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Abstract

As an organized subarea of academic communication scholarship, the study of visual communication is relatively new. For instance, at this writing, visual communication has not yet attained regular division status in either the International Communication Association or the National Communication Association. However, interest in visual issues appears to be growing among communication scholars, and the two books under review are part of a rapidly expanding literature (e.g., Barnard, 2001; Emmison & Smith, 2000; Evans & Hall, 1999; Helfand, 2001; Howells, 2002; Mirzoeff, 1999; Prosser, 1998; Rose, 2001; Thomas, 2000). As it seeks to differentiate itself from other scholarly areas with similar purviews (such as mass communication or cultural studies), the study of visual communication is increasingly confronted with two major issues. First, on a theoretical level, visually oriented scholars need to develop a sharper understanding of the distinctions among the major modes of communication (image, word, music, body display, etc.) and a clearer appreciation of the specific role that each plays in social processes. Second, on the research front, there is a need for more sophisticated ways of exploring visual meanings and investigating viewers' responses to images. Taken together, the two books reviewed here touch upon both of these features of visual scholarship and make productive contributions with respect to each of them.

Disciplines

Communication | Social and Behavioral Sciences

Visual Communication: Theory and Research

A review essay by Paul Messaris, *University of Pennsylvania*

Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture by Marita Sturken & Lisa Cartwright. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. 400 pp. \$32.95 (soft).

Handbook of Visual Analysis edited by Theo Van Leeuwen & Carey Jewitt. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2001. 210 pp. \$91.95 (hard), \$34.95 (soft).

As an organized subarea of academic communication scholarship, the study of visual communication is relatively new. For instance, at this writing, visual communication has not yet attained regular division status in either the International Communication Association or the National Communication Association. However, interest in visual issues appears to be growing among communication scholars, and the two books under review are part of a rapidly expanding literature (e.g., Barnard, 2001; Emmison & Smith, 2000; Evans & Hall, 1999; Helfand, 2001; Howells, 2002; Mirzoeff, 1999; Prosser, 1998; Rose, 2001; Thomas, 2000). As it seeks to differentiate itself from other scholarly areas with similar purviews (such as mass communication or cultural studies), the study of visual communication is increasingly confronted with two major issues. First, on a theoretical level, visually oriented scholars need to develop a sharper understanding of the distinctions among the major modes of communication (image, word, music, body display, etc.) and a clearer appreciation of the specific role that each plays in social processes. Second, on the research front, there is a need for more sophisticated ways of exploring visual meanings and investigating viewers' responses to images. Taken together, the two books reviewed here touch upon both of these features of visual scholarship and make productive contributions with respect to each of them.

Sturken and Cartwright's discussion of visual culture is a broad survey of theoretical approaches to the study of images and the social contexts in which images play a part. The authors examine the role of visual media in politics, the public sphere, and the workings of ideology; in consumer culture, popular culture, and global culture; in science, art, and commerce. Each of the book's many topics is accompanied by a wide-ranging review of relevant theories and scholarly perspectives. In addition to covering the work of writers who have dealt directly with visual issues, the authors provide a more extensive overview of general theories of culture and society. For example, in connection with the ideological aspects of images, they spend several pages reviewing Marx, Althusser, and Gramsci before proceeding to an examination of more visually oriented subjects (pp. 50-54). In fact, this book could readily serve as a general introduction to cultural studies.

Though Sturken and Cartwright stress the multiplicity of theoretical angles from which images can be approached, one theme that emerges repeatedly in their work is that of the constructed or conventional nature of images. In discussing photography, for example, they are careful to distance themselves from any notion that photographic technology provides a more objective record of reality than other kinds of representations. In their account, faith in photographic objectivity is a relic of 19th-century positivism, according to which "the photographic camera was held to be a scientific tool for registering reality" (p. 17). The authors also challenge traditional notions of realism in nonphotographic images such as paintings or drawings. They

argue that Renaissance perspective appears realistic to us only because it is the dominant representational style in Western image making (pp. 113-114). In their view, "It is a convention that makes images that use perspective seem like reality" (p. 114). What emerges from these arguments is a theoretical conception of visual images as a medium whose apparent reality or truthfulness rests on a foundation of purely, or largely, arbitrary conventions. Such a conception of visual communication has important theoretical consequences because it highlights the arbitrary and potentially even illusory character of cultural processes in which images play a part. For example, in discussing the relationship between images and ideology, Sturken and Cartwright emphasize that ideology entails "naturalization" of the arbitrary: "The most important part of ideologies is that they appear to be natural or given, rather than part of a system of belief that a culture produces in order to function in a particular way" (pp. 21-22).

Because of its contribution to the unraveling of cultural constructions, this insistence on the arbitrariness of standards of pictorial objectivity and realism is a common feature of contemporary visual scholarship. Nonetheless, we should not take for granted that the basic premises of this approach are entirely correct. First of all, it is questionable whether the general public has ever been as trusting of photographic truth as academic scholars sometimes assume. Photographic historian Vicki Goldberg (1991, p. 24) has pointed out that, even as far back as the 1860s, the use of photographic evidence in a famous post-Civil War trial had to be accompanied by expert testimony to reassure the jurors that the pictures were fair representations of the events portrayed in them. As Sturken and Cartwright themselves point out (p. 20), any feelings of trust that the public may have had in photographs is likely to have eroded considerably since the advent of large-scale, and widely publicized, digital manipulation. It may be, then, that those of us who study visual communication professionally are somewhat self-deluded about the extent to which the general public needs our guidance in order to be able to see through images.

What is more problematic is Sturken and Cartwright's embrace of the idea that photographic truthfulness or realism are mere conventions. In the case of Renaissance perspective, this belief in arbitrariness has a long intellectual pedigree, extending as far back as the 1920s, when the prominent art historian Panofsky, impressed by the many inevitable discrepancies between perspectival pictures and reality, proclaimed perspective an arbitrary representational style (Panofsky, 1927/1991). At face value, Panofsky's contention may seem to have logic on its side, and it has been echoed down the years by successive generations of visual scholars. The problem, though, with Panofsky-and virtually all of his successors- is that their writings show little regard for the findings of perceptual psychology, which have increasingly made it clear that the human visual apparatus can function in real-world mode even in the presence of visual representations that depart very markedly from the appearance of reality, so long as those representations contain certain rudimentary optical cues, such as basic outlines, figural overlap, or linear perspective (e.g., see Anderson, 1996; Gibson, 1986; Hochberg & Brooks, 1962; Livingstone, 2002; Marr, 1982; Reed & Jones, 1982). If images appear real to us, it is not simply because we have internalized their conventions, but also because those conventions successfully capture something about the way our perception operates in real-world vision. In comparison to the Panofskian view, this conception of images provides a more satisfactory explanation of the fact that images can inveigle us into seeing them as real, even though most of us know full well that they are artificial constructions. Moreover, it also serves as a clearer demarcation of how images differ from words, whereas, if we were to take the Panofskian view to its logical

conclusion, it would lead us to the *reductio ad absurdum* of not being able to make any meaningful distinction between those two modes of communication. To the extent that visual theorists emphasize the symbolic as opposed to the iconic aspect of pictorial signification (in Peirce's well-known terminology), they bypass the question of what makes images unique.

Whereas Sturken and Cartwright's focus is mainly on theory, van Leeuwen and Jewitt's edited volume is intended as a guide for visual research. In putting together this collection, the editors have clearly aimed for variety, in terms not only of methodology but also of the types of research questions examined. Some of the book's topics, such as cultural studies or content analysis, will probably be familiar to most readers with a communications background. The book, however, also ventures into relatively new territory as far as communication scholarship is concerned, with chapters on the ethnomethodological analysis of professional vision (e.g., scientists engaged in color classification), or the use of drawings in psychotherapeutic encounters, or the use of photographs in ethnographic interviews. Most of the book's chapters are based on actual studies conducted by their respective authors, and although the descriptions of these studies are typically accompanied by methodological comments, in almost all cases it is the studies themselves that will be of most use to readers looking for guidance or inspiration. Except for content analysis, which receives a very thorough methodological treatment by Philip Bell, the types of research covered in this book do not lend themselves very well to systematic procedural rules.

Several of the analyses in van Leeuwen and Jewitt's collection focus on cases in which images convey an unspoken meaning, or even contradict the ostensible meaning of their broader context. For example, in a study of a British sexual health campaign aimed at young people, Jewitt and Oyama argue that the pictures used in the campaign contain stereotypical representations of masculinity "which in words would probably be unacceptable to many sexual health workers and young people" (p. 138). Elsewhere, in a discussion of child psychoanalysis, Diem-Wille gives detailed illustrations of children's use of drawings to express meanings that they cannot or will not put into words (pp. 123-127). As both of these examples indicate, most of the chapters in this book are devoted mainly to still images rather than to movies, video, or TV. Of course, research approaches that are useful for dealing with the former can often be applied very fruitfully to the latter as well. However, by not paying greater attention to motion pictures as such, the book misses an opportunity to delve more extensively into the analysis of visual movement and, perhaps even more importantly, editing. A major exception to this generalization is Rick Iedema's study of a TV documentary, which is the centerpiece of his chapter on "social-semiotic" analysis of film and television. The documentary, about the financial problems of an Australian hospital, is structured around the conflict between the hospital's administrators, on the one hand, and its doctors and other caregivers, on the other. Through a detailed examination of the documentary's visual techniques, Iedema shows that there is a pronounced bias against the administrators and, by implication, the legitimacy of their concerns.

Although these analyses, and others in the book, are grounded in fairly detailed dissections of the visual images to which they are addressed, they all raise what is arguably the thorniest problem in visual research, namely, how we judge the validity of the analyst's, or anyone else's, interpretation. How do we know that Iedema's, or Diem-Wille's, or Jewitt and Oyama's claims are adequate reflections of how other viewers would respond to the same images? For the most part, the authors of these studies seem well aware of this problem, and they are appropriately cautious

about any suggestion of having made definitive analyses of their data. Moreover, either explicitly or implicitly, some of the studies point to a variety of ways in which a researcher's claims about visual meaning can acquire greater authority. One of these ways is illustrated in Iedema's study of TV camerawork and editing. Most of the variables that he focuses on—shot selection, visual framing, camera angle, editing rhythm, and so on—are associated with well-understood conventions whose functions have been studied systematically in the past, not only by other scholarly writers but also by media practitioners. When that is the case, and when an interpretation stays close to those conventions, the reader may perhaps have greater confidence that the meaning inferred by the writer is likely to be shared by an image's intended viewers. An elaboration of this appeal to existing conventions occurs in another part of the book, van Leeuwen's chapter on semiotics and iconography. Borrowing from the art-historical methods of Panofsky (the same Panofsky mentioned above, but not the same body of research), van Leeuwen attempts to explicate the meaning of a set of contemporary advertisements by tracing and contextualizing the history of the visual conventions employed in them. His results are a striking demonstration of this method's capacity to plumb the depths of an image's nuances.

Of course, the most straightforward way of validating an interpretation is to ask a representative group of viewers for their own responses to an image or set of images. Although this kind of research does not receive much attention in van Leeuwen and Jewitt's book, one of the chapters, by Malcom Collier, contains a thoughtful discussion of the benefits and potential problems of interviews with viewers (p. 52). Collier is a visual anthropologist who has used photographs as means of stimulating his informants' memories in ethnographic interviews. He provides some telling examples of how this procedure can be used to get at visual meanings that a researcher might otherwise completely overlook. However, he also makes clear that there is very substantial variation in people's capacity to provide useful information in such interviews. Not everyone is equally good at retrieving visual memories and associations. Moreover-and, perhaps, more importantly- many people may not be very good at translating their visual experiences into words for the interviewer, especially in cases in which technical vocabulary (e.g., the description of camera or editing techniques) may be at issue. The latter problem deserves special attention from visually oriented scholars. We need to be more sensitive to the inherent difficulty of exploring visual phenomena through a nonvisual mode of communication. Indeed, isolated attempts have been made to develop purely visual tests, such as picture-sorting tasks, of people's reactions to pictures (Meyers, 1984), while other researchers have bypassed communication entirely in favor of direct physiological measurements of viewers' responses (e.g., Lombard et al., 2000). Such methods have their own limitations, though, most notably that they cannot measure complex cognitive responses.

As may be evident from what has been said so far, the two books discussed in this essay have complementary approaches and would work well together if used as instructional texts. Sturken and Cartwright provide a thorough overview of theory, and van Leeuwen and Jewitt's collection is a wide-ranging illustration of research in action. The occasional reservations expressed above should be taken not as criticisms of these specific works but rather as indicators of areas in which all visual scholars need to do more work. In particular, these books point to two areas of pressing need. First, visual communication theory would benefit from a tighter integration between sociocultural and perceptual-psychological approaches. As this review has briefly suggested, the characteristic cultural-studies conception of images as "naturalizers" of social constructions

would actually be augmented if it were modified to accommodate relevant findings from the psychology of vision. Conversely, psychological approaches would undoubtedly benefit from a greater appreciation for the role of culture. A second direction that visual studies needs to take is toward more visually oriented research methods for measuring viewers' responses to images. If we are to move beyond the type of visual analysis that is either completely unsupported by viewer data or is constrained by inevitable limitations in viewers' abilities to translate visual impressions into words, we will need to think more creatively about how one person can see through the eyes of another.

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