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# Introduction

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Katarzyna Bojarska

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## Visual Literacy

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DOI:10.18318/td.2015.en.2.1

Twenty years ago, in 1996, American academic journal *October* published a survey entitled "Visual Culture Questionnaire."<sup>1</sup> Among the respondents were: Svetlana Alpers, Susan Buck-Morss, Jonathan Crary, Martin Jay, Stephen Melville and others. The questions posed tackled several topics including the shift from historical to anthropological thinking in the interdisciplinary model of visual culture studies; inspiration that visual culture scholars find in eccentric art historians such as Aby Warburg and Alois Riegl; criticism of visual culture for concentrating on the disembodied image and thus producing ideal subjects for globalized turbo-capital; and the claim that the shift in academia (from the historical study of images under the umbrella of art history towards visual culture) parallels the shift in the art world (in brief, from modernist autonomous art object to postmodernist art practices), while what follows would be the retreat of critics who tend to find it more challenging and productive to discuss cultural artefacts in a broader context rather than works of art per se.<sup>2</sup>

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1 *October*, 77 (Summer, 1996): 25-70.

2 *Ibid.*, 25.

Susan Buck-Morss provided an account of how an attempt to institutionalize visual culture studies failed at Cornell University where she worked at the time, and how it was impossible to grasp, frame and change something which was more of a process (an interdisciplinary network of exchanges and encounters) into something that would be an academic discipline. She introduced a crucial problem, namely: "what would be the *episteme* ... of such a field?"<sup>3</sup> And even though she went on to name the set of theoreticians included in the reading lists of visual culture courses (Barthes-Benjamin-Foucault-Lacan) and the set of problems addressed (reproduction of images, the society of the spectacle, scopic regimes, perceiving the Other, etc.), she concluded by saying that more than anything, images need to be read (sic!) "emblematically and symptomatically, in terms of the most fundamental questions of social life."<sup>4</sup> This for her means that visual culture is responsible for working out its own theories, ones that "themselves are visual, that show rather than argue."<sup>5</sup>

Jonathan Crary, on the other hand, saw in the emergence and success of visual culture studies a response to the "collapse of certain enduring assumptions about the status of a spectator."<sup>6</sup> According to him, vision remains closely attached to more general historical questions dealing with the "construction of subjectivity." Martin Jay on his part, seemed to have been convinced that visual art in the 20th century can no longer be separated (and as such studies in separation) from other images, from the conditions of their production, circulation and reception (an idea popular at least from the times of John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*, from 1972).<sup>7</sup> We seem to owe this meaningful shift to the pressures coming both from within 20th century art as well as from without. However, this lack of a single method, the call for new (visual) theories as well as the "threat" of anthropology (the threat of ignoring the historical order of things and their historical specificities), together with an overdose of the inter- and multi-disciplinary have made many suspicious of the status of this new interpretative mode, this new approach to visuality and culture more generally.<sup>8</sup>

As Nicholas Mirzoeff has rightly pointed out,

like history visual culture is both the name of the academic field and that of its object of study. Visual culture involves the things that we see, the

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3 Ibid., 29.

4 Ibid., 30.

5 Ibid., 30.

6 Ibid., 33.

7 Ibid., 44.

8 See *Visual Culture: Images and Interpretations*, eds. Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Holly and Keith Moxey, (Hanover N.H.: University Press of New England, 1994).

mental model we all have of how to see, and what we can do as a result. That is why we call it visual culture: a culture of the visual.<sup>9</sup>

And it is precisely the proximity of history and the visual that proves crucial in thinking about Polish culture and the role images played in its transformation at the turn of 21st century. Why is it interesting and actually necessary to introduce this framework? Mostly because its inception can be dated to the very beginning of the 1990s and the birth of Polish democracy. At that time, people began to see themselves, their history and their current role in history differently (or at least many hoped that was the case). Moreover, in that cultural context, which was very strongly based on the word (especially the written word) and literature as records and expressions of collective sentiment and identity, the role of imagery (and visual arts alike) has for a long time been underestimated. And yet it seems that when it comes to the experience of Poland's political transformation and the outcome of the fall of the Iron Curtain, together with all the accompanying identity, political and economic consequences, it is the visual (rather than literary) culture that offers the big picture and one that is complicated. In the history of the 20th and 21st centuries, one finds numerous instances of both artist-as-(art)theorists and artists engaged in digging deep into matters of politics and aesthetics, or what Jacques Rancière would call the distribution of the sensible. Lack of proper education in reading the images and placing them in context is partly to blame for the mis-recognition and underestimation of the production in the Polish visual field.

It seems to be an interesting moment to turn back and look at how thinking and writing about images of all sorts – their production, circulation and reception – developed and whether we can talk in the case of visual culture about the formation of “its own theory.” The reason for this is also the fact stressed so accurately by the author of *How to See the World*:

Today there is a new world-view being produced by people making, watching and circulating images in quantities and ways that could never have been anticipated in 1990. Visual culture is now the study of how to understand change in a world too enormous to see but vital to imagine.<sup>10</sup>

This enormous world presents itself to us everywhere and always; the core of the difference is that back in the 90s, specific things could have been seen only at specific sites (such as art in museums), while nowadays we can see everything

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9 Nicholas Mirzoeff, *How to See the World* (London: Pelican, 2015), 11.

10 Ibid., 12.

everywhere, that is of course mostly on the internet. And this experience has yet another element: images have become even more equal than when John Berger claimed their equality as sights "recreated or reproduced" no matter whether by artists, machines, or ordinary people.

In Poland many events have shaped visual culture, among them iconoclastic acts against works of contemporary art which took place at the beginning of 2000s, the debates and conflicts over the so-called critical interventions in the field of visual arts, the emergence of visual studies, and the common use of new as well as social media. The dynamically developing image culture post-1989 and completely new (democratic but mostly capitalist) modes of image production and circulation as well as their political uses and abuses have radically transformed Poland's post-transformation society and its self-representation. In recent years, numerous seminal works in visual culture studies have been translated into Polish and there has been an ongoing debate on how to study images (and a competition of sorts) between the representatives of art history and of visual culture; numerous important debates have taken place.<sup>11</sup> More importantly perhaps, there seems to be a growing quantity of images and modes of image production and circulation; there is an abundance of visual evidence, documents, archives. It is not only the art historians nowadays who are obliged to study images, but also historians, literary scholars, sociologists, anthropologists, et. al. The question of interpretation, or visual literacy seems to be very significant. Is there still a need for sharp distinctions between image and text, and are we still tempted to read images? And if so, why? Or have we come up with a different, specific type of apprehension and are these types specific for every discipline?

Among many issues, one should also consider that of the agency of images and their political nature: the fact that they not only illustrate or document politics but also help create it (not only by catering images of politicians to voters). In order to be a conscious and critical citizen, one needs to be able to "read images" and read between the images (as between the lines), understand the nature of manipulation and the traps of the apparent neutrality of man-made image. The dissemination of images and their meanings has gotten out of control and more often than not we do not know what we are looking at and fail to see. Observing the world and self-observation (as well as recording) have become easily accessible (with access to the Internet and digital cameras – especially those built into cell phones); writing history and writing one's own history have increasingly become a visual task. So what do we do with these images and what do they do

11 See among others, a discussion concerning Andrzej Leśniak's book *Ikonoŋilia. Francuska semiologia pikturalna i obrazy* [*Iconophilia. French pictorial semiology and the images*] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Badań Literackich PAN, 2013) in *Widok. Teorie i praktyki kultury wizualnej* <http://pismowidok.org/index.php/one/article/view/126/187> and other essays.

to us? What do we actually do when we decide to freeze a moment as a photo and store that photo or share it with others? Everyday life, ordinary history and world history have become permeated with banal or meaningful images which do not disappear easily but rather store themselves or are stored in the collective unconscious and transmitted in a haunting manner.

In her introduction to the course book devoted to the anthropology of visual culture, Iwona Kurz paraphrasing Claude Levi-Strauss writes that "some images are good (food) for thought."<sup>12</sup> What she means by that is that the theory of visual culture at its best reaches for cultural artefacts which formulate critical discourse in their own media and not merely provide illustrations for already existing theories. They are called, after Mieke Bal, theoretical objects, i.e. objects which render the structural complexity of the visual field. The visual perspective according to Kurz is not an element of culture in general, but rather a specific way of looking at culture and framing human activities.<sup>13</sup> It is in this framework that the phenomena from various domains such as design, architecture, art, photography, film, television, new media, etc. can be addressed and interpreted, as well as less obviously visual aspects of culture and – in the academic context – of the humanities. In the vast yet rather spectral field of such interdisciplinary study, the visual meets critical theory, history (including art history), comparative literature and literary theory.

What we propose in the present issue is not an account of visual culture studies in Polish academia, nor is it a survey of writings on images by professionals dealing with the visual, but rather different instances of how scholars representing various disciplines encounter and approach images or/and visibility as the subject of their analysis. *Teksty Drugie* journal has for many years concentrated on literature, its practice, theory and criticism. However, to see a growing interest on the part of its authors and editors in the visual field can also be perceived as a sign of our times and a certain tendency in academia.

The contents have been divided into four parts reflecting dominant issues, methodologies, or perspectives in the gathered articles. We begin with "Topographies" devoted to various aspects of and representations of sites, places, space and territories. Transgressing the figure of palimpsest and feeling an urge to go beyond its tradition, Roma Sendyka comes up with the figure of a prism in order to adequately describe and deconstruct what she calls the "non-sites of memory", i.e. sites of historical slaughter, destruction, gore such as former

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12 Iwona Kurz, „Wobec obrazu – wobec świata. Projekt antropologii kultury wizualnej,” in *Antropologia kultury wizualnej*, ed. Iwona Kurz et al. (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego), 12. If not otherwise specified all translations of referenced works are provided by the translator of the respective article.

13 Ibid., 18.

concentration camps and anonymous mass graves. By introducing the concept of geological structure, the author offers a new look on a rather old problem and in her reading of the territory of the Płaszów concentration camp, she digs deep and reaches courageously for marginal themes and tropes in the reflection on Holocaust memory and oblivion. Focusing especially on the relationship between map and territory, Elżbieta Rybicka discusses the map as metaphor, practice and concept in contemporary theories. The author concentrates on three aspects of this relationship: maps seen as the simulation of territory; as a kind of experiment with territory and as an invention of territory (together with the production of a system of knowledge, identity and experience). She also devotes some time to the functioning of maps and cartography, more generally in the reading and study of literature. Marta Zielińska, for her part, offers an account of how, as a scholar of Polish Romanticism, she sketched the maps of the history of the romantic movement in Polish literature. As a literary scholar Zielińska, pursues her research with the use of visual materials and a visual practice of her own, and in turn describes all the problems as well as illuminations encountered along the way.

In the section entitled "Photo-graphy" two essays are devoted to the intricate relationship between photography, memory, trauma and representation of historical events – the case study of which is the Holocaust. Marianna Michałowska concentrates on Dariusz Jablonski's documentary film *Fotoamator*, devoted to the photographic documents of the Litzmannstadt Ghetto. The author reflects on the many aspects of the problematic nature of the creation and reception of visual documents. The question of what photography is actually able to capture, record and transmit as well as that of what can be made of it by artistic practice (Boltanski, Schefferski, Levinthal) stand at the core of this essay pointing in the direction of specific photographic hauntology. Looking at the work of several artists whose oeuvre has been shaped, even if not explicitly, by the historical experience of the Holocaust (Strzeminski, Richter, Boltanski, Mikhailov, Libera), Adam Mazur reflects upon the use of experimental and avant-garde strategies in the representation of a traumatic, violent and transgressive past. Two other essays undertake the question of the relationship between the visual (in this case, photographic) and the literary. Paweł Mościcki offers an analysis of numerous collaborative projects realized by photographers and writers at the times of the Great Depression in the United States, which can be treated from today's perspective as a testimony to specific moment in world history as well as in the history of visual and literary media. Inspired by studies on the iconography of Parisian clinic Salpêtrière and the feminist deconstruction of the history of the nude, Adrianna Alksnin writes on Jean-Marie Charcot's experiments with photography and his female patients. The author points to the problematic oscillation between the medical and erotic aspects of this collection.

In "Reading Art", several scholars with backgrounds in art history, philosophy (aesthetics) and literary studies offer an interesting mosaic of problems with the visual encountered by artists and their commentators. Agnieszka Rejniak-Majewska discusses Barnett Newman's challenge to the category of painterly abstraction and art theory in general. His radical anti-aestheticism and anti-formalism are contextualized by the author in a critically and historically informed way. She claims and highlights the influence of a specific historical experience and points to Newman's strategy of displacing it. Inspired by the studies of 19th century painters (Eakins, Menzel, Courbet) by the American scholar Michael Fried, Krzysztof Pijarski offers a reading of visual realism which he calls "embodied" or "empathic." Here, realism becomes a practice of resistance in the culture of spectacle, capitalism and inequality. The author moves on to discuss the work of a contemporary artist, Douglas Gordon, in order to put that theoretical framework in motion and show its validity in our times. Ewa Tonika, in an impressive dispute with the legend of 19th-century Polish painter Artur Grottger, proves that there is no such thing as a legend sanctioned by critical and scholarly narratives and that the powerful life and work of Grottger still remains a pivotal figure for identity politics both in the field of arts and academia. Adam Dziadek analyses a unique outcome of an encounter between Stefan Themerson and Kurt Schwitters, i.e. the book Themerson wrote together with his wife, Franciszka, on the work of the author of *Merzbau*. The author treats this work as an exemplary case of interference in the arts and genres. He offers a close-reading of this multi-layered and heterogenic book which includes various forms of textual and visual interventions thus becoming a challenge for the reader. Magdalena Popiel devotes her article to the critical reading of the history of an aesthetic genre of caprice (*capriccio*). The author stresses an impressive complexity of this form of representation: the uses of various stylistic modes, tropes and its numerous meanings.

In the last section entitled "Looking Awry", we have gathered several meta-reflections on certain methodological issues and discussions, articles, some of which at the time of their publication, raised critical issues for identifying particular disciplines, and initiated formative debates in Polish academia. Anna Zeidler-Janiszewska offers a comparative study of the science(s) of image, which have originated in different national and academic traditions. She juxtaposes the American version of visual culture studies with the German tradition of *Bildwissenschaft* with its stress on historical continuity and anthropological foundations. The author looks for a third way allowing for an approach to images in the most creative and productive way possible while avoiding the traps and limitations of either tradition. Luiza Nader, on her part, puts forth a project of affective art history in the framework of an ethical and affirmative humanities. The author asks how the study of visual arts can become a political and transformative project for an academic discipline and society more generally. Leszek Koczanowicz looks

closely at the intersection of the visual arts, politics and ethics in the public sphere in search for possible forms of emancipation and resistance both in an individual and collective context. Marta Leśniakowska reflects on the relationship between the visualisations of experience and the experiencing of images. She offers a case study of Aleksandra Polisiewicz's *Wartopia*, a work of art referring to the Socialist urban planning and the projects for Warsaw. Last but not least, Grzegorz Grochowski addresses the intricate relationships and mutual influences of words and images within works of literature. The author focuses on what he calls "multiple semiotic games" which include various sign-based orders, forms of representation and conventions of communication. He attempts at naming and describing all possible functions images play as elements in the literary medium and their influence on the reading audience.