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How To Practice Visual and Material Culture Studies? A Cultural Sociological Perspective

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How To Practice Visual and Material Culture Studies?

A Cultural Sociological Perspective

by Dominik Bartmanski

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We seem to be living in a time of revolutions which do get televised or at least tweeted, or both. Yet, for a given observer, most political upheavals are remote news about numerous distant struggles. Following countless observations of this fact, a contributor to this volume notes that ours is a culture of “media-ubiquity” and “image-saturation” [Frosh, 186]. Moreover, prominent visual media scholars argue, that visuality is as much about perception as it is – literally and figuratively – a political matter of concealment and spectacle, a “technique of colonial and imperial practice” [Mirzoeff 2013, xxxvii]. The editors of the present book concur.

The world is indeed full of conflict and associated visual strife. Each national outbreak has the potential of shaking the international stage and even punching above its own weight, provided it is properly shown and referenced. If this social process does happen, it is possible in no small measure because of sustained *visual* exposure that helps turn a given local *occurrence* into a translocal *event*, or – to use Bruno Latour’s parlance – “a matter of fact” into a “matter of concern.”

Conversely, if sustained visual exposure and iconic contextualization don’t happen, even genuine rebellion or tragedy may come across as underwhelming, or simply go unnoticed. All kinds of *media*, old and new, are the usual suspects here. Just about any social occurrence is subject to the constraining influence of visual framing and rhetorical deployment. Thus, *visibility and iconography* must be thematized, “practices of looking” [Sturken and Cartwright 2009] unravelled and the politics of visual culture scrutinized.

The editors of this volume, Gillian Rose and Divya Tolia-Kelly present an important collective project advancing that kind of perspective. They succeeded in gathering an interdisciplinary team documenting “how things are made visible.” There is more at stake in “Visuality/Materiality” though. Undoubtedly significant, the virtual technologies of communicative aesthetics do not exhaust the complex issue indicated by the title. The authors of the project team argue that the concrete object qualities, specific affordances of places, and practices *in situ* can hardly be ignored. *What* exactly happens and *where* are no small concerns. Physical accessibility counts, and so does the specificity of location and physical distribution of human and non-human entities. In short, “real” stuff matters in all its dimensions. We may also take a reverse shot and add: sheer materiality and its multiple exigencies continue to define the production of what passes for “real,” visible and thus socially meaningful, even if we now witness profound reconfigurations of the material.

Indeed, many contributors to this volume show that among the crucial variables are crude resources and fine infrastructures, our apartments and vehicles of mobility, space and place, cities and their mundane markets. The trick, however, is that sociologists cannot conceptualize them in an old-fashioned realist way anymore. Rather than separate inert entities, they are complex assemblages socially actualized through a multiplicity of intertwined practices and must be approached as such. Visuality scholars are invited to ask what people *do* with all these things and what these things do to people in turn. This is an important plea, one that facilitates potentially insightful combinations of sociological materialism with ethnographic sensibility.

If properly balanced, such a perspective reveals material patterns and performative regularities in momentous events, including revolts, even when they seem arbitrarily triggered and uniquely contextualized. From the Velvet Revolution of 1989 in Czechoslovakia to the more violent Turkish upheaval in 2013, civil struggles became resonant at the central sites of their capitals, Wenceslas Square and Taksim Square respectively. When the time is ripe, inner city plazas and avenues set the key stages for “making visible ‘the people’” [Berdahl 2003, 9]. Consequently, it is by no means negligible that the latter upheaval flared up precisely when Erdogan’s government decided to cut the trees in the adjacent park and to replace that inner city greenery with a supermarket and a mosque. The picture of a defenseless woman in a red dress attacked with tear gas by a policeman in a gas mask iconized the Istanbul protests not just by chance but due to its immanent material content which lent itself to iconic formalization.

In other words, concrete materialities, emplacements and embodiments remain crucial. Regardless of location and scale, social spaces matter and some are deemed

more symbolically charged and/or amenable to certain political appropriations than others. Both human and non-human configurations jointly activate certain meaning-structures whose social efficacy depends on the work of emotionally and cognitively invested carrier groups. Such binary codings as center/periphery persist as palpable socio-spatial divisions and several contributors to the volume, notably Sheller and Crang, convincingly show that they remain all too clearly, albeit intricately, related to material inequalities despite the alleged “deterritorialization” brought about by the information age. In sum, it is the politically charged nexus of visibility/materiality that this volume discusses and presents as the locus of new explanatory power.

Now, scholars who try to navigate the field need to deal not just with usual external challenges but also with internal structures of academic labor. Engaged experts emphasize that “whereas visual culture was first formulated above all as a critical project, the expanded field of visibility requires the production of new knowledges” [Mirzoeff 2013, xxxvi]. In addition to our socially rebellious times that beg understanding and inspire involvement, we are engaged in sciences that develop through more or less revolutionary “turns.” At least since Kuhn, and especially in social and cultural sciences, the paradigmatic shifts map the intellectual terrain [Bachmann-Medick 2007]. The challenge here is to position oneself in an outstanding way. Rose and Tolia-Kelly subscribe to the “material turn,” yet they rightly note that it is “more about a *re*-turn,” in particular the return to materialism fuelled by what they experience as “fear” of the idealism of the cultural turn. In order to situate their overall agenda not only as timely but also unprecedented and above all *critical*, the editors make two pivotal claims in the introduction explicitly dubbed “a manifesto for practice.”

First, they assert that none of the relevant *turns* in the social sciences has taken seriously “the co-constitution of visibility and materiality” [p. 2]. Second, because cultural objects are necessarily bundled with other things and the cultural turn is claimed to run the risk of “ephemeral account of society,” the editors infer that instead of *interpreting the meanings* of objects and images, it is necessary to shift attention to “matters of mediation, ethics, consumption, practice and translation” [p. 4]. It is not exactly clear, however, how this refashioned materialist gaze could prioritize phenomena of ethics and translation without any analysis of meaning. While their general scepticism towards logocentric and overly structuralist culturalism is warranted, the two specific claims are less so. Neither are other relevant “turns” unconcerned with materiality, nor is their culturalism as unreflexive and perniciously idealist as the reclaimed materialism would have it.

First, it is not quite correct to present the co-constitution argument as entirely novel and unprecedentedly serious. In one of the pioneering handbooks of visual

research, cultural sociologists Michael Emmison and Philip Smith emphasize the importance of objects, body language and all kinds of “three-dimensional data” vis-à-vis traditional accounts epitomized by such art historians as E.H. Gombrich [2000, viii-ix]. They also tried to come to terms with how “tensions between surveillance, visibility and privacy regulate our lives and our uses of space” [*ibidem*]. In the aptly entitled article “There are no visual media,” W.J.T. Mitchell [2005, 257] argued that “all media are, from the standpoint of sensory modality, ‘mixed media’.” Although Mitchell’s *pictorial turn* may indeed seem to privilege the visual over other sensory registers [see Bartmanski 2012, 9–11], the idea that representation is of a hybrid, multidimensional nature is suggested in his writings, and productively developed by subsequent generations of American cultural scholars.

For example, sociologist Terence McDonnell in his study of visual AIDS campaigns in Accra entitled “Cultural Objects as Objects” demonstrated that attention to materiality in the context of visibility is crucial because it “ultimately explains variation in the cultural power of cultural objects” [2010, 1803-1804]. Similarly, anthropologist Webb Keane clarified the limitations of purely representational conceptions of images and objects, and offered a synthetic framework that integrates meaning and matter instead of “privileging” any single category. Things are inextricably *entangled* with other things and humans [Hodder 2012], and “capable of transformations of meaning across time and space contexts” [Woodward 2007, 27]. As Keane writes, “in practice there is no way entirely to eliminate the factor of copresence, or what we might call bundling” [2005, 188]. In fact, according to Keane this is just the beginning, not an end point of new social theorizing, because only with a robust theory of such co-constitution one can develop what Kopytoff and Appadurai famously called the *biography* or *social life of things*.

These arguments are not explored by the editors even though Daniel Miller’s seminal volume “Materiality” featuring Keane’s study cited above explicitly thematizes their ramifications. Miller himself painstakingly argues that although empirically adequate, using the term *mutual constitution* is actually “much overused in contemporary anthropology” [2005, 45]. It is precisely in the name of *practice* when he notes that “while this becomes an insurance against reductionism or reification, the point, once made, would quickly become tedious.” Analytically distinct terms do provide heuristic devices, useful both for social scientists interested in holistic but fine-grained explanations *and* for those they study [*ibidem*]. In short, Anglophone cultural sciences did take the co-constitution argument seriously enough to build on it strong theoretical and empirical solutions.

Finally, within German *Kulturwissenschaften* Gottfried Boehm’s *iconic turn* has since the 1990s thematized copresence and agentic properties of things, showing that

images are not mere signs, and that therefore studying them requires a “science of the inner nexus of representation, presentation and presence” which is “necessarily a science of performance and experience” [2012, 22–23]. Although not explicitly critical and/or political, it by no means excludes materiality as a key factor, evident in works of German art historians like Horst Bredekamp or Hans Belting. With an exception of Mitchell’s work employed by Yglesias and Frosh, none of these relevant conceptual resources are systematically used for explanatory purposes in “Visuality/Materiality.” Perhaps *critical materialism* takes preference over *materiality* in the editors’ incisive agenda? This leads me to the second problem indicated above, namely their use of the meaning/matter dualism which glosses over important distinctions for the sake of programmatic simplicity.

It seems that because the editors are politically motivated to “privilege practice” via Marxist, feminist and post-colonial ideas, they foreground normative critique regarding research *problems* at the expense of adequate representation of research *categories*. This may help understand their decision *not* to be concerned with applying “the usual cultural logics,” the presumably detached, abstract, rationalistic, language-driven, somewhat static, and perhaps elitist historical methodologies insufficiently attuned to power. Instead, a “concern with a situated eye” and “attunement to embodied textures” are advocated. While including theories of embodiment and critique of “naturalized visibility” is of course spot-on, a blind spot of the manifesto is that as far as social life is concerned there is no materiality and visibility without *meaning*, just like the reverse is also the case. Focusing on the practical effects of political “ecologies of the visual” neither implies nor justifies downplaying the effects of structures of meaning and textuality, or what Keane theorizes as “semiotic ideology.” Here, too, we have a tightly woven interdependence.

This is a real matter of concern, which can be appreciated in a variety of unsuspected ways as well as misrepresented for ideological reasons. You can be a structuralist hermeneut and still offer a cogent critique of naturalistic fallacy [Alexander 2003, 91–92]. You can also be a critical materialist who misses the point that “the terms with which empire is criticized derive from precisely that same Enlightenment whose insistence on reason was attacked as the cause of imperial domination,” and that therefore “deconstructive antilogocentrism is a fraudulent basis for a critique of empire” [Berman 1998, 7]. In short, there is simply no escape from challenges of interpretation, in human life and human sciences, and an attempt to bracket or to theoretically subordinate meaning runs a risk of being analytically regressive, no matter how progressive it is politically. It would be an ephemeral idealism *à rebours*.

Some contributors to the volume realize precisely this predicament, and aim at more nuanced arguments, for example Paul Frosh whom I discuss below, or Mark Jackson who extends rather than supplants the semiotic register with “material vectors” by thematizing the “relationships of matter and meaning” in the case of Chinese Commodity City. Indeed, Rose and Tolia-Kelly apparently find the terms *interpretation* and *meaning* indispensable too, for they include both in the presentation of the phenomena their approach is concerned with; they feel compelled, however, to qualify the latter with the word “productive.” That the book’s overarching approach may indeed be more about a critical, “formal politics of materialism” than about *materiality* itself is evidenced in Jackson’s chapter: “what now needs critically attending is less an analysis of ideology than the political ontologies immanent in the thing itself” [p. 49]. To the extent that this may be the case, the book delivers some remarkable points. Yet, its title implies an analytically broader focus. In fact, a few contributions validate more balanced and complex stances matching the breadth and depth of the topic.

What the manifesto does unambiguously well, and the following substantive chapters develop in greater detail, is informing the readers just how socially consequential the workings of visibility are. Especially the first three contributions elaborate the editors’ observation that “there is no visual/material site of ideas, performance, phenomenon and practice which is secured away from the often violent, dirty, messy matters of surveillance, governance, money, rights and bodies” [p. 4].

First, Mimi Sheller offers a cultural reconstruction of the social biography of aluminum, from its extraction in the Caribbean to consumption patterns in the USA. She does not only describe “the rise of an aluminum material culture” but also the visually constituted relations between discrepant modernities. Aluminum is revealed to be a strategic resource and coveted commodity which “embodied the new aesthetics of modernism and futurism” and “set the modern West apart from the rest of the world” [p. 21]. Sheller rightly points out that aluminum was neither the first nor the last “new material” capable of profoundly transforming the world and “re-working the asymmetric material relations and visual circulations between centers and fringes of modernity” [p. 15]. Her chapter develops the argument that although “the light metal gave meaning to the design of modernity and continues to be a significant signal of progressive values,” the system of its production “just as effectively erased the modernity and humanity of the laborers” [p. 15]. This is indeed a distressingly familiar scheme, one that begs mentioning not only Benjamin’s remarks on iron but also the less known but staggering masterpiece by Adam Hochschild on the rubber boom and the resulting humanitarian disaster of monstrous proportions in Belgian Congo [Hochschild 1999].

If Sheller looks at the controversial industrial beginnings and the Janus-faced social life of iconic materials, Mike Crang provides a powerful sequel to this poignant issue by discussing a landscape of “cemeteries of steel.” He looks at the relatively underexposed, giant industrial wasteland near Chittagong in Bangladesh through the photographs of famous artists like Sebastiao Salgado. Doing that enables him not only to discuss the visual marginalization of the “residue of destruction” left by global industrial processes, but also to analyze the ways and conditions through which pictures transcend their indexical function and assume iconic meanings.

The flow of compelling sociological arguments by Sheller, Jackson and Crang is somewhat interrupted by the essays of Nirmal Puwar and Caren Yglesias. The paper of the former author, not included in the list of contributors, is a short vignette from New Delhi which tries to illustrate “the imbrication of materiality with visibility” through a description of the Indian Parliament building. The contribution by the latter entitled simply “Seeing Air” revolves around the more general question: “in what way does visual thinking benefit from drawing, not just abstract forms, but also materials?” While it is much more elaborate than the preceding piece, the topic seems to be a relative outlier compared with other, more sociologically-oriented papers. Nonetheless, a recognition of the three steps of design practice (sighting, siting and citing) helps systematize our understanding of this salient production of visibility and yields a theoretically important conclusion that “materials accrue significance when they are worked in ways where their materiality guides decisions about form” [p. 91].

All four remaining chapters bring the reader’s attention back to the specific technologies of perception and visibility. The one by Tsouvalis *et al.* offers a Latourian sociological examination of environmental science in action, i.e. a socially consequential intersection of natural and human-made materialities. The following study by Jacobs *et al.* revisits an emblematic site of Western urban modernity in Glasgow, reminiscent of the visions of Le Corbusier and materialized by the British state-led welfarism of the 1960s. By unraveling the materiality of a single architectural element, the *window* (a part), and thus showing what it means to approach a seemingly trivial object as a techno-cultural *assemblage* (complexity), they concisely but systematically shed light on the *broader vision of modernism* (a whole). This is an inspiring example of what might be called a material hermeneutics.

In addition to specific landscapes and cityscapes, Karen Wells adds a meditation on “deathscape” – the London-based spontaneous bottom-up memorials to two different victims of murder. She traces the panorama of emotional responses of the people who tried to commemorate the victims visually and thus endow their lives and abrupt deaths with meaning. The value of this analysis is indeed its capacity to

present those modes of memorialization as visualities that “provoke us to ask political questions about the unequal distribution of violence, risk and (in)security in the contemporary city” [p. 166].

The book is concluded with a theoretically dense piece by Paul Frosh. Occasionally burdened with avoidable jargon (“circulatory forms of connectional energy”, p. 174), this essay is nevertheless a fitting, accomplished closure of the volume. For one thing, it thematizes the ‘unconscious,’ or the ‘repressed’ of the visual: *inattention*. Second, following the visual artist and writer Victor Burgin, Frosh explains why “it is not an arbitrary fact that photographs are deployed so that we need not look at them for long” [p. 177], and so that another photograph follows quickly and invariably in order to maintain the relentless visual flow of modernity. Third, he explores and juxtaposes the modalities of the two key modern carriers of this flow: still photographic images and moving image of television.

Last but not least, it is in this text where one can find a sustained argument which ties together various key notions of the visuality studies as defined in this book: practice, object, indexicality, iconicity, and image. Importantly, Frosh explicitly cautions against simply inverting the received meaning/matter dualism and “privileging the extra-hermeneutic category of ‘material conditions’” [p. 175]. He advocates instead a “continual questioning and crossing of the matter-meaning distinction itself: no matter without meaning, and no meaning without matter” [*ibidem*]. This laudable element of reflexivity strengthens not just his interesting chapter but the whole diverse project it concludes.

In sum, the book is satisfying in important ways despite the somewhat exclusionary theoretical vision of its programmatic introduction. The contributions coalesce into a salient discourse of global scope and activist spirit. Had the editors approached the new theories of “cultural logics” more generously instead of typecasting them, they could have discovered their fruitful recent accomplishments and thus eschewed ritualistically turning them into the strawman. It is the complex category of *materiality* which opens up truly new, cutting-edge explanations, not *materialism*, which by itself obscures as much as it reveals. The latter perennially risks reductionism. It is the former that is capable of more epistemologically viable, integrative applications that apart from avoiding this risk can also accommodate what Michael Bull and Les Back call “thinking within a ‘democracy of the senses’,” a mode of analysis in which “no sense is privileged in relation to its counterparts” [Bull and Back 2005, 2]. It is precisely this context that enables us to see that materiality is too serious to be left to materialism. In the end, to be not only productive but also sustainable, both in life and science, we need to work out a fully multidimensional and open approach, one wary of political *and* analytical naivete.

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