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Ian Verstegen

University of Georgia Studies Abroad, iversteg@uga.edu

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A Plea for a Cognitive Iconology within Visual Culture

Ian Verstegen

Abstract

A place is needed for a 'cognitive iconology' within "visual culture." Like Logical Positivism before it, visual culture must reexamine its tacit assumption that conflation of psycho-sociological contributions to visual meaning is an adequate methodology, and that sociologism is a worthwhile overriding philosophy. Cognitive iconology isolates the psychological contribution to the study of images and does not monopolize it but isolates the foundational basis for it on which narrower interpretations must be built. With examples from the work of Titian, it is shown how the cognitive and 'cultural' contributions must work together to make meaning. Using the philosophy of Maurice Mandelbaum, and the example of Rudolf Arnheim and his analysis of visual art, a foundational approach of cognitive iconology to visual culture is sketched.

Key Words

cognitive iconology, visual culture, art history, anthropology, psychology, perception, behavioral sciences, reductionism, Maurice Mandelbaum, Rudolf Arnheim, behaviorism, natural science, social science, cognitive gaze

1. Introduction

"Visual culture" is an egalitarian term that usefully unites practitioners from different disciplines to study jointly the communication by means of visual signs. As an art historian I applaud the opportunity to work more closely with psychologists, anthropologists and semioticians. However, at the same time I think it is useful to keep certain distinctions separate in order to make this collaboration more fruitful. This does not mean that an anthropologist is forever doomed to give only the 'anthropological' aspect of visual culture (as the art historian will be doomed to report on the 'art historical'). Rather I think it is useful for the anthropologist (and art historian) to know when they begin practicing a certain kind of theorizing of visual culture (to which both are welcome) and when instead they move on to practice another variety. I shall ultimately argue that a "cognitive iconology" will be indispensable for visual culture as a foundation to, but not a monopoly of, its resources.

'Cognitive,' 'perceptual' and 'psychological' are used here interchangeably to refer to psychological facts of the science of behavior (even though we are speaking mostly of sensory perception) true of all human beings, necessarily instantiated in, but not derivative, of culture.^[1] We must simply begin with the premise that there are psychological and societal contributions that make up a communicative act. A naïve conflationism, whether a pure mixture or a reductive psychologism or sociologism, will simply stall productive research. The missing psychological contribution to visual culture is precisely what I am calling 'cognitive iconology': 'cognitive' as a psychological indicator and 'iconology' as a reminder that the 'logic of images' includes both its historical

context and its psychological effects upon perceivers.

In this respect visual culture seems to be in a similar position that the behavioral sciences were in thirty years ago.^[2] Led then by the power of the 'unity of science' thesis of the logical positivists, psychologists and sociologists got together to mark out a common territory simply called the 'behavioral.' Unfortunately, this model of the complexity of science was purely atomistic and the emergence of different levels of behavior was simply predicated on new aggregates of behavioral units. Thus 'sociology' was simply that aspect of the behavioral sciences that treated the emergent aspects of people aggregated together - groups.

The weakness of this position can be seen in an extreme view of the tasks of psychology and sociology. How an individual deals with social stress, his or her individual symptoms and feelings, and methods of coping are obviously psychological, whereas the ways in which large-scale movements of groups in society lead to conflict is obviously sociological. What is the benefit of running these two entities together?

Today there are Departments of Communications that institutionalize a demarcational ambiguity. The simple existence of a hybrid discipline alone, however, should not offend us. After all, communication is one of the most urgent tasks before twenty-first century society and academic departments ought to train people to use all the resources at their command to promote it. What is objectionable is once again this carried-over conception of the Unity of Science. More specifically, the highly influential watered-down empiricism found in the quantitative methods of communications is objectionable. According to empiricism, we are justified in running together all communicative activity because it is all subject to statistical regularity and controlled prediction.^[3] Statistical regularity is phenomenal and is not a very impressive goal of a science that ought to look for generative mechanisms. Furthermore, as much post-positivist philosophy of science has argued, prediction is not symmetrical with explanation and there is no reason communications as a science need include prediction in its purview to remain scientific.^[4]

2. Conflationism

All of this is merely to take us back to visual culture to reexamine its positions, since it seems in its most conspicuous guises to espouse conflationism.^[5] Upon closer inspection, however, it can be seen to practice a conflation of a peculiar kind. Instead of making psychology and sociology meet somewhere in the middle as in the 'behavioral sciences,' visual culture tends to be reductive in the direction of sociology. Its strategy has been to demote the individual authority of visual signs in order to make them indexes of social movements. This was made clear ten years ago when Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson wrote that "the basic tenet of semiotics [which can stand in here for visual culture]. . . is antirealist," and this mandate was reaffirmed recently by Robert Nelson when he wrote that: "visuality belongs to the humanities or social sciences because its effects, contexts, values, and intentions are socially constructed."^[6] It is this sense of conflationism I propose to resist with a space staked

out for 'cognitive iconology.'

Let us take the case of a painting to see the consequences of such a view. Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (click to view illustration) in the Galleria degli Uffizi in Florence was painted in 1538 for the wedding of the future Duke and Duchess of Urbino (Guidobaldo II della Rovere and Giulia Varano), and depicts a reclining nude. [7] Approaching this image in terms of visual culture as a generic term means, presumably, that we muster the various tools necessary to understand it as a token of sixteenth-century visuality. This includes the contemporary's habits in consuming images of women, beliefs about marriage, notions of the power and efficacy of images and the charge of domestic spaces that would hold such a work. It can be seen that these various influences are extrinsic to the work, which remains a passive vessel awaiting illumination.

However, we run into an analogous problem as the psychological and sociological manifestations of "social stress" mentioned above. Not only will the question of Titian's feel of the relationship of compositional elements be quite different from his Venetian attitudes about erotic imagery in sixteenth century society, they will not be asked under the current slant of Visual Cultural discourse. Once again, we have to ask: what is the value of conflating these different aspects of the image?

There are some very good reasons for this conflationism. In refusing to lay boundaries, which may turn out anyway to be motivated by ideological disputes, visual culture can rest safe in not prematurely 'essentializing' its object of study. And in laying emphasis on the social nexus of culture, it can appear even more forcefully to do this. But I hope we can see the dangers here, when visual culture becomes a strange bedfellow of the positivism that it so universally despises in adopting a more current view of behavioral science.

The danger can be seen best in the example of Anthony Giddens, no poststructuralist of the kind that tends to inspire the visual culture community, but still close enough to their concerns to be instructive. [8] Giddens is most famous for espousing the 'duality of structure' by theorizing how agents both act voluntaristically and instantiate social structure by reproducing practices at the same time. In such a perspective, one cannot separate people from groups. The simplicity of individualism or holism is rejected in favor of a more complicated series of encultured individuals.

Giddens is about as horrified by sociological dualism (agent-society) as visual culture is of distinct meaning systems. But as interesting as Giddens makes cultural life with his process ontology, it possesses major conceptual shortcomings of the sort that could potentially endanger visual culture as well. Conflationism does not allow for the theorization of the subject's influence by society, and vice versa, because the two terms are not given any reality. This is all well and good until we realize that critique ends immediately. One cannot investigate the effect of a hypothetical social power on an individual who is held in brackets. [9]

3. Dualism

At this point I think it is absolutely essential that we make use

of a strongly ontological conception of a *natural* and a *social* science. This lies in the ontological properties of the "societal facts" at the disposal of the social sciences. Statements made regarding societal facts are irreducible to statements of, for example, psychological facts. Conversely, psychological, biological and physical facts have other relationships of emergence to one another but the significant fact is that, in contrast to societal facts that only have application within their particular social group, the other facts pertain equally to all people.

In a classic argument, Maurice Mandelbaum noted that if a Trobriand islander walks into a bank, and observes someone else withdrawing money, the only way that they will understand the transaction (or even know that it is a transaction) is by being informed of certain societal facts or rules upon which the transaction depends.^[10] These facts would include the fact that a bank is a savings institution and that upon the demonstration of a savings book these savings may be withdrawn, and that the level of savings correspondingly goes down. When one attempts to take such facts and reduce them to psychological terms, one finds that they possess a "gestalt" character, they are super-summative and cannot be reduced to the parts or individual acts themselves.^[11]

What is suggested here is that we distinguish between the natural and social sciences by the fact that the social sciences deal with societal facts irreducible to their individual cultures or sub-cultures while the natural sciences deal with facts common to all people. This separation also changes the burden of being a science. Even though the facts of a physics experiment are universal in all circumstances, we do not expect the physicist to explain how the conditions of the experiment came about (his or her sociological pressure to choose this kind of experiment over another). Likewise, we do not expect sociology to explain how the scientist's metabolism operates as s/he handles the experimental equipment. It follows that such demarcational foregrounding will be an important factor for productive studies of culture and, by extension, visual culture.

With what has been said, we can briefly think about how these elements might work in practice. An excellent example of the balancing of contributions in a single model is the cross-cultural theories of J. W. Berry.^[12] He attempts to explain variations in perceptual abilities in different cultures based on the "Law of Cultural Differentiation": "Cultural factors prescribe what shall be learned and at what age; consequently different cultural environments lead to the development of different patterns of ability." But instead of viewing his cross-cultural psychology as the mere registration of perceptual differences, he provides a model which takes into account the environment (ecology), basic principles of seeing and then cultural practices unique to the society.

Another example is the work by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson on "relevance theory" in linguistics.^[13] In distinction to "code theories" of cultural communication, they take for granted the psychological assumption that we seek meaning in communication ('relevance') to serve as the basis of

sociolinguistic investigation. Here relevance theory does not usurp sociolinguistics but makes for a more credible, larger theory of communication. Sperber and Wilson's semiotic concerns are quite close to visual culture and can serve as an important model.

Unfortunately, it is rare that researchers are as self-conscious as Berry, Sperber and Wilson. But it points to the possibility that pluralistic work can continue in visual culture, not because "anything goes," but more accurately because different discourses actually fit together if they do not claim exclusivity. A surprising source for this can be seen in discussions of the Gaze, where I believe that the under-girding of the literal, spatial or "positional" gaze and the Lacanian, psychoanalytic gaze (to borrow from the distinction of James Elkins) demonstrate what I am saying.[\[14\]](#)

4. The Cognitive Gaze

The psychoanalytic gaze has been developed as a component of Lacanian notions of subjectivity. The gaze represents the mirror-like view into the linguistic order, which reciprocally reinforces encultured subjectivity. In his analysis of Poussin's paintings, David Carrier notes how the French artist frustrates identification between subjects and also the viewer.[\[15\]](#) Poussin ultimately frustrates desire, the Lacanian name for the yearning toward closure of subjectivity and its mirror.

What is interesting about Carrier's analysis and others similar to it is the necessity of a positional analysis of gazes in a more literal sense that can underlie the psychoanalytic analysis. That is, Carrier must first sketch the relations of viewing and unreturned gazes (blindness) between the various figures of the image and their relation as a whole to the spectatorship of the viewer before he can outline the consequences for Poussin's attitudes to desire. Carrier hastens to stress that he is not a "formalist," but the point I am trying to make is that it may not so much be a matter of formalism vs. a Lacanian-informed notion of desire, but rather two parallel analyses of the Gaze that necessitate and reinforce each other. In fact, without the prior effect of the positional gazes, the Lacanian analysis would not be possible.

5. The Sociological Percept

These last observations look to expand a Visual Cultural analysis 'downward,' but we can do the same thing in a direction 'upward.' For example, it is often said that the psychology of art of Rudolf Arnheim is too naïve for present concerns in the analysis of images.[\[16\]](#) The same David Carrier writes how "Arnheim's essentially ahistorical way of thinking. . . treats art from all cultures as immediately accessible right now."[\[17\]](#) However, Arnheim is merely the most distinguished proponent of 'cognitive iconology' as utilized in its proper place.

Arnheim indeed outlines perceiving principles that he believes are operative for the artistic traditions of all people (i.e., psychologically). However, he does not exactly say that interpretation ends with what he says. It is true that he has never shown how his approach will ultimately mesh with a socio-historical account (as Gombrich, for example, has). But

as long as Arnheim does not rule out a realistic (i.e., causally efficacious) sociological element, there is the potential that he is simply maintaining disciplinary boundaries, rather than laying a large stake in interpretation.

If this is true then we should not be so hasty to oppose approaches per se as if they are concrete *interpretations*. That is to say, we ought to be able to agree that two different authors are not so much disagreeing with one another but offering different facets of the explanation of the image, that may or may not be true *for that facet*. It can be agreed that some such psychological explanation of the visual image is necessary for an explanation, in addition to a sociological explanation, but in its present form is not acceptable.

The reader may complain that this is merely a logical distinction of little value. I agree that more often than not a psychologically faceted explanation and a sociologically faceted explanation are actually warring *psychologicistic* and *sociologicistic* explanations. Arnheim's discussion of the development of Picasso's *Guernica* based largely on the unfolding of formal factors will not please others with more ideologically motivated interpretations of the work.^[18] He believes that only this initial exhaustion of the formal origin of the work can serve an adequate social reading.

But it is of the utmost importance that Arnheim is not denying the sociological (just as his opponent ought not to deny the psychological). Rather, it is causally inactive in his account. In other words, the explanation brings with it an implicit model of sociological (or conversely psychological) activity that in that case happens to be unimportant. In the Poussin example, the positional or cognitive structure of gazes and spectatorship made the more elaborate psychoanalytic interpretation possible but did not exhaust it. Conversely, Arnheim's interpretation of *Guernica* exposed certain cognitive facts that constrain any other interpretation.

Recalling this fact keeps before our eyes the need to think in terms of unified explanation. As soon as we oppose the 'formalist' and the 'semiotic' (or positivist and postmodern) interpretation we have sacrificed the complexity of the world and falsified the nature of our task of understanding visual culture.

6. An Example: Titian

With all this said, I want to return to my example of Titian's *Venus of Urbino* to see what advantages such demarcational foregrounding may bring. As noted, there are literally dozens of ways to approach this image. There is the diachronic debt of Titian to previous Venetian exemplars of reclining Venuses, most notably Palma Vecchio and Giorgione. There is also the diachronic tradition of wedding symbolism - roses, myrtle, *cassoni*, and a dog - discussed ably by Rona Goffen.^[19] A proponent of visual culture might be attracted to non-canonical readings of the work, those that do not stress so much Titian's formal development but the debt of the painting to popular imagery or a new, repressed content (as in Goffen's racy reading that this wedding gift features Venus masturbating herself as an augur to the young couple).

As stated before, all of these broad approaches stress social content at the peril of the humble perceptual-psychological. One might even take the recent arguments of Thomas Puttfarcken's *The Discovery of Pictorial Composition: Theories of Visual Order in Painting 1400-1800* as evidence that we have overstated the importance of visual composition, especially in the Renaissance, since works of this era were largely monumental and were more interested in relating to the viewer than balancing artfully their inner contents.[\[20\]](#) This would be a mistake, as a careful reading of Puttfarcken also reveals.

As I have stated, *some* psychological contribution is necessary because it is causally active in determining the further form or meaning of the work. This can be as trivial as saying that any social content must find its way to our minds through our senses but obviously there is more at stake. For any gesture, outlay of objects, or focusing is subject to the laws of perception that can and must be invoked to explain the conduit for the symbolism lying behind it.

Arnheim has not discussed Titian's *Venus* in print, but as a means of provoking discussion, his analysis of another nude, Goya's *La Maja Desnuda* (1797; [click for illustration](#)) in the Prado, is intriguing. Arnheim notes how the large visual center of the nude's head is reinforced with the knowing glance at the viewer, underscoring the activity of the mind behind it, but the visual center of the work places interest instead on the sexuality of the woman.[\[21\]](#) Inherent in the very composition of the work is a sophisticated statement of conflict between mind and body. This is a relatively low level of meaning that seems secure but admittedly says little about Goya, his ideas or his times. But this elementary meaning can support and undergird further levels of meaning that we may wish to find in the work.

As it turns out, although it is true that most of Titian's output was monumental paintings for altars, the *Venus* is easily a bedroom picture, smallish and more intimate, and therefore (according to Puttfarcken's criteria) more susceptible to active composing in the contemporary sense. As Puttfarcken shows with another of his examples from Titian, another work can convincingly be claimed to have been prematurely analyzed in simple compositional terms, Titian's *Ca' Pesaro Altarpiece* (1527; [click for illustration](#)) in the Franciscan church of Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari in Venice. But this work is especially enlightening for the importance and limits of an Arnheim-style compositional analysis. From head-on, the work is confusing because of the two columns that seem to cry out for interpretation. They upset the balance and have led all the way from suspecting they were later additions (conservation shows they were not), hailing Titian for his off-balance "baroque" composition, to a special iconographic significance referring to the Immaculate Virgin as the "Gate of Heaven."

Puttfarcken notes how this side chapel is approached along the nave of the church from an oblique angle and when seen from this position the two columns fit into a perspectival scheme weakly carrying on (since the columns don't exactly match) the actual interior of the church. So the old fashioned formal analyses of the composition were wrong after all.

Is composition as a category overthrown? The facts Puttfarcken is discussing are still perceptual (psychological): the work has not been seen from the proper distance and angle. No doubt the importance of photographs rather than *in situ* study of works of art has contributed to the puzzle of the painting. But the very principles that Arnheim (or some other psychologist) might muster for an analysis of the composition seen dead-on are just as applicable instead to the picture in a larger physical context. The issue here is the contemporaneity of perceptual forces acting together. They can act together with a simple direct view, or they can act together from a different view. But the nature of the act - perceptual viewing - has not changed, only the larger spatial context.

If this is so, we can say that a perceptual-compositional analysis of Titian's *Ca' Pesaro Altarpiece* from the simple direct view is correct but trivial because it says nothing about the real placement of the painting. Ironically, all of the elaborate iconographical interpretations of the work have relied on an implicit compositional idea of the picture that turns out to be wrong. Puttfarcken's oblique view, on the other hand (and assuming that his convincing argument is correct) has found the correct, causally efficacious perceptual view. It is this view that undergirds any further social-iconographical meaning we wish to find in the picture.

7. Conclusion

Finally returning to the *Venus*, I hope it is clear that the way in which anything that claims to be an "interpretation" of the work is not social at the peril of the psychological (or vice versa). Any such interpretation must presume an implicit psychological (or sociological) model. This should be foregrounded in studies of visual culture because it ought to aim for hybrid, causally realistic models of the communicative process. The sociological biases of visual culture are masked as a methodological circumspection that becomes, nevertheless, a disguised form of essentialism. To understand any phenomenon under study we have to call upon all the resources that are available to us. This will require a naturalistic dialogue about the ways in which different discourses fit together, as they must, for a unified picture of the meaning of a visual artifact. 'Cognitive iconology' takes as its object of study an important, but by no means the most important, set of these forces.

Endnotes

[1] Christopher Lloyd, *Explanation in Social History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 171; *The Structures of History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), pp. 149-152.

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[13] Dan Sperber & Deidre Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*. 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

[14] James Elkins, *How the Visual is Studied*. Unpublished book manuscript. Accessed August 20, 2003; <http://jameselkins.com/Texts/visualculturegaze.pdf>.

[15] David Carrier, "Blindness and the Representation of Desire," *Poussin's Paintings: A Study in Art-Historical Methodology* (University Park: Penn State University, 1993), pp. 105-144.

[16] Rudolf Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974); *The Power of the Center: A Theory of Composition in the Visual Arts* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988).

[17] David Carrier, 'Rudolf Arnheim as Art Historian', in *Rudolf*

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[18] Rudolf Arnheim, *The Genesis of a Painting: Picasso's Guernica* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1962).

[19] Rona Goffen, ed. *Titian's Venus of Urbino* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 63-90.

[20] Thomas Puttfarcken, *The Discovery of Pictorial Composition: Theories of Visual Order in Painting 1400-1800* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

[21] Arnheim, *The Power of the Center*, p. 129.

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Ian Verstegen

University of Georgia Studies Abroad

Via Roma, 9

52044 Cortona (AR)

Italy

iversteg@uga.edu

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