



INTRODUCTION

Visual Culture Studies: History, Theory, Practice¹

What is Visual Culture Studies?

Visual Culture Studies is the discipline or sub-discipline or field of inquiry that studies visual culture.

If we go to our university or college library, to a local bookshop or to any website that sells printed matter, we will encounter numerous books with 'visual' and 'culture' in the title. When they are not in a section of their own – which rarely happens – Visual Culture Studies books are shelved throughout the library or bookshop in sections that are in keeping with the categorizing systems of these places and the programmed drifting of the potential lender or purchaser. Depending on the type of library or bookshop you're in, these books appear in sections as diverse as Art History or Art Theory or Aesthetics or Critical Theory or Philosophy or Film and Media Studies or Women's Studies or Black Studies or Theatre and Drama or Architecture or Queer Theory or Anthropology or Sociology. No one quite knows where to put 'Visual Culture Studies' books and no one quite knows where to look for them. Neither authors, publishers, retailers, nor customers are entirely clear as to what a Visual Culture Studies book should do or where it should be placed.²

Why is this? Because books with 'visual' and 'culture' in the title come in all shapes and sizes, they provide an almost infinite diversity of texts that seem to want to address all historical periods, explore any and every geographical location, conceive of all manner of thematic, and recommend an encyclopaedia of accompanying methodological tools and practices. So, for example, some books are gathered together diachronically, marking a broad historical timeframe from the Middle Ages to the present, while others amass synchronically across diverse territories from Wales to Latin America. Books that set themselves apart by identifying their frames of reference in these two ways include *Defaced: The Visual Culture of Violence in the Late Middle Ages* (Selwyn and Groebner, 2004); *Reframing the Renaissance: Visual Culture in Europe and Latin America: 1450–1650* (Fargo, 1995); *The Visual Culture of Wales* (Lord, 1998–); and *The Visual Culture of American Religions* (Morgan and Promey, 2001). Others cut

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across a variety of themes or subject matter such as race, class, gender, and sexuality that have been at the heart of debates in the Humanities for three decades, and thus central to the emergence of Visual Culture Studies as a political and ethical field of study. These include *Diaspora and Visual Culture* (Mirzoeff, 1999); *Displacement and Difference: Contemporary Arab Visual Culture in the Diaspora* (Lloyd, 2001); *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader* (Jones, 2003); and *Outlooks: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities and Visual Culture* (Horne and Lewis, 1996).

Ultimately, we find that the majority of books with 'visual' and 'culture' in their titles are introductions to readers or textbooks, often edited collections, frequently written for pedagogical purposes – for students – and sometimes concerned with pedagogical matters themselves. In the main, these books are what we might call methodological inquiries, cabinets of curiosity, since they offer a variety of interpretive ways of engaging with our past and present visual cultures – including semiotics, Marxism, Feminism, historiography, social history, psychoanalysis, queer theory, deconstruction, postcolonial theory, ethnography, and museology. In addition to being concerned with the production, circulation, and consumption of images and the changing nature of subjectivity, they are also preoccupied with what Rogoff (1998) has called 'viewing apparatuses' which include our ways of seeing and practices of looking, and knowing, and doing, and even sometimes with our misunderstandings and unsettling curiosity in imagining the as-yet un-thought. Examples here include *The Visual Culture Reader* (Mirzoeff, 1998/2002); *The Block Reader in Visual Culture: An Introduction* (Block Editorial Board and Stafford, 1996); and *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* (Sturken and Cartwright, 2001).

The diversity of books addressing 'visual culture' is certainly testament to the potential historical range and geographical diversity of the study of visual culture, the array of themes Visual Culture Studies is willing to address, that comprise it even, and the multiple methodological practices it is able to put forward in order to engage with the objects and subjects and media and environments included in and thus composing its purview. It is also worth pointing out that these books consider all manner of visual culture – from high culture to popular, mass, and sub culture; from the elite to the everyday; from the marginal to the mainstream; from the ordinary to the extraordinary – and that the objects and subjects and media and environments embraced by Visual Culture Studies can include anything from painting, sculpture, installation and video art, to photography, film (terrestrial, cable, satellite) television, the internet, and mobile screenic devices; fashion; to medical and scientific imaging; to the graphic and print culture of newspapers, magazines, and advertising; to the architectural and social spaces of museums, galleries, exhibitions, and other private and public environments of the everyday.

Interestingly, these books recognize most acutely the points where images and objects and subjects and environments overlap, blur, converge, and mediate one another. They argue for instance, that interacting with newspapers or

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the internet always involves a coming together of text and image, of reading and looking simultaneously; that cinema always comprises sight and sound, viewing and hearing at once; that video phones necessitate a confluence of text (texting), image (photographing/videoing), sound (ringtones), and touch (the haptic or tactile bond between the user and his or her unit) (see Cooley, 2004). These books recognize, then, that every encounter taking place between a viewer, participant, or user *and* her or his visual (and multi- or inter-sensory) culture makes it possible to imagine a distinct new starting point for thinking about or doing Visual Culture Studies, as well as a new 'object' of visual culture.

In addition, as I have already mentioned, these books present us with an almost inexhaustible diversity of critical tools, models and methods, and mechanisms and techniques, as well as tropes, figures, modalities, and morphologies. They do so both to engage with the objects and subjects and media and environments of visual culture themselves *and* to facilitate our doing so by providing us with the meanings by which to grasp, understand, and navigate the numerous historical, conceptual, and contemporary ways of seeing, practices of looking, scopic regimes, and visual metaphors that are crucial to our encounters with visual culture and our studies of it.³

At the same time, the huge number of books tells us that the phrase 'visual culture' is becoming ubiquitous, omnipresent, that it can and is being used to signify works or artefacts or spaces from *any* historical period, geographical location, thematic concern, or combination of methodological practices.⁴ Because of this, the phrase 'visual culture' conveys little that is specific to our past or present visual culture *per se*. It seems that 'visual culture' is everywhere, and thus nowhere, wholly over-determined and almost meaningless simultaneously.

So where does this leave us with regard to the question with which we began this section: 'What is Visual Culture Studies?' As has become obvious in this brief trawl through books with 'visual' and 'culture' in their titles, the phrase seems to be wholly pervasive, indicating that Visual Culture Studies is fast becoming a prevailing field of inquiry in the Humanities and beyond, and yet is also ubiquitous, an unhelpful indicator of both what it is and what it does. What is astonishing about all these books, and somehow not unexpected, is that there is no real common consensus as to what the term 'visual culture' actually signifies. The answers to this question very much depend on the specific nature of the inquiry undertaken in each book. Sometimes 'visual culture' is employed to characterize a historical period or geographical location such as the visual culture of the Renaissance or Aboriginal visual culture, or as Svetlana Alpers (1996) has put it in her discussion of Dutch visual culture, a culture that is bustling with a plethora of 'notions about vision (the mechanisms of the eye), on image making devices (the microscope, the camera obscura), and on visual skills (map making, but also experimenting) as cultural resources'.⁵ Sometimes 'visual culture' is used to designate a set of thematic individual or community-based concerns around the ways in which politically motivated images are

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produced, circulated, and consumed to both construct and reinforce, *and* resist and overthrow articulations of sexual or racial ontologies, identities, and subjectivities – such as black visual culture or feminist visual culture or lesbian and gay visual culture. Sometimes ‘visual culture’ marks a theoretical or methodological problematic that can be caught up in epistemological debates, or discussions of knowledge, of what determines our looking, seeing, or viewing practices, and how we can articulate this in terms of questions of disciplinarity, pedagogy, and what constitutes an ‘object’ of visual culture.

All in all, then, it’s not in fact true, as it often seems, that Visual Culture Studies simply includes anything and everything that is visual – although it’s certainly the case that the field of inquiry is preoccupied with the problem of visibility.⁶ Rather, the phrase ‘visual culture’ is always used in particular ways for specific ends – and if this doesn’t seem to be the case, it may well be that an author is using the phrase in a number of ways simultaneously. So, this is why asking the question ‘What is Visual Culture Studies?’ *in any given instance* is always more valuable than finding a single answer to the question.

Disciplines, Inter-disciplines, Indisciplines

In this section, we need to concentrate on the question of the status of Visual Culture Studies as a field of inquiry: is Visual Culture Studies a discipline, in the sense that Philosophy or History are disciplines? Is it a sub-discipline, a component or an offshoot of a more established discipline such as Art History or Anthropology – or even of a newer discipline such as Film Studies or Media Studies? Is it, like Cultural Studies, what we might call an inter-discipline – something that exists between disciplines and emerges from within this grey area so that Visual Culture Studies operates between visual cultural practices and ways of thinking? Is it indeed the spark itself created by either the sympathetic or the hostile friction of disciplines rubbing together? Or is it something else altogether? Entertaining these questions of disciplinarity reveals that there are a number of interwoven accounts of the genealogy or the emergence of Visual Culture Studies as a discursive formation.⁷

1 *The search for origins.* Some accounts of Visual Culture Studies do their best to locate the origins of the area of study as specifically as possible, trying, for instance, to identify the person who first used the phrase ‘visual culture’, and in so doing identify the founding moment of the discipline. The two often cited winners of this contest are Michael Baxandall for *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*, a social history of style and the period eye, and Svetlana Alpers for *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century*, a study of seventeenth-century Dutch description, representation, images, appearance, cartography, and visibility.⁸ I would argue,

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though, that this quest for beginnings is a red herring – at best it gives us an ‘official’ starting point, although I’m not sure what the purpose of this would be, and at worst it wilfully misleads by intimating that the ‘naming’ of a field of inquiry necessarily pinpoints the first time a certain kind of interrogation has taken place. This is simply not the case: analyses of visual culture were being carried out long before ‘Visual Culture’ or ‘Visual Studies’ or ‘Visual Culture Studies’ emerged as academic fields of inquiry, and similarly universities in the UK, such as Middlesex and Northumbria, have been delivering undergraduate degrees in Visual Culture Studies – without being named as such – for over twenty-five years.

- 2 *The return of the ‘forefathers’*. What is more useful to my mind is not to isolate individuals using the phrase ‘visual culture’ reasonably recently but rather to follow researchers and academics who have begun to excavate the Humanities and visual arts for the writings of earlier generations of scholars and practitioners working in and against a variety of disciplines that has led to the emergence of the study of visual culture as a truly interdisciplinary project. Such Visual Culture Studies scholars *avant la lettre* might include Aby Warburg and Erwin Panofsky, Sigfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, André Malraux, Roland Barthes, Raymond Williams, John Berger, and Gerhard Richter. Calling these scholars ‘forefathers’ is meant to be a little facetious. At the same time, it must be noted that they offer the most important and fascinating earlier prototypical models or visual cultural practices that form part of the genealogy of Visual Culture Studies and a series of methodological techniques that are ‘proper’ to its interdisciplinary nature, its criticality, its sensibility, and its often awkward arrangement of images, objects, and environments of study. See, for example, Warburg’s *Mnemosyne Atlas* (c. 1925–29), Benjamin’s *Passagenwerk* (1927–40), Malraux’s *The Voices of Silence* (c. 1950), or Richter’s *Atlas* (1961–present).
- 3 *The practices of pedagogy*. One more useful account of the emergence of Visual Culture Studies as a field of inquiry charts its historical development back to the 1970s and 1980s in the university, former polytechnic, adult education, and art and design school sector of the British education system. Here, Art History and Design History and studio staff worked towards equipping practice-based as well as academic-stream students with the inter-disciplinary tools necessary for their craft: to introduce social history, context, and criticality into a consideration of art history and fine art practice; to present students with a history of (not just fine art) images; to furnish them with the resource of a diverse visual archive; and to mobilize practice itself. As a history of Visual Culture Studies that emerges specifically from pedagogical and practice-based imperatives, in the main this was a push to encourage students to think outside of or past the tenets of formalism within the discourse of Modernism.
- 4 *The limits of disciplinarity*. Concomitant with this account, another suggests that Visual Culture Studies as a reasonably distinct series of interdisciplinary

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intellectual practices surfaced around the same time, and that it was brought on by feelings of discontent experienced by academics struggling within Art History, Design History, Comparative Literature, and other disciplines in the Humanities to become more self-reflexive about their own disciplinary practices. Individuals, clusters of academics, and in some cases whole departments frustrated by what they felt were the limitations of their own discipline: what subjects and objects can they include in their purview? What range of critical tools do they have at their disposal, and do they have the wherewithal to wield them? How best to motivate their students in a critical analysis of the historical, conceptual, and aesthetic nature of an ever-changing visual culture? Needing to converse with new visual, tactile, sonic objects of convergence, as well as other spaces and environments – how, for instance, would the discipline of Art History deal fully with the intricate and inter-sensory multivalences of performance art or video art or installation art or site-specific art? – they were driven by an impulse if not to break down then certainly to *question* established disciplines and to *pressure* existing disciplinary boundaries.⁹

- 5 *Theorizing between disciplines*. Allied to this is the impact of ‘theory’. As well as attending to new forms of visual arts practice, along with the emergence of the Marxist and feminist ‘New Art History’ in the late 1960s and early 1970s, exemplified by the work of T.J. Clark, Linda Nochlin, and Michael Baxandall, scholars began to pay close attention to allied developments in Film Studies, in particular to semiotics and psychoanalysis. At the same time, they began to integrate the interests of Cultural Studies – just as Cultural Studies had drawn on Anthropology. For while questions of class, gender, and race had already been integral to the development of the New Art History, Cultural Studies offered a means of addressing analogous concerns focusing more on the ordinary, the everyday, and the popular and on the politics of representation, difference, and power in ways that reminded us how *cultural practices themselves do make a difference*. Thus emerged what we might call a visual ‘take’ on Cultural Studies. Here Visual Culture Studies, like Cultural Studies before it, begins to function as an inter-discipline, drawing from existing disciplines and ways of thought, and because of it finding techniques to articulate the objects of visual culture differently.
- 6 *Conferences and programmes*. Still another flashpoint in the development of Visual Culture Studies is the period 1988–89 in which two events took place. The first was a conference on Vision and Visuality held in 1988 at the Dia Art Foundation in New York. Participants included Norman Bryson, Jonathan Crary, Hal Foster, Martin Jay, Rosalind Krauss, and Jacqueline Rose. The proceeds of this event went on to appear as the influential collection *Vision and Visuality*, edited by Foster (1988). Of this collection, Martin Jay (2002: 268) has recently remarked that its publication ‘may be seen as

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the moment when the visual turn ... really showed signs of turning into the academic juggernaut it was to become in the 1990s [because] a critical mass beg[an] to come together around the question of the cultural determinants of visual experience in the broadest sense'. The second event was the establishment in 1989 of the first US-based graduate programme in Visual and Cultural Studies at the University of Rochester, which gave a certain academic and institutional legitimation to Visual Culture Studies. (Founding staff in the programme included Mieke Bal, Bryson, Lisa Cartwright, and Michael Ann Holly.)

Offering this account of the genealogies of Visual Culture Studies is part of the process of legitimizing it as an academic field of inquiry, a discipline in its own right, or at least as a discursive formation, a site of inter-disciplinary activity, a 'tactic' or a 'movement'.¹⁰ This is necessary because the question of the disciplinary status of Visual Culture Studies matters, and it matters for two reasons in particular. First, because introducing such accounts of the emergence of Visual Culture Studies as a potentially legitimate discipline, as I have done here, makes us aware of the fact that it *does* have its own distinct, albeit interwoven, histories that need to be acknowledged and articulated. For a field of inquiry that is so often accused of ahistoricism, as I mentioned in the Preface, it is imperative to recognize that Visual Culture Studies did not simply appear from nowhere, as if by magic, at some point in, say, the late 1980s but does in fact have a series of much longer divergent and interconnecting genealogies. The status of Visual Culture Studies continues to be hotly contested, and everyone has a different story to tell about its origins. Second, the question of the disciplinary status of Visual Culture Studies matters because it offers new ways of thinking, and of thinking about objects, such that it *is* a distinct field of inquiry.

As Martin Jay points out, Visual Culture Studies *did* become an academic, intellectual, and publishing juggernaut in the 1990s – the number and range of books I listed above testifies to this. On the whole the 1990s and the early years of the first decade of the twenty-first century have seen a multitude of triumphant books and journals, conferences, departments, centres, programmes, courses, minors, and modules bearing the name 'Visual Culture' or 'Visual Studies'.¹¹ If Visual Culture Studies was inaugurated out of frustration in relation to the stifling effects of disciplinary policing and border controls, as a call to look self-reflexively both inwardly towards the limitations of one's own discipline and outwardly to the opportunities made available by others, it can safely be said that it continues to do this, and to productive ends. In working with and against other disciplines and between fields of inquiry, following its counter- or anti-disciplinary impetus it has led to disciplines questioning their own foundations and imperatives, even as it has also displayed outward hostility towards the prospect of its own conditions of possibility. Perhaps even more importantly, it has found its own methodologies and its own objects of study.

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It is a true example of what Barthes, paraphrased by Mieke Bal (2003: 7), says of inter-disciplinary study, that it 'consists of *creating* a new object *that belongs to no one*'. I shall return to this assertion in a moment.

Finally, in bringing this section to a close, I would like to offer a word of caution: in its ongoing and ever-more successful search for legitimation, Visual Culture Studies has the potential to become too self-assured, and its devotees too confident. In so doing, it can all too easily lose sight of its drive to worry or problematize other disciplines. It must remember to continue plotting a fractious course between disciplines, learning from them and teaching them lessons in return; and to continue engendering new objects or mobilizing more established things in new ways, by carrying on *doing* the work that it does. Visual Culture Studies should be careful not to lose, as W.J.T. Mitchell (1995) puts it, its 'turbulence', its 'incoherence', its 'chaos', or its 'wonder' as an *indiscipline*: the 'anarchist' moment of 'breakage or rupture' when 'a way of doing things ... compulsively performs a revelation of its own inadequacy'.¹²

What's in a Name: Visual Culture or Visual Studies or Visual Culture Studies?

Mitchell's conception of Visual Culture Studies as an *indiscipline* is very appealing.¹³ Here, the chance to consider attending to the field of inquiry as 'a way of doing things' is fascinating, as is gesturing towards the extent to which studies of visual culture have the potential, indeed must make evident their own limitations as a necessary part of their capacity and willingness to comprehend and perform these new 'way[s] of doing things'. But does this challenge of Visual Culture Studies as an *indiscipline* allow us to settle another question: what do we in fact call this field of inquiry itself, Visual Culture or Visual Studies or Visual Culture Studies?

When writing on or from within this new discipline, inter-discipline, indiscipline, discursive formation, or movement, some scholars are happy to use the phrases 'Visual Culture' and 'Visual Studies' interchangeably to designate the field of study. But there are plenty of reasons not to do this: 'Visual Culture' and 'Visual Studies' are not the same thing after all. Mitchell, for instance, makes this clear when he distinguishes between 'Visual Studies' and 'visual culture' as, respectively, 'the field of study and the object or target of study'. He goes on to write, 'Visual Studies is the study of visual culture' (Mitchell, 2002: 166).

We won't find a clearer definition of the two terms anywhere, or a better explanation of the difference between them. The reasons Mitchell gives for making this distinction are good ones: he says he wants to 'avoid the ambiguity that plagues subjects like history, in which the field and the things covered by the field bear the same name' (Mitchell, 2002: 166). That is, he wants us to

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avoid confusing 'Visual Culture' as an area of inquiry with the subjects, objects, media, and environments of 'visual culture' themselves, so that these things are not sacrificed to the study of them.

To add to this concern, *Visual Studies* does sound overly bureaucratic, and perhaps this isn't surprising for a field of study that is so inordinately concerned with definitions, delineations, naming, historiography, methodology, tropologies, and paradigm shifts, as it tries to establish, account for, and validate itself by way of these very concerns. It is also interesting to note that 'Visual Studies' should be so caught up in these questions of knowledge, these epistemological concerns, at a time when, as it is often said, we live in a post-epistemological age.¹⁴ Actually, ironically, many of the most aggressive critiques of Visual Studies or Visual Culture have been launched at the field of inquiry from exactly this angle, accusing it of ahistoricism, as I have already noted on a couple of occasions. Such claims are best exemplified in – perhaps they even began with – the first question asked in the 'Visual Culture Questionnaire', compiled by the prominent arts journal *October* in 1996:

It has been suggested that the inter-disciplinary project of 'visual culture' is *no longer organized on the model of history* (as were the disciplines of art history, architectural history, film history, etc.) but on the model of anthropology. Hence it is argued by some that visual culture is in an eccentric (even, at times, antagonistic) position with regard to the 'new art history' with its social-historical and semiotic imperatives of 'models' and 'text'.¹⁵

More recently, in 2002, Hal Foster, one of the editors of *October* responsible for the 'Visual Culture Questionnaire', returned to this issue in order to further elaborate. In his book *Design and Crime (and Other Diatribes)* he suggests that Visual Culture is or is seen to be the "visual wing" of cultural studies' (p. 90), and he goes on to say that:

As an academic subject ... 'visual culture' is ... maybe as oxymoronic as 'art history'. Certainly its two terms repel each other with equal force, for if art history is sustained between the autonomy implied in 'art' and the imbrication implied in 'history', then visual culture is stretched between the virtuality implied in 'visual' and the materiality implied in 'culture.' (p. 90)

Foster continues:

Its [visual studies'] ethnographic model might also have this unintended consequence: it might be encouraged to move horizontally from subject to subject across social space, more so than vertically along the historical lines of particular form, genre or problematic. In this way visual studies might privilege the present excessively, and so might support rather than stem the posthistorical attitude that has become the default position of so much artistic, critical, and curatorial practice today. (p. 91)

While flipping backwards and forwards at will between 'Visual Culture' and 'Visual Studies', here *October* and Foster do highlight importantly both what is

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for many a crucial feature dividing Art History from Visual Culture *and* a key criticism of Visual Culture: its potential ahistoricism. Foster's argument here is that the attention 'Visual Studies' or 'Visual Culture' lavishes on the contemporary, and on particular contemporary forms of visual culture – the spectacle of visual commodities, technologies, information, and entertainment – is both born of and leads to subjective, interpretive, and ethnographic practices – from psychoanalysis and anthropology – that are themselves in effect dematerializing and dehistoricizing. (In their attention to the visual, they dematerialize art. In their attention to culture, they dehistoricize history.) This is the case, he says, because '[j]ust as social imperative and anthropological assumptions have governed the shift from "history" to "culture" so technological imperatives and psychoanalytic assumptions have governed the shift from "art" to the "visual"' (2002: 92). While I have never been quite sure why *in principle* 'the visual' is open to accusations of de-materialization or why 'the cultural' is charged with a will to de-historicize, Foster's argument is nonetheless a precise account of why Visual Studies or Visual Culture as a field of inquiry needs, if it does not do so already, to attend to history, and historical formation as well as consider the present.

But what kind of 'history'? The matter of history in general, and the supposed ahistorical impulse of Visual Culture or Visual Studies is imperative, and the fact that the word 'history' does not appear in either nomenclature is a point worth making. It does imply that the field of inquiry does not have a commitment to 'history' in the same way as does, say, Art History or Film History. And this is of course the point: not that Visual Culture or Visual Studies might be modelled on the practices of Anthropology, as the *October* Questionnaire intimates, but that it is *no longer organized* on the model of history as it was conceived of *at the advent* of the discipline of Art History in the nineteenth century or even Film History in the twentieth century. Rather, Visual Culture or Visual Studies may well be organized on a *different* model of history, to use *October's* phrase, that has to confront and struggle with the very question of 'history' as a question in our post-epistemological age – or with what Foster refers to above as a posthistorical attitude.¹⁶ To adopt a posthistorical attitude is not to concentrate simply on the present at the expense of the past but to take account of the problem of the state of 'history' in the present, which is all we can ever do, and that will of course have implications for how we then 'speak with' the past. Similarly, neither Visual Culture nor Visual Studies necessarily intrinsically imply an over-attention to the present at the expense of the past – instead it may well be committed to an effort to focus on how the past can only be glimpsed through the distorting prism of the present. (This is nothing new for Art History.)¹⁷

This tells us that Foster is right in principle to warn those involved in Visual Culture or Visual Studies of the need to attend to 'history', and we can respond to this challenge by reaffirming that the problem of 'history' should always be

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very much in view. Visual Culture or Visual Studies has to respond to this perceived ahistoricism, and in particular to the perceived lack of attention it might pay in its analyses to the historicity of the objects, subjects, media, and environments under consideration, to make sure they are not stripped of their own history. This is the reason why I have taken the time here to consider both the genealogies of Visual Culture or Visual Studies *and* 'history', specifically in relation to discussions of the naming of this field of inquiry: it is in taking account of the question of 'history' that we see why a choice of names has to be made. For if it is problematic to use the term 'Visual Studies' to designate this emerging field of inquiry, as we have already indicated, so too is it a problem to use the term 'Visual Culture': to do so is to conflate the name of the field of inquiry ('Visual Culture') with the objects, subjects, media, and environments analysed therein ('visual culture'), and in the moment of this conflation the danger is that the historical and material character of these things in their specificity gives way to the analysis of them.

Because there are problems with the nomenclature of both 'Visual Culture' and 'Visual Studies', following Walker and Chaplin's *Visual Culture: An Introduction* (1997: 1) I prefer to use the phrase Visual Culture Studies, a phrase that does not designate a discipline so much as 'a hybrid, an inter- or multi-disciplinary enterprise formed as a consequence of a convergence of, or borrowing from, a variety of disciplines and methodologies'. Using 'Visual Culture Studies' allows us to consider what in *Feminism and Visual Culture* Amelia Jones (2003: 2) has called 'the formation of new interdisciplinary strategies of interpretation'.

In fact, it is at this point that one comes to realize it is not its disciplinary status that is of interest so much as the prospect that Visual Culture Studies might be a whole new *strategy* for doing research, of seeing and knowing, of outlining our encounters with visual culture, and mining them for meaning, constituting its own objects and subjects and media and environments of study that belong to no one, as Barthes would have it, *and* that can only come into existence, be made, and made sense of as 'a way of doing things' that is particular to Visual Culture Studies. It is in this way that the 'object' of visual culture, and the question of the 'object' in Visual Culture Studies, comes into view.

What is the 'Object' of Visual Culture Studies?

Given the work that Visual Culture Studies *does*, with what objects does it engage, and how are they constituted?

Some academics are happy simply for Visual Culture Studies to include an expanded field of vision, an expanded purview, an expanded object domain, to include all things 'visual'. (Of course some would say that in certain quarters the discipline of Art History has already been doing this for years.¹⁸) Other scholars

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are more attentive to its particular character. In writing of and on Visual Culture Studies they have returned, explicitly and implicitly, to mull over meticulously the full implications of Roland Barthes's remarks on interdisciplinarity mentioned earlier. Rogoff (1998: 15) for instance, like Bal, has drawn on Barthes' ideas in thinking of Visual Culture Studies, and its inter-disciplinarity, as 'the constitution of a new object of knowledge'. Bal (2003: 23) has recently made similar comments, pointing out that '[i]f the tasks of visual culture studies must be derived from its object, then, in a similar way, the methods most suitable for performing these tasks must be derived from those same tasks, and the derivation made explicit'. Likewise in suggesting that this field of inquiry has the potential to be an example of inter-disciplinarity in an 'interesting' sense, James Elkins (2002: 30) has suggested that it 'does not know its subjects but finds them through its preoccupations'. All of this is to say that, whether we are discussing objects or subjects or media or environments or ways of seeing and practices of looking, the visual or visibility, Visual Culture Studies as an inter-disciplinary field of inquiry has the potential *to create new objects of study*, and it does so specifically by *not determining them in advance*.

What does this actually mean? It means that Visual Culture Studies is not simply 'theory' or even 'visual theory' in any conventional sense, and it does not simply 'apply' theory or visual theory to objects of study. It is not the study of images, based on the casual premise that our contemporary culture is an image culture.¹⁹ Rather, it is the case that between (1) finding ways of attending to the historical, conceptual, and material specificity of things (2) taking account of 'viewing apparatuses' and (3) our critical encounters with them, the 'object' of Visual Culture Studies is born, emerges, is discernible, shows itself, becomes visible. In these moments of friction, the 'object' of Visual Culture Studies comes into view, engendering its own way of being, of being meaningful, of being understood, and even of not being understood. It is not a matter of *which* 'objects' are 'appropriate' or 'inappropriate' for Visual Culture Studies, but of how beginning from the specifics of our visual culture, our preoccupations and encounters with it, and the acts that take place in and by way of visual culture, *none of which are determined in advance*, make it possible for us to focus, as José Esteban Muñoz (1996: 12) has written, 'on what acts and objects do ... rather that [sic] what they might possibly mean'.

Notes

- 1 An earlier version of this introduction appeared as Smith (2005a).
- 2 There are of course many other books on the topic of 'visual culture' that don't include the phrase itself in their title, including books on visual studies (a phrase often used interchangeably with visual culture). Some of the most important books and edited collections in the development of the area of inquiry include neither, such as Buck-Morss (1989),

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Crary (1990), and Martin Jay (1993). And there are also the accompanying journals, and journal articles, as well as conferences, departments, programmes, and courses that have both spawned and been spawned by visual culture. In the English context, it is often said that the first avowedly visual culture journal is *Block*, fifteen issues of which were produced by academics based at Middlesex University — then Middlesex Polytechnic — between 1979 and 1989.

- 3 On scopic regimes see Jay (1993).
- 4 There is a concern, of course, within discussions of Visual Culture Studies that the phrase can be applied in such undifferentiated and homogenizing ways.
- 5 Alpers (1996) p. 26. See also Alpers (1983) and Jay (1993).
- 6 Visuality has been defined by Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall (1999, p. 41) as 'the visual register in which the image and visual meaning operate', and more clearly by Amelia Jones (2003, p. xx) who speaks of visuality as 'the condition of how we see and make meaning of what we see'.
- 7 In noting Stuart Hall's insistence that Cultural Studies is a "'discursive formation" rather than a discipline', Amelia Jones (2003, p. 2) makes it possible for us to imagine also characterizing Visual Culture Studies in the same way.
- 8 Evans and Hall (1999) comment that Alpers is the first to use the phrase 'visual culture' in her *The Art of Describing* (Alpers, 1983, p. xxv), but Alpers herself in that book attributes the phrase to Michael Baxandall (Baxandall, 1972, p. xxv). It is worth noting that those mentioned (Alpers and Baxandall) are firmly established within the discipline of Art History. (Incidentally, for all the emphasis that Visual Culture Studies is said by its detractors to place on analyses of the contemporary, it is well worth noting that these so called earliest instances of visual culture analysis are of fifteenth-century Italian and seventeenth-century Dutch culture.) Walker and Chaplin (1997, p. 6, footnote 2) say that to the best of their knowledge, the first book to use the term 'visual culture' is in fact Caleb Gattegno's *Towards a Visual Culture: Educating through Television* (1969). Dikovitskaya (2005) also affirms this. To my knowledge, no one writing on the development of Visual Culture Studies from within Art History has noticed that in 1964 Marshall McLuhan used the phrase 'visual culture' in *Understanding Media*. It needed a scholar with a background in Film and Media Studies to spot this, Raiford Guins (in conversation).
- 9 For more on issues raised in points 3 and 4 see Walker and Chaplin (1997, pp. 35–50).
- 10 Mirzoeff (1998, p. 5) refers to Visual Culture as a 'tactic'. Recently Mieke Bal (2003, p. 6) has referred to it as a 'movement'.
- 11 *October's* 'Visual Culture Questionnaire' (1996) continues to be a most engaging critique of Visual Culture Studies. In particular, the questions posed by the Editors of the 'Questionnaire' rather than the answers to it accuse Visual Culture Studies of ahistoricism (an over-attention to analyses of the contemporary) and of dematerializing the image. On this question of ahistoricism, it is well worth mentioning that Art History, along with many other disciplines in the Humanities, including Visual Culture Studies, is no stranger to questions of historiography. From their inception, such questions necessarily plague, challenge, and offer ways forward for disciplines themselves. *October* is well aware of this. While the 'Questionnaire' has been a huge bone of contention in subsequent discussions of Visual Culture Studies, a clear, extended elaboration of its underlying assertions written by one of its originators can be found here in the interview with Foster and in Foster (2002).

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- 12 Mitchell (1995, p. 541). It is here that Mitchell first uses the wonderfully damning phrase 'safe default interdisciplinarity' to characterize a particularly prevalent but ineffectual form of inter-disciplinary study. It is a phrase that parallels Stephen Melville's (1996, pp. 52–4) comment in the *October* Questionnaire. Carlo Ginzburg (1995, pp. 51–3) has also reasonably reminded us, albeit not in reference to Visual Culture Studies, that 'there is nothing intrinsically innovative or subversive in an interdisciplinary approach to knowledge'.
- 13 In this section, I will be using the terms Visual Culture and Visual Studies as they are employed in Mitchell's argument rather than how they are used in the rest of this Introduction.
- 14 See for instance Cheetham, Holly and Moxey (1998, p. 2) 'Introduction'.
- 15 'Visual Culture Questionnaire' (p. 25); my italics. In addition to accusations of ahistoricism, the *October* questionnaire – the questions posed by the editors of the journal, rather than the answers to it – accuses Visual Culture or Visual Studies of anthropologism and of a dematerialization of the image.
- 16 Here I want to distinguish very strongly between the interesting if thorny challenge of the question of our post-epistemological age and of its post-historical attitude, and the neo-conservativist discussions of the end of history by the likes of Francis Fukayama (1992).
- 17 It is of course well worth mentioning that Art History, along with many other disciplines in the Humanities, is no stranger to questions of historiography. From their inception, such questions necessarily plague, challenge, and offer ways forward for disciplines themselves. *October* is well aware of this.
- 18 See Donald Preziosi, 'Introduction' (1999) where he offers an astute account of Art History's efforts to expand its object domain, its willingness and ability to extend its purview.
- 19 Manghani, Piper and Simons (2006). For a critique of this image culture, see Sobchack (2004, p. 181) who writes: 'Our contemporary image culture (as well as our contemporary theory) has increasingly reified our bodies as manageable matter. We have become fixated on the appearance and objectivity of the visible – and, as a consequence, both images and bodies have lost their other dimensions and values'.

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