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## Symposium “Visual Studies / Études visuelles: un champ en question”

Université Paris 7, Institut Charles V, October 20-22, 2011

**Camille Rouquet**

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# Symposium “Visual Studies / Études visuelles: un champ en question”

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- 1 Organised by François Brunet (UPD/LARCA), Catherine Bernard (UPD/LARCA), Marc Vernet (UPD/CERILAC) and André Gunthert (EHESS/LHIVIC), this three-day conference was dedicated to the following issues: the archaeology of visual studies in the Anglophone world, the translatability of visual studies into the French and European fields, and the relationship of visual studies to history and its methods. This symposium was an opportunity to try and assess the position of visual studies in France, where they are but recent fields of interests, contrary to the United States, Britain and Germany where they have been studied for a few decades.<sup>1</sup> The objective of this symposium was to ask the following question: can visual studies find a place in French research fields, and if not, why?

## Keynote—Margaret Dikovitskaya (Wolfsonian-Florida International University), “Visual Studies, Ten Years After”

- 2 Margaret Dikovitskaya opened the symposium with a presentation centred on the evolution of visual studies in the last thirty years and on their long-standing opposition to the field of art history. In her own words, visual culture, or visual studies, is a field where the visual image is the focal point in the process through which meaning is constructed. Since its establishment within the humanities, it has crossed over to other fields of research, therefore making it fundamental to find a way to conciliate various points of view.
- 3 Despite the great evolution of the theory of visual studies these past ten years, the field has been subjected to some “friendly fire”. One of Margaret Dikovitskaya’s examples was Mieke Bal’s article “The Genius of Rome: Putting Things Together”, published in

the *Journal of Visual Culture* shortly after it was launched in April 2002, and in which Bal talked of "visual essentialism" and deemed the concept of visual studies highly problematic. Likewise, in the 1970s and 1980s, visual studies were strongly criticised by semiotic and philosophical experts attached to the *performance* of art and its association with visual signs. W.J.T. Mitchell provided a new point of departure from the 1980s onwards when he stated that all media were visual media. By asking what was cultural about vision and, conversely, what was visual about culture, researchers, according to Margaret Dikovitskaya, realised there was a need for a new, richer and more philosophical definition of the visual.

- 4 At the Stone Summer Theory Institute of July 2011 entitled "Farewell to Visual Studies", James Elkins stated that visual culture had not fulfilled its promise to provide a methodical model for the study of images. Margaret Dikovitskaya argued in response to his statement that image studies and visual studies are two different concepts. The visual is not restricted to images but encompasses everyday practices of seeing, either mediated or not. Whereas Elkins considered that "the growth of visual signs and hybrid departments signalled the end of the project of visual studies", Margaret Dikovitskaya saw the evolution of the field in the past ten years as highly promising. She is one of many contemporary researchers intent on underlining the connection between what is seen and what is read, therefore moving away from the previous distinction between the visual on the one hand and the written language on the other.
- 5 Margaret Dikovitskaya concluded her argument by stating that these aspects of the evolution of visual practices and visual studies in the past three decades point to a "new visual culture"; its aim is to describe and analyse visual media and communication while resisting the temptation to define them *systematically* by focusing, instead, on specific issues such as the frontier between high and low culture.

## Frank Mehring (Freie Universität Berlin), "How Silhouettes Became Black, or What We Can Learn from Advertising the Harlem Renaissance in the Age of Transnational Studies"

- 6 Frank Mehring used the example of the iPod advertising campaigns of 2004 to try to bridge the gap between art history and modern advertising through the concept of re-appropriation. His examples were posters and clips featuring black silhouettes with white earphones against unified, brightly coloured backgrounds. Frank Mehring showed that during the Harlem Renaissance, silhouettes were appropriated from Alain Locke's anthology of poems *The New Negro*—one of the first to use primitive figures as illustrations—for the promotion of Afro-American culture. Frank Mehring also approached the concept of "recodification" by focusing on another field of art that uses silhouettes: the shadow play. Originating at the time of Goethe to capture and study the features of individuals, shadows were incorporated into German visual arts in the 1920s (with the examples of *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* in 1920 and of *Schatten* in 1923). The art of the silhouette culminated in 1926 with the animated film *Die Abenteuer des Prinzen Achmed*, recreating Arabian tales in shadow images against coloured backgrounds. In the United States, this film instantly evoked Black culture and the rebirth of the

minstrel tradition. Since then, the silhouette has been central in many iconic works such as Disney's *Fantasia*, many of Matisse's paintings and Keith Haring's graffiti style.

- 7 Frank Mehring used this historical presentation to show that we live in an age of "transnational mediation" and to ask what we can learn from re-reading this particular style from the Harlem Renaissance. This was a way to understand the transnational dimension of American society, as well as its persuasive cultural power when it comes to pushing the boundaries between fine art and popular arts. In Frank Mehring's words, "from amplification to simplification, the viewers can activate their own fantasies."

## Olivier Lugon (Université de Lausanne-UNIL), "Visual studies and European Modernism"

- 8 Olivier Lugon dedicated his presentation to the archaeology of the field of visual studies in Switzerland. He aimed at showing that the study of the visual could be focused on practices rather than theories and mentioned that his department in Lausanne does not seek out self-definition—a process which Olivier Lugon considers specific to the United States.
- 9 Olivier Lugon focused on the relationship between László Moholy-Nagy and Sigfried Giedion in the 1920s as an example of the willingness to redefine art and the teaching of art in the age of the Bauhaus. He explained that Moholy-Nagy and Giedion stepped out of the boundaries of classical arts at a time when words were starting to give way to the visual. The two men experimented with photography and focused on new ways to combine words and images (such as their photo-texts). Already, they felt that teaching visual studies was absolutely necessary and, as early as 1927, Moholy-Nagy declared: "the illiterate of the future will be the person ignorant of the use of the camera as well as the pen." The new notion of *visual literacy*, as Olivier Lugon explained, was then created to encompass everything that related to the transmission of visual knowledge, to critical reflection and to personal expression.
- 10 According to Olivier Lugon, the collaboration between Moholy-Nagy and Giedion is a good example of how visual history took its definition into its own hands. He explained the need to open the way outwards, beyond the high arts, and insisted that, although art history should not be restricted to a certain category of visual production, visual studies, on the other hand, cannot oppose art history diametrically.

## Martine Beugnet (Edinburgh University), " 'Firing at the Clocks': Cinema, Sampling and the 'Cultural Logic of the late Capitalism Museum' "

- 11 Martine Beugnet chose a title composed of quotes from Rosalind Krauss and Walter Benjamin to underline contemporary visual theory's need to turn to experts on modernity who first saw the importance of cinema in our cultures. Her point of departure was the alleged disappearance of cinema and she proposed to study this in relation to the new place given to film in the museum space. Martine Beugnet's focus was on film compilation, a practice which deeply links the work of the artist to that of the museum curator.

- 12 Her main example was Christian Marklay's *The Clock*, a 2011 compilation of footage relating to time. The film is fully synchronised with non-diegetic life and lasts 24 hours. It has been screened intensively and was recently shown at the Centre Pompidou in Paris. This example was particularly relevant to the general issue of nationality in visual studies—Martine Beugnet showed that little footage was found in Indian cinema for example. She argued that cinema in relation to time was quite characteristic of capitalism and Western modernity. Marklay's film was made directly for the museum space and is therefore not part of the category of experimental films, which are meant to be seen inside a cinema. The length of this film as well as the small number of hard copies made (5 or 6) also excludes it from the public screen—Martine Beugnet called it an *artist's film* and noted the artist's wish to limit it to museum exhibitions.
- 13 The issue of the reception of films in the gallery was also approached and deemed sensitive; indeed the example of *The Clock* showed that the behaviour of museumgoers is more akin to window-shopping than to a process of agreeing or disagreeing. In her presentation, Martine Beugnet showed that as cinema enters the museum space, there is the establishment of a stimulating dialogue between art theory and film theory, and a redefinition of the notion of reception, either by artists and experts, or by the public.

## Emmanuelle André (Université Paris Diderot), "The visible man at the core of vision. Visual studies and film analysis"

- 14 The question raised by Emmanuelle André's presentation was how to determine what is at the core of vision and how this relates to visual studies in regards to the history of the ways of seeing. In order to answer this question, Emmanuelle André went back to the origins of visual culture as Béla Balázs defined it in *The Visible Man* (1924). For him, cinema was a new medium that reproduced and broadcasted productions of the mind, and had the potential to raise man to new visibility and new freedom. Images were thereon not organised *around* cinema but forced to rethink their own representation.
- 15 Emmanuelle André then presented the 19<sup>th</sup>-century tendency to look at the body in its most fragile state, a tendency that climaxed in Alphonse Bertillon's anthropometric police shots and Dr Doyen's "sagittal views" of sliced human bodies in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. She explained that Alphonse Bertillon, who worked with Chauvin, started to make a distinction between man as body and man as subject. This shift in the definition was caused, according to Chauvin, by the recurring exposure of the body to the *look* of an audience, or a readership—in which case the process was mediated by images. Emmanuelle André exposed these ideas in order to compare them with the modern enthusiasm for the figure of the invisible man in literary and film. She showed that the way of looking at the human body has been modified: dissections and decapitations are no longer favourites of the public. She mentioned the importance of cinema in the process of redefinition of the body and said that once again images take on the role of mediators. In John Carpenter's *Memoirs of an Invisible Man* (1992), the protagonist faces his invisibility, undresses his visibility, in Emmanuelle André's words; he welcomes the public's observation at the risk of making a part of himself invisible. Emmanuelle André concluded that, although observation had prevailed in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, nowadays the subject—man—is no longer dissected by the look but upset by it.

## Jens Schroeter (Universität Siegen), "Visual Studies, Practice, History. The Example of 'Digital Photography' "

- 16 Jens Schroeter's contribution to the symposium was an attempt at deconstructing the opposition between "analogue and digital photography," based on the issue of referentiality. Jens Schroeter presented the claim (recurrent in the history of visual media) that analogue photography refers to a specific reality, closely linked to the object that is photographed. This deeply changed the status of photography, and yet today there is a distinction between these two kinds of photography—what Jens Schroeter called a "haunting dichotomy between referentiality and manipulation." He noted several contradictions in the definition of digital photography as less reliable: doctors, scientists, soldiers rely more on digital than analogue imagery to *analyse reality*. In Jens Schroeter's opinion, nothing in the definition of photography suggests that the *writing* should be produced through a *chemical* process.
- 17 Jens Schroeter also mentioned that the definition of digital imagery is almost as complicated as that of referentiality—it encompasses scans and generated images. To show that manipulation is not directly opposed to reference, he took the example of the Apollo programme of 1964: the images sent by Ranger 7 were analogues transmitted through a video signal, but NASA processed them digitally upon reception. The same qualification between reference and manipulation goes with book illustrations; they are usually "photoshopped" to be made sharper but, according to Jens Schroeter, no one would call that manipulation.
- 18 Jens Schroeter's conclusion was that there is no difference between analogue and digital photography; for him these are simply two different processes and ways of storage, which should both be included in the study of visual practices.

## W.J.T. Mitchell (University of Chicago), "Seeing Madness: Insanity, Media, and Visual Culture" (INHA, "Si la photo est bonne" conference)

- 19 Thanks to the collaboration with the LHIVIC conference "Si la photo est bonne. Le rôle des industries culturelles dans la construction de l'imaginaire" (EHESS), the symposium moved to the IHNA auditorium on Friday afternoon to listen to a presentation by W.J.T. Mitchell.
- 20 W.J.T. Mitchell came to present madness as visual display and approached this topic through a focus on cinema. According to him, the arch of madness is deep; from divine folly in Greek mythology to Charcot and Freud, and to the keenness of surrealist cinema for paranoia and delirium. W.J.T. Mitchell used *film noir* and horror films to raise a double question about cinema and madness: what does cinema reveal about insanity that was not available to knowledge before? Why is madness in film so attractive to the general public? The point of departure of his argument was that madness *can* be seen, and W.J.T. Mitchell presented the history of its representations. He mentioned the ritualisation of symptomatology by Charcot in the 1880s, the

dissimulation of madness in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and William Blake's *Nebuchadnezzar...* Beyond these various topics relating to madness, W.J.T. Mitchell directed his inquiry towards visual culture and a series of films about the institutionalisation of madness (*Shutter Island*, *The Snake Pit*, *Sunset Boulevard*, *Now, Voyager*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *A Beautiful Mind*, among others). He deliberately chose films that feature psychiatrists, and his goal was to turn the gaze towards the structures of confinement that put madness on display. W.J.T. Mitchell not only asked what these films bring to madness but what madness brings to these films. He insisted on the different effects of the representation of madness depending on the medium used: when phantasmagoria existed, the illusions were in the room with the audience; in an opera, the audience is easily brought to the same state as the artist. Cinema, however, has the capacity to turn the gaze around towards the institutions that treat mental illness, according to W.J.T. Mitchell.

- 21 W.J.T. Mitchell found that in films about madness, there often is a tracking of the clues at the origin of the trauma. One of the props recurrently used to do so is the cigarette—the cigarette normalises the moment between sanity and insanity; it is often offered by doctors to patient to cool them down. In *Shutter Island*, the detective is shown looking for his cigarettes in vain—a moment that W.J.T. Mitchell deemed a classical opening to the detective film. For him, smoking becomes the symbol of the detective genre and comes to link the medium to the prospect of seeing madness. W.J.T. Mitchell concluded his presentation by asking what role the post-cinematic medium might play in the representation of madness, mentioning second-life gaming as an example of “the reprivatisation of madness in the solitude of the game.”

## Roundtable and conclusion, “The outlook for visual studies”

- 22 François Brunet introduced the roundtable by summarising some of the issues dealt with during the symposium. A recurring idea was that new visual studies now have a definition that moves them closer to “visual science”; the visual is evolving beyond images to a realm of experiences. François Brunet noted the distinct willingness, among researchers, to look at visual studies no longer as a mere propaedeutic tool but as a legitimate field of knowledge (W.J.T. Mitchell speaks of *visual literacy*) within the humanities. Secondly, the archaeology of visual studies shows old attempts to create the conditions for visual literacy (with two important attempts, first in the 1920s-30s with a focus on understanding and practicing, then in the 1960s-70s in Europe when semiology was understood as a kind of education). The question that is asked now is: why do we start again? Was something not transmitted? Finally, François Brunet proposed the idea that visual studies often take on a political dimension in the Anglophone world and might therefore have difficulties finding a French context.
- 23 As far as education goes, Gil Bartholeyns noted that the lack of pedagogy in the field is notable. For him, there are two ways of teaching visual culture—presenting the history of the field and *making* visual culture—but the two are hard to conciliate. Margaret Dikovitskaya linked the notion of education with that of science and recommended caution in bringing together the fields of visual studies, humanities and sciences, in order not to create an “academic ghetto” and for visual studies not to disappear. Signs of the collaboration between different fields of research are already visible in France:

the professorship in visual studies at Lille 3 was established within the History Department in an attempt, according to Gil Bartholeyns, to connect art history to humanities. The French field was under review during this symposium and a question was raised as to why the French tradition of the political critique of signs and images does not communicate with the more socially—and culturally—oriented outlook of visual studies. W.J.T. Mitchell showed that the comparison with American politics is striking: he chose to talk about the "Occupy Wall Street" movement to demonstrate that, in the United States, media coverage is a spectacle—an idea that is only starting to reach France.

- 24 A programme of the symposium can be found at: [http://www.ufr-anglais.univ-paris-diderot.fr/COLLOC\\_CHV/20111020-22FB/PROGRAMME%20VisualStudies\\_1\\_10\\_11-1.pdf](http://www.ufr-anglais.univ-paris-diderot.fr/COLLOC_CHV/20111020-22FB/PROGRAMME%20VisualStudies_1_10_11-1.pdf).
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## NOTES

1. So far in France, the field of visual studies has been restricted to two major poles of research at the LHIVIC (EHESS) and around the unique Visual Studies professorship held by Gil Bartholeyns at the Université Lille 3. A second professorship in Visual Studies is to be filled in Spring 2012 within the English Department of the Université Paris 7.
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