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What is Radical Writing in Visual Studies?

James Elkins

From its North American beginnings in the late 1980s, its German beginnings in the 1970s, and its prehistory, going back to Derrida, Benjamin, and before, visual studies has taken as part of its mission the breaking of disciplinary boundaries. Visual studies has always pictured itself questioning conceptual domains and hegemonic identities, inhabiting margins, rethinking received ideas of cultural inquiry, identity, and place. Refraction, the theme of this issue, is one such boundary formation.

Especially in its pre-war incarnations as *visuelle Kultur,* visual studies had broken with art history in its interest in film and photography, and later in animation, gaming, advertising, the digital, and alternative media. And yet one of the founders of visual culture studies, Michael Holly, was wistful and perhaps a little regretful when she remembered the original promises visual studies had made to itself in Rochester in the 1980s, in comparison with the discipline it became. (This is in the book *Farewell to Visual Studies*.) Visual studies had promised itself the daring juxtaposition of previously unstudied theoretical methods with previously unstudied art practices from all times and cultures, but it had solidified into a definable academic practice centered on contemporary first-world visual production, a reasonably predictable roster of theorists, and a consistent politics. Holly herself decamped to a position at the Clark, at the very center of a disciplinary allegiance that the founders of visual studies had avoided.

This paper is a meditation on what might still count as radical or otherwise innovative writing that can still take place under the banner of visual culture studies. I'll take as my example a book I helped edit, called *Theorizing Visual Studies: Writing Through the Discipline*. My co-editors were all graduate students, and all sixty-one of the book's chapters were written by graduate students. I helped out with copyediting and correspondence, and I wrote two of the book's three introductions, but I never voted on which essays should be included, and I never edited for content or made any suggestions about the book's organization.

The idea was to create a next-generation visual studies reader, one that could move past the existing anthologies. The publisher, Routledge, had asked me if I wanted to write a second edition of my book *Visual Studies: A Skeptical Introduction* (2003). They were hoping, in part, to compete with the two best-selling introductions to visual studies, Nick Mirzoeff's *Visual Culture Reader* and Lisa Cartwright and Marita Sturken's *Practices of Looking*. This was in 2008. I suggested, in return, that instead of becoming the next "senior" scholar to compile an anthology or introduction to visual studies, it would be interesting to see what the latest writing and thinking looked like. I sent the editor a counter-proposal: I would assemble a group of MA students in visual studies, and we would issue an international call for paper from MA and PhD students around the world.

When we started, the graduate student group that planned *Theorizing Visual Studies* was about twenty people. As time went on—and some people graduated—the group shrank. The book lists five editors: myself, Kristi McGuire, Maureen Burns, Alicia Chester, and Joel Kuennen. It was an outlandish amount of work, as much as I have put in on any other book. First, the students decided they wanted to organize the book according to unusual concepts. Instead of the usual tropes of visual studies—hybridity, post-disciplinarity, nomadism, gender, and so forth—they invented their own, and planned to write a dozen encyclopedia-style entries that would then be sent to the students in other institutions who were going to contribute the bulk of the book, so that the book would present an alphabetically arranged vocabulary for visual studies—a new dictionary for the field, independent of the usual preoccupations. There was a lot of talk at the time about how old-fashioned Mirzoeff's and Sturken and Cartwright's Tables of Contents are. The student group wanted new metaphors and models. But the initial group dispersed and only a few of those essays got written. The remaining editors decided to issue an international call for contributions, still hoping for an A to Z of visual studies on unexpected topics but without the guidance of their original concepts. The initial responses were mixed, and we didn't have enough submissions to comprise a book, so we sent out a second call, using an email database of 11,000 academics and institutions in over 50 countries.

The book finally appeared in 2012. Over four years of work had gone into it. I myself read every one of the contributions, made thorough copyediting notes, sent it back to the authors, and cleaned up the resulting texts. The student editors did the same. Some of the sixty-odd chapters were edited as many as five times. It was by far the most time-consuming project I have ever worked on, including some large edited volumes in a series called the *Stone Art Theory Seminars,* several of which involve over 60 scholars.

From a publishing standpoint, the book was a failure (I think we made around $50 in royalties), and as far as I can tell, it has hardly been reviewed and is seldom assigned in classes. I do not think the reason has to do with the content, which is mainly what I want to revisit here. The lack of sales and textbook adoptions probably has much more to do with the fact that teachers naturally prefer to assign texts written by well-known contributors, or single-authored texts that can be read straight through. *Theorizing Visual Studies* is not easy to read or use.

Of the three introductions, Kristi McGuire's, tells the story of the students' ambitions and hopes, and the way the book metamorphosed from an idealistic post-disciplinary philosophic tract into an enormous anthology of brief chapters. One of my two introductions, the longer one, "An Introduction to the Visual as Argument," is an extended essay on what I still think is visual studies' central claim in relation to art history: visual studies has intermittently but consistently positioned itself as the discipline that will let images *argue,* will let images propose their own *theories*. Tom Mitchell has said this in various ways, and so has Susan Buck-Morss. The idea that the visual is also a form of theory, that there is "picture theory," has been traced to Benjamin and can be found, in other forms, in Jean-Francois Lyotard and others. Visual studies' self-imposed brief was to refuse to let images become ornaments, illustrations, or mnemonics, as they so often are in art history. Images were not to accompany textual arguments, but to actually participate in them, steering and modifying what is claimed in texts. That promise has never materialized, even in Mitchell's texts. This introduction was meant to explain what we all hoped was going to happen in the submissions we were gathering. The call for papers said explicitly that it was important that images should not be used only to illustrate arguments. Images, we said, should participate *as* arguments: they should sometimes direct or deflect arguments, and should be equal participants in whatever theories and interpretations the authors were pursuing. Only two or three of the hundreds of submissions we received did that. The introduction I wrote became an analysis of how visual studies was, in fact, continuing to use images the way art history does: as illustrations to arguments, as ornaments, as mnemonics.

The shorter introduction, "An Introduction to the Visual Studies That is Not in This Book," is a succinct bibliographic introduction to the history of visual studies, visual culture, and *Bildwissenschaft,* including many texts and names, and leading from the early twentieth century to 2009, when it was drafted. It's a useful essay, I think; there still isn't another history like it.

We anticipated that the texts in our reader would be easier to understand if we provided the background of the field because, as it turned out, almost none of the submissions made any extended use of earlier authorities. Lacan, Foucault, and Fanon were largely absent. If a reader were to use our book as her first introduction to visual studies, and if she skipped the introductions, she would have almost no sense that visual studies had been practiced before the twenty-first century. As the shorter essay's title implies, it is an exploration of the presentism of visual studies. I had been surprised by the contributors' detachment from the history of their own field, and their presentism about theory (their lack of interest in their potential dependence on, say, Foucault), but I wasn't disappointed. I thought that might be a sign that the contributors were thinking freely and radically in relation to the pasts they had probably been taught in their various institutions. But a close look at the book—and the exercise of repeatedly reading and re-reading for editorial purposes—made me see that most of the essays in *Theorizing Visual Studies* are conventional in their forms of argument and their politics. There are definitely some brilliant essays in the book, and a few that could easily be models for innovation; and there are a number of essays that explore subjects and art practices that are new to the field. The Table of Contents hints at the intermittent radicalism of the project. It begins:

> Airborne Horses—Mike Gibisser
> Anaesthetics—Kristi McGuire
> Animal—Michelle Lindenblatt
> Animations—Nea Ehrlich
> Arial—Arden Stern
> Ars Oblivionalis—Thomas Stubblefield
> Artifact—Lucian Gomoll
> Augmented Reality—Horea Avram
> Breathing—Vivian Li
> Collecting—Josephine Landback
> Decolonial—Lara Haworth and Nicole Cormaci
> Diaspora—W. Ian Bourland
> Double-Consciousness—Cara Caddoo

But the majority of the essays are actually conventional in tone, narrative, interpretive strategies, rhetorical forms, and disciplinary allegiances. They are not the cutting edge of the field: they are the products of scholars just beginning to find their way, and strongly beholden to the expectations of peers and instructors. I know this is a harsh judgment, and there are some genuinely amazing exceptions—essays that should be anthologized in the next visual studies reader, and taught as models—but the overall lesson of the book, for me, points in a different direction.

Here are three of the principal conclusions that I think the book warrants. (Please forgive the long quotations: the passages I'm repeating here—modified from their original settings—present positions that have not been addressed within the field, problems that I think are crucial for the ongoing sense of visual studies.)

(1) Visual studies is presentist in relation to its own history. Here is an abbreviated version of the end of "An Introduction to the Visual Studies That is Not in This Book":

> The contributors to this book are insouciant about visual culture's disciplinary allegiances and historiography, and I take it that is one of this book's principal lessons. There are essays here that keep close to their theoretical mentors—one on Jonathan Crary, another on Georges Didi-Huberman, a third on Jacques Rancière—but most are inventive and opportunistic. And few have much to say about visual studies' sense of itself, at least as that sense can be gleaned from graduate seminars in the history of visual studies, or from journals such as *Journal of Visual Culture* or the University of Rochester's *Invisible Culture*.
>
> The histories and geographies I have briefly sketched in this introduction are largely a picture of what does not matter in this book. At the same time, those histories are increasingly important to the pedagogy of the field, as they are taught in most introductions—so I wanted to make a gesture in their direction. If you are new to visual studies, the sources listed here are crucial for a sense of the historiography of the field. But they may not matter in a direct, causal fashion: they're more a question of what senses of the recent past are being abandoned in order to make way for new work. The current moment in visual

> studies is, I think, partly enabled by an insouciance regarding received versions of its own past: hence this introduction to a visual studies that is not, for the most part, in this book.
>
> This presentism has not yet been addressed. Visual studies seminars and curricula continue to teach the same set of several dozen theorists and scholars. They are required reading, but they are not often part of the living discipline. That's an interesting condition, because it implies visual culture studies feels the need of a sense of its history that it does not use.

(2) Visual studies has not yet found ways to let images participate as equals in the production of arguments. This is from the end of "An Introduction to the Visual as Argument":

> It may seem perverse to have written such a long introduction focusing on just this one problematic. It may also seem inappropriate to write an introduction criticizing some of the content of the book it introduces. And it may seem unhelpful to have presented this theme as an introduction to the current condition of visual studies, when this book itself makes it so abundantly clear that visual studies is going in many different directions. In fact, my own concerns about the field are in other books; they have only a little to do with what I have written here. Yet I believe that no matter what visual studies turns out to be in the coming decades, it will not really be about the visual until it comes to terms with this most fundamental issue. Images need to be central, and they need to never be fully controlled. They need to be able to suddenly derail or contradict an ongoing argument, or slow it, or distract it, or even overwhelm it. Will we dare to let images control our arguments? Will we pay enough attention to images to see how seldom they simply exemplify the ideas we hope they illustrate?

(3) Visual studies is not often actually visual. This last passage is a version of the opening of "An Introduction to the Visual as Argument":

> One of our principal starting points is the claim that despite its growing complexity and rhetorical sophistication, visual studies remains a field that is mainly engaged with kinds of argument that do not need to make continual, close, concerted, dialogic contact with images. To some degree that is the normal condition of several related fields, including art history and visual anthropology, but visual studies has always had the special brief of extended engagement with the visual world, so its wordiness is significant: the difficulty is in saying what that significance is, and how far its effects reach.
>
> Most of what is in any given book or article is text, and some texts on visual subjects have virtually no illustrations. This is a superficial observation, but also, I think, characteristic. It is probably equally true of art history and visual studies, although that can't be quantified because when the budget permits, art historical texts traditionally include lavishly printed illustrations even if the argument does not require visual detail. In general, an essay or book of visual studies will be mostly text. A quick look through my bookshelves suggests that the ratio of text to image might be around twenty or thirty to one. This is only a statistical observation: it is not at all easy to know what sorts of conclusions could be drawn from it. I am not suggesting, for example, that visual studies should tend toward a state where images predominate in sheer page count, or that there might somehow be a balance between images and writing. On the other hand, it seems there must be something to be said about a book like W.J.T. Mitchell's *Picture Theory,* which is less than ten percent images, even though it is centrally concerned with the proposal that pictures are theory, just as much as exemplifications of theory. I am not exempting any existing practices: my own book, *Visual Studies,* is one-quarter images, three-quarters text. This book, *Theorizing Visual Studies,* is no exception:

> here, too, the pages devoted to text outnumber the pages given to images. There isn't a clear conclusion lurking here: the notion is just to start by pointing to the appearance of our texts, which must bear some relation to our ongoing interest in the theorization and conceptualization of images, and our concomitant distrust, discomfort, or lack of interest in those kinds of argument that might need images to be in continuous dialectical relation with texts—not to mention our aversion to the kinds of arguments that might let images lead the way.

I hope these thoughts might be helpful for young scholars who want to achieve work that is radical in relation to disciplinary expectations, unexpected in what is understood as interpretation, and surprising in the choice of subjects. A good strategy for writing texts that are strongly voiced, compellingly written, and intellectually and affectively independent is to learn the field you're trained in as well as possible—its histories and historiography, its senses of itself, its claims and promises, its presentism, its politics, its vexed relation to images, the forms it takes in different countries—and then strike out on your own, without looking back.

* * *

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