

Visuality refers to the acculturation of sight. It starts from the premise that vision is cultural as much as biological; as Martin Jay has pointed out “there is no ‘natural’ vision prior to cultural mediation.” How we acquire, interpret, and transform ocular data is always contingent on the cultural and historical context of the observant subject. An optometrist might still refer to a person’s defective ‘vision’ but in the humanities and social sciences this word has largely been displaced by ‘visuality’, a term which is used to think about the experiential, discursive, and necessarily subjective character of the human senses. Nicholas Mirzoeff has detailed how the earliest appearance of the term can be found in the writings of the Scottish essayist and historian Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881). Carlyle coined ‘visuality’ as a historiographical device with which events separated by time (‘a succession of vivid pictures’) could be ordered within a single analytical frame. Its more recent origins, however, are to be found in a philosophical reflection on the status and function of the visual realm throughout human history, a move that has taken place over the last three decades in a nexus of academic fields that includes philosophy, art history, film studies, and cultural studies. Visuality is one of a number of key terms (alongside ‘the gaze’, ‘scopic regime’, ‘ocularcentrism’) in the emerging hybrid field of ‘visual studies’ which – with its attendant *Journal of Visual Studies* – has sought to bring together old and new ways of handling visual culture, from established domains such as art and architectural theory and history through to photography and new media, as well as drawing insights from social sciences such as sociology and anthropology.

At first glance, geography might seem at the margins of this new field. The ‘big names’ in visual studies do not, on the whole, identify as geographers. However, from its earliest origins as a formal discipline, geography has consistently engaged with questions of visuality. Indeed, the connection between the faculty of sight and the practice of geography is so strong as to have attained the status of a rather banal truism. Over a 100 years ago, Halford Mackinder – one of the reputed ‘founders’ of disciplinary geography – wrote that “to be able to visualise is of the very essence of geographical power.” So frequently has this claim been made throughout the succeeding twentieth century that it has started to sound a little too glib. Take, for example, the following repetitions of and variations on this basic position. Susan Smith held that “geography is *after all* a quintessentially visual enterprise, traditionally using observation as the route to knowledge, and regarding sight as the measure of truth.” In a similar vein, Don Mitchell has remarked that “geographers *for very obvious reasons*, tend to focus on the visual.” Daniel Sui has gone further still, claiming that it is “*almost trivial to point out* that geography is [to use Susan Smith’s exact phrase] a quintessentially visual enterprise.” So safe is this association between geography and the visual that, until recently, it was in danger of becoming beyond serious consideration. Gillian Rose has since brought this train of certainty to a shuddering halt in her provocative paper entitled ‘On the need to ask how, exactly, is geography “visual”?’ This question, together with its counterquestion (how, exactly, is visuality geographical?), will doubtless set the terms for a great deal of future work in both geography and visual studies.

### Geography’s Visuality

Let’s return for a moment to the hyperbole about geography’s own ‘way of seeing’, the idea that a particular visuality is internal to the disciplinary practice of teaching and research. It is not difficult to find eye-minded geographers. “I suspect most good geography of any stripe, begins by looking” wrote J. Fraser Hart in 1981. In 1979, Yi-Fu Tuan went so far as to say that “blindness makes a geographical career virtually impossible.” At the same time, however, visuality took on a dangerous, even seductive guise. Tuan worried that using pictures in the classroom could introduce ‘bias’ or, worse still, ‘mislead’. “Visual media may not be able to educate at an analytical level” he wrote, “but there is no doubt that they do entertain. They entertain and amuse for the same reasons that they fail to educate.” Visual media, he concludes, “even as they open our eyes, blind us to other realities.” From a similar era, Douglas Pocock considered that “geography is to such an extent a visual discipline that, uniquely among the social sciences, sight is almost certainly a prerequisite for its pursuit.” This was the sort of tough talk that preceded the cultural turn: a casual certainty about the relationship between geography and the visual unaccompanied by much empirical enquiry.

The advent of the ‘new’ cultural geography in the late 1980s changed all this, ushering in a greater reflexivity about the precise character of the discipline’s engagement with the visual. Central to this movement was the influential historical scholarship on landscape and representation by Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels. In his classic monograph on the idea of landscape since the Renaissance, *Social formation and symbolic landscape*, Cosgrove gave primacy to vision suggesting that geographers were interested “in the argument of the eye.” Much of his subsequent work and that of Daniels – encapsulated in their deservedly famous edited collection *The iconography of landscape* – has been concerned with the nature of this relationship. Cosgrove and Daniels used a broadly historical materialist approach to draw attention to the role that Western art has played in the dominant construction of a landscape aesthetic. A prominent theme in this work is, according to Cosgrove, the attempt to link:

the coevolution in the modern West of spatial experience and conception and of the techniques and meanings of seeing. Cultural landscape may be regarded as one of the principal geographical expressions of this coevolution, whose critical examination is a current preoccupation with cultural geography (Cosgrove).

He considers that there is “a profound connection . . . between the modern usage of landscape to denote a bounded geographical space and the exercise of sight or vision as the principal means of associating space with human concerns.” Throughout this work, it is worth pointing to the undoubted inspiration of art historian and novelist John Berger, whose BBC TV series and book *Ways of seeing* not only brought a critical sensibility to art history but traced the connections between painting and more everyday practices of looking. However, it was the uncompromisingly art historical focus of Cosgrove and Daniels’ work that attracted criticism from anthropologists such as Tim Ingold who challenged their definition of landscape as “a cultural image, a pictorial way of representing or symbolising surroundings” on the grounds that it was essentially static, generalizing one experience (representation) into landscape *tout court*. And as we shall later discuss, Ingold’s more phenomenological interest in the senses has since acquired a wider currency in geographical treatments of landscape. However, at a time when current research agendas are shifting away from representation, it is worth acknowledging the abiding significance of Cosgrove and Daniels’ early work, which not only brought a careful art historical scholarship into geography, but also, more importantly, drew attention to the political status of the observant subject.

If landscape was one major field of empirical geographical work on visual culture, then another was a reflection on the primacy of vision in the history and philosophy of geography. Derek Gregory has suggested that geography “continued to privilege sight long after many other [discipline]s became more – well, circumspect.” His book *Geographical imaginations* is, among other things, an

attempt to explore geography's own 'empire of the gaze'. At the heart of this thesis is an attentiveness to particular forms of visual practice at work in geographical teaching and research. For instance, another geographer, Joan Schwartz has shown how photography and the ability to represent photographic images through the magic lantern (the precursor to the slide projector) was an essential means of acquiring, ordering, and disseminating geographical knowledge. Amateur, professional, and commercial photographers gave visual form to the empire, making the photographic plate a key referent to be used as art, record, data, or propaganda. It has already been mentioned that Halford Mackinder forged a longstanding association of geography and visual culture, a role that has attracted much recent commentary from scholars in the history of geography. James Ryan has documented how Mackinder, as an early advocate for 'visual instruction' in the teaching of geography, supervised the British Colonial Office Visual Instruction Committee (COVIC) from 1902–11, a body that distributed lantern slides of India for use in British schools. Ryan suggests that Mackinder's geographical gaze had truly imperial intent, allowing citizens "the power of roaming at ease imaginatively over the vast surface of the globe," the 'real geographer' being the 'man' "who sees the world drama as *he* reads *his* morning paper." In a similar vein, Gearóid Ó Tuathail sees Mackinder as an exemplar of the Cartesian model of viewing the world that is both detached and Olympian. For Ó Tuathail, Mackinder's way of seeing stands in for an entire philosophical approach to geopolitics in which the intellectual is independent of, and set apart from, a preexisting social reality along the lines of the simple Cartesian binary between an 'in here' mind/self/consciousness and an 'out there' world of objects. The gaze of the geopolitical theorist is thus neutral and disembodied and, by implication, blind to issues of personal subjectivity.

The last three decades of geographical scholarship have included an important seam of reflexive work examining the discipline's engagement with visual culture, both contemporary and historical. However, it is also the case that much of this literature has not been adequately concerned with 'actual' practices of looking, either empirically in terms of archival or ethnographic work, or – until recently, at least – in terms of geography's engagement with visual art practice. Indeed, as James Ryan has argued, the recent history of geographical thinking on vision has tended toward the iconoclastic, with a mistrust of the visual as a mode of geographical knowledge, centered upon the fear of being 'seduced', 'misled', or of introducing 'bias'. Images have certainly been surrounded by more semiotic hazard lights than other forms of evidence, a mistrust of the visual which is, as Ryan points out, part and parcel of visuality within geography. Such a stance is significantly informed by debates about visuality in philosophy and cultural studies, particularly those surrounding the alleged 'ocularcentrism' of Western thought. Indeed, much of geography's treatment of visuality could be characterized as part of a wider 'anti-ocular' turn that has drawn inspiration from feminism, psychoanalysis, and post-structuralism.

## Ocularcentrism and Anti-Ocularcentrism

The concept of ‘ocularcentrism’ describes a tendency in Western modernity to ascribe particular primacy to vision above the other human senses. But why should the modality of sight be singled out for this cognitive priority? Take, for example, the sentence: ‘I see’. In this, the most ordinary of statements in the English language, there is an alignment of ‘the eye’ (vision) with the ‘I’ (the Cartesian *cogito*) to signify rational knowledge. This interplay between the ‘I’ and the eye has become one of the hallmarks of Western modernity. However, the one thing we cannot see is sight itself. The ‘problem’ of perception – whether by vision, hearing, or any other sense – is one of the most ancient and profound of philosophical questions, as it has a bearing upon the very constitution of the human subject. The Cartesian conception of the observer as a seat of awareness, bounded by the skin and set against an exterior world has proved to be a remarkably durable model. It is concerned with the crossing of boundaries and the translation across ideas of ‘in here’ and ‘out there’, and poses such basic questions as ‘how is the external world rendered intelligible to the self?’ Our ability to see has thus become messily entangled with our ability to know. Seeing has a bearing on how we know what we know. The question of how visual evidence structures the stories we tell is one of the foremost problems of epistemology.

This association between sight and sense-making is at the heart of the idea of ocularcentrism. The term was popularized by the work of Martin Jay in his book *Downcast eyes* in which he identifies vision as a philosophical buttress to Western thought that was only challenged by an ‘anti-ocular’ turn in twentieth-century continental philosophy. To be ocularcentric is to adhere to an objective world independent of and external to human consciousness, to which the observer gains admission by the authority of the eye. Jay argues that this ‘Cartesian perspectivalism’ – the form of perception that represents space, and the subjects and objects in that space, according to the rules of Euclidean geometry – succeeded as “the reigning visual model of modernity” because “it best expressed the ‘natural’ experience of sight valorized by the scientific world-view.” In the last century, European (and particularly French) scholarship has mounted a thoroughgoing critique of ocularcentrism, though arguably this recent ‘denigration’ of vision has paradoxically served to reaffirm its centrality. Jacques Derrida, for instance, holds that the binary of darkness and light is the founding metaphor of Western philosophy: “the entire history of our philosophy is a photology, the name given to a history of, or treatise on, light.”

Many of Jay’s examples are taken from the latently (or explicitly) French Marxist intellectual tradition in which vision is considered to have an undesirable presence in Western culture and epistemology. In Marx’s own writing the camera obscura is used as a metaphor for the inversion of the truth of appearances. As Jonathan Crary notes, “the very apparatus that a century

earlier was the site of truth becomes a model for procedures and forces that conceal, invert, and mystify truth.” Vision, according to anti-ocularcentrism is the one modality of perception that leads us to objectify our environment, regarding it as a repository of things that exist outside of and alien to our own bodies, and over which we exercise domination, enabled and often heightened by technical prostheses. In this analysis, the eye (or at least a particular historical manifestation of visual experience) has given birth to modernity’s bastard twins, positivist science and capitalist popular culture, while other sensory registers such as the ear have enjoyed only virtuous association. This critique of the primacy of vision has gained considerable purchase within human geography; indeed, one might argue that much of the geographical canon on visual culture has adopted, to a greater or lesser degree, this basic position. As a consequence, by the end of the twentieth century the geographer Daniel Sui was able to identify a transition “from the eye to the ear in geographic discourse”; that is to say from visual metaphors of ‘perspective’ or ‘point of view’ to aural ones such as ‘voices’, ‘silences’, and ‘polyphony’. In line with the anti-ocularcentric turn, Sui (2000: 322–343) notices “an increasing disenchantment with visually evocative metaphors,” a *fin de siècle* tendency that has been paralleled by a predilection for the aural as it is expressed in terms of ‘conversation’ and ‘dialog’. Under this theoretical regime, the human senses have been ascribed certain moral characteristics. Vision, not surprisingly, has come out of this rather badly: it is the fallen sense associated with abstraction, objectivity, masculinity, coldness, and detachment. Hearing by contrast, is the very embodiment of virtue: it is concrete, subjective, warm, and inclusive. This odd individuation of the senses based on apparent moral characteristics is what the historian of sound Jonathan Sterne has described as the ‘audiovisual litany’, a model that posits history as something that happens ‘between’ the senses. The stock of one sense (hearing) rises, as another (vision) falls. There are of course numerous problems with this argument, but it has been the dominant position of the geographical literature in the last 20 years. And the newly discovered affinity for the aural and the haptic is in keeping with this anti-ocular trend rather than a departure from it. One of the reasons that this model has persevered for so long is surely the undoubted influence of a feminist critique of vision which has constructed ‘the gaze’ as a metonymic expression of patriarchal power.

### **Gendering the Gaze and Situating Vision**

This feminist critique is most notably and most memorably present in the work of Gillian Rose who, on reading the Marxist-aligned work of Cosgrove and Daniels, identified a “blind spot in the geographer’s way of seeing,” namely that the analytic of class eclipsed that of gender in their art historical treatments of landscape. In a much-cited essay on ‘Geography as a science of observation’

and subsequently in her book *Feminism and geography*, Rose examines the ways in which the visual landscape has been feminized in the geographical tradition, such that nature and its exploration are conflated with the body of a woman. Rose develops John Berger's critique of the masculine gaze at the nude within Western art to reconsider the pleasurable gaze of the geographer in the field. In doing so, she reveals the gendered social relations between the implicitly male observer and the landscape as woman.

By translating John Berger's critique of the masculine gaze at the nude within Western art to the pleasurable gaze of the geographer in the field, Rose reveals the gendered social relations between the implicitly male observer and the landscape as woman. She identifies "a masculine position [which] is to look actively, possessively, sexually and pleasurably, at women as objects." But for Rose, it is the practice of geographical fieldwork rather than landscape painting which is at the heart of her critique. Rose highlights the ocularcentric nature of fieldwork in geography, as a process of visualization where "the eye [holds] the landscape together as a unit" . . . "selecting [those] . . . features requiring elucidation." In the figure of the geographical fieldworker, she discerns a complex tension between "the distanced, disembodied objectivity of science" and the sensitive, artistic, desirous appreciation of scenery. It is a contradiction latent in geography's treatment of landscape, between the production of knowledge on the one hand and the disruptive pleasures of looking that might 'seduce' or compromise the masculine integrity of such scientific 'truth' on the other.

In order to challenge "geography's white, heterosexual masculine gaze, a gaze torn between pleasure and its repression," Rose employs the feminist psychoanalytic theory of Laura Mulvey, who in turn draws upon the work of Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan and Simone de Beauvoir. Although this is a formative (and in certain respects, a compelling) critique, Mulvey's theory – which is a significant basis for Gillian Rose's work – has since been troubled by subsequent feminist readings. In particular, Mulvey's basic binary:

Woman as image/man as bearer of the look

Female passive object of the gaze/male active viewing subject (Mulvey)

has been challenged on the basis that it unwittingly reifies the dominant constructions of gender that it seeks to critique, leaving women powerless to break from a marginal perspective (as long as men are held to be the chief agents in the construction of the visual field). The most significant attempt to develop a feminist approach to landscape that celebrates the agency of women as observant subjects has been undertaken by Catherine Nash. Nash discusses the work of two women artists who construct the male body as landscape, thus offering an alternative schema of association between visual pleasure and the gaze. Rather than an outright dismissal of the visual pleasures of landscape (whether in oil painting or in geographical field practice), Nash has questioned

the way in which the female figure is singularly constructed as passive object of the gaze rather than as the observant viewing subject. "Arguments based upon Mulvey's initial critique" she argues "have tended to ignore the issue of women's spectatorship and reproduce the dominance of heterosexism in understanding gender and visual pleasure." For Nash, then, the dominant paradigm of vision and landscape is open to critical interrogation and practical disruption. Rose's work, like that of Cosgrove and Daniels, has been developed and critiqued in various empirical, theoretical, and political ways. However, it would be unwise to consider their contributions as being safely 'closed', as simply an old part of the 'new' cultural geography. There remains an abiding significance to this work in the sense that it has focused attention on the construction of the looking subject; as Rose points out, it forcefully reminds us that the ways in which the world is made visible cannot be separated from the positions of power and privilege that the observer may occupy.

This stance in turn takes us to another strand of feminist theory often associated with Donna Haraway but which is also at the forefront of many recent geographical treatments of visuality. It concerns the inevitably situated character of vision. In contradistinction to the model of the Cartesian observer, this idea insists that vision 'takes place' through particular situated bodies. When we see, we have a point of view and a field of vision. As Martin Jay noted, "there is no 'view from nowhere' for even the most scrupulously 'detached' observer." But the consequence of embodying the eye is resolutely geographical: as Haraway has outlined, a feminist politics of vision that argues for an embodied knowledge is also a call for a situated knowledge. That is to say that the grounding of vision in some body is also to locate a view from somewhere. By promoting situated and embodied knowledges, she is arguing against "various forms of unlocatable, and so irresponsible, knowledge claims." Another consequence follows from thinking of sight as embodied and situated: that vision cannot therefore be understood as an abstract or free-floating discourse but rather must be examined as an embodied practice occurring in particular places and in specific historical contexts. Geographers have had to think beyond the abstraction of ocularcentrism and the now familiar visual exegeses of art historical scholarship, to more carefully (and empirically) address what it means to see. In other words, the future agenda for visuality in geography will surely be concerned with the messy business of looking itself. This, one would argue, is where some important contemporary work is heading.

### **Looking Lively: Observant Practice**

One of the niggling problems with visuality both within and beyond geography, is that it often requires us to isolate vision from other sensory modalities. The literature on ocularcentrism, for instance, treats vision primarily as a discourse rather than as a practice and neatly distinguishes sight both from other sensory discourses and a wider bodily sensorium. If vision is regarded as the hallmark



of modernity, the distinction between vision and other senses is for the most part considered to be unproblematic. And the feminist critique of vision too assumes a safe individuation of the senses, such that the eye can neatly stand in for masculinity; “the eye has a penis,” in the preposterous terms of Arthur Kroker. However, there remains a problem here. While much of this work recognizes the discursive nature of vision, it does not also acknowledge that the idea of vision as a discrete modality is itself culturally specific. It is one thing to argue that sight has been given a certain discursive priority in the Western configuration of the senses. It is another thing altogether to accept the terms upon which this honor has been conferred; namely, that the senses can be individuated as having a discrete rather than a connective function and that this distinction lies outside the realm of discourse.

It is in this context that some new writing in a phenomenological (or post-phenomenological) vein has made an impact. Especially significant is the work of the anthropologist Tim Ingold. He demands that we consider the wider perceptual system in its totality instead of isolating stimuli-specific registers of experience. Under the influence of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Ingold is interested in ‘looking-and-listening’ as aspects of one bodily activity rather than two individuated actions. He describes it as a kind of scanning movement, accomplished by the whole body – albeit from a fixed location – and which both seeks out, and responds to whole modulations or inflections in the environment to which it is attuned. As such, perception is not an ‘inside-the-head’ operation, performed upon the raw material of sensation, but takes place in circuits that crosscut the boundaries between brain, body, and world. For Ingold (2000), vision and hearing “are virtually indistinguishable: vision is a kind of hearing and vice versa,” an argument which leads him to reject Jay’s (1993) thesis that the Western fixation with ‘objectivity’ is a function of the privileged place of vision. He emphatically dismisses the binary which constructs hearing as “warm, connecting and sympathetic” and defines the self socially in relation to others, while vision is held to be “cold, distancing and unfeeling” defining the self individually in opposition to others. Ingold also dismisses the idea that anthropology can meaningfully differentiate cultures according to the relative weighting of the senses through which people perceive the world around them. The distinction between hearing and vision, he argues, is itself a division drawn according to the specific culture of Western intellectual enquiry. “It is hard to avoid the suspicion,” he writes, “voiced by Nadia Serematakis, that in the imputation to non-Western ‘Others’ of heightened auditory (along with tactile and olfactory) sensibilities, they are being made to carry the burden of sensory modalities exiled from the sensory structure of Western modernity on account of the latter’s attribution to the hegemony of vision.” The implications of Ingold’s reassessment of vision are at once abstract and profound. Following his critique of Jay, on the basis that the latter is overly invested in reducing vision entirely to the realm of discourse, Ingold instead advocates the detailed empirical consideration of actual practices of looking.

Ingold's agenda has gained at least a toehold in some new work in geography. One thinks here of John Wylie's accounts of the body-subject in a landscape which depart significantly from earlier work in the geographical tradition. For instance, in an essay on walking the English South West Coast path Wylie explores how "various affinities and distanciations" of self and landscape emerge through the experience of walking. In this account, vision is scarcely divisible from other tactile and sonorous relations; it certainly does not involve the 'cleaving of self and world' that characterize earlier models of landscape. "Elemental encounters with land, sea and sky" he argues "are less a distanced looking-at and more a *seeing-with*." Elsewhere Wylie reconfigures the visuality of landscape by supplementing the later phenomenological account of Merleau-Ponty with a Deleuzian critique. Contra John Berger, Wylie argues that landscape "is not a way of seeing the world. Nor is it something seen, an external, inert surface. Rather the term 'landscape' names the materialities and sensibilities with which we see." The conventional spectatorial view of the gazing subject is thus replaced by an examination of the ontological processes (of depth and of fold) which enable the actualization of landscape. This sort of work, although highly theoretical and abstract, is nevertheless a serious engagement with what it means to see. It is concerned with rewriting the conditions of the gaze.

Very different in style, though sharing certain similar intents, is a recent ethnomethodological investigation by Eric Laurier and Barry Brown, who reject the idea of vision as the cognitive skill of a lone individual and instead conceive of it as the learned outcome of certain communities of practice. For them, the ability to apprehend certain things is learned for specific purposes. Using the example of learning how to see fish under water (a skill acquired, practiced, and transmitted by fly fishermen), they argue for a detailed and specific inquiry into mundane practical activities, in this case, learning 'how' to see. Not content with writing about their own learning to see fish, Laurier and Brown insist that the reader attempt to acquire this skill through reading the paper – that is, being instructed – an experience which itself generates the 'data' for their research.

In this way, the familiar mode of deconstruction and visual exegesis since the cultural turn – so commonly applied to maps, images, and to geographical fieldwork – is giving way to a more diverse set of inquiries into the sociality of looking, both in theory and in practice. When T.J. Clark dismissively referred to art history's penchant for "hauling . . . visual images before the court of political judgement," this rather terse description could perhaps have been levelled at human geography in the 1990s. Now, however, the picture is rather different. How these emerging agendas on 'observant practice' will fold back into the key concerns of human geography is as yet unclear, but what has been achieved in recent times is to seriously question what visuality itself means. This has entailed no loss of interest in many of the key themes that might fall under the label of 'visual culture' nor, for that matter, in the political dimensions

of visuality. New geographical scholarship is being produced on surveillance culture and urban space; on the proliferation of screens in late capitalism; on new modes of visualization from Google Earth to web-based video-telephony; as well as more lively historical geographies of past optical instruments such as dioramas, panoramas, and camera obscuras. Geography's engagement with the visual still runs broad and deep.