appropriate dress, updating his coiffure and institutional “proper” grooming regimens, expanding his epicurean boundaries, and assisting him in acquiring upscale aesthetic tastes. The fab five stand in judgment as the arbiters of “taste.”

In Project Runway, contestants (some of whom are openly gay) compete to win the top honors as a fashion designer. The premise of such shows is the assumption that being victorious in the series will secure for the lucky winner entrance into the fashion industry and a prominent, coveted place within it. Openly gay fashion guru Tim Gunn functions as a gatekeeper to this world, making decisions about what is good and what is bad, who is allowed in, and who is cast out.

These programs take for granted that gay men are imbued with an aesthetic sensibility intrinsic to their sexual orientation: a “queer eye” presumably inaccessible to heterosexual man. When examined critically, the supposed prominence of gay men within the world of aesthetic production, if it has any resonance with reality, arose out of more complex historical, cultural, and social formations than biological markers. Although the term Gay Mafia may also embody some “positive stereotypes” for gay men—for example, that gay men are artistically talented or aesthetically gifted—like all stereotypes, it is a double-edged sword. Although the term Velvet Mafia could imply that gays are gifted in aesthetics production, the homophobic other side is that gays control fashion, and entertainment seems to be inextricably embedded in the term.

Stephen Hocker

See also: Aesthetics; Identity Politics; Self; Sexual Minorities; Social Movements

Further Readings


Visual Culture

For many people around the globe, life in contemporary times is mediated through the swirl of visual imagery. Television, film, the Internet, medical imaging devices, cell phone cameras, satellites, newspapers and magazines, and a host of other multimedia devices enhance our sight, represent ideas, and help human beings see and be seen. Attempting to understand this cultural condition, its material and symbolic manifestations, and the effect on our individual and collective identities is the project of visual culture. As a hybrid enterprise recently formed through the convergence of a variety of theories and methodologies, visual culture examines relationships between individuals, societies, and images. Visual culture is the characterization and examination of meaning making through the visual—how we see, what we see, what we
can’t see, what we are not allowed to see, and so on—beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries.

Beginning in the early 1990s, scholarly texts, professional journals, new course and program descriptions, and conference proceedings specifically focusing on the concept of visual culture began to flourish across disciplines. These disciplines included art education, art history, cultural studies, English, and media studies. There are three interrelated definitions of visual culture woven through the literature emerging from these areas. The definitions suggest that visual culture is (1) a cultural condition in which human experience is profoundly affected by images, new technologies for looking, and various practices of seeing, showing, and picturing; (2) an inclusive set of images, objects, and apparatuses; or (3) a critical field of study that examines and interprets differing visual manifestations and experiences in culture. The three definitions often overlap, converge, and inform one another. In some cases, scholars use the term visual culture to mean all of the definitions simultaneously. The potential source of confusion notwithstanding, all three definitions of visual culture deal largely with the process and pressures of constructing individual and collective identity.

Visual Culture as a Cultural Condition

The term visual culture can connote a shift or turn in society where the increase in production and consumption of imagery in concert with technological and economic developments has profoundly changed the world and the context in which awareness of that world and one’s identity in it is rooted. Visual culture is thus defined as a shift in reality and a present-day condition where images play a central role in the creation of knowledge and the construction of identity. Although one could argue that the “visual” has always mediated an understanding of identity, experience in much of the world today is deeply affected by an abundance of visual imagery in a variety of global contexts, in a different respect than the past. For example, images flow across borders to convey information, offer pleasure, and initiate and reinforce values and beliefs. These circulating signs affect the formation of individual identities and inter-individual power relations in ways unimaginable for many even a few decades ago.

The relationship between humans and their experience in visual culture is engendered by what some describe as an endless placement and displacement of meanings through the proliferation of imagery, as well as the negotiation of social relationships through images and the process of imagining. Like the postmodern condition, identity in visual culture depends largely on images and the tendency to visualize ourselves and others as pictures in our imagination. On the one hand, these pictures come together in our minds with purpose and direction. On the other hand, we unconsciously learn to look and practice interpreting meanings of images around us on a daily basis.

For many human beings around the globe, visual culture is how the feeling of life in contemporary times is toned, colored, and textured. The increased visual stimuli in the mediated through constructed instruments help forge identities. These identities include notions of ethnicity, race, nationality, sexuality, friendship, family life, independence, and citizenship. In this new cultural condition, visual representations and their mediating resources do more than “represent” a world already out there; they shape and limit visions of the world and are constitutive of identity itself.

Visual Culture as Stuff

When the term visual culture is used to describe a cultural condition, it often emphasizes the identities that are constructed through culture. Although images cannot be easily separated from the values and beliefs they imbue, another definition of visual culture focuses on the substantial things of culture—the “stuff.” Scholars who use the term visual culture to describe the substance of culture offer examples of images, objects, sites, and instruments. This register of stuff includes, for instance, advertisements, architecture, artworks, automobiles, computer games, fashion, films, graffiti, Internet sites, landscape design, malls, magazines, medical images, newspapers, packaging, performances, photography, popular images, satellite images, scientific illustrations, simulation rides, tattoos, television programs, textiles, toys, and videos. Although some of the things mentioned in the attempts to catalog visual culture’s constituent parts include fine or high art, most of them come from outside of the art world—outside the museum realm.
When describing visual culture as stuff, scholars also refer to new technologies designed to enhance biological vision. In recent years, for example, apparatuses for monitoring and tracking individuals, such as surveillance cameras, global positioning systems, spy-cams, thermal imaging devices, and biometric machines have become visual objects of interest. These things are of particular interest to scholars writing about identity in a time of global “permanent war.” Some theorists, however, focus less on technology and more on “natural” objects and scenery. Examples of these things include landscapes, geographic conditions, outer space, and animals. Although these forms may seem to fall outside things that are culturally mediated, they are in most cases encountered by individuals who have been affected consciously and unconsciously by previous representations of nature and the entire history of imaging nature in a particular society. All natural objects and sites are part of visual culture when people bring cultural knowledge to bear on their experience with them.

None of the substantial parts of visual culture are exclusively visual. Applying the term visual culture to a thing does not exclude the multimedia aspects of that thing. Using the term visual culture to describe a particular image, for example, does not negate the fact that images appear in a variety of contexts and are viewed in different situations. These specific contexts and situations—whether watching television, playing a video game, leafing through a magazine, or standing in a museum—affect the available senses to one degree or another. Although one representational register may be more acute than another, usually we cannot voluntarily immobilize all other senses and view an image in complete optical isolation. Therefore, our experience with visual culture, similar to our identity in general, is also always situated and incomplete. For most scholars of visual culture, however, the content for study is not simply “things.” The experience of human subjects interacting with the substantial parts of visual culture is of primary concern to visual culture when defined as a field of study.

Visual Culture as a Field of Study

Besides referring to a cultural condition or suggesting a range of images and objects, visual culture can be defined as a field of study. As a critical set of projects, visual culture attempts to interpret the wealth of visual (multi-mediated) experiences in culture and the visual practices of a culture—the interactions between viewers and what is being viewed. Some theorists prefer to use the term visual culture to refer to a field of study, but other scholars prefer to deploy the term visual culture studies or visual studies. For those who prefer to use visual culture to connote the project, the term is usually employed as a field of study not abstracted from its substantial content (stuff) and historical presence (cultural condition). For others, the attempt to extricate formations of the visual from the cultural is mainly based on the belief that the term visual culture is a potential source of confusion. Either way, whether one uses the term visual culture, visual cultural studies, or visual studies, there seems to be no categorical formations or fixed components of the field. However, two general themes seem to cut across most scholarly writing around the subject of inquiry and methodological process. One is the contextualizing of visuality in everyday life and the other is the notion of transdisciplinarity.

Contextualizing of Visuality in Everyday Life

For many scholars interested in visual culture, the subject of inquiry and methodology for their project is often determined around issues that stem from the conditions of everyday life. The concept of everyday life is important because meanings and identities are created and contested through the seemingly endless array of visual images we encounter on a daily basis. The questions involved in the study of visual culture may be determined by the circumstances created by this proliferation of visual representations that function within public and private spaces everyday. When the inquiry turns to specific forms of visual culture, such as artwork or film for example, understanding the context of production and reception is vital. Context includes the cultural purposes of the development, production, distribution, and regulation of images. Context also includes the sociopolitical, economic, environmental, and historical conditions around the production and reception of images.

Although many scholars of visual culture often refuse to adopt a predetermined methodology,
there are central questions around visuality that seem to be common across disciplines. For instance, these questions may revolve around how identities have been fashioned through the visual in the past and how they are being refashioned in present. Other questions may deal with the politics of identity as constituted through social categories of seeing, spectatorship, gazing, and glancing. In addition, there may be questions of what it means to be looked at, seen, not seen, or made invisible. In this sense, the project may focus on who is privileged as producers of images and as consumers of images, what aspects of history circulate as visual representations, and who is empowered and who is subjugated through visuality. Here, visuality refers to the socially constructed character of vision, and the politics and ideology of specific visualizing practices that may serve the needs of particular identities.

Other inquiries in the field of visual culture revolve around the concept of vision as a totality, the ubiquity of vision in a particular era, or how images play a central role in representing certain parts of the world. Additional questions may focus on differences and similarities between so-called high and low culture, or between fine art and vernacular images. Although these questions and issues can be understood as part of a larger rubric of inquiry, as stated earlier, the methodologies to engage these issues are usually quite fluid.

Visual culture’s methodological fluidity is connected to and depends on its ability to destabilize traditional notions of disciplinarity—the legitimate knowledge base of a discipline. Therefore, visual culture is transdisciplinary by crossing and challenging disciplinary boundaries to provide a useful set of provisional theoretical collaborations. Transdisciplinarity can be understood as a gleaning of knowledge and practice from a myriad of disciplines while pushing against and permeating the rigid boundaries of those disciplines. Visual culture as a transdisciplinary field of study does not negate disciplinary areas of inquiry—it merely refuses to remain confined to restricted parameters defined by experts in a given field.

The following disciplines and areas of study are usually implicated in the field of visual culture: anthropology, archaeology, architectural theory, art criticism, art education, art history, Black studies, critical theory, cultural studies, design, feminist studies, film studies, linguistics, literary criticism, Marxism, media studies, philosophy, postcolonial studies, poststructuralism, psychoanalytic theory, queer theory, semiotics, and sociology. Scholars interested in visual culture work in these fields and appropriate ideas from them. They reject doctrinal disciplinary foundations and patch together whatever works for the study of visual culture.

**Conclusion**

*Visual culture* is used to describe a social and cultural condition (historically and contemporaneously) where visuality and visualizing practices have a profound effect on individual and collective identities. Visual culture is also a way of referring to the images, objects, and instruments tangled up in the complex process of understanding what it means to see and be seen, and to picture something or someone—including ourselves. In addition, visual culture is a transdisciplinary field of study that attempts to recognize, theorize, and interpret, in all of their contextual richness, the interactions between subjects and objects, and viewers and what is being viewed.

*Kevin Tavin*

**See also** Gaze; Scopophilia; Simulacra; Spectacle and the Self; Visuality

**Further Readings**


Visuality

Visuality refers to the intersection of text and image, or more precisely, the relationship between the verbal and the visual within a social and ideological context. W. J. T. Mitchell, professor of English and art history at the University of Chicago and editor of the interdisciplinary journal Critical Inquiry since 1978, is strongly associated with visuality, its relation to cultural and social identity, and the emergent field of visual studies (or visual culture). His book Picture Theory (and other subsequent works) has been significant in establishing visual culture (a term often associated with, and perhaps analogous to, postmodernism) as a field of critical inquiry in the humanities. Because of his work, and the work of others of like mind, this field now has a recognizable institutional profile, with a number of associated journals and university programs functioning internationally. This entry provides an overview of the concept of visuality and the discipline of visual studies.

In Picture Theory, Mitchell proposes that a verbal image is a picture in logical space. This is a proposition that he explores over a wide range of visual material, including an analysis of Michel Foucault’s significant 1968 essay on the relationship between words and image, “Ceci n’est pas une pipe” (“This is not a pipe”). The essay considers the complexities of the appearance of words (language) in René Magritte’s 1929 image Les trabizon des images. Foucault’s text can be interpreted as challenging the self-understanding and the social positioning of the autonomous and unified self in modern society. The picture, Foucault’s text, and by association poststructural visual criticism, are interpreted as an attempt to destabilizes self-identity (the stable Cartesian self) and dominant ideology by exploring the complex and circuitous transaction between the picture, the text, and the observer. Mitchell explores this complex relationship, here and throughout his writing, as he attempts to expand the field of what constitutes visuality.

In 1995, Mitchell was invited to present his intellectual perspective in the journal Art Bulletin, the long-established, and some might say, the conservative voice of the College Art Association of America. An association that had already awarded Picture Theory, the Morey Prize for a book of special distinction; further, in 1996 in a special issue (No. 77), the poststructuralist writers associated with the journal October (Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Hal Foster, Annette Michelson, and Benjamin Buchloh) initiate a discussion that brings to the surface the crucial tensions between the discipline of art history and the emerging discipline of visual culture. These writers suggest that visual culture avoids dealing with the aesthetic specificity of works of art, concentrating instead on images that are mediated by mass culture and, therefore, open to the processes of commodification and reification. This is a challenge to visual studies’ integrity that Mitchell responds to by proposing a cluster of arguments and neologisms.

Mitchell suggests that Western culture has consistently privileged the spoken word as the highest form of intellectual pursuit, and seen visual representations as mere “illustrations” of ideas. According to Mitchell, visual culture as a subject of study contests this hegemony, developing what he calls picture theory. In Mitchell’s view, Western philosophy and science now use the pictorial, rather than the textual, for making models of the world. This marks a significant shift in understanding and presents a challenge to the notion of the world conceptualized as a written text. A position that has dominated contemporary intellectual discussion in the wake of the linguistic-based movements: structuralism and poststructuralism (Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Rosalind Krauss, and others).

In exploring the conditions that enable the life of images, Mitchell attributes a crucial role to their “medium,” which he understands as an expanded field of study, as a “habitat” or “ecosystem,” in which images circulate. By doing this, Mitchell questions the received notion of medium specificity. Emphasis on medium specificity as an internal and constitutive characteristic of modernism fulfills the Greenbergian stipulation that “purity” in art consists in the acceptance of the limitations of the medium of the specific art. For Mitchell, the notion of the medium is much more than a material or limitation that is specific to a particular art form. According to Mitchell, the medium now includes the entire range of practices that make an image possible in the world. This represents a much wider notion of the visual as a social field.
This is one of Mitchell’s most important contributions to the emerging field of visual studies.

Those writers who promote visual studies against traditional forms of art history, a model of inquiry that concentrates, for example, on developments in medium and style, would do so by saying that the material groundings and fixed notions of quality or historical and aesthetic specificity so important to that discipline have never been lost; they have, in the postmodern period, simply migrated from one system to another: that is, visual studies. Those defending this emerging phenomenon in the humanities would argue that the “history” now involved is that of the viewing subject (the previously silenced voice of the beholder that simply received the images presented). It might be suggested that such a new discipline is not organized around its “objects” of study, rather, the theories and methodologies by which it considers those objects.

In the 2002 article “Showing, Seeing: A Critique of Visual Studies,” Mitchell charts the expanding territory of visual studies, and its character as dangerous supplement, as well as the possible ramifications of its de-disciplinary effect. According to Mitchell, visual studies stands in an ambiguous relation to art history and aesthetics. It functions as an internal complement to traditional fields of art historical study and is a way of “filling in a gap” between the disciplines. If art history is about visual images, and aesthetics about the senses, then it can be proposed that a subdiscipline might evolve that concentrates on the notion of visuality as such. Mitchell suggests that this discipline would link, or integrate, the field of aesthetics and art history around the conceptual problems of the visual experience. For example, issues concerning light, visual apparatuses of various kinds (for example, the camera and the mirrors), optics in general (microscopic and macroscopic), and optical experiences, the eye, notions of the scopic drive, and so on. As noted, Mitchell tells us that the problematic issue arises when this supportive or complementary function of visual studies threatens to become what Derrida calls supplementary (the supplement transfigures what has been previously interpreted as a site of wholeness and authenticity). In this aspect, visual studies might be understood as threatening the internal coherence of aesthetics and art history because these disciplines have somehow failed to pay attention to consider the most central material in their own domain.

Mitchell is reflecting a position adopted by many contemporary writers and critics who deal with an expanded field of culture and visuality, for example, Kobena Mercer, Richard Dyer, Simon Watney, Isaac Julien, John Grayson, Judith Baine, Teresa de Lauretis, Tom Waugh, Cindy Patton, Richard Fung, and Stuart Marshall. One might suggest that these writers feel that cultural and social identity, which include sexual and race identities, has not been sufficiently theorized or understood by the academic world. Within contemporaneous social determinates, their writing, along with Mitchell’s, attempts to coordinate issues and practices concerning the exercise of power, ideology, the aesthetic marginality of race and gender, and psychological self-division (homosexuality and lesbianism) in relation to contemporary philosophies of consciousness and selfhood. Others would warn that such interpretations might lead to a type of fetishism that focuses too much on difference and not enough on human commonality and solidarity.

Peter Muir

See also Society of the Spectacle; Visual Culture

Further Readings


VISUALIZING DESIRE

Vision plays a key role when one thinks of desire. Although vision in and of itself is a synesthetic activity involving the interrelations of all the senses, it is the primary sense when we think of the way desire, unconscious desire in this case, is mobilized. Desire, as conceptualized within psychoanalysis, is