

Visuality/Materiality

Images, Objects and Practices

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Chapter 1
Visuality/Materiality:
Introducing a Manifesto for Practice

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Amongst the various calls for theoretical re-orientations within the social sciences and humanities over the last twenty years, there has been an increased interest in the visual and material, evidenced by many new handbooks of visual culture (Heywood and Sandywell, 2011; Leewen and Jewett, 2001; Mirzeoff, 1998; 1999; Carson and Pajaczkowska, 2000), visual anthropology (Appadurai, 1988; Pink, 2005; 2006), methodology (Rose, 2001) and of material culture (Buchli, 2002; 2004; Hicks and Beaudry, 2010; Pink, 2004; Tilley, 2006), guides to visual methodologies and journals devoted to the visual or to the material. The aim of this contributed volume is to do something rarely done in these by-now substantial bodies of work, which is to attend to the relationships *between* the 'visual' and 'material', and to explore what kinds of new thinking might emerge in that intersection. The collection attempts to stage a respectful engagement with accounts of both the material and the visual, as they have emerged across a range of disciplines.

'Visual culture' (see Dovitskaya, 2005; Rogoff, 2001; Smith, 2005; 2008) has rapidly emerged as a privileged term for exploring 'the visual'. As a field of study, 'visual culture' responds to the myriad of shifts in visual media and its grammars. Included in the foundational lexicon of 'visual culture' are engagements with theories of Marxism, feminism, postcolonialism, identity and race, and 'visual culture' has a continuing relation to cultural studies in intellectual framing, texture and forms (compared with the Western imperial foundations of art history). This collection collates visual culture research that is reflexive about its theories, technologies and practices, and about its position as a realm of intellectual study that has experienced a set of refiguring, renewals and reincarnations such that cultural studies is no longer its only reference point. The politics of *visual culture* are enlivened further in this collection by including a focus on how researchers engage with *theory in practice*. In editing this volume we have privileged papers which delve into research as an attempt to account for the embodied politics present in the everyday material world. It is at this nexus that emergent visualities are enabling political revolutions, the 'war on terror' and fuelling the everyday geopolitical economics of cities, identities, histories, everyday and socialities. Through practical technologies there is a continuing mobilisation of communicative aesthetics which refigure our encounters with space, form, time,

grammars of meaning and their habitual interpretation. The material turn for du Preez's (2008) account of art argues for a careful attendance to the stuff of art rather than a 'rhetorical deployment' of materiality (see Kearnes, 2003), which needs to be combined with a commitment to look (Bal, 2005).

The material 'turn', meanwhile, has been more about a *re*-turn; for some materialists at least, it is partly a response to a feared negation of materialities and those things that matter. Another part of this return has been a move towards restoring an alternative philosophical legacy to a denuded account of cultural materialism (Anderson and Wylie, 2009). These calls for a return embody a fear of an ephemeral account of culture and society, and a hope that 're-materialising' would reaffirm a formal politics of *materialism* (Jackson, 1989; Whatmore, 2006; Cook and Tolia-Kelly, 2010), rather than an *idealism* underpinning elements of the 'cultural' turn with its focus on language, text and poststructural accounts of postmodernism. These calls for materialism also respond to accounts of culture in society which were seen to be without connection to economy, society, situated bodies and the material infrastructures of societies' politics, inequalities and ideologies. Within the bounds of these material turns, however, the speculative, temporal, spatial and, above all, *visual* processes of becoming, enchantments and vibrancy (Bennett, 2001; 2010), hauntings (Stewart, 2007; Edensor, 2008) or indeed 'against' materiality (Ingold, 2007), and are all at the margins of what is seen to be core to the work of social science.

Neither turns have thus taken seriously the need for research on materiality that requires an understanding of the co-constitution of visuality and materiality. *Visuality/Materiality* emerges in this context as a collection which promotes the dialogues made possible in a space where these two modes of enquiry in their research are coconstructed. The scholarship represented here is reflecting research conducted in response to the call to *re-materialise*; but it also reflects 'more than representational' (Lorimer, 2005) research sites and practices where the cultures of the visual have exceeded the narrow, pedestrian promises of *matter* (see Coole and Frost, 2010; Barad, 2007).

Simultaneous with these theoretical debates, there has been a gravitational pull towards the visual, entailing a collective shift in praxis across the social sciences. In the realm of 'doing' research, text has become materially and visually framed, such that the contextualisation of visual forms as well as an urgent need to create the tools for the analysis of new media have become priorities. In the process of writing on art itself the text of academic practice has an embodied politics (see Hawkins, 2010). New modes of theorising the visual in anthropology (Pinney, 1998; 2011) and visual-historical anthropology (Edwards, 2001), as well as new visual elements of governance and security (Amoore, 2007), have enabled a congregation of political engagements and practice within the realms of visual culture. Reflected in this collection are these very creative cultures of thinking the 'visual' and 'material' which drive the scholars in this collection in the diverse realms of intellectual work in the disciplines of art history, anthropology, visual culture, geography, sociology, cultural studies, architecture and cultural geography.

In the contemporary research fields of visual culture and material culture there is a strong veer away from a 'pure culturalism' (Hicks, 2010, p 2). The senses, memory, body and history are part of the analytical process; as Buck-Morss (2002) argues, 'one needs all of one's senses to do justice to material reality' (p 328).

The aims of this collection are thus threefold: to theorise the interrelationship of materiality and visuality; to offer a series of empirical explorations of that interrelationship, which pay particular attention to research praxis; and to address questions of ethics in relation to difference, identity and power. The chapters were all presented at the *Visuality/Materiality* conference held in July 2009 in London. The *Visuality/Materiality* approach is evidenced here through research practices which are actively modest, contingent and partial, having at their heart political integrity and innovation. This is research as *practices* (and methodologies) which remember that the politics of *doing* the visual are as material as matter is visual and that both are engaged beyond the ocular.

Privileging Practice

This collection privileges how visual and material concerns are attended to in contemporary research through a focus on practice. Practice is what humans do with things. Some of the effects of some of those doings is to make things visible in specific ways, or not, and this approach thus draws attention to the co-constitution of humans subjectivities and the visual objects their practices create. This is somewhat different from enquiries based on looking, seeing, analysing and writing text; instead, it considers the (geo)politics of embodied, material encounter and engagement. This is a configuration of the practice of the visual and material in research that unravels, disturbs and connects with *processes*, *embodied practices* and *technologies*. Practice, processes and technologies are acknowledged as enabling intellectual enquiry to adhere to a path that is more-than theoretical, and more-than-representational (Lorimer, 2003), thus putting approaches to the *non-representational* beyond *pure theory*, and the processes of *representation* beyond *pure culturalism* as an analysis of the purely visual or material basis of text.

Here, we map this approach as an identifiable intellectual site that some researchers have been traversing and inhabiting for some time. The collection invites a recognition of this site of practice and process, which sits beyond disciplinary boundaries and their constraints. *Visuality/Materiality* is an emergent orientation of research practice that is inevitably critical and constantly reflexive of the power play between representation, text, practice and technologies of production, display and performance. The legacy of materialism within cultural theory is extended, enlivened and made meaningful through an approach that recognises a world of more-than signification through text, narrative, line and object. At the heart of the collection is an attentiveness to a reconceptualisation of the visual (through theory, method and practice), as an embodied, material, and often politically-charged realm. The critical argument at its heart is that the

'visual' and the 'material' should be understood as in continual dialogue and co-constitution. This co-constitution is also advocated and recognised here as being shaped through politics and in turn shapes politics at various scales. Thus there is no visual/material site of ideas, performance, phenomenon and practice which is secured away from the often violent, dirty, messy matters of surveillance, governance, money, rights and bodies. Yet what continues to happen, except usually in rather isolated pockets of anthropological research, is that visualities and materialities are considered separately. This collection argues that these fundamental approaches to cultural practices can be understood by prioritising the analytical context of human practices. What people do with the affordances of particular objects is, in part, to co-produce visualities.

The Cultural Logics of Sights and Things

The approach of the researchers in this collection is not concerned with applying the usual cultural logics in order to determine the meaning of objects and texts of visual culture. Instead of interpretation and meaning, treating visual and material as co-constituted has produced, for our contributors, a greater interest in matters of mediation, ethics, consumption, practice and translation. What has emerged as primary in the chapters are clusters of thinking and practice around the themes and questions of 'how things are made visible', 'which things are made visible' and, as a particularly explicit focus in three chapters, 'the politics of visible objects'. These are deliberately different from modes of thinking in visual culture that are about being critical, or having a 'good eye' (Rose, 2011), where the researcher looks at a text, separate from it, distinguishing it from others and being involved in a process of judgement (Frosh, this volume). Embedded in the *Visuality/Materiality* approach here is a concern with a situated eye, an attunement to the collective, multiple and embodied textures, sensibilities and productive meanings of the visual through the material, and vice versa. The focus is on questions of effect, histories, and ethics of engagement, interpretation, practice and process, which often fracture or displace the familiar fields of genre, media, audiencing and production. We can describe this as a concern with *ecologies of the visual*; where the co-constitution of visuality and materiality is in constant dynamic process and situated within networks, hierarchies and discourses of power.

Making things visible is just one of the effects of a practice approach to the co-constitution of visuality and materiality: of not thinking 'visuality' as simply observation, nor considering the 'material' purely as 'solid matter'. The question of *what* is made visible are critical to analysing using this approach. One example of a foundational model for visual analysis and one approach that has informed our expansion from visual materialism per se has been *iconography*. Iconography (in relationship to the cultural landscape) has been a framework of reading visual representations whilst privileging matters of politics and economy (Cosgrove, Daniels); it has sought to collapse the notion of representation as 'truth', but

it is also a mode of inquiry which denaturalises the signification of aesthetics, grammars and icons within a frame. Lorimer (citing Wylie) terms iconography as a 'less deceitful veil to be pieced 'vertically' (in order to uncover power structures), than a complex texture to be searched horizontally' (della Dora *et al.*, 2011 p 4). The *Visuality/Materiality* approach advocated here is about claiming collective possibilities as well as embodied and phenomenological, whilst decentring the capturing, objectifying eye. This is where the visual is an embodied process of situation, positioning (Hall, 1990), re-memory (Morrison, 1990; Tolia-Kelly, 2004), encounter, cognition and interpretation. The *materiality* within our approach does not assume solidity of object and fixity of meaning (e.g. Dant, 1998), but incorporates the poetics of rhythms, forms, textures and the value of memory-matter engagement. Matter can be temporally and spatially unfixed, so that not only can the proverbial Proustian madeleines be evoked through the scent, touch (e.g. Brown *et al.*, 2011) sound and aesthetics of materials, but the sensory affordances of materials can also incorporate a pluralistic account of reactions and interpretations that link to *histories, memories and ecologies of seeing*, feeling and perceiving.

How Things are Made Visible

In this volume, Sheller, Jackson and Crang all locate the processes, practices and technologies that make certain things visible. These authors explore the naturalised *visibility* of materialities and tear away the seeming integrity of discourses, narratives and visualities which solidify our cultural logics of valuing and affixing meaning to their subjects. They differently subvert what is usually recognised, understood and seen within particular logics of modernity and enrich accounts of materials such as aluminium, ships and mass commodities. Sheller eloquently argues for understanding aluminium and its technologies through a 'visual semiotics for the technologically sublime'. Aluminium simultaneously is at the heart of capitalist 'dreams of de-materialisation' at the same time as being reliant on being mobilised for 'increased earthly destructions' (through military use) and resulting increased toxicity of land, peoples and oceans. Driving Sheller's account is a politics of materiality that is being shaped and economically consolidated in the late twentieth century in the forms and process of 'cybernetic economies running on semiotic superhighways' (Lash and Urry, 1994 cited in Sheller). The geopolitics of aluminium design, production, advertising and affective experience are unravelled by Sheller to expose mythologies through illustrating occluded histories, visualities and materialities of inequality, ecological degradation and neo-Imperial ecologies of seeing and governance.

Jackson's chapter takes Yiwu, China as a preeminent site where he unravels for us 'the architectures of the visible', in this city which is emblematic of China's nation building programme. Yiwu is a site of production of both aspirations of world and materials to assist us in the world, to practice the lifestyles of late

capitalist modernity. Yiwu's contribution to aspirational politics are driven by the visualised futures of material living through the constellation of commodity opportunities and economy it innovates. Yiwu, in Jackson's account, is revealed as a critically important hub for firstly the production of the materialities of our global everyday consumption modes; the materialities of UNHCR, Disaster Aid, Wal-Mart, and Tesco. And secondly, Jackson (informed by Barad) illustrates how Yiwu 'the Commodity City' creates a material/visual commodity field through its conglomeration of city shops, exhibition centres, markets, outlets, advertising hoardings, economy, industry, and its ideological position in China's economy, 'an urban catalyst for aspirant narratives and their representation'. By tracing Yiwu's materialities from an atomic to a global scale we see how Yiwu inhabits a situation of being a 'contemporary cultural economy of consumption' which incorporates local grammars, and is powered and actively drives visualisations of ideologically driven notions of international consumption and identities that feature in our own locales visually and materially. Flowing, making mobile and empowering the transitions of ideological into material cities 'other' to Yiwu is the figure of the normally occluded shipping container, made visible in this account.

Crang starts by thinking fluidity in steel, and looks to philosophers Jane Bennett and Michael Serres for a departure point for thinking shipbuilding, steel and the materialities of living modernity through mobility rather than fixity; a vision of metal that is both material and creative. Ships are positioned at the heart of a notion of negative becoming; fluid, material, envisioned as torn from the usual discourses of bounded, fixed and solid to thinking about their 'breaking' as 'a negative becoming, or a sense of productivity that includes failure, disassembly and destruction'. The processes, practices of seeing these dynamic hulks of the sea is disturbed and refigured in Crang's account. The atomisation of metal is visualised as the source of becoming other both conceptually and materially here, presenting and making visible, a poetic account of routes of material that are not privileged in a notion of commodity, economies of the sea or indeed of steel. Crang pursues the question through photography and considers 'how does photography reveal, indeed reveal, in the transience it finds in this obdurate material through the grammar of the still image?' The matters of seeing and touching process through visual technologies and text fold into each other here to produce a *Visuality/Materiality* field that is more-than representational, but which is tuned into the economies of enchantment and profit.

Practices of Looking

Yglesias, Jacobs *et al.* and Tsouvalis *et al.* explore specific practices of *looking* at and with material objects, and explore the consequent seeing, envisioning and registering. Yglesias suggests training the visual imagination to enhance the material process of drawing, of communicating the mind's eye. Balancing the affective and pragmatic tools of practitioners is unravelled through her account of

the role of creative and material practices, as they are intertwined in architectural work. Yglesias argues that 'seeing is more than an optical operation; understanding what is seen is a thoughtful activity', acknowledging this enables us to witness the process through which designers can 'create places of enriched experience' in two dimensional drawings. A particular attentiveness is needed, a phenomenological attunement to the practice of looking prior to drawing: feeling, experience and affective registers are thus translated onto the page. The aim for the author is to promote a notion of visual practice which engages with the matters of artistic intuition, situation, experience and the *doing* of drawing which results 'in a more truthful and sound manner' of technique.

Tsouvalis *et al.* also strive for a depth of seeing and a practice of seeing informed by multiple modes of seeing the English lake of Loweswater. Various practices of looking and seeing this site are presented in dialogue. Echo-sounding as a form of seeing through a hydro acoustic scientific survey is laid alongside the material visualisations and ethics of seeing that are promoted by locals and environmentalists. Rendering the algae of the lake as visible for the authors is an opportunity to do 'politics with things' (Latour, 2004). Based on the philosophies of material intra-action (Barad, 2007) the lake, and envisioning algae becomes a political setting with practical, ethical and political contingencies.

Jacobs *et al.* drive forward research on urban materialities (Latham and McCormack, 2004), by taking seriously the concept of assemblage and exposing the rich relationship between visualities and materialities. Their chapter sees the high-rise residential development Red Road not simply as an object of visualisation, but also as a technology that supports and depends upon what Cosgrove called 'vision in the sense of active seeing'. The sites of active seeing are the windows of Red Road. The window is a complex assemblage of things (material and immaterial); design specifications, material components (glass, jambs, frames), building and safety regulations, mechanisms such as hinges and locks, and decorative artefacts such as curtains. In unison with human users it becomes a purposeful aperture between the interior and exterior of a building: letting in light, ventilating, offering views (both out and in), as well as metaphysical opportunities. It also offers other, un-programmed opportunities: an opening to jump from or through which to throw rubbish. The chapter links the windows of Red Road and the viewing practices they afford and live alongside to visualities of other orders (avant garde architectural visions, urban visions, the visualisations of housing and building science, electronic surveillance, the glance).

The Ethics of Envisionings

Three further chapters focus in particular on examples of more intense power relations that can be articulated through specific enactments of visuality (see Poole, 1997) and materiality. Wells builds on previous work (2007) and presents a collage of practice which calls for a public recognition of what is seen, hidden allowed

to be commemorated and the politics of public memory. Grammars of class, race, geopolitics of governance are all encompassed in her chapter which thickly describes the visceral outcomes of exclusion of certain visualities which become remainder, or marginal to others. The historical foundations of the body-politic of nation are at the heart of Puwar's account. Puwar takes the methodology of doing *visuality/materiality* further through the grammars of her own text. Expressing the limitations visually and materially of writing when dealing with the affective and body-politics of the everyday city, her writing exposes the positioning through which the city is revealed a counter-lens. Both Puwar and Wells urge us to witness, to reflect and *feel* the cityscape, so often images, represented and utilised in particular ideological accounts of history, memory and commemoration. Wells argues that seeing is a political practice of historical consciousness. Viewing, seeing and encountering sights are for Wells, require an embodied ethics of practice where a necessary logic of experiencing place requires an attunement to the sedimented history of a place. Everyday seeing, remembering and living is about an ethics of practice: the inclusion and occlusion of the histories of 'others' becomes then a collective responsibility for those traversing, seeing, viewing and situating themselves in place. Looking is a responsibility; a visceral, ethical and historically conscious practice.

Frosh (this volume) explores potential consequences of the mode of *inattentiveness*: how things that are visual are subject to routinised, inattention and distraction. This immediately challenges conventional accounts of interpretive approaches to the ethics of looking, seeing, and meanings texts, which assume a high degree of attention directed at images in order to look at them differently. Frosh comments on the ethics of a contemporary culture of the visual where seeing and looking are partial where a reciprocity between the transmission of images such as television and reception of the audience is not in synthesis. The social practices of inattention, where images become the background or 'wallpaper' to our everyday lives, becomes for Frosh a political problematic which he terms 'civic inattention'. The production of images of the material world is continually exposed to a lack of concern, care and subjugation to the 'eye'; no longer arresting, grasping or indeed holding or moving our attention. While this account of the collapsing of visuality through the practices of watching television risks rendering any political imperative to respond to 'war', 'terror', 'genocide', 'poverty' impotent. Frosh argues that it may also harbour the potential for a tolerant indifference towards difference.

Concluding Remarks

The nine chapters in this collection are all grounded in detailed empirical work, attentive to what is done in the world between people and objects. Those doings are of course extraordinarily diverse. From highly contested visualisations of the Caribbean to a visuality saturating the commodities in a Chinese exhibition hall;

from glances at and through a window to built and painted shrines and memorials; from the affordances of echo-sounded images to photographic images; from what might happen when an object is carefully drawn to what might happen when a television is inattentively watched; our contributors will take you to all these sites and the practices that take place there. They are all also highly attentive to the consequences of those practices. In those specific practices, what is made visible? (And what is rendered invisible?) How is it made visible, exactly – what technologies are used, and how, and what are the specific qualities of the visual objects thus enacted? And what are the effects of those visualised materialities and materialised visualities, particularly for the people caught up in those practices, as researchers, and as those researched? For while this introduction has offered a conceptual framework for approaching material and visual cultures, we would like to end our contribution to this collection by affirming the need for many more investigations of this kind: empirical, nuanced, alert. For it is only through such engagements with visual and material culture that we stand a chance of understanding just how contemporary culture is once again reshaping and reforming itself.

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