Week 5

Visual analysis II: 'the visual construction of the social'

Overview

1. "Showing seeing" (Mitchell) – studying the visual – a basic problem

2. **Discourse analysis and practices of visibility**

3. Group research project exercise

4. Interview with guest

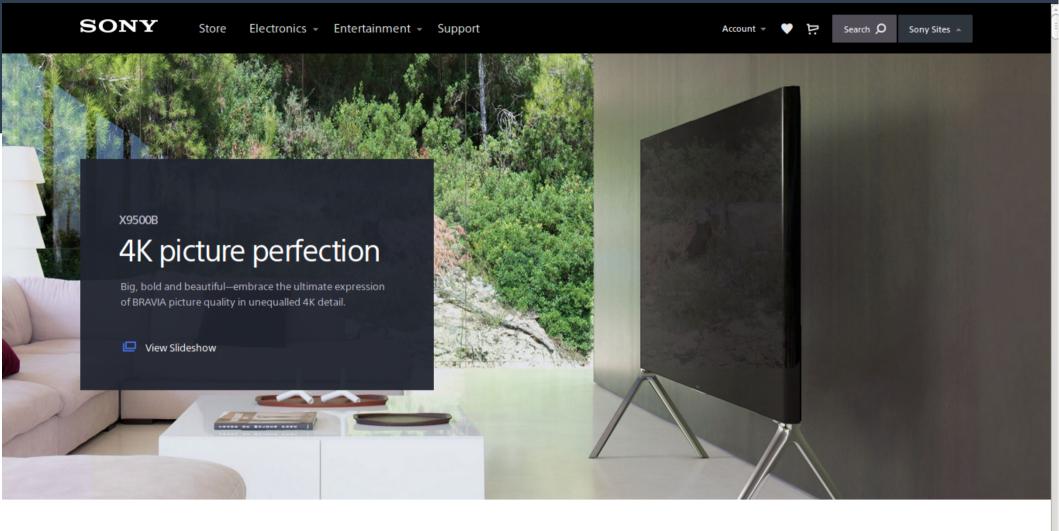# 'Showing seeing'

Reading for this week: Rose on 'discourse analysis' (Michel Foucault)

Key ideas:

- All media are mixed (no 'visual media')
- Not so much *social construction of vision* as **visual construction of the social**

Mitchell's idea of 'visual culture'

"I propose what I hope is a more nuanced and balanced approach located in the equivocation between the visual images as instrument and agency, the image as a tool for manipulation, on the one hand, and as an apparently autonomous source of its own purposes and meanings on the other. This approach would treat visual culture and visual images as go-betweens in social transactions, as a repertoire of screen images or templates that structure our encounters with other human beings" W.J.Mitchell, 'Showing Seeing', *Journal of Visual Culture,* 2002p. 176.

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Exercise: 'showing seeing'

- **Look at this screen – the one you are reading now**

- **Describe seeing it for people who have no visual culture**

  - You cannot assume that they know anything about eyes, images, light, colour, pictures, technologies, etc. and need all of that explained to them

Mitchell, 'Showing seeing'

In all of these locations I have found it useful to return to one of the earliest pedagogical rituals in American elementary education, the show and tell exercise. In this case, however, the object of the show and tell performance is the process of seeing itself, and the exercise could be called showing seeing. I ask the students to frame their presentations by assuming that they are ethnographers who come from, and are reporting back to, a society that has no concept of visual culture. They cannot take for granted that their audience has any familiarity with everyday notions such as color, line, eye contact, cosmetics, clothing, facial expressions, mirrors, glasses, or voyeurism, much less with photography, painting, sculpture or other so-called visual media. Visual culture is thus made to seem strange, exotic, and in need of explanation.

The assignment is thoroughly paradoxical, of course. The audience does in fact live in a visible world, and yet has to accept the fiction that it does not, and that everything which seems transparent and self-evident is in need of explanation. I leave it to the students to construct an enabling fiction. Some choose to ask the

- **"Show and tell exercise"**
  - Seeks to challenge our assumptions or taken for granted approaches to living in a 'visible world.'
  - Paradoxical exercise and requires an 'enabling fiction.'
  - What do we learn from it?

Part II: Discourse analysis

- Discourse analysis as a key method for textual/media environments (texts, meanings and readers)
- Discourse analysis as conceptualised by Michel Foucualt (1972): map groups of **statements** that structure of how things are thought and actions based on that thinking
- Discourse analysis involves reading/looking at things *and* at actions

'Visualities themselves are practices' (Rose, 550)

Discourse analysis as a method

- **Centred on Foucault's notion of a discourse:** groups of **statements** that **structure** the way a thing is thought, and the way we **act** on the basis of that thinking

- Discourse includes both language and things, what is said and what is seen, what is written and what is done

- Discourse analysis less concerned with **meaning** and more with **how** power **actually works in practice**

- For Foucault: **power is productive** (not just repressive!)

- Different emphases in later versions of discourse analysis – some on **language** ('critical discourse analysis' (Fairclough)) or **images,** and some on **practice/institutions**

Doing discourse analysis

- **Usually starts from authoritative account + lots of other sources** that relate to it

- No set number of sources, but sufficient quantity to generate complexity or tensions

- Try to forget preconceptions in reading/viewing the sources

- Look for **common features** across sources – similar conventions, styles, features – and perhaps code/tag images/texts

- Look for **different relations** or reactions to the same thing: complexities, **tensions, contradictions**

- Read with an eye for **details** that may indicate something taken-for-granted but neverthelss important

- Implicit challenge for researcher: how to **reflect** on their own position in relation to a discourse

Observing 'what happens when people look'

- **Practice**: what is routinely done, and involves **body**, **things**, **thinking**, **place** and **knowledge**

- Practices are fundamental to *performativity* (and hence experience and identity)

- **Exercise**: list examples of practice and say why they are practices

Discourse analysis of actions: visual practices and their importance

- **Focused on how institutions and subject-positions are made visible together:**

  – School:students/teacher;

  – Factory:worker;

  – Hospital/clinic: doctor/patient, etc

  – Media: spectator?

- **Each is a regime of visibility**

  – Each may use images but in different ways

Methodology for studying regimes of visibility

- **Look at institititutional apparatuses (architecture, laws, regulations, policies, theories, rules)**

- **Look at technologies – disparate sets of tools and methods assembled**
    - Compare photography as used in fashion magazine and photography as used in passports or forms of ID

- **Look at production, circulation and audiencing of images**
    - e.g. how are photographs used, stored, classified, valued, etc differently in different institutions

Sources for analysis of institutional apparatuses

- **Images and documents**

- **Architectures of specific places**

- **Websites and apps**

- **What experts, practitioners, professionals and participants say or do**

- **Wider discourses and institutions (governments, organisations)**

Sources for discourse analysis of technologies

- **Technologies of display, seeing, looking, searching,**

- **Textual technologies – labels, captions, indexes, print formats (booklet, pamphlet, article, etc.)**

- **Architectural technologies: entry points, facades, designated paths, thresholds, accessible vs inaccessible spaces**

- **Specialized spaces: studios, laboratories, control rooms, archives, etc.**

Example: 'Blood Swept Lands, Seas of Red', 2014

Group research project exercise A

- **Write a preliminary description of the institutional apparatuses, technologies and practices of audiencing that visually construct 'fake news'.**

- **Document this description using text and images on your group project online site.**

Preparation for the interview with Joe Deville

- **prepare 3 three questions in your groups for the visitor.**

- **The questions must** relate to methods for studying:

    - Visual/media construction of the social

    - Power relations and visibility

Next week:

ethnography and observing people in practice

- **Adam Fish**
- **Murthy reading**