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The advent of visual culture

Journal of Visual Culture (JVC): While *The Dialectical Imagination* (1996), *Adorno* (1984), and *Force Fields* (1993) – to name but a few of your earlier works – touch upon questions of aesthetics and/or vision in passing, it is not until *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (1994) that you attend to matters of visibility in a more sustained manner. Why this passage from intellectual history and critical theory to what we might call a critical intellectual history of visual culture or a cultural history of vision?

Martin Jay (MJ): The work that links the two projects is, in fact, *Marxism and Totality*, the history of Western Marxism I published in 1984. In that work, I noticed that hostility to the concept of totality was often accompanied by skepticism about the possibility of a totalizing gaze, a God's eye view, of the whole. Sartre and Merleau-Ponty were its main critics, but Adorno also challenged the spectatorial premises of what he called 'peephole metaphysics'. Althusser as well, from a very different vantage point, had linked ideological mystification with the persistence of Lacan's mirror stage. It then became gradually clear to me that questions of philosophy and social theory, as well as those pertaining to the position of the critical intellectual, were closely related to the privileging of vision in Western thought. I did not, however, anticipate how varied and pervasive the critique of that privileging had been in French thought until I began my research.

JVC: In 'Visual Culture and its Vicissitudes', your contribution to *October's* watershed 'Visual Culture Questionnaire' of 1996, you present yourself as an intellectual historian interested in discourses about visibility. Here, you suggest that advocates of visual culture have extended its scope not only beyond the traditional concerns of art history, but also further than what W.J.T. Mitchell called the 'rhetoric of images' to include, and I quote you here, 'all manifestations of optical experience, all variants of visual practice' (p. 42). In writing this, you claim that visual culture's democratic impulse, its sense of inclusivity, can happily and comfortably investigate anything that can 'imprint itself on the retina', including, you say, non-retinal ingredients such as the 'optical unconscious' (p. 42).

First, I'd like to ask you how serious you were in making this last claim at that time.

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That's to say, what does it mean for visual culture to be democratic? What are the advantages and the dangers too? It certainly seems the case that your generosity towards visual culture is tempered. If I hear this dissatisfaction – your wryness – correctly, then I'm in accord with it. I worry – putting aside the accusations of ahistoricism often directed at writings bearing its name – that visual culture is too habitually caught up in a form of political correctness that makes it impossible for it *not* to be democratic. I'm wondering if you, like me, are concerned by the restrictions in this that limit what it might be possible for visual culture to become, to do.

MJ: By democratization, I simply meant the growing willingness to take seriously as objects of scholarly inquiry all manifestations of our visual environment and experience, not only those that were deliberately created for aesthetic effects or have been reinterpreted in formalist terms (as was the case with, say, so-called 'primitive' ethnographic objects by aesthetic modernists). Although images of all kinds have long served as illustrations of arguments made discursively, the growth of visual culture as a field has allowed them to be examined more in their own terms as complex figural artifacts or the stimulants to visual experiences. Insofar as we live in a culture whose technological advances abet the production and dissemination of such images at a hitherto unimagined level, it is necessary to focus on how they work and what they do, rather than move past them too quickly to the ideas they represent or the reality they purport to depict. In so doing, we necessarily have to ask questions about the viewer as well, thus the value of Benjamin's notion of the optical unconscious recently resurrected by Rosalind Krauss, as well as the technological mediations and extensions of visual experience.

The danger in such an indiscriminate levelling, of course, is the loss of an ability to make distinctions among different kinds of images and experiences. Traditional art history with its canonical restrictions still has a lot to teach us about the ways in which optical virtuosi, those with the gifts and training to explore and extend the limits of visual experience, transcend the conventions of their visual environment and open up new worlds for our eyes. I am still enough of a follower of Adorno to want to maintain the vexed distinction between genuine works of art and derivative kitsch, high and low, avant-garde and academic art, at least as a way to avoid the promiscuous reduction of everything to the same level of cultural significance.

JVC: As an enthusiastic reader of philosophy as well as history, do you think that the recent ethical turn, if I can call it that, characterized by the writings of, amongst others, Jacques Derrida, Alan Badiou and Simon Critchley, and the extensive re-discovery of Emmanuel Levinas that underpins it, will have an impact on visual culture? Should it? Has it already? Will this ethical turn assist and advance the ethical imperative of visual culture, or is it already part of the problem that people identify with visual culture's democratic impulses? How can, say, a concern for hospitality, nourish the thinking, writing and practices of visual culture?

MJ: In the critique of the reifying power of the gaze, most extensively explored in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, there was already a powerful ethical moment, which was given added impetus when feminists like Luce Irigaray and Laura Mulvey stressed its gendered character. The Jewish emphasis on hearing as opposed to the Greek stress on sight, which Levinas tied to the relative importance

respectively of the ethical and the ontological in each tradition, increased still further the ethical stakes in discussions of visual culture.

Perhaps the real task these days is not so much to rehearse these now familiar connections, but rather to probe the ways in which the sense of 'looking after' someone is just as much a possibility as 'looking at' them in *le regard*, and 'watching out for someone' is an ethical alternative to controlling surveillance. I remember very well a conversation I had in the mid-nineties in Berlin with the poet Allen Ginsberg about the 'gaze of the Buddha', in which he demonstrated for me the non-dominating, benign way in which looking takes place in that religion. Perhaps it is time to look for comparable examples in traditions a bit closer to home.

Questions for the academy

JVC: In particular ways, Visual Studies very clearly emerges specifically out of disputes in recent art history, film studies and cultural studies, born of questions, often historiographical in nature, of politics, ethics and practice. At stake are the vital matters of democracy, recognition, identity, inclusivity and difference to name but a few. How much of this is of Visual Studies itself, rather than adopted from elsewhere? That's one question. Another is this: How much do these preoccupations of Visual Studies jar or confirm, in your experience, with the more wary accounts which suggest that the field of study is first and foremost an administrative contribution to the further professionalization of academia and academics, a chance for some to make an academic and commercial profit from what otherwise might primarily be an intellectual matter? That's to say, is Visual Studies any more than rhetoric, in the most straightforward sense of that word?

MJ: No new field emerges full-blown without debts to what preceded it. We shouldn't be surprised to find it borrowing some of its methods and concerns from neighboring or antecedent disciplines and intellectual formations. There are furthermore perennial questions, such as those you mention, which need to be addressed again and again, no matter in what idiom or with what tools of analysis. So I am not really troubled by the parasitic nature of much of what passes for Visual Studies. From new combinations, however, potentially new answers can follow, so it remains to be seen how fruitful the institutionalization of the new field will be. As for professionalization itself, I am not cynical in a priori way about the careerist and even commercial exploitation of visual culture. Those of us who earn our livings by inhabiting established fields, which can pretend to have always existed rather than being themselves products of historical struggles for legitimation, have no right to look down on emerging formations, which are compelled to be more forthright in their attempts to gain respectability and recognition.

JVC: In 'Vision in Context: Reflections and Refractions', your introduction to the collection co-edited with Teresa Brennan entitled *Vision in Context: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Sight* you say that the volume includes a 'welter of competing interpretations of the meaning and implications of vision and visibility' that don't 'provide a sovereign overview' (p. 10). I too support the need for Visual Studies to be richly varied and for it to offer rival accounts, explanations,

speculations. It's imperative that it not be reducible to one dominant model. My question then is how you think this lack of a sovereign overview is both a strength and a weakness.

MJ: To argue for a single dominant approach seems to me problematic in the extreme in any intellectual endeavour. What, for example, would the result be if we were to have only one way to make sense of that extraordinary thing we call 'language', or to assume that all languages were somehow subvariants of a single ur-model? Would we get rid of, say, hermeneutics or grammarology or ordinary language analysis or structural linguistics or sociolinguistics, all in the name of one master discourse? Making sense of visual experience demands no less a willingness to tolerate different, sometimes complementary and sometimes contradictory, approaches. Certain questions are perhaps more fruitfully addressed by one approach than another, but we can always think of new questions that demand fresh analytical tools.

The experiences of practice

JVC: Your work is testament to the value of melding, working with and through the confluence of the historical and the present. Such a convergence makes it possible to account for and direct our thinking towards the indeterminacies that are made available by re-definitions, competing interpretations, meanings, and so on, when it comes to practices of looking, or reading, or doing history. Much of your research and writing over the last 30 years has been tied to this kind of complex historical and philosophical convergence as it takes place in and can be drawn out from the concerns of German and French thought, of intellectual history. Your work on Adorno, Benjamin and the Frankfurt School, and *Downcast Eyes* – on vision in 20th-century continental thought – is testament to this. Your most recent work seems to be directing its gaze onto a specifically American genealogy. I'm wondering about the reasons for this shift, and its implications.

MJ: My current project, which examines the discourse of experience in modern theory, necessarily has an American component because of the extraordinary attention paid to the concept by pragmatists like William James and John Dewey. But anyone who is interested in 20th-century European thought has to recognize that the Atlantic has become a very narrow body of water (sometimes, in fact, much narrower than the English Channel!). That is, the current of ideas that went largely from Europe to America in the 18th century and much of the 19th – with some exceptions like Poe and Emerson, who had an important influence in Europe – began to become a reciprocal flow in the early 20th century. Pragmatism itself is an example, as figures like Bergson, Schiller and Papini learned a great deal from James. Works like James Kloppenberg's *Uncertain Victory* (1988) have shown us how integrated the Western intellectual world already was by the 1880s. By the time of the intellectual migration from Nazi Germany, much of the most creative thought in Europe was in exile in America and elsewhere, and when it went back, either through personal returns or intellectual exchanges, it was powerfully changed by its experience abroad. The well-known shift of avant-garde art's centre of gravity from Paris to New York reinforced this tendency. By the time Richard Rorty was finding

parallels between Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida and Dewey, the old distinctions between American and European thought were in large measure overcome.

Or to put it differently, a complicated process of creative misreadings of different national traditions and idioms is now going in both directions with enough vigor to undercut any simple notion of center and periphery (a point that would be complicated still further, if we acknowledge the global cross-fertilization of ideas outside of the NATO cultural region). As an American intellectual historian of mostly 'European' ideas, I recognize that I come to them with the prejudices of my formation, but I also understand that my formation is always already filtered through ideas that have a European accent. So I guess it was only a matter of time before I was compelled to read a little more seriously in American sources and compare the results with what I had learned from a lifetime of reading European ones.

JVC: A question about experience: in *Downcast Eyes* you are already attending explicitly to the *experience* of vision. For instance, you consider questions of natural visual experience, the art of describing, the optical unconscious, scopic regimes, enLIGHTenment, the optics of temporality, epistemological vision, phenomenological perception, glances, gazes, spectacles, and so on. And you consider these questions as experiential or phenomenological rather than theoretical questions per se.

Your forthcoming book continues to be concerned with the question of experience. As a thinker for whom experience has played such a central role – in your preoccupation with intellectual history, the study of culture, and the matter of the visual – how do you think that this new book will impact upon our understanding of the necessary difficulties of experiencing something called visual culture?

MJ: *Songs of Experience*, as the new, still unfinished book will be called, focuses on the discourses about experience in European and American thought rather than on something that one might directly call experience itself. Its goal is to clarify the assumptions that underlie our appeal to experience, whether they be in epistemological, religious, aesthetic, political or historical terms. It also seeks to understand the attempts made by many 20th-century thinkers to revive a more robust and all-encompassing notion of experience, often one that transcends the traditional subject/object dichotomy. To the extent that the eye is implicated in one way or another in virtually all of these modalities, I hope that by increasing our sensitivity to the historical complexities of the concept of experience itself, we will become more aware of how mediated our visual experiences are by the discursive contexts in which they appear.

JVC: As historians of visual culture, how do we respond to the events of Tuesday 11th September 2001 and its aftermath?

MJ: It is perhaps too early to draw definitive conclusions from the events or even to begin talking about their 'aftermath'. That is, the war they initiated, and I'm afraid that is an accurate term to use to describe what is now happening, is a long way from being over. Having said that, I would only add that one immediate result is that the long-standing assumption of much cultural studies, visual or otherwise, that the hegemony of global capitalist culture must be 'subverted' or 'transgressed' in

the name of a more progressive alternative is now very hard to maintain in its naive form. Insofar as the hijackers hijacked the vocabulary of anti-globalization for their own not very progressive ends, it is necessary to recognize a new political/cultural landscape in which some of the old conventional wisdom no longer holds. I was at a conference a short while ago at the University of California, Davis on 'Visual Worlds' in which radical artists using media like the internet to produce acts they had once called 'cultural terrorism' were beginning to engage in a painful rethinking of more than just their rhetorical strategy. This is not to say that the chilling warnings of what has come to be called 'patriotic correctness' in the United States against any form of dissent should be heeded, just that it is no longer possible to revert to the late 20th-century premises of cultural studies, which in any case were beginning to get a bit too stale and predictable.

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Martin Jay is Sidney Hellman Ehrman Professor of History at the University of California, Berkeley. His books include *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923–1950* (University of California Press, 1996[1973]); *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (University of California Press, 1986[1984]); *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (University of California Press, 1994[1993]); and *Cultural Semantics: Keywords of Our Time* (Athlone, 1998). Martin Jay was speaking with **Marquard Smith**, the Editor-in-Chief of the *journal of visual culture* who teaches in the School of Art, Film and Visual Media, Birkbeck College, University of London.