

Depth Comprehensive Definition – Visuality, Perception and Power

This depth comprehensive focuses on the relationship between visuality, perception and power in the modern era, particularly with regard to the medium of photography. This entails the examination of two distinct yet interrelated forms of power. The first is concerned with how visualization and photography have been used by modern institutions (both formal institutions such as governments and their related agencies, as well as informal social, cultural and political institutions and groups) to surveil and control individual subjects. The second is concerned with how claiming "the right to look" (Mirzoeff, 2011, 1-5) and subjective engagement with photographs can assist individual subjects in challenging and even overcoming the institutional forces that seek to define and control them by creating other ways of seeing and understanding the perceivable world. As such, this depth comprehensive is roughly divided into three overlapping sections: 1) modern theories of visuality, perception and power that lay the essential groundwork for understanding how knowledge production and power have been linked through the visual from the eighteenth century to the present; 2) studies that focus on the role visualization and photography have played in the institutional control and surveillance of individual subjects and/or members of oppressed groups, some of which also address the possibility of contesting such knowledge production through the re-reading and re-appropriation of photography and photographs; and 3) studies that focus on how various forms of phenomenological engagement with photography and photographs can open a productive space for alternative forms of seeing and thus the reorganization of knowledge about the world. These three sections trace the relationship between visuality, perception and power as it pertains to photography through a theoretical and analytical genealogy that brings the traditional fields of philosophy, social criticism, anthropology and history, as well as the relatively new and highly interdisciplinary field of visual studies, into direct dialogue.

Visuality, Perception and Power in the Modern Age:

The modern theories of visuality, perception and power that create the framework for this comprehensive find their genesis in the work of French philosopher Michel Foucault. In *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception* (1963/1994) Foucault highlights the role played by "the act of seeing and the gaze" (ix) in the reorganization of medical knowledge at the end of the eighteenth century. In doing so, he demonstrates how perception and language assisted doctors in gaining power over both the mapping of the body and the definition of the individual through the discovery of empirical truths. Foucault returns to the relationship between the gaze, power and the body in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975/1995), however, here he expands his argument to the new technological power of the disciplinary gaze which developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Foucault argues that the discipline meted out by panoptic surveillance resulted in a new form of individuality defined by self-surveilling and docile bodies that conform to the norms of ruling institutions.

Following the rise of the interdisciplinary field of visual studies (Alpers et al. 1996; Bal April and August 2003; Belting 2005; Elkins 2003; Mitchell 2002, 2003; Mirzoeff 2003) in the 1970s (Batchen 1997; Evans and Hall 1999; Rogoff 2002; Tagg 1993), Foucault's arguments concerning modern visuality, perception and power were taken up and expanded upon primarily by art historians concerned with the construction of vision and the observing subject. In *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (1990),

Jonathan Crary investigates the "massive reorganization of knowledge and social practices that modified in myriad ways the productive, cognitive, and desiring capacities of the human subject" (3). Thus, while Crary addresses the enactment of institutional power and control on the individual subject, he also pays particular attention to the modern "phenomenon of the observer" (5) and the optical media that contributed to its birth.

While *Techniques of the Observer* marks an early link between Foucault and the field of visual studies, in it Crary, much like Foucault (Hoy 1986), acknowledges but does not elaborate on how the observed and/or observing subject "resisted, deflected, or imperfectly constituted" (Crary, 1990, 7) such institutional forms of vision. However, in his later work *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (1999), Crary expands his earlier arguments by highlighting how in the nineteenth century attention was seen as "an inevitable ingredient of a subjective concept of vision... [both as] a means by which an individual observer can transcend...subjective limitations and make perception *its own*, and...by which a perceiver becomes open to control and annexation by external agencies" (5, emphasis in original). Therefore, while *Suspensions of Perception* is still primarily concerned with the latter manifestation of attention, further linking Foucault's ideas to the modernization of perception and the observer, Crary acknowledges subjective vision and embodiment as alternative means by which to engage the perceivable world.

Thus Crary acts as a bridge between Foucault and Nicholas Mirzoeff who is concerned with resistance to hegemonic vision that seeks to define, control and discipline subjects. In *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (2011) Mirzoeff details the modern struggle between visibility and countervisibility specifically with regard to plantation slavery, imperialism and the military-industrial complex. Here the authoritative operations of classifying, separating and aestheticizing of power that claim an exclusive right to visualize history and define reality are countered respectively by education, democracy and aestheticizing of the body by claiming "the right to look" (1-5), thus producing alternative realities through subjective and/or collective autonomy.

While the work of Foucault, Crary and Mirzoeff help trace the theoretical relationship between modern visibility, perception and power through the acts of looking and visualization, it is the work of W. J. T. Mitchell (2005, 1994) that links visual images, objects and media to issues of "power, value and human interest" (1994 5). In *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (1994) Mitchell addresses the problematic of the "image-text" (9), the power relation between pictures and discourse, that emerged with the reorganization of modern thought around visual images during the "pictorial turn" (9). Furthermore, Mitchell argues that "[i]f we want to understand the power of pictures, we need to look at their internal relations of domination and resistance, as well as their external relations with spectators and with the world" (1994 324). In other words, pictures have the ability to generate, reinforce and/or challenge knowledge both within the confines of their frames, as well as outside of them. Mitchell returns to the latter concern in *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images* (2005) where he elaborates on the demanding and desirous relationship between pictures and their viewers. Thus while he still addresses the question of what pictures do, he goes further by asking what they want of us and what we desire from them. As such, Mitchell's work highlights the

importance of subjective and embodied engagement with the visual, encounters that have the potential to generate different ways of viewing and understanding the world.

Finally, in *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography* (1997), Geoffrey Batchen links the issues of visibility, perception and power to the medium of photography. He does so by exploring (individually and in relation to one another) the postmodern and formalist approaches to “photography’s historical and ontological being” (viii). Batchen argues that supporters of the former locate photography’s significance in the cultural context in which it is employed, thus the medium has no clear identity or unified history of its own outside of the institutions and agents that utilize it. In contrast, he asserts that proponents of the latter find photograph’s meaning and value in the inherent nature of the medium itself. These two approaches loosely bookend the aforementioned theoretical shift from Foucault to Mitchell by moving from the relationship between visibility, knowledge production and institutional power to a concern with perception, the nature of visual images, object and media, as well as the observer’s subjective engagement with them. As such, the texts chosen for the next two sections demonstrate how such theoretical and analytical shifts concerning visibility, perception and power in the modern age have been addressed in available academic scholarship on photography.

Knowledge Production I – Institutional Surveillance and Control:

Given that the introduction of photography in the nineteenth century was an important factor in the rise of modern notions of visibility, perception and power (Batchen 1997; Crary 1990; Lalvani 1996; Tagg 1993), scholarship building (directly or indirectly) upon Foucault’s arguments about the relationship between power, knowledge and the body take photography as their primary medium of study and thus focus on three key areas of research. The first is concerned with the use of photography by social and political institutions (governments, police, prisons, hospitals, asylums, schools, families, etc.) to control, regulate and surveil those individuals deemed deviant (Lalvani 1996; Sekula 1989; Tagg 1993). The second focuses on the use of photography by anthropologists, scientists, colonialist, as well as racist governments and social groups, to identify and classify individual subjects and/or members of oppressed groups as ‘other’ based on race, culture and/or biological ‘imperfections’ (Hight and Sampson 2002; Pinney 2011; Racette 2011; Sekula 1989; Sturk 2004; Wallis 1995; Wood 2009). The third extends the above issues of racial, cultural and/or bodily difference (i.e. the deviant and/or monstrous body) to the social phenomena of public lynchings and the freak show, both of whose spectacular visual images and photographs were not only incorporated into popular culture, but also commodified (Adams 2001; Thomson 1996; Wood 2009). The latter category is additionally significant as available literature concerning public lynchings and freak shows not only addresses the role of photography and other material forms of visibility in controlling, surveilling and classifying the photographic subject, but also analyzes the visual spectacle of the events themselves, thus highlighting a distinction between the power of visual surveillance and spectacle that appears throughout the theoretical and analytical genealogy presented in the first section of this comprehensive (Adams 2001; Thomson 1996; Wood 2009). Furthermore, and distinct from public lynchings, the freak show was a uniquely modern manifestation of visual surveillance and spectacle that encompassed multiple kinds of deviance that formal and informal

institutions sought to define and control, i.e.) race, gender, sexuality, bodily difference and disability, etc. (Adams 2001; Thomson 1996).¹

While some of the studies in this section follow Foucault and Crary by not directly addressing or elaborating on how individual subjects sought to avoid, counter or complicate such definition and classification (Hight and Sampson 2002; Lalvani 1996; Pinney 2011; Sekula 1989; Tagg 1993), others account (to varying degrees) for how the practice of photography and/or the aforementioned types of visual images have been re-appropriated and re-read by their subjects, thus challenging the institutional forces that seek to define and control them (Adams 2001; Edwards 2001; Pinney and Peterson 2003; Racette 2011; Sturk 2004; Thomson 1996; Wood 2009).

Knowledge Production II – Phenomenological Engagement:

Academic focus on the re-reading and re-appropriation of photography and photographs not only speaks to various forms of opposition to institutional power, but also to a shift toward understanding the experience of the observing subject and thus the “right to look” (Mirzoeff, 2011, 1-5). Such studies build (directly or indirectly) upon the work of Walter Benjamin (2008) and Roland Barthes (1981) whose writings “pursu[e] a general phenomenology of the photographic image” (Yacavone, 2012, 7). More specifically, Benjamin and Barthes both highlight four aspects of the observing subject’s engagement with photography that have been taken up by contemporary scholars and, more recently, extended to other visual media such as film and art (Yacavone 2012). First is subjective engagement with photography and photographs, often with particular attention paid to the historical and existential contexts in which such encounters occur (Barthes 1981; Benjamin 2008; Bourdieu et al. 1990; Elkins 2011; Kracauer 1995; Sontag 1977). Second is ethical engagement and encounter between the agent, viewer and the photographic subject (Azoulay 2008; Guerin and Hallas 2007; Kuhn and McAllister 2006; Sontag 2003, 1977). Third are subjective, psychological and/or autobiographical forms of engagement with photographic images, most prominently found in memory and trauma studies (Hirsch 1997; Guerin and Hallas 2007; Kuhn 1995; Kuhn and McAllister 2006). Last, is embodied and/or affective engagement with various forms of visual media, including photography, film and art (Bennett 2005; MacDougall 2006; Marks 2000; Sobchack 2004).

Taken together, these four aspects of phenomenological engagement not only entail the re-reading and re-appropriation of visual media and images, but place the power to produce knowledge back into the hands of the observing subject, thus demonstrating photography’s ability to produce new ways of seeing and comprehending the perceivable world.

¹ I have included both Rosemarie Garland Thomson's *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (1996) and Rachel Adams's *Sideshow U.S.A.: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination* (2001) as together they provide a more complex understanding of the freak show as a modern form of visual control, surveillance and spectacle than either does on its own. For instance, together they more thoroughly address the various forms of visual media used by promoters to advertise the freak show and ‘sell’ its performers (i.e. carte de visite/postcards, life books, film, posters and other advertisements, etc.). Together they also provide a deeper analysis of the freak show from the varied perspectives of the audience, promoters and performers.

Key Questions:

This comprehensive explores a number of issues related to my dissertation, as well as my overall research and teaching interests. As such, it explores the following three core questions:

- 1) How and why did knowledge production and power become linked through the visual in the modern era?
- 2) How and why has photography been used by various formal and non-formal institutions and agents to justify and sustain, as well as deflect and challenge, dominant narratives concerning normality and deviance and/or the West and the Other?
- 3) How do the aforementioned forms of phenomenological engagement with photographs and/or other visual images create the possibility for multiple ways of seeing and thus the production of new knowledge about the perceivable world?

Definition word count: 2205 (excluding footnote)

Definition Sources Not Included in Reading List for Comprehensive Exams

- Evans, Jessica and Stuart Hall, eds. *Visual Culture: The Reader*. London: SAGE Publications, 1999. Print.
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Defining the Field of Visual Studies:

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Knowledge Production I – Institutional Surveillance and Control:

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- Pinney, Christopher. *Photography and Anthropology*. London: Reaktion Books, 2011. Print.
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Knowledge Production II – Subjectivity Engagement:

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Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version" and "Little History of Photography." *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*. Ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty and Thomas Y. Levin. Translated by Edmund Jephcott et al. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008. 19-55, 247-298. Print.

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Total readings = 45