

SUSAN BUCK-MORSS

The production of a discourse of visual culture entails the liquidation of art as we have known it. There is no way within such a discourse for art to sustain a separate existence, not as a practice, not as a phenomenon, not as an experience, not as a discipline. Museums would then need to become double encasings, preserving art objects, and preserving the art-idea. Art history departments would be moved in with archaeology. And what of “artists”? In the recently expired socialist societies, they printed up calling cards with their profession listed confidently after their name and phone number. In recently restructured capitalist societies, they became caught in a dialectical cul-de-sac, attempting to rescue the autonomy of art as a reflective, critical practice by attacking the museum, the very institution that sustains the illusion that art exists. Artists as a social class demand sponsors: the state, private patrons, corporations. Their products enter the market through a dealer-critic system that manipulates value and is mediated by galleries, museums, and private collections. Tomorrow’s artists may opt to go underground, much like freemasons of the eighteenth century. They may choose to do their work esoterically, while employed as producers of visual culture.

Their work is to sustain the critical moment of aesthetic experience. Our work as critics is to recognize it. Can this be done best, or done at all,

within a new interdisciplinary field of visual studies? What would be the *episteme*, or theoretical frame, of such a field? Twice at Cornell over the past decade we have had meetings to discuss the creation of a visual studies program. Both times, it was painfully clear that institutionalization cannot by itself produce such a frame, and the discussions—among a disparate group of art historians, anthropologists, computer designers, social historians, and scholars of cinema, literature, and architecture—did not coalesce into a program. Still, visual culture has become a presence on campus. It has worked its way into many of the traditional disciplines and lives there in suspended isolation, encapsulated within theoretical bubbles. The psychoanalytic bubble is the biggest, but there are others. One could list a common set of readings, a canon of texts by Barthes, Benjamin, Foucault, Lacan, as well as a pre-canon of texts by a long list of contemporary writers. Certain themes are standard: the reproduction of the image, the society of the spectacle, envisioning the Other, scopopic regimes, the simulacrum, the fetish, the (male) gaze, the machine eye. Today the phrase “visual studies” calls up 202 entries in a keyword search at the Cornell University Libraries. There is a media library, a cinema program, an art museum, a theater arts center, two slide libraries, and a half dozen possessively guarded, department-owned videocassette players. If the theoretical bubbles burst, there remains this infrastructure of technological reproduction. Visual culture, once a foreigner to the academy,

has gotten its green card and is here to stay.

Silent movies at the beginning of the century initiated the utopian idea of a universal language of images, one that could glide over political and ethnic borders, and set to right the Tower of Babel. Action films and MTV at the end of the century have realized this idea in secularized, instrumentalized form, producing subjects for the next stage of global capitalism. In this way, visual culture becomes the concern of the social sciences. "Images in the mind motivate the will," wrote Benjamin, alluding to the political power of images claimed by Surrealism. But his words could provide the motto as well for the advertising industry, product sponsoring, and political campaigning, whereas today the freedom of expression of artists is defended on formal grounds that stress the virtuality of the representation. The images of art, it is argued, have no effect in the realm of deeds.

A critical analysis of the image as a social object is needed more urgently than a program that legitimates its "culture." We need to be able to read images emblematically and symptomatically, in terms of the most fundamental questions of social life. This means that critical theories are needed, theories that are themselves visual, that show rather than argue. Such conceptual constellations convince by their power to illuminate the world, bringing to consciousness what was before only dimly perceived, so that it becomes available for critical reflection. I do

not understand the description of "anthropological" models and "socio-historical" models as antithetical poles of this theoretical project. Any interpretation worth its salt demands both. It needs to provide a socio-historical and biographical story of origins that estranges the object from us and shows us that its truth is not immediately accessible (the object's prehistory), and a story of deferred action (its afterhistory) that comes to terms with the potency of the object within our own horizon of concerns.

While the Internet is the topic and the medium for new courses in digital culture, it is striking to anyone who has visited the Internet how visually impoverished a home-page can be. Cyberdigits reproduce the moving image haltingly, and the static image unimpressively. The possibility of computer screens replacing television screens may mean a great deal to stockholders of telephone companies, but it will not shake the world of the visual image. Aesthetic experience (sensory experience) is not reducible to information. Is it old-fashioned to say so? Perhaps the era of images that are more than information is already behind us. Perhaps discussions about visual culture as a field have come too late. It is with nostalgia that we boycott the videostore and insist upon seeing movies on the big screen.

The producers of the visual culture of tomorrow are the camera-women, video/film editors, city planners, set designers for rock stars, tourism packagers, marketing consultants, political consultants, television

producers, commodity designers, layout persons, and cosmetic surgeons. They are the students who sit in our classes today. What is it they need to know? What will be gained, and by whom, in offering them a program in visual studies?

Government,
Cornell University

TOM CONLEY

What you have assembled is cause for both laughter and alarm. I shall try to explain why by moving from point three to points two, one, and four, respectively.

Alarm. The notion that visual culture is based on disembodied images is fraudulent. Images are by definition riddled and stippled with language. Images cannot be disembodied, even if they deny the presence of the languages inhering in them. Without those languages they would fail to be images. Everything we know about *dialogue* and *dialogism*, concepts vital to communication, psychogenesis, subjectivity, literature, poetry, and the apprehension of expression in general, depends on the immiscible qualities of image and language. The two are different and exclusive but constitutive of one another. To say, then, that visual studies is producing “subjects for the next stage of globalized capital” is ludicrous. By adhering to the miscibility of image and language we tend to fracture the unity of meaning—a result of the valorization of the one to the detriment the other—that ideology purveys. When we see that language is the welcome *other* in visual culture, we have at our behest a modest but effective, tactical means of challenging strategies aimed at the globalization of capital.

If, then, we build visual culture on the models of the generation of Riegl and Warburg, we must realize that the *return* is fraught with a logic