebted to generations of antiquarian collectors and the various institutions they created, including museums and historical societies, government-sponsored projects, philosophical societies and libraries, and preservation efforts both private and public. Well before the emergence of modern academic disciplines, a wide range of American antiquarians were assiduously collecting, classifying, researching, and interpreting material objects, and often exhibiting them to a public eager to view them.

Preservation efforts and museums laid the foundations for American material culture scholarship, beginning in the late eighteenth century. David Brigham (1995)

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