

OUR EVOLVING VISUAL CULTURE

Exploring the implications of how visual messages in our modern world affect the way we represent, create, and reinforce cultural expectations

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INTRODUCTION

Becoming a visual culture

The pictures that constantly impinge on consciousness form a basis for geographical knowing.

John A. Jakle

The Visual Elements of Landscape (1987, 143)

In May 2003 over 25,000 photographers spread out across America to document the amazing diversity of daily life around our country. In one week, these photographers – amateurs and professionals alike – created over one million digital photographs. These photos were transmitted electronically to dozens of editors who eventually pared them down into over 1,200 images found in a new book, *America 24/7* (DK Publishing). The project was conceived and directed by Rick Smolan and David E. Cohen, the two men responsible for the *Day in the Life...* series of photography books, whose aim this time was to “assemble a scrapbook of the whole nation at a certain moment (*American Bounty*, 2003, 66).”



Photograph By: Dan White America 24/7

I first became aware of the efforts to create *America 24/7* early one morning as I watched the *Today Show*. As the story unfolded, I began to wake up and pay more attention to the television screen. Initially, I was simply interested as someone who would love to spend more time photographing the world around me. Then I realized that the concept of so many people taking pictures of their everyday lives was an illustration of something else I was interested in at the time – the expanding role of images in our culture and how this new visual means of communications affects the way we represent, create, and reinforce our cultural expectations, both for ourselves and others.

The *America 24/7* project, which is probably the largest collaborative photography effort in history, is a striking example of the widespread enthusiasm of average Americans to record the daily environment of their family, friends, and neighbors in

images for the rest of the world to see. Not only will the results of this massive endeavor fill the *America 24/7* book, the images will be featured in television documentaries, a Web site, traveling photography exhibits, and 53 large-format, lavishly-produced books for each state plus New York City and Washington, DC. A week or so after seeing the *Today Show*, yet another story about the book caught my eye. Again, I was struck by the tremendous number of people who came together in the belief that they could answer Smolan and Cohen's call to, "record the texture of modern family life" through photographs (American Bounty, 2003, 71). The book and the massive promotion efforts surrounding it seemed to reinforce the growing assumption that we can communicate who we are and what we believe in through images.

THE ROLE OF IMAGES IN CREATING CULTURAL MEANINGS

Contemplating the visual in our lives

The way spaces are used and places are portrayed in film reflects prevailing cultural norms, ethical mores, societal structures, and ideologies.

Concomitantly, the impact of a film on an audience can mold social, cultural, and environmental experiences.

Stuart C. Aitken

*Place, Power, Situation, and Spectacle:
A Geography of Film (1994, 5)*

America 24/7 represents the increasing role that the visual – all of the natural and created images we view each day – plays in how we create meaning and significance in our world today. Visual culture can be defined in several ways. Although broadly speaking, visual culture is "what is seen" (Roeder, 1998), it reveals even more than that. According to Karen Stanworth, it is phrase that is a short cut to "describing a complex set of relations between visual phenomena, meanings, and actions" (2002). It not only encompasses what we see or can visualize, but visual culture can also be studied "as a reflection of culture and as something that has cultural efficacy in its own right" (Visual Culture Cluster, 2003).



Today, “what is seen” multiplies daily. Images come at us from all directions. Visual culture is more than simply television and the cinema or art galleries and photographs. It directs our attention to the centrality of visual experience in every day life (Mirzoeff, 1999, 3). We experience direct visual observation of the images in our environment – landscapes, architecture, clothes, artifacts – as well as exposure to created forms of visual communication that are second-nature – art, maps, photographs, television, movies, music videos, advertising, interactive games – and we are constantly being introduced to new forms of visual technology. Digital photographs can now be e-mailed in seconds. Affordable digital video recorders document our most personal celebrations and memories as well as create films for commercial purposes. Animations and short films pop up on Internet Web sites whether we ask to see them or not. DVDs are rapidly replacing VHS tapes. Cell phones transmit pictures instantly. As Nicholas Mirzoeff argues, “Visual culture is not then a casual collision of two fashionable terms but a necessary bringing together of the key constituent parts of modern life” (1999, 123).

Visual memories and meaning

Words are easily forgotten,
but pictures stay in our minds.
Paul Lestor (1995)

Paul Lestor argues that many of us may not remember a great deal about the facts leading up to the brief student uprising in China’s Tianamen Square in 1989, but for those of us who saw the image, most will remember the lone protestor standing in front of the long line of tanks. He goes on to argue, though, that we remember the picture not only because it is a highly emotional image, but also because we have thought about the image in our mind with words. “Words and pictures become one powerfully effective communicative medium inside your head” (1995).



*Tianamen Square, June 5, 1989
Photograph By: Stuart Franklin*

Still, I wondered, if this is such a powerful way to communicate, why is it so hard to remember the facts of why the protestor was willing to risk his life against overwhelming government force? Has the image become an icon without substance? But then I considered how many people, including myself, may still remember feeling the power of one man's determination to stand up for what he believed in against a faceless and seemingly omnipotent government – whether or not we can name the specifics that brought him to such a precarious situation. I'm not sure that I would have felt such a connection with this man I would never know as deeply from reading one textual account of the event. "Narratives can make us understand," Susan Sontag notes, but "photographs do something else: they haunt us" (2003, 89). It is also important to recognize that the meaning I place on the image derives from my own interpretation, filtered through my personal and cultural beliefs at the time. As Robert Sack argues, "Television messages are absorbed by different individuals in different contexts, thereby forming different interpretations – which contribute to increased local differences" (1992, 100).

When I consider the significance I attach to my memory of the protestor in Tianamen Square, it reminds me that I learn a great deal – both facts and impressions – about the world through visual communication. Lately I have begun to wonder what effect all of these images have on the information I receive and how I interpret it. As Karen Stanworth argues, "A picture can replace a thousand words, but it is never innocent nor empty of situated knowledge" (Stanworth 2002). How do I create meaning from these images, consciously or not, and why is it important to understand this? Do I learn less by watching television or movies or reading a photojournalistic article, with their emphasis on images? Or do I gain a different, yet just as meaningful, type of information as I appreciate the pictures? So I entered into a wide-ranging, introductory exploration of the variety of ways that we can – and must – approach the study of the visual in modern life. In my explorations, I have discovered that these are just a few of the many questions and issues about visual culture that scholars have begun to address. As scholars approached these issues from different perspectives, most of them concluded their own explorations with a set of further questions rather than definitive answers. Yet, the search for more meaningful and appropriate answers goes on, as our modern culture evolves daily.

...the visualization of everyday life
does not mean that
we necessarily know what it is that we are seeing.
Nicholas Mirzoeff
An Introduction to Visual Culture (1999, 2)

“Visual culture,” Mirzoeff maintains, “used to be seen as a distraction from the serious business of text and history. It is now the locus of cultural and historical change” (1999, 31). But it has not been easy for scholars to develop new ways to incorporate the growing flood of images into their studies. The study of such a broad subject can be approached in many different ways and encompass so many different disciplines, and each struggles to find the appropriate use of images in their studies (Groth 1997). As Michael Emmison and Philip Smith note in the preface to *Researching the Visual* (2000), although we can all agree that “studying the visual is important because we live in a world where the ‘visual’ is of tremendous significance, ... just how to conduct research in such an important and staggeringly diverse field is far from clear” (xi).

As scholars have acknowledged the growing prominence of the inescapable image, they have begun to give greater respect to visual sources (Roeder 1998). People from a wide variety of disciplines and perspectives – including art, anthropology, sociology, communications, humanities, psychology, geography – are examining the impact of the overwhelming abundance of visual information we receive and how it works to create a sense of place, culture, and meaning in people’s daily lives (Mirzoeff 1999, 4). My own exploration into how images affect our cultural views of the world reflects my varied Liberal Studies interests and background. Yet there is one perspective that seems to link many of the aspects I am interested in, and that is cultural geography.

In *Terra Infirmis: Geography’s Visual Culture* (2000), Irit Rogoff discusses how “geography, like discourses of space and spatialization, allows for “a set of material conditions of subjects’ lives which co-exist with and both shape and are shaped by psychic subjectivities” (4). Denis Cosgrove also notes, “The aim of cultural geographers is describing and understanding the relations between collective human life and the natural world, the transformations wrought by our existence in the world of nature, and above all, the meanings that cultures ascribe to their existence and to their relations

with the natural world” (1994, 387). I am interested in how Cosgrove’s last concern – cultural meaning and our relationship to the natural world – is affected, for better or worse, by our growing acceptance and reliance on the multitude of images we create and view every day as a way of gaining knowledge.



The interest in visual culture by scholars has been both hesitant and overwhelmingly enthusiastic. On the one hand, there has been a past reluctance to recognize or acknowledge the importance of the images – in part because of the ingrained belief in the superiority of the word, as well as the ingrained belief in the inferiority of anything that is popular with the masses (Mirzoeff 1999). So that even though there has always been a reliance on the visual – firsthand viewing, maps, drawings, photos – to explore the world and its people, there has been a greater value placed on using the verbal or literary to put things into context. Images have been regarded merely as evidence or secondary sources of information rather than possessing critical meaning themselves.

“Intellectuals raised on the written word can be mistrustful of other ways of knowing” (Walker 1997, 165). The image has also had to struggle for respect from scholars, even as – and possibly because – it has become a dominant force in the minds of the masses. Johanna Drucker argues, at least in the art world, there is still a lack of appreciation or engagement with modern popular images. Art critics and historians have never been able to make a place for visual works that “figured their engagement with modern life through representational imagery or an enthusiastic dialogue with the mass media” (2002).

On the other hand, some don’t agree with the idea that images can’t have value on their own merits. Even if we can’t understand something visual without prior linguistic understanding, Nicholas Davey argues, “all that could be concluded is not that linguistic understanding has a supremacy over visual understanding but only that an understanding of our linguistic experience can deepen our awareness of how and what we come to ‘see’” (1999, 11). In addition, as Kevin Robins argues, there is actually a new trend by some to idealize the latest image technologies with extravagant claims. He distances himself from the new “technoculture,” not because he doesn’t believe in

the importance of change, but in order to put forth some contrary, balancing perspectives. Robins' aim is to bring about a more open-ended discussion about how we "endeavor to change the terms by which vision is validated in our culture" (1996, 6). Others are joining him in exploring a more measured approach to visual studies.

Jay Ruby, in exploring how film and anthropology can better work together, agrees the world "is in the midst of the telecommunications revolution – a revolution potentially as profound and far-reaching as the agricultural and industrial revolutions," and argues that what sets this revolution apart from the others is that it is happening so fast, "we can actually be aware of it." Ruby believes this awareness brings both opportunity and responsibility. Like Robins and many other scholars who are asking thoughtful questions about the "affect and effect" of images, he believes we must look with an open mind at just what this visual and technological "revolution" means. "As privileged members of the segment of the world that manages, if not controls, the image empires, we have an obligation to pause and reflect on the past and contemplate the future" (2000, 149).

Geographers, too, face the need to examine the possibilities, potentials, and pitfalls to be found in visual learning. In "Sight and Pictures," Yi-Fu Tuan spends a great deal of time examining the limitations of images as a way to gain knowledge, noting that images can often "sustain a viewer's curiosity without allowing that curiosity to develop into thought." Yet he ends his essay by stressing the importance and value of understanding the, at times intangible, advantages of images – despite their limitations – including their ability to take viewers beyond mere words. Tuan argues that while a projected image of a landscape "may not set in motion a train of analyzable ideas," it does "present a reality so impacted with subtle references that before it, at least for the time being, the proper response is silence" (1979a, 422). Jakle concludes in *The Visual Elements of Landscape* (1987), that geographers must shift from their traditional emphasis on



Photo by: Rob Gray
www.robgray.com

"the form and function of landscape as object reality" to focus instead on the role of sightseeing – a part of tourism whereby the traveler obtains visual stimulus – which has

received little respect in the past from academics in North America. But, Jakle argues, scholars could benefit greatly by focusing on sightseeing as a “form of environmental experience,” one in which it is not “object reality” that is important, but the “impression of that reality as conveyed through the process of seeing” (165-173).

For other scholars, as Richard Lowe argues, visual literacy – understanding and generating specialized, technical types of graphical images – is an essential component of science and technology education today (2000). James Borchert believes that visual analysis of how ordinary people have lived and ordered their lives can be a powerful tool for social historians who are examining the efforts of different groups of people to construct and maintain unique environments that may contrast sharply with those next to them. Yet, Borchert argues we cannot accept visual analysis as being foolproof – it is just one more research tool to grasp how people create meaning from the way they organize and use the spaces around them (1997, 43). Emmison and Smith discuss how there is a growing movement in cultural studies that focuses not so much on visual ethnographic materials that are filed away for reference material, but instead is concerned with images that are distributed through the public sphere. The significance is that such media forums not only indicate “shared beliefs and ideologies, but are also presumed to have considerable influence in shaping them” (2000, 66). And for geographers, Groth and Bressi argue that rather than “being an easy substitute for work with written sources, spatial and visual analysis usually requires additional work” as “spatial and visual information often sparks new and important questions, suggested by oppositions and juxtapositions not apparent in written records” (Groth 1997, 17). All of these efforts indicate that there is still much to be explored before we can understand how visual communication affects how we interpret our world.

Visual impact on social narratives

The way that people communicate can have a
profound effect upon the way they think.
Mitchell Stephens
the rise of the image the fall of the word (1998, 21)

One way that we communicate and create meaning for our shared values and beliefs is through the narratives, or cultural texts, we tell among ourselves. As Anne

Buttimer argues in the “Cultural Geographers Forum” in *Place and Culture* (2003), one of the five principles of cultural geography is that:

Cultures are constructed, transmitted, and re-affirmed through storytelling and communication networks at various scales. In modern settings, however, media, film, literature, travel brochures, and iconography have become powerful transmitters of cultural images and values. Geographers today examine communities of interest, social space and time, popular press and media, commercial and ideological labeling of merchandise and events, quite as eagerly as previous generations plotted artefactual landscape expressions of culture. (3)

Irit Rogoff states that geography is concerned with the relationship of people and places that is produced through “socio-cultural narratives which are geographically emplotted” (2000, 22). In the past, much of the communication that created these narratives was carried out in words, whether oral or written, and images played a secondary role by providing evidence or illustrating the text. Today, however, visual messages have assumed a much larger role in our social discourse about relationships between our physical and social environments, much to the dismay of many, and the delight of a growing number. In *the rise of the image fall of the word* (1998), Michael Stephens believes, despite the long-standing skepticism of his “fellow print lovers,” that the moving image has the potential to “present us with new mental vistas, to take us to new philosophic places, as writing once did, as printing once did” (xii). He argues against the skepticism of those who fear the growing power of imagery, instead choosing to ask us to examine the potential, not prejudge the limitations of learning through visual means and messages (Stephens 1998).

As we create new meanings and reinforce or rethink existing ones, we “construct spaces, places, landscapes, regions and environments. In short, we construct geographies” (Anderson 1992, 4). Cultural and societal issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality are also constructed in many different ways – through social narratives that stem from our personal or community beliefs, through laws and accepted behavior within our society, as well as through the increasingly media-driven world of photos and TV or print news and information. These geographic constructions and social identities are often dependent on visually-coded differences and are embedded in commonplace stereotypes (Stanworth 2002). With the wealth of visual information we are exposed to each day, the impact of those images on our socially constructed beliefs

and behaviors is another area that can use a great deal more exploration. As Rogoff argues, the relatively new arena of visual culture “provides the possibility of unframing” some of these discussions” (2000, 31).

Personal Observation – creating meaning from what we see around us

Sight presents us
with the richness and the diversity of the world;
it makes the world seem
packed with fascinating objects.
Yi-Fu Tuan
Sight and Pictures (1979a, 414)

A great deal of information about our world comes to us through daily first-hand observation and experience. Mirzoeff argues that one of the advantages of considering visual culture is that it “directs our attention away from structured, formal viewing settings like the cinema and art gallery to the centrality of visual experience in everyday life” (1999, 7). We view our world in a particular place and time, and we interpret and make judgments about our relationship to our physical and social environment through the eyes of our culture, no matter where we might be, whether we are aware of this or not. “Even those sensations that seem a direct result of the proximate environment are selected and transformed by our feelings, tastes, and symbolic systems” (Sack 1992, 96).



*Photo By Fred Voestch
Old Faithful Geyser
(2003) Acclaim Photos*

Like the rest of us, scholars in various disciplines have also used first-hand observation as a way of learning about other cultures. Anthropologists study cultures both near and far to examine and document different ways of life. Sociologists examine behaviors to find similarities and differences between cultures. For geographers, Henry Castner believes vision can be considered the basis of geographic inquiry and involves looking “with discrimination and with the ability to discern clues and discover evidence not only in our surroundings but also in our graphic representations of the world” (2003, 121). Although he notes that fieldwork has been in and out of vogue for geographers at different points in history, Wilbur Zelinsky argues that the fascination with visiting places in person is

“something virtually all human beings crave in varying degrees, while reaching a higher-than-average pitch among the majority of geographers” (2001).

Geographers use fieldwork to uncover a sense of place as they examine the world from a spatial perspective – the climate, the terrain, the proximity to other similar places, the dress, the language, the religion, the economics of a particular area. They look at objects, structures, distances, changes over time and a variety of tangible factors. Much of this observation is done intentionally as part of a geographer’s research, but there is also value in being more conscious of seeing the world around us, whether in our daily rounds, or as we venture to new places (Zelinsky 2001). Jakle argues there is much to be learned from the spontaneous sightseeing that results when someone is in between home and specific tourist destinations – the stretches between such places where the traveler can “relate spontaneously to landscape as an unwinding visual display of place stimulation” (1987, 10). Like Jakle, Zelinsky stresses the particular importance of being receptive to viewing during the “casual, unstructured sensing of our surroundings or simply an ad hoc, impulsive exercise in getting one’s bearings” (2001).

As we examine the visual evidence of the world around us, we form an opinion on what this space is like, possibly from a purely aesthetic viewpoint, or perhaps from a cultural viewpoint, in which we feel a sense of familiarity or alienation. “When we look at a landscape and see a church spire at the end of a tree-lined road, our eyes have automatically combined visual data to form a stereoscopic image, and our mind has integrated, with little conscious effort, diverse clues and experiences to give a rich meaning to that image” (Tuan 1979b, 96). Whether we are natives or tourists or scholars, we create meaning for what we observe based on our cultural experiences. “All insights about social, cultural, and geographical knowledge [...] are embedded in the experience of particular people in specific times and places” (Burgess 1985, 14).

The term media can be used to describe the means by which we gain information through other than direct contact.

Although media transmit information, they do so selectively and in a particular form, so that the information becomes transformed.

Robert David Sack

Place, Modernity, and the Consumer's World (1992, 96)

Today, it is virtually impossible to experience and observe everything on a first-hand basis. We don't really need to, with so many technologies bringing us information about the world constantly; and unless we live in the remotest part of the world with no means of technological communication, we are exposed to visual messages created by others without much choice or even conscious awareness. The nineteenth-century invention of photography set the stage for today's visual culture as it brought into being "a series of mass media (including cinema, television, and video) that could lay claim to reproducing certain features of human perceptual experience directly" (Messaris 2001, 182).

In addition to being filtered through our own eyes, many of our shared social experiences are "transformed by the communications media, which both add to and filter these experiences" (Sack 1992, 96). As Stuart C. Aitken notes, there is a growing acknowledgment that "our everyday experience – the practice of living and the places that ground that practice – is *re-presented* to and with us" (1994, 6). Leo E. Zonn broadens the definition of "medium" to "encompass any mechanism that has the capacity to convey information," whether it be a "newspaper or magazine to a novel to a photograph to a painting to cinema to word-of-mouth, to a map" (1990, 2). And, although most of us rarely, if ever, stop to ask ourselves how these constructed, increasingly visual interactions in which we constantly participate affect how we represent, create, and reinforce our personal and cultural identities, scholars have begun to acknowledge that they can no longer relegate the image to "pop cultural" status – that it is becoming an integral part of the scholarship of many, if not all disciplines. "Visual culture is new precisely because of its focus on the visual as a place where meanings are created and contested" broadening the long-accepted emphasis placed on literary or spoken texts to create social narratives. (Mirzoeff, 6).

An early introduction to the idea that contemporary and historical insights can be gained from a geographical study of the media is found in *Geography, The Media & Popular Culture* (1985), edited by Jacquelin Burgess and John R. Gold. They argue that “Raymond Chandler is as valuable a source as Thomas Hardy and that the *Daily Mirror* has as much to say about the nature of places as the *Geographical Journal*” (1985, 1). Burgess and Gold felt they were observing two distinct strands of research into the nature of media emerging at that time – an “American School” concerned with “the effects of media on individual attitudes and behaviour” and a “European School” that was centered more on “the production of meaning and the relations of the media to other cultural and political forms” (1985, 4). Since then, these distinctions have been blurred by an increasing number of books and articles being written by scholars from a myriad of disciplines with a wide range of approaches.

A few years after Burgess and Gold’s introduction to visual culture and geography, Zonn brought together a new collection of essays in *Place Images in Media* that focus on the production of meaning – “the nature and character of place images in terms of settings that are socially, culturally, and historically defined” (1990, 4). Zonn later joined with



©1997 Ronald C. Saan
Joe and Aggies - Route 66

Aitken to further that focus in *Place, Power, Situation, and Spectacle* (1994), arguing that the “study of the interrelations between film and the politics of social and cultural representation offers a provocative research setting for geographers,” a setting that was virtually ignored by geographers at the time (Aitken 1994, ix). Essays ranging from “The City as Cinematic Space: Modernism and Place in *Berlin, Symphony of a City*” by Wolfgang Natter to “Filming Route 66: Documenting the Dust Bowl Highway” by Arthur Krim, are linked by the underlying belief that cinematic representation has contributed to understanding our sense of place in the world (Aitken 1994). Later works, such as geographer Kevin Robins’ *Into the Image: Culture and Politics in the Field of Vision* (1996) and Rogoff’s *Terra Infirma: Geography’s Visual Culture* (2000) continue to develop the link between geography and visual culture.

Throughout all of these essays on mediated means of visual communication and their relationship with our modern culture, scholars from varied perspectives present sometimes-differing viewpoints and look at images with varying degrees of emphasis. Zonn is concerned with how we create meaning from constructed images, and breaks his exploration down into four general areas that provide some common basis for discussion: the medium that creates the image; the content of the image itself; the audience, or those who perceive the image; and the intent and interpretation of the creator of the image (Zonn, 2-4). As geographer Peter Goin argues, a photograph is “more than the sum of the facts therein,” noting that “reading a nineteenth-century photograph made, say by an itinerant colonial photographer in India provides much more information than just how that scene appeared at that time and place. Even the technology of photography has changed, and these technologies offer metaphoric opportunities then and now” (Goin 2001, 366).

Each of the areas that Zonn has used to organize his discussion is the subject of on-going explorations, and it would be impossible to discuss any of them in great depth, or come to any compelling conclusions. What is certain is that the discussions – some of which have been going on for years, others that have just begun – are opening up new possibilities for scholars as they move from studying images and media “as research tools and research material” to looking at them as “objects and events in themselves which can be studied in the context of the culture within which they were made and used” (Worth/Gross 1981, 34). Yet, there are some ways in which we can consider how Zonn’s four factors play a role in creating a sense of our world.

The first is the medium itself. Ever since the technology of photography was introduced, many have hailed it as a breakthrough in showing reality that marked the end of painting as a means of illustrating life. “The camera has enlarged our world in space and time. Since the middle of the last century, it has been possible for us to see strange places and people in images that have a validity completely different from that of a drawing or a painting” (Beloff 1985, 3). With photography’s availability to the mass public, Mirzoeff notes that it “democratized the visual image and created a new relationship to past space and time.” Ordinary people could record their lives and create a record for future generations. With today’s digital computer imaging, however, he argues that “we can in turn say that photography is dead.” Or, at least we can argue

that its claim to mirror reality is no longer valid. "The claim of photography to represent the real has gone" (1999, 65).

Goin, however, examines the issue from a different perspective, as he makes a distinction between *truth* and *fact*, arguing that although photographs can contain factual, verifiable information, they can also create a sense of place and emotional feeling that becomes truth to the viewer. "A photograph can represent a fact. But a photograph can also represent a truth that transcends fact." He goes on to argue that relying on the photograph simply as fact, "denies all of us the tremendous potential still ahead" (2001, 380).

The questioning of representation versus reality also takes place with the medium of film. Aitken and Zonn argue that the ability of film "to sustain meaning is its greatest measure of success." Yet, the "reel" world of film is "a matter of representation. [...] The camera does not mirror reality but creates it, endowing it with meaning, discourse, and ideology. And this endowment can and should be contested." They continue that if we agree with this position, then both geographers and film theorists should be coming together to address common concerns revolving around "presenting and *re*-presenting the dynamic context of lived experience." It is their belief that "lived experience is a coalescence of *re*-presentations anchored in media images on the one side and our places and practices on the other" (Aitken 1994, 15-21).

A second area of discussion regarding mediated images is what is being portrayed. Régis Durand, like Goin, argues that photographs can transcend mere representation and create a feeling in the viewer that is greater than simply the pleasure or information to be gained from looking at a two-dimensional image. "In some photographs attention moves from the thing represented to an awareness of texture, say the grain of the skin or the weave of foliage as they become identified with the photographic texture itself." He argues that, "it is a real event, a moment of purely visual thought that takes place – as we shift from a regime of pure opticality to the optical-tactile." Just how such a rich experience takes place, of course, "remains to be studied in detail" (1995, 150-51).

In "A Mapping of Cinematic Places" Jeff Hopkins believes that geographers should leave the study of film for its aesthetic beauty and means of technical and artistic production to others. "Like conventional film theorists, we are concerned with the construction and narrative film and the portrayal on screen of spaces, places, people,

power, mores, and values, but only as a means of understanding the geographical experiences of film and the possible ramifications for the geography beyond the theater” (Hopkins 1994, 60-61).

Zonn’s third area of discussion, which is receiving more and more attention but finding little agreement, is the way audiences perceive and create meaning from images. This lack of consensus is caused in part because, as Mitchell Stephens states in *the rise of the image the fall of the word* (1998), “although moving images are gaining responsibility for more and more of our communication, this is a suggestion most of us have great difficulty accepting (5). However, Stephens believes that rather than fearing the image as a lesser form of communication that will displace writing, we should look at images, especially moving images, as a way to significantly add to the power of writing, just as writing once added power to the spoken word. “All our enlightenments are not behind us. We are beginning again, and in this new beginning is the moving image” (1998, 230).

Robert D. Sack uses a geographical framework to explore how places created by and for mass consumption – which includes mass communication and television – are “fundamental to our making sense of the modern world” (1992,1). From that perspective, he also acknowledges a concern about the effect of the overwhelming number of images we consume each day through mass media. “As technologies have changed and mass production of images has proliferated, people everywhere began to see and think differently. There began to be more commonality of thought, especially among the masses,” but he argues, perhaps optimistically, that we may not be giving viewers enough credit. “The power of the media to homogenize experience is important, but this power can be countered by other tendencies. For example, viewers maybe active and critical in their reception of television and may see through the media, so that what is televised is not necessarily accepted as a picture of reality (Sack 1992, 100). The debate regarding the ability of viewers to be knowledgeable consumers of information is, and will continue to be, one of the most studied and explored issues concerning mediated images.



*Digital TV
LoRes HDTV by ATCS
Recording Technology History
1999 Steven Schoenherr*

This concern about how the masses perceive and create meaning from images can also apply to the perceptions of scholars and the images they use and analyze in their research. Gillian Rose discovered the significance of “the relationship between the image and the researcher” after looking back on her experiences researching a group of Victorian photographs that had long fascinated her. She was surprised to find that she drew different conclusions from the images when she viewed them as they were presented in the archives at the Victoria and Albert Museum’s Print Room than she did when she viewed the prints in her study at home. “The visual qualities of those photographs were inflected by those different practices,” in that she felt a deep connection with the photographs when she viewed them in her study, yet felt removed, almost confrontational with them in the strict, disciplined environment of the archives. She argues that photographs contain particular visual and spatial forms or organization, and these attributes “can be allied, more or less strongly, with the particular parts of the complex network of interpretations in which photographs are placed.” Rose points out that we must be alert not only to the establishment of meaning for photographs through their uses, but also through “the relationships between the photograph and the historical geographer,” (2000, 255-271) or by extension, indeed anyone who is analyzing and interpreting the image.

The fourth consideration in exploring mediated images is the individual or collection of individuals who create the image. More and more scholars are beginning to see the possibilities in embracing visual portrayals of information in their own research. In *Picturing Culture* (2000), anthropologist Jay Ruby has a “fantasy” about a body of cinematic work produced “solely by anthropologists, who use the medium to convey the results of their ethnographic studies and technological knowledge.” In his dream, their works range from “general-audience films produced for television as well as highly sophisticated works designed for professionals.” A low-cost distribution system has been established, and “videotapes/CD-ROMs/DVDs are as common as books in the libraries of anthropologists, and the Internet and the World Wide Web occupy a place of some prominence as anthropological resources” (Ruby 2000, 1-2). While Ruby admits this is a long way from reality, he also offers concrete suggestions on how anthropologists can begin to use film to produce new ways of disseminating knowledge about cultures. These suggestions can also apply to other scholars who want

to take part not only in understanding visual culture, but in using it to communicate new information and understanding to others.

In our everyday lives, James Lull argues that the convergence of today's new media technologies – characterized by hardware and software integration, miniaturization, interactivity, user-friendliness, commercialization, and relative affordability – is transforming the very nature of contemporary communication and culture by extending the power to create images to the ordinary person, not just specialized experts or large media institutions. "The person himself or herself is now a 'cultural programmer' rather than just a 'cultural member', 'audience member', or 'consumer'" (Lull 2001, 135-36). Thus, in today's modern world the lines between Zonn's distinctions are blurring, as new technologies give the masses not only the ability to view images created by others, but also the power to become the creators and producers themselves.

LIVING AND LEARNING IN A VISUAL WORLD

Embracing and exploring our changing world

Contemporary visual culture –
the combined product of 'the media'
and a variety of other spheres of image production –
can no longer be seen as simply 'reflecting' or 'communicating'
the world in which we live:
it contributes to the making of this world.

Victor Burgin

In/Different Spaces: Place and Memory in Visual Culture (1996, 21-22)

Change is constant. I'm reminded of this every day. In a recent issue of *TV Guide*, a headline reads, "Point, click and pass the popcorn: Will online movies replace the video store down the block?" The story is aimed at those of us who can't find anything to watch on the hundreds of channels on cable and satellite disks at our disposal – and who don't want to run to the video store down the street to rent a DVD.



www.movieflix.com

Now we can order up movies simply by signing onto the Internet on our computer in the convenience of our own homes where we can select and download videos ranging from new releases to adult videos to “a 1954 commercial starring Bozo the Clown.” The article reminds us that many computers can now be hooked up to our TV, allowing us to watch our movies on a bigger screen. There’s yet another choice for “those looking for a little video snack – a brief office break, say – to check out the sites specializing in short films” while we work (Meyers, 2003). And who knows what new visual alternative might be available next week?

And so, there is no doubt about it. We now live in a visual world, made up of different forms of images or things that we see, ranging from natural places and objects in our environment that we observe first-hand, to mediated images that can include television to movies to digital photographs and many things in between. And if, as Karen Stanworth notes, “visual culture is implicated in the formation of a social identity,” then this is an important argument for “paying attention to the visual quality of our lives” (2002).

In the last few decades, scholars from a wide variety of disciplines and perspectives have taken notice and begun to explore the implications and ramifications of how visual messages affect how we live and learn and create meaning to our world – past and present, near and far, familiar and unfamiliar. Yet, coming to any kind of agreement or understanding on how or what we should pay attention to is a difficult task in and of itself. As Aitken and Zonn note in the preface to the essays they gathered for *Power, Place, and Spectacle: A Geography of Film* (1994), “though sharing a general sympathy for the need to coalesce the categories of people, place, space, and society on the one hand, and reality and representation on the other, the essayists frequently disagree on how this can be accomplished or what the outcome may be” (ix-x).

The quest to understand our visual culture is only beginning. Yet it is by embracing our visual culture and exploring how to approach and understand it that we will be better able to make sense of our increasingly visual world. As Lester argues: “When words and images have equal status within all media of communication, the cultural cues that define a society will not only be more efficiently passed from one generation to another, but within this generation, here and now, diverse cultures will be able to understand each other a little better” (1994-96). We can at least hope that this is not only possible, but that one day it will be achieved.

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12 December 2003

GEOG 598A: Special Topics
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