

Seeing Perception (Leipzig, 24-26 Nov 2006)

H-ArtHist - Rainer Donandt -

Seeing Perception: Images & Texts

(Universität Leipzig, 24-26 November 2006)

Over the past two decades, matters of seeing and visual perception have garnered increasing critical attention. With good reason, the visual has come to feature in several different disciplines as well as in inter- or transdisciplinary perspectives (such as "visual studies" or "visual culture"): vision can be, and has been, conceptualised as a philosophical category, as cultural medium of expression, as instrument and technology of visualization as well as a means of communication.

Turning away from the "denigration of vision in twentieth-century French thought" (Jay 1993), studies such as Norman Bryson's (1983) monograph on the "Logic of the Gaze," Brennan and Jay's (1996) collection of essays on "Vision in Context" and Jonathan Crary's (1999) book on attention have contributed to highlight the centrality of visual perception in all areas of Western culture. A majority of contributions to the field follow a Foucauldian trajectory in stressing the constructed and ideological nature of seeing. As Crary puts it, "vision (...) is embedded in a pattern of adaptability to new technological relations, social configurations, and economic imperatives" (13). On the other hand, however, James Elkins has described seeing as irrational, inconsistent, and undependable. It is immensely troubled, cousin to blindness and sexuality, and caught up in the threads of the unconscious. "Our eyes are not ours to command; they roam where they will and then tell us they have only been where we have sent them. No matter how hard we look, we see very little of what we look at. (...) Seeing is like hunting and like dreaming, and even like falling in love. It is entangled in the passions - jealousy, violence, possessiveness; and it is soaked in affect - in pleasure and displeasure, and in pain." (11)

As Elkins' title, "The Object Stares Back," implies, there exists a reciprocal and indeed dialogical relation between spectator and object: "Ultimately, seeing alters the thing that is seen and transforms the seer." (11f) Seeing is therefore closely related to matters of power, of sexuality (Rose), and to identity itself (Silverman).

The conference /Seeing Perception/ attempts an overview over the main historical lines of methodological research on vision and perception, and on the multiple "practices of looking" (Sturken and Cartwright), as well as proposing new directions of research which are in continuation of, but nevertheless distinct from, those approaches offered by the visual studies/visual culture paradigm. Not the image as visible object, but the visual perception framing and surrounding it with its restless motion and performance constitutes the focal point of this conference. Visual perception as we conceive of it need not be limited to the realm of optics and to optical media; it also determines processes of reading and constructions of time and space, as well as bodily experience and processes of cognition. The multiple and varied treatments these topics have received make it necessary to take stock of the current state of debates surrounding seeing and perception, and to inquire into their underlying bases. Thus, we are interested in papers focussing on questions of theory and method (rather than mere case studies). Participants are invited from the following disciplines and fields of study: visual studies; art history; film studies; media and communication; theory of photography; literature; semiotics; narratology; philosophy.

We currently envision four conference sections:

The relation of spectator and object

Conceptualizing the relation of spectator and object raises questions of identity and alterity, self and other, as well as inquiring into the specific nature of seeing and looking. Formulations such as the "gaze," Lacanian (Silverman) or not (Bryson 1983, 1988), fixate that relation by describing looking as a voyeuristic desire that forcefully moves towards the image and only partially replaces a desired touch with looking. Bryson's "glance," on the other hand, describes a respectful and self-reflexive way of looking and thus keeps the relation of spectator and object in an unfixable motion.

Going one step further, theorists such as George Didi-Huberman, James Elkins and W.J.T. Mitchell have furnished the image with its own set of eyes when they imply that images can be organisms with their own peculiar life and an at times threatening activity. Gottfried Boehm's (2004) recent postulate of a new definition of the image no longer orients itself towards a frame, limiting part or detail, but rather centres on the intentional focus which the spectator directs at an imaging field. Conversely, images, with their ordered visibility, can seem to be 'alive' or even 'look back' at the spectator. We invite papers that critique the dynamic and dialogical formulation of the relation between spectator and object, or papers focusing on the

questionable agency of the object.

Pragmatics of the image

It is well known that images can not only be looked at or perceived, but also touched, used, painted over or destroyed (Freedberg). This line of research has received increased attention through the study of new media and media art, of computer games and every kind of interactive image use. Such a pragmatics of the image is concerned with images as objects, as well as images as action, event or experience, as creation, configuration or as a deconstruction of identity (and of alterity). At the same time, this approach stresses that logical differentiations between image and medium rely on a concept of perception which includes imagination, memory, and other practices of image production in which all meaning-making processes relating to images are based. In this context, we would like to query how far images can be said to steer or control perception, and how images translate perception into physical reactions, social gestures and pragmatic actions.

Perspectives on focalization

The concept of focalization, drawn from narratological theory (Genette), is one of the key issues in theories geared towards a transmedial narratology in the sense of a set of universal, media-independent tools of interpretation. Through its basis in the notion of perspective, focalization is associated with matters of vision; it has therefore been proposed as a concept bridging textuality and visibility (Bal), and has been tentatively used as a tool for analyzing visual artifacts (Yacobi 2002) as well as ones that combine the visual and the verbal (Horstkotte). However, it remains to be seen in how far focalization can serve to grasp the inherent problematic of seeing and the visual, or if it remains a metaphor for more traditional (or simple technical) concepts such as perspective. In particular, concepts of a 'visual' focalization will have to explain how different narrative agents (author, narrator, focalizer) can be separated if we move from the textual to the iconic paradigm. The distinction between focalizer and narrator is crucial in narrative; in visual art, however, it is not always possible to clearly discriminate between a narrative agent and the represented perspective. How, then, can we move beyond the constrictions inherent in an overtly technical concept of perspective, and how can narratological categories such as focalization help us in analyzing modes of perception both within the image and circulating around it

Describing seeing, describing images

The ways in which images are perceived in Western culture are

inextricably linked with verbal and textual structures and ways of thinking. If words can "cite," but never "sight," as W.J.T. Mitchell (1994) has it, how can the verbal paradigm deal adequately with matters of vision and perception

We invite participants to inquire into what Tamar Yacobi (2000) has termed "interart narrative;" moreover, we are interested in approaches linking images and texts, as each other's "other," beyond classical traditions of ekphrasis.

Please email paper proposals (300 words), accompanied by a short bio, by 31 January 2006.

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Reference:

CFP: Seeing Perception (Leipzig, 24-26 Nov 2006). In: ArtHist.net, Dec 2, 2005 (accessed Mar 29, 2026),
<<https://arthist.net/archive/27789>>.