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Images as Arguments in Visual Studies

The text presented here is part of the introduction to a book I have edited called *Theorizing Visual studies*. It is being written entirely by graduate students around the world. The book will be published in 2013, by Routledge (New York and London). The book has two purposes. First, it is an attempt to produce an anthology, or textbook, for the study of the visual, which is not written by middle-aged professors (like me!) but reflects the interests of the current generation of scholars. Second, it is intended to interrogate the role of the visual in visual studies, art history, Bildwissenschaft, iconology, and related fields. Increasingly, visual studies has become a theory-driven enterprise in which images provide only an illustrative function: they illustrate theories that are often taken from philosophic sources. In this book, every image has to do more than just illustrate points made in the text. This excerpt sets out my ideas about how that can be done.

One of our principal starting points is the claim that in several specific respects visual studies is not yet a visual discipline. Visual studies has been around for about twenty years, depending on who writes its history. It is represented in about a dozen journals (again, depending on how they are counted), and has produced several hundred books, at least ten introductory studies, and at least five anthologies or readers like this one. Yet despite its growing complexity and rhetorical sophistication, visual studies remains a heavily theorized, text-driven field. To some degree that is the normal condition of any field in the humanities, including art history, but visual studies has always had the special brief of extended engagement with the visual world, and so its wordiness is significant: the difficulty is in saying what that significance is, and how far its effects reach. There are at least three senses in which it could be said that visual studies is not yet a visual enterprise.

First, most of what is in any given book or article is text, and there are some texts that have virtually no illustrations. This book is no exception in that regard: in this book, too, the pages devoted to text outnumber the pages given to images.

Second, visual studies analyses often tend to use images as examples, illustrations, or reminders of concepts developed in the accompanying texts. Thus images of the Twin Towers, of Dolly the cloned sheep, of the New Yorker cover cartoon depicting Barack Obama as a terrorist, and many others are reproduced as reminders. Their detailed content—their visual content—is not often at issue. Images are used as examples of political, gender, and other issues—examples, as Wittgenstein would have said, of things that they are not.

Third, one of the tropes of visual studies is a promise to let images set the terms of the discussion, so that they generate and determine the reader's and viewer's interests and arguments. That promise is a trope because it is commonly made, but seldom practiced. Tom Mitchell, for example, has argued that pictures produce theory just as texts do, and that there should be a reciprocal attention to pictures in theory and pictures as theory. He calls this "picture theory." Susan Buck-Morss has written on several occasions about the way she takes images as starting points, and how her arguments develop around images. But we feel that despite these efforts, images remain overwhelmingly marginal and even dispensable, and there are still no texts in

which images take on the work of argument. A sign of the imbalance is that points that are made by art historians and visual theorists about gender, subjectivity, political identity, and many other subjects, could sometimes be made just as well without images. To address this condition, we attempt two things in this book: first, a critical reevaluation of some values that have led to the current relation between textual and visual material; and second, a rethinking of the places of the visual.

1 Visual studies as argument

This book is intended as an introduction to the subject, and so it includes some of the essential figures—Lacan, Benjamin, Foucault, Barthes—and some of the irreplaceable concepts—the frame, the gaze, the spectator, the operator. But we have also tried to cut into the assumptions of the field by proposing new concepts—collapsing, surfacing, perforating, invisibility. We both present the field's history and argue with it, rehearse the canonical texts and criticize them. Some of this conceptual work is done in the longer introductions to the book's Nodes and Perforations (these are explained in "How to Use This Book"), but most takes place in the brief introductions to the hundred Topics that comprise most of the book. The introductions to the hundred Topics are intended to do three things:

First, they frame the material, setting out the basic arguments and justifying the particular texts and images we have chosen.

Second, the introductions also provide the elements of a history of reception (*Rezeptionsgeschichte*) for each concept, visual image, or text. As visual studies develops, it becomes more aware of its history. It begins to matter that Walter Benjamin's work was translated into English relatively late, that Manon Souriau was "rediscovered," that the "revival" of Aby Warburg has several phases, each with its own history. Texts like Foucault's and Lacan's are no longer just tools, but historical episodes that bring with them specific and often contested moments in the history of visual studies and other disciplines in different parts of the world. The introductions explore selected moments in the pertinent secondary literature, so that readers who are new to the material can begin to find their way into the critical reception of the work.

And third, the introductions also argue: if we find that an author or artist has been misread, or that a passage or work has been overlooked, we make the case in the introductions. Hence some introductions are interventions in the reception history. The combination of historical scholarship and arguments with history has several precedents in art history, most notably Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois's *Formless: A User's Guide* (English ed., 1997) which reports on Georges Bataille's "Dictionary," but also expands it in directions the authors acknowledge Bataille would not have done. The purpose of that combination of historical and critical work was to produce something that could be "useful" for art production and criticism at the moment the exhibition and book were produced. This book has a similar motive for combining history with argument: our purpose is not to enliven historical scholarship, and not only to demonstrate that the past has living connection to the present. Instead we are interested in producing a text that can help produce other texts, other images.

2 The visual as argument

In this book we attempt—we think for the first time—to explore what might happen when the visual is allowed the same discursive, rhetorical, and philosophic space as the linguistic. We try to do this in several ways. First there are three negative guidelines—things we have tried to avoid:

- No images in this book simply illustrate the surrounding argument. An excerpt from Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, for example, will not be illustrated by photographs of nineteenth-century Parisian arcades; an excerpt on Foucault's discussion of surveillance will not be illustrated with a print of Bentham's Panopticon prison.

- No images in this book exemplify the framing argument, showing how a given theory works in visual art. An argument about political activism in relation to business, for instance, will not be illustrated by a video still of a performance by the Yes Men; an argument about intervention in the art world will not be illustrated with a poster by the Guerrilla Girls.

- No image in this book will primarily function as a mnemonic. In art history, one of the principal purposes of illustrations is to remind readers of artworks that they have, ideally, encountered in the original. For that purpose, the reproductions need not be of good quality. University presses in particular have adopted laser printing technologies and uncoated paper stock, so that the average greyscale range in contemporary first-world academic publishing is lower than it was at the beginning of the twentieth century. High quality illustrations are associated with the art market, where connoisseurship and formal values matter in a way that they do not in academic discourse. The low reproduction quality of academic presses is not an issue if the purpose of the illustration is to remind readers of absent artworks or to reassure readers that the author and publisher are not aiming at the commercial art market. But if the internal structure or details of the image are part of the accompanying analysis, high quality is important.

To complement these negative guidelines, we develop several models of the visual as argument:

1. Images as intelligent theories. Some images in this book are intended as intelligent commentary on other images and theories. This idea comes from the art historian Leo Steinberg's discussion of Leonardo's *Last Supper*, which surveys engravings, paintings, and other copies of Leonardo's painting and takes them as "intelligent" responses, on a par with critical and historical evaluations. (Steinberg, *Leonardo's Incessant Last Supper*.)

An image that provides a commentary on a text, and is therefore an intelligent theory in its own right, can be understood in two senses. The image be presented as an insight into a text or image that inspired it, or it can be presented as a further development of that image or text. Steinberg is only interested in the former possibility. The copies of the *Last Supper* that he reproduces are used as ways of deepening our understanding of Leonardo's painting. But it is also possible to take the copies Steinberg presents as further developments of ideas that began in the *Last Supper*, and therefore of interest in their own right. In the latter case, images can be

participants in an ongoing development of theory or argument. In Steinberg's book, none of the copies are said to be anywhere near the level of the original painting, but in this book, images can often be considered as having equal or greater interest than the texts or images to which they respond. In that case, it is the images themselves that are of interest as developments of ideas apparently originated in earlier texts or images. Steinberg's book is illustrated with a billboard of the Last Supper, which he encountered off a highway in New Jersey. The approach we take here would be open to the possibility that the billboard is a development of the Last Supper that is potentially of greater theoretical intelligence—greater interest, cogency, persuasiveness, truth—than the original.

2. Images as mistaken theories. Some images in this book are presented as simplifications or misreadings of theories. The idea that an image might be mistaken is outside Steinberg's working method: in his account, there is no way to know when a given copy of the Last Supper is not "intelligent"—and for the same reason, there is no way to tell when an image misunderstands its model. But if images are arguments, then some of them will be mistaken, simpleminded, wrongheaded, or otherwise unhelpful. (Others will be strong misreadings, and therefore "intelligent" from Steinberg's perspective.)

The same two possibilities apply here as in the case of "intelligent" images. An image that exemplifies a mistaken reading of a theoretical position can be presented as a way of understanding problems inherent in the original theoretical position, but such an image can also be understood as simplified or mistaken interpretation of the theoretical position. In the first case, the image is presented as a way of criticizing the original theory, text, or image on which it depended. The equivalent in Steinberg's book would be a copy that reveals a weakness in the original Last Supper. In the second case, the weakness or mistakes in the image are presented as the faults of the person who made the image. The equivalent in Steinberg's book would be a copy that misunderstands the Last Supper, for example by missing its theological symbolism. A contemporary example might be the myriad contemporary photographs of everyday life, from Beat Strueli to commercial companies such as Corbis that offer stock images of everyday life for advertisers to use as backgrounds. Such images can be understood as simplifications or misreadings of theories of the everyday articulated by writers such as Michel du Certeau. In the first possibility, the contemporary photographs would be evidence of weaknesses in du Certeau's position (that it allows itself to be co-opted for capitalist and ostensibly fine art purposes). In the second possibility, photographers such as Strueli necessarily misread writers such as du Certeau for their notions of the everyday.

3. Images as interruptions. Some images make theories more complex by changing the subject, interpolating unexpected examples, conjuring ideas, or juxtaposing apparently irrelevant places, people, shapes, colors, or other visual incident with theories that are apparently unrelated. Some justification for this position can be found in Jean-François Lyotard's *Discours, figure* (1974) but in a less philosophic sense images are often interruptions: it is a common experience to be momentarily distracted from some train of thought by an image that is presented as pertinent. That kind of interruption is fundamental to the functioning of advertising. For example a billboard by Benetton showing child workers in a brickyard could be taken as a shocking advertising ploy, juxtaposing child labor with fashion, and that kind of

observation was a starting point for visual studies analyses of the Bendetton campaigns. But the advertisement also brings in images of battered red bricks, which nominally contribute both to the theme of child labor and the theme of fashion, but also provide a strange distraction, a mass of visual incident and an influx of apparently unrelated visual precedents and associations, which can have a measurable, but unpredictable, effect on conversations about the image and its interpretation. This capacity of adding apparently unrelated visual incident to well-known messages and meanings can be construed as a fundamental property of the visual. In this book images are sometimes presented as interruptions in otherwise more continuous conversations or discourses, and the challenge is to understand the interruption as both relevant to further analysis, and also as an inescapable, inherent property of the visual, which—as Lyotard would say—can never not be an interruption.

4. Images as things that remind us of argument. These first three points amount to claiming that images can contain, embody, suggest, or propose arguments in various forms. All three positions assume that specifically propositional thought can be extracted from images. When images are said to theorize, or to reciprocally influence theory, as in Tom Mitchell's "picture theory," propositional thought is what is at stake. We recognize the appearance of visual argument as a particular mode of a more general response, in which visual images elicit the feeling of legibility—the sense that they might make sense, without a clear articulation of what that sense might be. The attempt to understand images as objects structured like language or writing is usually exemplified by Roland Barthes's structuralism. Barthes wrote, for example, about diagrams in Diderot's *Encyclopédie* ("The Plates of the Encyclopedia, Eng. trans. 1986). In *Culture of Diagram*, Michael Marrinan and John Bender note that Barthes uses terms like paradigmatic and syntagmatic to describe objects like pots and pans depicted in a plate of the *Encyclopédie*, and in doing so, he "effaces their problematic visual fissures"—their apparent weightlessness, the shadows they fail to cast, all sorts of odd things about them. Even though we know images aren't writing, the feeling persists. This more general field is poorly theorized and tremendously varied. There are claims that images are "pensive" (this was explored, for example, by Hanneke Grootenboer, in a pedagogic program called "The Pensive Image"), that they work in society as if we imputed agency to them (Mitchell's question, "What do pictures want?" asks about this possibility), that they entrance us because they conjure time, loss, or memory, without necessarily doing so in an articulated manner (this appears, for example, in Louis Marin's *To Destroy Painting*, English ed. 1995). Many related ideas have been developed over the last hundred years. These strands converge on the idea that images can elicit a feeling of reading, sense, logic, or legibility, and that property sets in motion a range of claims about the relation between visual images, language, and logic.

In this book we take an opportunistic or pragmatic approach to these theories, using them to justify taking images as originators of thought, and not just reflections of it. Some images in this book modify theories without actually providing any new propositional content. They put us in mind of arguments, reading, sense, meanings, claims, propositions, and logic, but they do not clearly contribute those things. Contributors to this book sometimes take images as things that are reminiscent of argument, but actually provide something more complex and difficult to articulate.

5. Images as things that slow argument. When images are used in certain ways, they can slow the sometimes vertiginous speed of analysis, and provide intervals of relatively sparse argument. The images of the Iraq war conjured by Nicholas Mirzoeff in the book *Babylon* are an example. *Babylon* is sparsely illustrated, partly because the images that interest Mirzoeff have such wide currency. (They are photographs disseminated by the military.) Such images work in a very direct way in Mirzoeff's argument, as instances of "weaponized" visual material that is entirely packaged and delivered by the military. But as individual images—even if they had been shown in Mirzoeff's book in greater numbers, and at higher resolution and better print quality—they do not speak about their weaponization. Instead they conjure such ideas without expressing them. Their muteness, their vagueness (some are taken in classified locations, and there is often limited information about the circumstances in which they were made), the very uniform and general way they can be taken to be "weaponized" by the military-industrial complex, all work to slow the argument Mirzoeff pursues, the way a sea anchor weights down and slows a large ship. Looking at length at specific images of the war, as Charles Green and Lindell Brown have done in the case of Australian military in Iraq, produces an entirely different effect: their paintings, done after photographs they took while embedded with Australian troops, elicit specific arguments about the war. The images disseminated by the military diffuse, slow, weaken, and potentially undermine arguments about their weaponization simply by being non-propositional. In this book some images appear as sumps of logical, propositional thought: places where thought slows, and argument pauses.

These five positions and their three counter-positions amount to a theory of the place of images in critical thought. This book is intended as an answer to the text-driven, text-centered corpus of visual studies, and as an accumulation of instances of what we are calling visual argument.

It may seem that this list of four positions omits one that is crucial to any account of how images create meaning: the claim that images alone can comprise an argument. We are skeptical about this. Buck-Morss has said that *Dreamworld and Catastrophe* (2000) began with images, which had their own argument, and similar things have been claimed, implicitly, by many books that avoid texts. In twentieth-century art history there is Horst Janson's nearly textless *Key Monuments of the History of Art* (1959), a pedagogic tool that is nevertheless intended to embody a standard Western narrative of art history. Outside of art history there is also André Malraux's *Musée Imaginaire* (1947-1950), with its mixture of surrealist and historicist examples intended to produce a meaningful experience. In more recent history there are wordless graphic novels, from the Weimar Republic to artists such as Chris Ware and Yuichi Yokoyama. In the West the tradition of wordless books is centuries-old, and includes such eccentric examples as the early eighteenth-century *Mutus Liber* (ed. Jean Laplace, 1979), a deliberately obscure set of pictorial instructions for alchemical operations. In this long and heterogeneous history there are few examples of sets of images that can be read as possessing clear arguments aside from conventional narratives. The claim that the arguments in a book began as collections of images is plausible and common (it is made implicitly in Benjamin's *Arcades Project* and explicitly by Buck-Morss), but the claim that images can stand in place of arguments remains problematic. In this book we address this by including some images as Image Boxes, on the model of the usual Text Boxes: this is to signal that the images are

intended to raise this question without, perhaps, offering any definitive answer. For more on this see "How to Use This Book."

A textbook may not be the best place to introduce new concepts, turn history to the purpose of immediate use, pursue arguments with the field, or experiment with the place of the visual in visual studies. Those could all be considered prerogatives of advanced texts or experimental monographs aimed only at graduates or colleagues. But visual studies continues to be diverse and even fragmented, uncertain about its relevant history, mobile in its methods, and experimental in its subjects of study. We feel it is not time for the kind of anthology or reader that presents the field's history and sets out its methods. In this labile atmosphere, even the few texts that have become canonical (Foucault, Benjamin) call out for invested, critical readings. We hope this book recreates the flux of the field.