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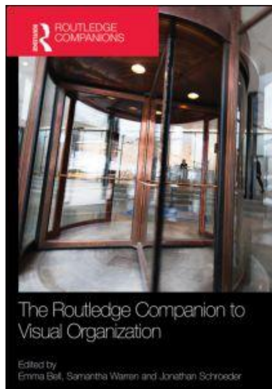

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Navigating the scattered and fragmented

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11

Navigating the scattered and fragmented

Visual rhetoric, visual studies, and visual communication

Kelly Norris Martin

Because of the attention devoted to the visual from a wide variety of disciplines, many of which use different approaches and techniques, visual research is often considered a place of turbulence and incoherence. As Smith *et al.* write, the field of visual communication 'is scattered and fragmented' (2005: xi). The term 'indiscipline,' proposed by Mitchell (1995) to describe inter-, cross-, and transdisciplinary work that is at the 'inner and outer boundaries of disciplines,' is therefore an accurate description of the visual research field. Although well-established disciplines such as art history, design history, and visual anthropology have established theoretical canons and methods, they too have entered conversations about the growth of visual research.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a general understanding of three main analytical approaches to visual research. Though it focuses primarily on literature from visual communication and rhetoric, the types of approaches identified may have relevance to other fields that study the visual. A recent meta-study of visual research in communication studies found three prevalent approaches to the visual:

> Studies that take a primarily rhetorical approach consider images and designs key occasions of persuasion[;] … studies that take primarily a semantic approach consider the visual as text in much the way that linguists look at language[;] … [and] studies that take primarily a pragmatic approach consider the visual a practice.
>
> *(Barnhurst et al. 2004: 629–630)*

Research that takes a primarily 'rhetorical approach' could evidently be classified as visual rhetoric studies; research that takes a primarily 'semantic approach' ('toward an internal logic of the visual' and including *anything* visual) could be classified as simply visual studies; and research that takes a pragmatic approach could be classified as empirical visual communication.

In this chapter, I discuss these three primary approaches to visual research. Each of them offers a distinct theoretical perspective and asks particular kinds of questions that, in turn, should determine the methodological choices of the researcher. Some would argue that the distinctions between them amount to academic bickering and turf wars, and, in some sense, these critics

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are correct. Much of the scholarship these approaches produce draws on common theorists and theories, and uses similar techniques, but there are slight differences – especially in regard to their history and treatment of the visual – that are important to acknowledge. For an illustration of these similarities and differences, see Figure 11.1.

In addition to outlining these three approaches and their corresponding methodological techniques, the chapter also reviews similarities and differences between them. Definitions of each of the three approaches and criticisms made of them are provided in Figure 11.2.

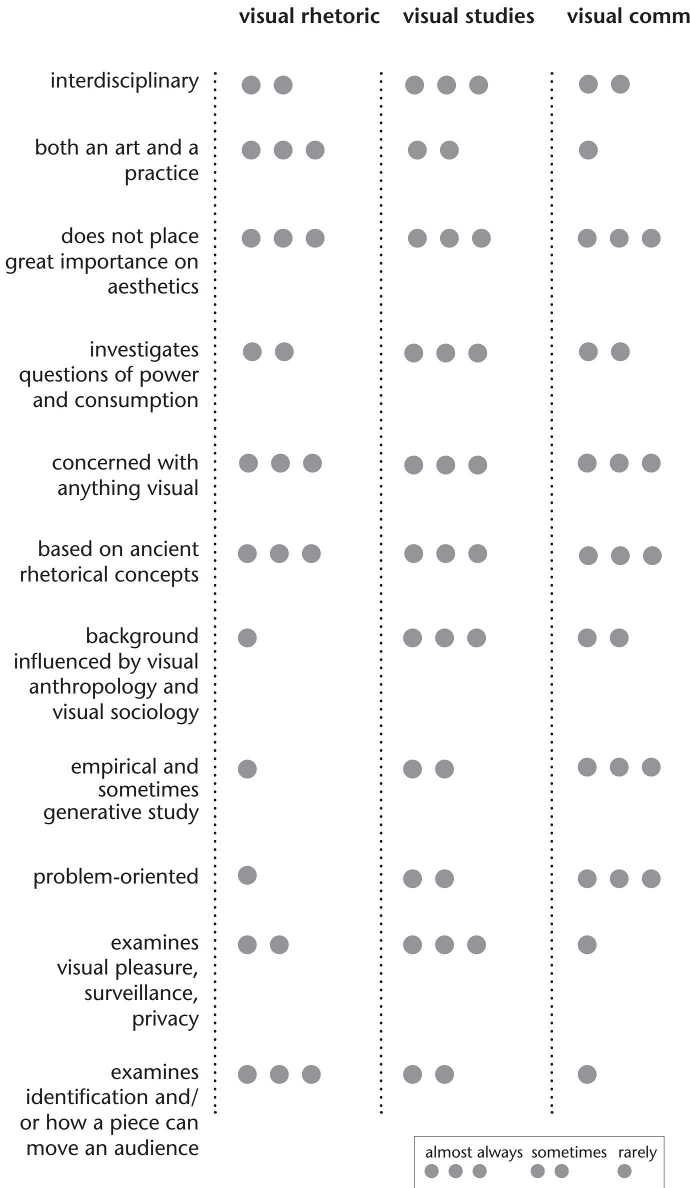

Figure 11.1 Comparison of three visual approaches

	visual rhetoric	visual studies	visual comm
definition	explores the connection between reflection and interpretation, historically situated ideas, and practices of design. It considers images as rational expressions of cultural meaning and examines the relationship between images and text	examines society's access to images and their entanglements in systems of meaning and power – "regards the visual image as the focal point in the processes through which meaning is made in a cultural context" (Dikovitskaya)	"an expanding subfield of communication science that uses social scientific methods to explain the production, distribution and reception processes, but also the meanings of mass-mediated visuals in contemporary social, cultural, economic, and political contexts" (Müller)
historic and potential criticisms	• may not be trained to deal with images or other forms of nondiscursive rhetoric • aesthetic concerns may be more important than some critics acknowledge • analyses may reveal only "stigmatized identity, crippled agency, distraction, diversion, nostalgia, self exhibition, exclusion, and the manipulation of collective memory" (Benson) • should try and support strategies and analyses by using findings from other areas of research such as cognitive studies • scholars do not test their analyses of rhetorical strategies against other findings using different strategies	• some analyses need deeper theoretical and methodological innovation • should be denser with existing visual theories and strategies • scattered subjects and untheorized choices of methods make it fairly simple to generate texts and unrewarding to compare one study to another • should be more attentive to neighboring and distant disciplines and less predictable in its politics • people may experience a type of looking that is different from voyeurism, fetishism and narcissism	• simply presents findings applicable to a specific group at a given time and even the more generalizable findings remain narrow in scope • there is the potential for critique but do not often arrive at philosophical, inventive, or artistic insight • rhetorical issues of framing and context would likely be valuable considerations • researcher may associate frequency of content with significance of content and also may use content categories without relating them to a theoretical perspective

Figure 11.2 Definitions and criticisms

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I continue the chapter by investigating the key concepts and theories associated with the three approaches, including their methods and disciplinary origins and linkages.

Visual rhetoric

Key concepts and theoretical assumptions

When referring to visual rhetoric, scholars use one of two common definitions. The meaning of one refers to the visual impact of the object itself. An example of how someone would write about visual rhetoric in this manner would be: 'the visual rhetoric of the political poster (or the advertisement, or whatever indicated visual artifact) helped constitute the incendiary nature of the organization.' The second refers to an approach rhetorical scholars have adopted to analyze the visual. An example of how it might appear in this manner would be: 'Gallagher (2004) used expertise in visual rhetoric to analyze the Civil War memorial.' Ott and Dickinson advance a short list of principles about which scholars of visual rhetoric agree:

> Visual rhetoric is a meaningful set of visible signs and therefore a mode of communication … 2) Visual rhetoric is rooted in looking, seeing, and visualizing and is fundamentally an optical process … (although process is registered viscerally by the body as well as symbolically by the mind) … 3) Forms of visual rhetoric are human constructions.
>
> *(2009: 392)*

Furthermore, visual rhetoric (as an approach for analyzing the visual) – which may also involve elements of semiotics, visual semantics, visual argument, and visual logic – explores the connection between reflection and interpretation, historically situated ideas, and practices of design. It considers images as rational expressions of cultural meaning and examines the relationship between images and text. It also assumes human beings are not passive recipients of messages but are active participants in shaping meaning. This is partly why visual rhetoric researchers do not assume function is synonymous with purpose. Therefore, they seek to discover how an image operates for its viewers instead of what was intended by the creator. Sometimes researchers of visual rhetoric self-identify as 'critics' because they believe the humanity of the critic is 'necessarily inherent' in the work (Sloan *et al.* 1971: 223), meaning that, because humans are not mechanical or electronic machines, there will always be a contextual influence in a study. The term 'critic' presents the researcher as an expert in the field but one who openly shares a critical viewpoint that naturally includes certain theoretical and social histories and perspectives.

Visual rhetoric involves persuasion, invention, and interpretation. Visual artifacts or images move an audience to action, awareness, or to certain values, but, through interpretive writing, the visual rhetoric critic may also persuade or enlighten his/her audience in regard to understanding the impact of the visual artifacts. It is suggested that rhetorical critics (as well as visual studies critics) have the power to advance stability or change based on their ability to provide a historical backdrop and social context.

Rhetorical critics also analyze visuals of the everyday. Once the field of rhetoric expanded to include other purviews, such as art and science (in addition to literature and speech), it also began to look at visuals encountered through mundane daily activities. In his analysis of the visual environment of Starbucks, Dickinson (2002) analyzed a Starbucks coffee shop by looking at the use of 'natural' colors, shapes, and materials. His goal was to determine how the visual and spatial elements of a coffee shop's interior make it a compelling place to visit. He found that the visual elements of the coffee's production and the interior design of the coffee house

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promote a sense of stabilized, localized authenticity. His argument was that Starbucks purposely draws on natural colors and materials in order to address society's growing dissatisfaction with mass production and feeling of up-rootedness to any particular geographical location. Because of Starbucks' consistency in their design elements throughout most of their stores, Dickinson's in-depth rhetorical analysis shows how material rhetoric can both constrain and enable interactions with our daily spaces.

Methodology

When rhetoric scholars met at the Speech Communication Association's Wingspread Conference in 1970[1] to reexamine how rhetorical criticism should be identified and to determine top priorities for the field, methodology was described as encompassing two poles: the 'critic-artist' and the 'critic-scientist' (Sloan *et al.* 1971). Visual rhetoric also incorporates these two poles methodologically. The rhetorical critic does not simply observe and report but takes his/her analysis a step further to illuminate contemporary rhetorical interactions. Although the concept of agency has lost momentum in the postmodern era,[2] it is traditionally an important notion for rhetorical critics because rhetorical criticism is both an art and a practice. Not only do critics espouse their agency within the interpretation and invention of their own writing,[3] but also they often make an effort to offer insights into how the visual artifact(s) may shed light on themes and possibilities that enhance agency in others.

Visual rhetoric critics will ask: how does this artifact move an audience to action? How does it teach? How does it exhibit certain values?[4] They also have the opportunity to evaluate an image, to assess whether it 'accomplishes the functions suggested by the image itself' (Foss 2004). Here, the critic would ask questions such as: What does it do? Is the image congruent with a particular ethical system? Does the image offer emancipatory options or improve the 'quality of the rhetorical environment?' (Foss 2005: 147). Instead of placing importance on the aesthetics of the visual, rhetorical critics examine how a piece can move an audience or how an audience may identify with a piece. They do not simply address their appreciation of the beautiful but inquire about the function of a visual artifact.

Olson *et al.* (2008) provide a useful review of some of the most common conceptual resources available to critics through the rhetorical tradition. These concepts, described as 'resources for analyzing and understanding symbolic acts of persuasion in context' (2008: 8), include visual argument, enthymeme, topoi, common rhetoric devices such as depiction and metaphor and Burke's notions of the tragic and comic frames, psychology of form, identification and representative anecdote. So, an organization, for example, might ask what kind of argument their website makes visually. Or what kind of messages does the visual environment of the workspace send to employees and clients? More recent concepts include ideograph, image event, rhetorical circulation, and iconic photograph. Olson *et al.* (2008) point out that critics of visual rhetoric also draw on transdisciplinary thinkers – who are also closely associated with visual culture/visual studies (see following section).

A familiar question posed to rhetorical researchers from scholars using other approaches is: why use rhetorical criticism to get at meanings of messages rather than just asking people what they think (by using a survey or interview)? One reason is that meaning is complex. A researcher might ask someone what he/she understood from a message multiple times and get a different answer every time. In addition, a researcher cannot rely on the intention of the message's creator because this is not the same message as may be interpreted by an audience. Another possible reason – though some scholars disagree with this argument – is that people may not be able to fully articulate meanings or articulate the meaning in enough detail or complexity.

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Just as artists have the ability to capture our deepest sense of emotion, wellbeing, or fear into a piece of artwork, a rhetorical critic may offer an analysis that takes an audience to a deeper sense of meaning. The rhetorical critic also tries to articulate a message in ways that others may not have considered before, thereby illuminating alternative meanings.

Limitations

One of the most frequent criticisms of visual rhetoric is that critics do not know how to produce the visual artifacts they study. Most critics of visual rhetoric do not teach students how to produce visual texts such as photography, filmmaking, design, etc. Hence, critics do not produce visual texts but only know how to act as 'a consumer, an agent by proxy at best' (Benson 2008). What more can rhetorical critics offer than an art historian or designer who has had extensive training with the visual? One way rhetorical scholars address this question is to say that evaluating an image according to rhetorical standards is different from aesthetic standards. Where designers or art historians are concerned with the aesthetic merits of a visual piece, rhetorical critics are concerned with the influence of image and the 'way images are constructed to affect such influence' (Foss 1994: 214).

Another criticism of visual rhetoric researchers comes from scholars of a social scientific visual communication approach. These scholars suggest that visual rhetoric scholars do not test their analyses of rhetorical strategies. For the past couple of decades, the rhetoric scholar Leah Ceccarelli has been urging critics to use what she calls 'reception studies' to test analyses against actual audience responses. Similarly, from a visual communication approach background, Kenney and Scott call for critics to learn how people identify with an image 'at the time' (2003: 49) by conducting ethnographies of symbolic action like Geertz or Baxandall. Otherwise, they write, rhetorical critics are accused of articulating conscious and unconscious intentions and interpretations of an audience based only on personal inferences and insights. Obviously, as with much qualitative research, rhetoric is constrained in regard to generalizability at the level of each individual study but the opportunity rhetoric affords is based on the generalizability of the theoretical ideas it promotes.

Scholars from visual studies and visual communication approaches also believe that visual rhetoric critics should try to support their analyses by using findings from other areas of research such as cognitive studies or neuroscience. The implication here is that the field of rhetoric sometimes becomes too specialized and loses its generalizable significance. The claim, as explained by McKeon (1987), is that, by supporting rhetorical analyses with evidence from other areas of research, visual rhetoric critics could possibly make firmer conclusions and 'discover intelligible patterns' (Buchanan 2001). Although supporting findings from other research disciplines may very well be helpful, if rhetorical critics arrive at interesting and helpful findings through rigorous interrogation of a visual artifact without any kind of supporting data from an outside discipline, this does not indicate that the rhetorical analysis cannot offer something relevant of its own merit. Researchers using a non-rhetoric approach will sometimes cite findings from a rhetorical analysis because they offer insights not addressed using other approaches (and vice versa). For instance, Kjærgaard (2010) in her content analysis study of nanotechnology in a Danish newspaper cites Faber's (2006) article on the rhetoric of nanoscience, even though this study does not support all conclusions with evidence from other areas of research.

Furthermore, and perhaps the strongest argument for a rhetorical approach, is that the concepts and criteria used in oral and written rhetoric are based on approaches grounded in 'making,' that is, in observing and theorizing effective practice and instructing students to produce rhetorical artifacts. These ancient rhetorical concepts and criteria have been tested for

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effectiveness since at least the fifth century BCE and are still primary concepts taught to students in writing and public speaking courses today. Even the visual was addressed in the ancient rhetorical concept of *enargiea* (vividness and energy), where speakers were encouraged to create a vivid image of their topic or to bring it before the eyes of their audience.

Visual studies

Key concepts and theoretical assumptions

Interdisciplinary visual scholarship, often referred to as 'visual studies' or 'visual culture,' examines society's access to images and their entanglements in systems of meaning and power. According to the California College of the Arts Visual Studies bachelor degree program, visual studies scholars ask such questions as: 'How do images work to support political regimes, religious systems, or institutions? How do they assist in the consumption of goods? To what extent do they condition our understanding of people, races and ethnicities, gender and sexual orientation, abilities and disabilities?'[5]

Depending on the context, the terms 'visual studies' and 'visual culture' are either carefully distinguished or indifferently conflated. For instance, Dikovitskaya defines visual studies as:

> Visual culture, also known as visual studies, is a new field for the study of the cultural construction of the visual in arts, media, and everyday life. It is a research area and a curricular initiative that regards the visual image as the focal point in the processes through which meaning is made in a cultural context.
>
> *(2006: 1)*

Elkins (2003), on the other hand, suggests that the terms cultural studies, visual culture, and visual studies have vague but significant differences. Although arguments are made that the history of visual studies dates back hundreds of years, most assign the term visual culture to art historian Michael Baxandall, who is considered one of the founders of visual studies. Visual studies emerged as a field of study 20 years after the publication of Baxandall's 1972 book *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*. His take on visual research was characterized by a fundamentally postmodernist point of view, a perspective taken up by many visual studies researchers. Baxandall argued that art historians should look at art through the experiences of viewers in the period. He urged artists to stop trying to control viewers' reactions and stop treating the exhibition as a static entity (Baxandall 1991: 40). Instead of writing about art from a viewpoint of connoisseurship, Baxandall studied artwork drawing from a variety of sources including the writing of ancient orators and mathematical manuals.

Today, cultural studies is defined as 'the search to understand the relationships of cultural production, consumption, belief and meaning, to social processes and institutions' (Lister and Wells 2001: 61). Along with Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart, Stuart Hall is considered one of the founding figures of British cultural studies. One of Hall's (1997) main concerns is with the concept of representation. He makes the argument that, because culture is about shared meanings, and meanings can only be shared through our common access to language, language, as a representational system, constructs meanings. Studies of visual culture hold many of the same principles as cultural studies except that studies of visual culture argue for the centrality of vision (as opposed to a focus on language in the written and spoken sense) in everyday experience. Furthermore, visual cultural studies is not considered a sub-division of cultural studies but

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a new method of analysis for the visual field. Visual culture is younger than cultural studies by several decades. With the late twentieth-century explosion of imaging and visualizing technologies (digitization, satellite imaging, new forms of medical imaging, virtual reality, etc.), it is suggested that 'everyday life has become "visual culture"' (Lister and Wells 2001: 61). Visual culture also refers to the values and identities that are visually constructed and communicated by a particular culture and 'to the enormous variety of visible two- and three-dimensional things that human beings produce and consume as part of their cultural and social lives' (Barnard 2001: 2). For instance, photographs, advertisements, and television programming are the first things that come to mind for many people when they think of visual data but this can also include objects and buildings, not just images.

Methods

Because visual studies researchers investigate questions of power and consumption, much of their research examines the concept of visual pleasure. Visual pleasure has been discussed in connection with power issues because scholars (especially film scholars) have argued that conventions of popular media are structured according to someone's viewing pleasure (most often male), where the camera (or tool that creates the image) disempowers those before its gaze (who are the subject of the image). Researchers of visual pleasure discuss concepts such as scopophilia and the gaze to elucidate various types of visual pleasure such as voyeurism, fetishism, and narcissism. Subjects of visual pleasure, the person or persons being viewed, essentially hand over control to the spectator whose work is 'one of prolonged observation, performed at the margins of a particular activity or event' (Azoulay 2005: 44). This control, or more specifically the gaze, is historically connected to the power of the male in society with the 'acknowledgement that much imagery is produced by men for men' (Schroeder 2002: 10).

Investigating the relationships of cultural production, consumption, belief, and meaning to social processes and institutions as they are exhibited visually also reveals issues of surveillance, privacy, and use of space (Emmison and Smith 2000: ix). In general, visual studies, as compared to cultural studies, owes less to Marxist theory and devotes more attention to Barthes, Baudrillard, Foucault, Lacan, and Benjamin. Therefore, visual studies is distanced from analyses that might lead to social action and more closely connected to culturally oriented sociological analyses and in particular what is seen.

The age of reproduction is also especially important for visual studies theorists because, as the image travels to the spectator, the meaning of images is permanently changed. Continuous reproduction results in images that are 'ephemeral, ubiquitous, insubstantial, available, valueless, and free' (Berger 1972: 32). Most visual studies researchers mark this era, where the image changes status, at the invention of photography. However, today, visual studies scholars must consider another era where spectators, and not just the experts, commonly produce images using digital software and online dissemination.

It is difficult to describe specifically the types of methods used by visual studies researchers. According to the journal *Visual Studies*, visual studies promotes 'acceptance and understanding of a wide range of methods, approaches, and paradigms that constitute image-based research.' It also states that visual studies is committed to promoting 'an interest in developing visual research methodology in all its various forms' and encourages 'research that employs a mixture of visual methods and analytical approaches within one study.'[6] However, it is safe to say that there is a critical interpretive component to any visual studies research, no matter what mixture of methods and analytical approaches is used in the study.

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Limitations

One of the most thorough and comprehensive discussions of the current state of visual studies is Elkins' 2003 book, *Visual Studies: A Skeptical Introduction*. Elkins claims that visual studies is 'too easy' and that '[the] scattered subjects and untheorized choices of methods make it fairly simple to generate texts and unrewarding to compare one study to another' (2003: 63). He proposes that visual studies needs to create texts of more lasting interest by balancing the innovative subject matter with strong theoretical and methodological innovation.

The three components of Elkins' arguments – that visual studies should be (1) 'Denser with theories and strategies,' (2) 'Warier of existing visual theories and more attentive to neighboring and distant disciplines,' and (3) 'less predictable in its politics' (ibid.: 65)[7] – are closely related and probably the harshest of his criticisms. However, many visual studies scholars argue that the field *does*, in fact, draw from dense theories and strategies. For example, one major resource for the canon of visual studies theory is Mirzoeff's *The Visual Culture Reader* (1998, 2002, 2012), a collection of essays that include works by Althusser, Balsamo, Barthes, Baudrillard, Debord, Descartes, Dubois, Lacan, Manovich, and many other writers. This thick collection of essays from well-respected authors (although Mirzoeff says it is impossible to represent the 'polymorphous field that visual culture is becoming' (2002: 21)) seems to indicate that visual studies does have its own set of theorists to draw from.

Communication scholars have also begun to question some of the assumptions made by visual studies scholars regarding power relationships. Finnegan (2006), a rhetorical critic from the discipline of communication, writes that there are three potential ways to frame 'communication as vision' – surveillance, spectacle and analogy. In her essay she argues that framing vision as surveillance is problematic because the dialectic of power relationships (e.g. 'the gaze' and someone being 'watched') impedes researchers' abilities to imagine relationships in different ways and 'blinds us to other interpretations' (2006: 62). Her problem with the notion of the spectacle (Debord's term for a 'social relationship between people that is mediated by images' (Debord 2000: 12)) is that audiences are passive viewers that absorb but do not engage. The spectacle turns attention away from materiality. Both visual studies concepts, surveillance and the spectacle, fall into the trap of iconophobia where vision is a dangerous one-way street. Instead, Finnegan argues that visual researchers should frame communication as vision through analogy, 'a perceptual process tied directly to how humans come to know and learn. It recognizes difference and attempts creatively to negotiate it by juxtaposing it with points of connection and similarity' (ibid.: 63).

An alternative to this could be a notion of visual wellbeing as described by Gallagher *et al.*: a 'state of feeling healthy, happy and content, of sensing vitality and prosperity, recognized precisely in one's experience of objects through the visual sense' (2011: 30). People may experience a type of looking that is different from the kinds of pleasures related to voyeurism, fetishism, and narcissism. They may experience visual pleasure that 'sustains them, that involves intersubjectivity and conscious experience' (ibid.: 30).

This commitment to a group of postmodern theorists inevitably results in visual studies analyses appearing predictable. Elkins notes, in his controversial *Skeptical Introduction* (2003), that an uncritical devotion to certain theoretical concepts makes the writing of the visual studies scholars predictable and uninteresting. However, the problem may not be that visual studies needs to move beyond its postmodern perspective but that it stops at a predictable conclusion without asking as Elkins puts it 'what distance from capitalist practices is optimal' (ibid.: 71). In other words, visual studies analyses are predictable because, like their contributions to theory, their insights do not go far enough. Visual studies does have great potential, but that is

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largely due to its openness to interdisciplinarity. As Finnegan points out, one of the strongest aspects of visual cultural studies is its focus on culture 'recognizes the ways that visuality frames our experience of the world' (2004: 244). Finnegan follows her assertion with a quote from W.J.T. Mitchell about visual culture: 'vision is a mode of cultural expression and human communication as fundamental and widespread as language' (Mitchell 1994: 540).

Visual communication

Key concepts and theoretical assumptions

Reviewing the literature, it becomes apparent that visual studies strongly influences and overlaps with visual communication research. However, visual studies research is not identical to visual communication. Visual studies and visual rhetoric perspectives are sometimes criticized for not using an entirely positivist or quantitative perspective as conceived by visual communication scholars. Critics argue that the material chosen for visual studies analyses appears to be selected to suit the analysis instead of illustrating a representative sample (Banks 2008). Visual communication scholars, on the other hand, conduct studies informed by a positivist perspective. The phrase 'visual communication' generally refers to the empirical and sometimes generative study of photography, television, film, advertising, drawing, illustration, etc. The purpose of these studies is to enable understanding of the creation, presentation, preservation, and support of media works as well as the effects and reception of audiences. Based on her understanding of visual communication as a problem-oriented approach, Müller offers this definition:

> Visual communication can be described as an expanding subfield of communication science that uses social scientific methods to explain the production, distribution and reception processes, but also the meanings of mass-mediated visuals in contemporary social, cultural, economic, and political contexts. Following an empirical, social scientific tradition that is based on a multidisciplinary background, visual communication research is problem-oriented, critical in its method, and pedagogical intentions, and aimed at understanding and explaining current visual phenomena and their implications for the immediate future.
>
> *(2007: 24)*

Methods

Because of this social scientific influence, research methods in visual communication are more empirical in design than in visual rhetoric or visual studies.[8] They use both qualitative and quantitative methods to 'explore the actual structuring, functioning and effects of visual phenomena in complex social, economic, political and cultural contexts' (Müller 2007: 19). The variety of contributing disciplines also results in the use of a variety of empirical methods – interviews, experiments, surveys, content analysis, diaries, visual ethnography, focus groups, visual-spatial intelligence tests, case studies, etc.

Limitations

With all of these research method options, scholars may ask what the specific methodological contribution of visual communication actually is. One of the most common methods used by visual communication researchers is content analysis. Most often viewed as a sophisticated method within communication science, content analysis is problematic in relation to images

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because of the difficulty of standardization. Visuals are not as easy to read because we do not have a dictionary or a grammar to apply to them as we do with written languages. Visual communication scholars sometimes use variations of traditional content analysis and employ interpretive and reception-based content analysis. According to Ahuvia, reception-based content analysis allows researchers 'to quantify how different audiences will understand text' (2001: 139) and, in interpretive content analysis, 'researchers go beyond quantifying the most straightforward denotative elements in a text' (ibid.: 139). With these two methods, the belief exists that readers' understanding of the artifact should be used as the basis for coding. The potential disadvantages to using content analysis with images (or using content analysis for any medium) are that the researcher may associate frequency of content with significance of content and also may use content categories without relating them to a theoretical perspective (Kenney 2009).

However, social semiotics theorists Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen and cognitive psychologist Donald Norman argue that content analysis is not more difficult using images instead of text because society does, in fact, utilize a grammar of visuals. Even with the overwhelming shifts in technology and globalization, the idea is to search out a framework in which scholars and practitioners may create, organize and analyze visuals according to an established grammar. Although postmodernists react negatively to the idea of a universal way of describing visual forms and their universal significance, there may be some fundamental strategies for reading images, as is also suggested by the concept of visual literacy, where audiences are able to 'read' or successfully understand the intended meaning of an image. Form may be influenced by such quantifiable sciences as ergonomics or economics, but in the final analysis design choices are made to satisfy conscious and subconscious desires (Heller 2004).

Another criticism of visual communication, noted by scholars committed to a visual rhetoric approach, is the amount of attention the social sciences and visual communication scholars devote to issues of rhetoric. As Simon points out,

> Broadly speaking, virtually all scholarly discourse is rhetorical in the sense that issues need to be named and framed, facts interpreted and conclusions justified; furthermore, in adapting arguments to ends, audience, and circumstances, the writer (or speaker) must adopt a persona, choose a style, and make judicious use of what Kenneth Burke has called the 'resources of ambiguity' in language.
>
> *(1990: 9)*

This statement applies to visual communication scholarship because, just as a writer or speaker must 'adopt a persona' and 'choose a style,'[9] so does the creator of a visual image. Artists, photojournalists, designers, etc. are often identified by their style and this is created by certain choices the visual author has enacted. Therefore, when conducting a visual communication study, rhetorical issues of framing and context are likely to be important considerations.

In addition to these observations, scholars of visual rhetoric and visual studies approaches sometimes criticize visual communication studies for not arriving at philosophical, inventive, or artistic insight. They argue that the studies appear limited in that they simply present findings applicable to a specific group at a given time and even more generalizable findings remain narrow in scope (Hill 2004; Scott 1994). However, almost all visual communication scholars approach their research post-positivistically recognizing that discretionary judgment is unavoidable in their research and that 'proving causality with certainty in explaining social phenomena is problematic, that knowledge is inherently embedded in historically specific paradigms and is therefore relative rather than absolute' (Patton 2002: 92). Therefore, many believe that multiple methods, both quantitative and qualitative, are needed to generate and test theory.

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Especially when using qualitative research methods, many, if not all, visual communication researchers embrace the interpretive skills needed to analyze the behaviors and beliefs of participants and situations. As Yanow mentions in Chapter 10 in this volume, the researcher needs to discern the meanings of visuals by engaging with their creators and/or users. Most visual communication researchers argue that, although their studies are specific to a certain context, if there is a sufficiently 'thick' description (Geertz 1973) in a study, two potentially similar contexts can be adequately assessed and transferability may be achieved. Transferability is a term proposed by education scholars Guba and Lincoln (1981) to account for the innate limit to naturalist generalizations. Their motivation for proposing the term stems from their belief that it is virtually impossible to imagine any human behavior that is not heavily influenced by context. They explain the concept: 'the degree of transferability is a direct function of the similarity between the two contexts … If context A and context B are "sufficiently" congruent, then working hypotheses from the sending originating context may be applicable in the receiving context' (Lincoln and Guba 1985: 124).

Concluding thoughts

Visual research has grown considerably and continues to disperse throughout many fields and disciplines. Critics insist that, with the increase in visual phenomena, more studies are conducted without sufficient rigor and without contributing to theory (Elkins 2003; Finnegan 2004; Müller 2007). Other scholars such as Mitchell argue that studying images, especially artistic images, makes them objects of science and that is not how the work was meant to be treated (Grønstad and Vågnes 2006); by treating the works as objects of science, the researcher may completely miss the deeper meaning or appropriate wonder or pleasure. Michael Ann Holly alludes to Heidegger in his evaluation of research methods in an interview: 'the manipulations and maneuvers of any research paradigm can contribute to the process of stripping the work of its awe, the awe that makes art still matter' (Smith 2008: 180). However, by recognizing that methods should not be the focal point of analysis and by understanding instead a variety of approaches, researchers may develop a better understanding of visual artifacts and avoid losing sight of what makes the visual notable in the first place.

Notes

1 Report of the Committee on the Advancement and Refinement of Rhetorical Criticism. In *The Prospect of Rhetoric: Report of the National Development Project*. Ed. Lloyd F. Bitzer and Edwin Black. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971, pp. 220–227.

2 Famous postmodern thinkers, such as Michel Foucault, do not consider the individual subject as a creative autonomous being but instead consider humans to be 'hedged in on all sides by social determinations' (Layder 1994: 95).

3 Though an argument could be made that agency is espoused through all writing in many different approaches to research, the concept of agency for the rhetorical researcher or critic is arguably more important because its history can be traced back to the humanist perspective of the sophists in the fifth century BCE. The sophists boasted a sincere confidence in the creative power of the word in the hands of an individual (Crick 2011). As mentioned in the discussion of the critic-artist and critic-scientist, a critical-interpretive work is considered an artistic as well as a pragmatic activity whose results cannot be quantified or measured but is judged with respect to how it enriches and broadens the experience of the audience. As with public speakers who learn their art through speaking, most rhetorical critics believe their research is conducted and improved upon through their writing. They also firmly believe that, as an expert of persuasion, the rhetorical critic has something special to offer an audience through their individual insights.

4 Many theories provide the basis for addressing these rhetorical questions. For instance, activity theory would be a very useful theory to investigate how an object may rhetorically move someone to action.
5 See http://www.universities.com/edu/Bachelor_degree_in_Visual_Studies_at_California_College_of_the_Arts.html.
6 See http://visualsociology.org/journal.html.
7 Though he does not go into the specifics of the politics, judging from other writings and interviews, it is likely he is referring to societal politics that designated academia as the generator of critical thinking. Standard political ideologies that are typically referenced include Adorno's Marxist critique and the Kantian Kritik. Elkins argues that many interesting ideas happen outside of academia and that they should also be considered in visual studies.
8 Though social science is often considered more empirical, rhetorical scholar Edwin Black once said that rhetorical criticism is fundamentally empirical because it is always grounded in the particular case.
9 Style in this sense refers to the characteristics of the writing itself and has also been defined as those figures that ornament discourse and represent the person writing.

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