



## **CRESC Working Paper Series**

Working Paper No. 51

**Writing the Visual**

**Andrew Hill**

CRESC, Open University

March 2008

For further information:

Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change (CRESC)  
Faculty of Social Sciences, The Open University,  
Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA, UK  
Tel: +44 (0)1908 654458 Fax: +44 (0)1908 654488

Email: [cresc@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:cresc@manchester.ac.uk) *or* [cresc@open.ac.uk](mailto:cresc@open.ac.uk)

Web: [www.cresc.ac.uk](http://www.cresc.ac.uk)

The support of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) is gratefully acknowledged.



## **Writing the Visual**

**Andrew Hill**

### **Abstract**

In the humanities and social sciences it is principally in written form that research on the visual has assumed the status of academic knowledge and circulated within the university. Despite this, scant attention has been paid to the effects writing the visual has had upon the terms in which the visual is conceived of and comprehended within academia. Jacques Lacan's ontological schema provides a means of conceptualising this relationship in terms of writing the visual entailing a move across ontological orders - from the Imaginary to the Symbolic. This paper examines the implications of this move for the status of the visual within the humanities and social sciences. It outlines four principal approaches to writing the visual in these fields: the humanist, the critical theoretical, the methodological, and the postmodern. Drawing upon Lacan's conception of 'the discourse of the university' the knowledge produced by each approach is situated as seeking to generate a different reader-student. These approaches to writing the visual are located in the broader context of the position of the university in society.

## Writing the Visual

The history of research on the visual is bound up with the history of the methodologies of this practice. The concern of this paper is to highlight and scrutinise an absence or blindspot that runs throughout the history of research on this area, specifically in the humanities and social sciences<sup>1</sup> - a fundamental absence in the sense that it constitutes a basis of the means by which the visual is incorporated into the research process and is consecrated as knowledge. Namely, that in researching the visual, the visual comes to be written about, and it is principally 'as written' that research on the visual circulates within academia. Whilst this may seem an obvious observation, it possesses significant ramifications for the terms in which academic knowledge of the visual comes to be produced, and is yet to have been scrutinised in sufficient detail.

In examining the writing of the visual this paper draws upon two specific aspects of Lacan's work: its concern with questions of ontology, as configured in terms of the tripartite schema of the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real; and the conception of 'the discourse of the university', one of the four discourses introduced in (the recently translated<sup>2</sup>) *Seminar XVII: the other side of psychoanalysis* ((2007) delivered in 1969-1970). The discourse of the university - and the terms in which the visual is brought within this discourse - serves to illuminate the broader position of the university in society, that constitutes a significant dimension to understanding how research on the visual is produced and comes to circulate within academia.

Whilst the concerns of this paper are not directed towards a strictly defined time period (as will become apparent, in commenting on the approach presented to writing the visual in the history of art), it is written from the perspective of the present and is addressed above all towards the contemporary university

### **i → S, academic knowledge**

The starting point for the analysis developed here is that it is as written about that the visual comes to assume the status of 'academic knowledge' - the knowledge that is produced by and circulates within academia, or the academic economy. It has rarely been the case that the visual 'by itself' - be it in the form of, for example, fine art, photography or film - has assumed the status of academic knowledge and been able to circulate in these terms<sup>3</sup>. Rather it is the writing on these and other aspects of the visual that has achieved the status of academic knowledge and is read, reviewed, refereed, responded to, referenced and submitted for auditing and assessment exercises in ways that the visual has not<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, writing that addresses the visual and yet includes no examples of the visual material discussed is frequently accorded the status of academic knowledge, as evinced in any number of academic journals devoted to film, visual culture and art.

Ryan Bishop and John Phillips' (2006) recent analysis of the terms in which the university functions as a 'knowledge apparatus' is revealing in regard to this issue in two respects. Firstly, they highlight the emphasis placed upon writing and 'the academic text' (explicitly a written text) in the functioning of this apparatus, with 'the written mark' (grammata) located as constituting 'the minimal unit of the knowledge apparatus' (188). At the same time, in their analysis Bishop and Phillips make no mention of the visual as a source or form of knowledge - an absence that can be read as symptomatic of the terms in which the visual is positioned outside of or beyond the range of academic knowledge.

How, then, can we begin to make sense of the effect that the need for the visual to be written about before it comes to constitute academic knowledge has upon the terms in which the visual is conceived of and comprehended within academia?

In terms of Lacan's ontological schema, writing the visual enacts a movement across ontological orders - from the Imaginary to the Symbolic. The Imaginary denotes the order of surface appearances and images - the level at which the individual subject encounters the world in visual terms. The Symbolic denotes the order of language<sup>5</sup> which doubles as the domain of what Lacan designates as 'the Law' - the linguistic-legal framework of the social order. In such terms, as Christian Metz observes in regard to cinema, research on the visual entails the attempt, 'to dis-engage the cinema-object [and here, the visual object more broadly] from the imaginary and to win it for the symbolic' ([1977] 1983: 3)<sup>6</sup>.

Whilst the interconnections between ontological orders became an increasing source of interest for Lacan (see, for example, Lacan 1974-75), each order retains its essential alterity from and non-equivalence to the other, designating a distinctive dimension to the terms in which the individual subject encounters the world. As such Lacan's schema provides a means of conceptualising the ways in which the process of writing the visual brings about a fundamental transfiguration, metamorphosis or as Julia Kristeva (1984: 59) terms it, 'transposition' - as in 'the transposition from a carnival scene to written text' - in the ontological status of the visual<sup>7</sup>. From the realm of the Imaginary, of visuality, seeing and sight, of the visual in its analogue complexity, with its qualities, if one is to follow the taxonomy Gillian Rose presents of the 'compositionality' of (still) images as including: content, perspective, colour (hue, saturation, value), volumes, rhythm and lines (2002: 38-53) - or Liz Wells' comments on the 'scale, tonal texture, colour intensity ... physicality and presence' of the image, and the way in which images, 'may be framed and inter-relate within particular environments' (2003: 429) - the visual comes to be transformed into and replaced by the grammata of the Symbolic, and as such is converted into the currency or minimal unit of the academic economy.

What then is the significance of the type of transformation the visual undergoes in being written about for understanding the relationship of the visual to academic knowledge? In undergoing this transformation, precisely what is visual about the visual (those qualities alluded to by Rose and Wells) comes to be lost, effaced or cast out, and replaced instead by the grammata of the Symbolic. In regard to the constitution of academic knowledge - as evident most clearly in those texts which address some aspect of the visual without including any images alongside the text - the visual can be seen as coming to assume the status of what in linguistics and information science is designated as 'redundancy': that which is no longer considered necessary for a statement or process to function.

The nature and scale of the transformation that takes place in this movement from the Imaginary to the Symbolic is highlighted in David Macdougall's observation - in contrasting the different epistemological qualities of writing and film - that, 'If a writer attempted to sketch in more than the basic details of a scene it would go on for ever' (2006: 34) - an observation that attests to the gap that exists between the Symbolic and the Imaginary, and the sense that no matter the attempts to move from the former to the latter, no such bridging of this gap can be achieved by writing alone. At the same time the division between these two orders is highlighted by a simple experiment derived from the adage, 'A picture's worth a thousand words'. Given one hundred, one thousand, or one hundred thousand words to describe an image - with what degree of accuracy would the reader be able to picture this work if they had never seen it before? How far would they be able to reproduce it accurately in their imagination? No matter the detail of the description it is likely that few (if any?) respondents would reproduce an 'accurate' reproduction of the image in their imaginations<sup>8</sup>. (Indeed greater detail may lead to greater variance, as the number of words multiplies the possibilities for imagining different features of the image described). Evident here is, as

Foucault contends in *The Order of Things* (1970: 9) in discussing Velazquez's *Las Meninas*, 'a language inevitably inadequate to the visible fact':

It is not that words are imperfect, or that, when confronted with the visible, they prove insuperably inadequate. Neither can be reduced to the other's terms: it is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say. And it is in vain that we attempt to show, by the use of images, metaphors or similes, what we are saying; the space where they achieve their splendour is not that deployed by our eyes but that defined by the sequential elements of syntax (9)

Foucault's assessment has provided a point of reference for others (Mitchell 1994; Shapiro 2007), and yet beyond the declaration of this gap, what is missing from Foucault's account (and the work that draws upon it), is an attempt to develop an ontological framework which can be applied and works to illuminate this relationship (an issue returned to later).

An initial rejoinder to the sense in which the visual is rendered 'redundant' might be that it fails to pay sufficient attention to the way in which research on the visual can include images of the visual material that is discussed - and as such the visual remains co-present with the text, (alongside it, or on another page). This though is by no means always the case. The inclusion of visual material differs widely between different published outputs, with research on the moving image rarely (up to recently, never) able to include moving images<sup>9</sup>. Furthermore, there is the question of the relationship between a reproduction of the object - in the form of a copy or photograph of it, and the object in its 'original' form (if such a form exists)<sup>10</sup>. More crucially for this discussion, where visual material accompanies a written text it is the latter that has typically been recognised as constituting knowledge. This is evinced in the terms in which writing about the visual can assume the status of knowledge (in, for example, journal articles which whilst discussing the visual, include no visual material), and yet the visual by itself does not. As such, in terms of the constitution of academic knowledge, when visual material does appear alongside a text it is typically relegated to the role of supplement to the written text<sup>11</sup>.

### **The discourse of the university #1, four approaches**

The processes outlined above cannot be separated or removed from the institutional context in which they occur - and the terms in which this serves to condition and structure them.

The metamorphosis into the Symbolic and academic knowledge that the visual undergoes in being written about provides a precondition for research on the visual to be incorporated within what Lacan, in *Seminar XVII*, conceptualises as 'the discourse of the university', one of the four discourses (along with that of the master, the hysteric and the analyst) he identifies as serving to structure social ties or linkages. Each of these four discourses take the form of an equation, or 'matheme', formed from the same four elements revolved through a quarter turn, with the position occupied by the elements in this matheme determining the role they play in each of the four discourses<sup>12</sup>. The discourse of the university designates the terms in which knowledge (or 'science', this discourse might more broadly be called the discourse of science) serves to structure these ties, and takes the following form:

$$\begin{array}{ccc} \underline{S2} & \rightarrow & \underline{a} \\ S1 & & \$ \end{array}$$

Here S2, knowledge, assumes the position of the active agent of this discourse, which is imparted to the *objet petit a* (a in the matheme) - in Lacan's thought that which functions as the object-cause or catalyst of the subject's desire. The position of the product of this discourse (the bottom right hand corner) is the individual subject in their relationship to

language (\$) . As such this discourse seeks, through the effects of knowledge upon desire, to generate a certain type of subject. And yet, the status of knowledge is underpinned by the presence of ‘the master signifier’ (S1) - that which, simply put, designates the assertion of mastery at the level of the Symbolic, and which occupies the position (bottom left hand corner) of ‘truth’ in each of the four discourses. (The attempt at mastery that stands behind the assertion of knowledge will be discussed in greater detail below). Whilst this discourse is at one level addressed toward the terms in which social relations are structured broadly - with particular relevance to late modernity (Lacan 2007: 148) (in which Lacan identifies the discourse of the university as having come to supersede that of the master<sup>13</sup>), the concern here is with how this discourse functions specifically in regard to the university.

The process of writing the visual constitutes the attempt (through the labour of the researcher / ‘research active’ academic) to bring the visual-imaginary into the discourse of the university by transforming it into S2 - the realm of the Symbolic, the signifying chain and knowledge - as set out in the following addition to the matheme:

$$\begin{array}{ccc} (i \rightarrow) & \underline{S2} & \rightarrow & \underline{a} \\ & S1 & & \$ \end{array}$$

Here, the ‘i’ - the imaginary in Lacanian algebra - is that which is transformed into knowledge (S2) and which comes to circulate within this discourse.

It is the differing terms in the Imaginary is transformed into academic knowledge ( $i \rightarrow S2$ ) that takes place in the act of writing the visual, that I now want to turn to in regard to four principal and pervasive approaches to writing the visual in the university, the terms in which they function in regard to this discourse and its matheme, and the type of academic knowledge they give rise to: ‘the humanistic’ (or ‘art historical’), ‘the ideological’ (or ‘critical theoretical’), ‘the methodological’, and ‘the postmodern’. (These four approaches do not, of course, cover the entire range of ways of writing the visual within the university, or even in the social sciences and humanities - beyond which there also stands the scientific: including the medical-optometric and the psychological - rather they constitute significant exemplars of the terms in which this has taken place).

### **a) ‘The humanist’ (or ‘art historical’)**

The first of these approaches, that constitutes the dominant approach to writing the visual up until the mid-twentieth century, can be traced back to the Renaissance and the emergence of the history of art as a discipline - as associated perhaps above all with the appearance of Vasari’s *Lives of the Artists* (first version 1550). As James Elkins (2002) argues, in his study of the poetics of those survey books attempt to provide the story of art that in a single volume - such an approach to writing the visual is bound up with the emergence of Renaissance humanism, and the contention that art history only arose at this time, ‘because it became possible to write about the artistic qualities of works without referring to their religious values’ (114).

At the core of this approach lies a cluster of humanist conceptions and concerns, focused on the individual Artist and the means by which they developed and displayed their (learned) skill and (innate) talent - as traced in the compositional qualities of their work. (Furthermore, as Elkins observes, running through the story of the development of compositional qualities that repeatedly figures in the histories of art produced by this approach, can be traced a metanarrative of an ever enhanced ‘realism’ - that accords with the humanist desire for, and belief in, the capacity of the artist to record and represent the ‘reality’ of the world, and ‘what it means to be human’ within this reality).

Perhaps the best known and most influential version of such an approach to writing the visual is E.H. Gombrich's *The Story of Art* (1995 (sixteenth edition), first published in 1950), as evident in the following account (selected from many such possible examples) of Bellini's *Madonna with Saints* (1505):

When one enters the little church of San Zaccaria in Venice and stands before the picture ... one immediately notices that his approach to colour was very different. Not that the picture is particularly bright or shining. It is rather the mellowness and richness of the colours that impress one before one even begins to look at what the picture represents. I think that even the photograph [reproduction in the book] conveys something of the warm and gilded atmosphere which fills the niche in which the Virgin sits enthroned, with the infant Jesus lifting His little hands to bless the worshippers before the altar. An angel at the foot of the altar softly plays the violin, while the saints stand quietly at either side of the throne: St Peter with his key and book, St Catherine with the palm of the martyrdom and the broken wheel, St Lucy and St Jerome, the scholar who translated the Bible into Latin, and whom Bellini therefore represented as reading a book. Many Madonnas with saints have been painted before and after, in Italy and elsewhere, but few were ever conceived with such dignity and repose. ... Bellini knew how to bring life into this simple symmetrical arrangement without upsetting its order. He also knew how to turn the traditional figures of the Virgin and saints into real and living beings without divesting them of their holy character and dignity. He did not even sacrifice the variety and individuality of real life ... St Catherine with her dreamy smile, and St Jerome, the old scholar engrossed in his book, are real enough in their own ways, although they, too ... seem to belong to another more serene and beautiful world, a world transfused with that warm and supernatural light that fills the picture (326-329).

As Marcia Pointon (1997: 87) observes, in its concern to document and attempt to convey the compositional qualities of a work of art, such an account reflects the terms in which this approach developed prior to the emergence of photography and the techniques of reproduction associated with the technology - when many readers would have had little chance to encounter the work discussed. The roots of such an approach can be traced back further than this though, to the Greek notion of 'ekphrasis' (reflecting the fact that humanism drew heavily upon the ancients): the attempt to recreate one type of work of art in another medium, and in so doing enhance the terms in which the original work is appreciated and experienced<sup>14</sup>. Indeed, a key vector in this approach to writing the visual is the facilitating of an appreciation of the history of art as an integral aspect of the cultivation of the Individual - as reflected in practices as various as the eighteenth century Grand Tour (an echo of which might be read in the opening of the passage quoted from Gombrich, that brings us into the church where Bellini's painting hangs), through to the perceived benefits of a twentieth century liberal arts education. In terms of the discourse of the university, the object cause (*objet petit a*) for the subject-student (\$) intended to be produced by this approach to writing the visual, is the 'good taste', or 'cultivated outlook' - or what we might after Bourdieu now call cultural capital - that derives from the knowledge produced by this approach.

What typically remains absent from this approach to writing the visual though is any reflection upon the methodologies by which such accounts are produced. As Rose (2000: 54) contends, this approach is 'methodologically silent' (and as Elkins (1988) adds, typically avoids declaring a theoretical position). At the same time, it typically occludes a reflection on the terms in which the act of writing constructs these accounts. Indeed, the very lack of reflexivity about such questions and the sense of definitude and facticity that permeates such an approach accords with the humanist standpoint, in which the Individual is conceived of as a certain, definite presence which provides the originary source of knowledge, as well as artistic practice (every Individual a little Master).

Whilst this approach is above all associated with the history of fine art, it has been present in writing on other aspects of visual culture, particularly in the period prior to the emergence of the following three approaches - and whilst challenged by the other approaches explored here, it is not the case that it has simply disappeared. Marilyn Stokstad's *Art History* (1995) presents the most recent version of these grand survey books. Whilst it attempts to relate the works it discusses more explicitly to their socio-historical context than previous such accounts (in so doing following the broader 'insuperable' changes in the writing of history), as Elkins (2002: 75-76) contends, it displays a certain flatness, or neutered quality - as evident in the following discussion of Bernini's *Saint Teresa of Avila in Ecstasy* (1652) in which Bernini's work:

Represents a vision described by the saint, in which an angel pierced Teresa's body repeatedly with an arrow, transporting her to a state of religious ecstasy, a sense of oneness with God. The saint and the angel, who seem to float upward on moisture-laden clouds, are cut from a heavy mass of solid marble supported on a hidden pedestal and by metal bars sunk deep into the chapel wall. Bernini's skill at capturing the movements and emotions of these figures is matched by his virtuosity in simulating different textures and colours in the pure white medium of marble; the angel's gauzy, clinging draperies seem silken in contrast with Teresa's heavy woollen robe, the habit of her order (1995: 760-761).

Evident here is an instance, as Elkins' observes in his critique of Stokstad's work, of 'carefully worded descriptions reserving judgements and usually trying for an open-minded attitude' (2001: 75), which gives rise to a sense of being, 'oddly purposeless - as if art history had no real story to tell, and was just a rote chronicle of facts', with, 'the avalanche of names and facts' ensuring, 'that the book as whole has no message or story line'. (Indeed, we are some distance in the blandness of Stokstad's account from Lacan's (1998: 76) identification of Bernini's work as an exemplary depiction of feminine jouissance).

Indeed, Stokstad's work can be read as symptomatic of the decline of faith in the humanist standpoint - in part borne from the critique of its class, gender and ethnic bias, highlighted in approach (b), and from the rise of Theory in the academy<sup>15</sup> - to which Elkins (2002: 85-86) adds his early 21<sup>st</sup> century voice in questioning the purported value to the subject-student of knowledge of the history of art: 'Does it really matter if you can drop an intelligent line or two about the *David* at a party? Is your life really better for knowing about the Renaissance?' - questions that to Gombrich and his predecessors would I imagine seem quite bizarre.

## **b) 'The ideological' (or 'critical theoretical')**

The second approach first came to the fore around the late 1960s. In part it can be situated as a reaction to approach (a), and the recognition that the sphere of culture constitutes an integral dimension of the political (in one respect through the 'growth' of this sphere witnessed in the expansion of mass culture). Above all it can be seen to evolve from out of Marx's work and to be prefigured by the Frankfurt School (whose work paid comparatively slight attention to the visual compared with say music or radio)<sup>16</sup>.

The prominence arrived at by this approach can be traced back to the appearance of a cluster of key texts - Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* (1957) (not published in English until 1972), with its analysis of photography, advertising and cinema; John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1972), which appeared as a BBC television series accompanied by a book, and its concern with painting and advertising; and the work in France post-1968 of a politically orientated *Cahiers du Cinema*, and in the UK of *Screen* - with their joint focuses on cinema and television. .



At the heart of this approach lies the desire to identify and illuminate the terms in which the visual comes to play an ideological function in working to sustain and reproduce socio-political inequalities. Where approach (a) was borne out of an engagement with 'fine art', this approach is addressed towards the breadth of contemporary visual culture. (Furthermore, this approach has to an extent filtered back into art history).

Berger's *Ways of Seeing* is of particular relevance for this discussion - not simply for the prominence accorded to it in the development of this approach - but for the staging it presents towards its opening of a confrontation between this approach and approach (a), via an analysis of Seymour Slive's (1989) study of Frans Hals. Indeed, the passage Berger quotes from Slive's work in regard to Hals' painting, *Regentesses of the Old Men's Almshouse* (1664), serves to cast further light on approach (a):

Each woman speaks to us of the human condition with equal importance. Each woman stands out with equal clarity against the enormous dark surface, yet they are linked by a firm rhythmical arrangement and the subdued diagonal pattern formed by their heads and hands. Subtle modulations of the deep, glowing backs contribute to the harmonious fusion of the whole and form an unforgettable contrast with the powerful whites and vivid flesh tones where the detached strokes reach a peak of breadth and strength (1972: 13)

Evident here (perhaps more explicitly so than in the examples from Gombrich and Stokstad) is a concern with 'the human condition' and the notion that a commentary on this condition is readable in a work's compositional qualities.

The focus of Berger's critique of this approach and its mode of supposed, 'disinterested art appreciation' (13), is that it works to conceal the social antagonisms at work in the painting, so that, 'All conflict disappears', and, 'one is left with the unchanging 'human condition', and the painting considered as a marvellously made object'. In contrast to such an approach, Berger's concern with this painting is directed towards the class inequalities at play in its production. He emphasises Hals' poverty at the time he produced this work and the fact that he was a resident of the very almshouse governed by the regentesses he depicts. Berger's broad desire though, as he makes explicit, is to emphasise the way in which, 'the entire art of the past has now become a political issue' (33).

It is this issue of the terms in which visual culture figures as a political question, that alongside and following Berger's work - with its Marxist, class based focus - has been taken up and applied to questions of identity politics, including gender (that Berger also devotes a chapter to), race and ethnicity (see for example Smith 1999; Wallace 2004), and sexuality (see for example Horne et al. 1996; Blake et al. 1995). *Screen* - in its most explicitly political period in the 1970s presented a somewhat different approach to these concerns (influenced by *Cahiers du Cinema*) - in providing a forum for psychoanalytically inflected readings of questions of spectatorship and visibility and their relationship to the ways in which the individual subject is constructed in regard to the political. Perhaps the best known example of this work is Laura Mulvey's (1975) essay on cinema and the gendered gaze.

In terms of the discourse of the university, the purpose of this knowledge can be delineated as producing a politicised subject, sensitive to the intersections between the ideological and the visual, with the *objet petit a* in this discourse coming to constitute political 'enlightenment', and it would be fair to say (following Marx's desire to not only understand the world but change it) political action. Indeed, the period in which this approach was perhaps most vibrant and influential - from the late 1960s through into the 1980s - accords with the high period of the politicisation of the university, and what Andrew Wernick (2006: 561) in an overview of the concept of the institution, terms, 'authority-hating zones of surplus consciousness'.

Whilst such an approach to writing the visual has not disappeared, it has come to lose much of its dynamism, having run its course as an intellectual project in exposing the inequalities it sought to highlight. Furthermore, whilst as a political project it has achieved some of its goals (in drawing attention to questions of gender, ethnicity and sexuality, although perhaps with rather less impact in regard to class), it has run up against the diminution in the university as a site of politicisation, as well as the more general processes of depoliticisation in western societies.

### **c) The methodological**

Whilst questions of method are implicit in the other three approaches, the third approach to writing the visual explicitly sets out to foreground methodological questions in researching the visual. There exists a history of such work - in regard to, for example, art historical method and its association with the concerns of approach (a) (see for example Pacht 1999; Pollard 1986). Yet this third approach has achieved a broader profile more recently in the appearance of a body of work concerned with researching visual culture beyond the concerns of art history (see for example Banks 2001, 2008; Burke 2001; Rose 2000). Such a development reflects in part the 'cultural turn' in the social sciences, and the increasing attention accorded to the visual across the humanities.

At the same time the concern with methods displayed in this approach reflects changes within the university and the organisation of academic disciplines that accord with the rise of the discourse of the university (and here it is worthwhile reiterating its alternative name: the discourse of science) more broadly in late modernity. The attention accorded to methodological concerns in this approach is symptomatic of the way in which the methodologies that produce academic knowledge are accorded particular attention in the contemporary university. In one respect this is evident in the demands of research councils in regard to research funding applications and the training of PhD students (in the UK not only the ESRC (the economic and social research council) but also the AHRC (the art and humanities research council)). At the same time it can be traced in the rise of a culture of auditing and quantification within higher education and the desire to define and measure the value of research - with the methodological 'rigour' of a piece of research typically judged to constitute a key (or defining) indicator of its value. Such developments raise particular concerns for the humanities given their traditional distance from such concerns (Bishop 2006:564) (in contrast with the social sciences, and sciences more broadly). In regard to this issue it is perhaps revealing to note how practice-led research in the visual arts (a realm that has typically been perceived as far removed from such concerns), has become subject to this demand for methodological reflection and transparency<sup>17</sup>.

The texts that fit with this approach are explicit about providing 'how to' guides to carrying out research. As Rose (2000: 2) states at the opening of her *Visual Research Methodologies*, her work is intended to provide 'a methodological guide to the production of empirically grounded responses to particular visual materials'. Similarly, Peter Burke (2001: 9) in *Eyewitnessing: the use of images as historical evidence*, positions his text as, 'written both to encourage the use of such evidence and to warn potential users of some of the possible pitfalls'. Rose's book surveys compositional interpretation (approach a), before moving on to cover: 'content analysis', 'semiology', 'psychoanalysis', and 'discourse analysis' in regard to 'text and intertextuality' and 'context, institutions and ways of seeing'. Throughout her intention is to clearly establish the correct (and incorrect) ways to conduct research. Burke's work - reflecting its humanities based standpoint - is organised around thematic issues that include: 'Photographs and portraits', 'Power and protest', 'Material culture through images', 'Stereotypes of Others', and 'Visual narratives'. In discussing each theme the emphasis is upon the need to think through a number of (it might be argued quite basic) issues in regard to using visual material, as in the general call for, 'Anyone planning to utilize the testimony of

images to begin by studying the different purposes of the makers' (19). So that for example, in the chapter 'Photographs and portraits', readers are instructed to 'look at royal statues or 'state portraits' not as illusionistic images of individuals as they appeared at the time but as theatre, as public representations of an idealized self' (68). And in regard to the study of material culture, Burke outlines how 'Images are particularly valuable in the reconstruction of the everyday culture of ordinary people - their housing for example, sometimes built of mate

In terms of the discourse of the university, the *objet petit a* this approach seeks to propagate is that of conducting research which conforms to the guidelines set out in these works (or is at least alive to their concerns), and as such is methodologically 'sound' - and therefore of recognisable (or measurable) value within the academic economy. In terms of the type of student produced by this approach, this can be understood to accord closely with the role of the contemporary university as a supplier of skilled labour in late capitalism - with the skills endorsed by this approach transferable to the demands of the knowledge economy in a way in which a familiarity with Bellini's work is typically not. In the case of a text like Marcus Banks' *Visual Methods in Social Research* (2001), with its practical chapters on image making as a part of the research process and the presentation of the images produced as an element of research results, there is a degree of overlap with the emphasis accorded to cultural production in late capitalist economies.

#### d) 'The postmodern'

The fourth approach is one that came to prominence in the 1980s - in part as a response to the proliferation of visual culture in contemporary society. Baudrillard's work takes this development as a key concern in regard to the notions of the hyper-real and simulacra. And Fredric Jameson (1985: 58) in his landmark essay on postmodernism accords the image a central role in regard to, 'a new depthlessness which finds its prolongation ... in a whole new culture of the image or the simulacrum'. However, whilst both Baudrillard's oeuvre and Jameson's essay offer key texts on the postmodern, in terms of the differing approaches to writing the visual surveyed here, their work can - in its concern to present a critical theoretical engagement with the role played by the visual in contemporary society - be seen to conform to approach (b).

Instead I want to locate Barthes' *Camera Lucida* ([1980] 2000) as presenting the pivotal work for this approach. Whilst Barthes points to a similar conception of contemporary society to that elucidated and developed by Baudrillard and Jameson by suggesting that what 'characterizes the so-called advanced societies is that they today consume images and no longer, like those of the past, beliefs' (118-119), Barthes' concern is above all with the way in which images are experienced by the individual subject - with Barthes taking himself as an exemplar of this figure. In place of the certain, pre-established Individual of humanism and approach (a), in Barthes' account subjectivity is something formed through this very encounter with the image world. Moving through the photographs he surveys he records how, 'I had perhaps learned how my desire worked' (2000: 60). Indeed, the exploration of questions of desire and enjoyment - pivoting on the basic duality '*I like / I don't like*' (18) - are central to Barthes' work, a position he associates with 'a desperate resistance to any reductive system' (itself mirroring the postmodern rejection of the metanarratives of modernity), that seeks instead to assert 'the ego's ancient sovereignty' (8), (to the extent that, 'I dismiss all knowledge, all culture' (51)). Indeed, in attesting to the sense in which the photograph engenders an 'arrest of interpretation' (107), Barthes invokes the sense - analysed by Jameson (1985: 60), of 'the emergence of a new kind of flatness and depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense' - in which the 'depth model' of interpretation is abandoned for a focus upon surfaces (discourses and practises) and 'textual play', and the notion that there is nothing to understand beyond the surface of the image.

In terms of the discourse of the university Barthes' work can be positioned as a key text in the move towards the emergence of a student-subject who looks to their own self and the pleasure it derives from visual culture, as well as the tastes and pleasures of others, for research material. This is most explicitly evident in the rise of the miasma of work on 'fandom' and fan cultures and genres the value of which are seen as needing to be asserted against their exclusion from the canon of works that are studied (all of which are particularly prevalent in film and television studies), but as present also in work on questions of cultural consumption and audience studies. Again here can be traced the role of the university as a supplier of labour in late capitalism, with such an approach according with the attention accorded economically to consumer and market research and profiling. At a different level, here too can be detected the sense in which the university itself becomes subject to the demand or injunction to enjoy Zizek (2003: 56-57) identifies as so prevalent in contemporary western societies, with research on one's own sources of enjoyment (and those of others) accorded the status of academic knowledge - a situation reinforced by the conception of the student as consumer (bound up in the UK with the extension of tuition fees in the higher education sector).

### **The perpetual blindspot, another way**

What remains absent from these four approaches - not entirely so, but given the fact that each operates 'continuously' through this process, to an overwhelming extent - is sustained scrutiny of the process of writing the visual, of the movement from the Imaginary to the Symbolic, of  $i \rightarrow S2$ .

Yet unless sufficient attention is paid to this process, the writing of the visual is imbued with an arbitrary logic or quality. As Bill Jay, writing on photography (pursuing approach (a) and hostile to approach (b)), declares, 'anyone can say anything about the image with varying degrees of relevance, because all subsequent meaning is supplied and applied by the viewer' (2000: 8). 'All meaning in photography, he argues, 'is *imposed*; it is not intrinsic to the image' (ibid.:46). Or as Susan Sontag contends, 'Photographs ... cannot themselves explain anything' ([1977] 2002: 23), they cannot 'speak', but, in the words of Jean Luc Godard and Jean Pierre Gorin (quoted by Sontag), remain, 'physically mute', relying upon the written text that accompanies them to 'talk' (108). Or as Mary Kelly (whose work corresponds to approach (b)) contends, 'Images, unlike words, are not doubly articulated. Verbal language is the only signifying system which has the ability to analyse itself. Hence the work of art ... does not possess the means of defining itself as art' (1981: 49). Comments such as these point to a fitful awareness of the need for the question of the terms in which the visual is written to be scrutinised and reflected upon in research on the visual. Yet such notions remain marginalised and isolated in the body of research on the visual. Even within the texts in which they appear they are quickly passed over, with little further elaboration.

How then can one make sense of the widescale failure of the four approaches outlined to pay heed to the terms in which writing the visual is integral to understanding how research on the visual is carried out? The answer lies in the pervasive lack of an adequate ontological framework (or conception of the ontological) to conceive of the relationship between the visual and the Symbolic. (Foucault's comments in discussing *Las Meninas* can also be included here). Where ontological questions are discussed the focus is typically upon the production and dissemination of images and their materiality, as opposed to the process of writing about them and the production of academic knowledge. The value of Lacan's schema - developed with quite different objectives in mind (the concerns of psychoanalytic theory) - in stressing the essential alterity of and gap between the Imaginary and the Symbolic, is in serving to expose the nature and scale of the transformation involved in moving between these orders.

This blindspot, and its significance, suggests a (partial) reorientation of research on the visual (not so much a ‘fifth way’ as an element to be added to research in general), in the need for research: to pay due attention to the movement from the Imaginary to the Symbolic that underpins the process of writing the visual (this need not take an explicitly Lacanian form), and to scrutinise and reflect on why the desire to transpose the Imaginary into the Symbolic occurs in the way it does in a particular piece of research, the type of knowledge this gives rise to, and the type of subject-student the research seeks to promulgate.

## **The discourse of university #2 and of the master, the ‘indeterminate’ Imaginary**

I want to conclude by adding a further dimension to the analysis of the terms in which writing the visual takes place - that of the broader context of the position of the university and academic knowledge within society. These concerns point us in the direction of an aspect of the discourse of the university yet to have been examined in any detail in this paper, that of the presence of S1, the master signifier, at the bottom left hand corner of this matheme - the position Lacan locates as constituting the ‘truth’ of the four discourses he outlines - and the terms in which this emphasises the dynamic of mastery, the exercise of power and the presence of the political, in this discourse. As Žižek (1998: 78) observes in discussing the four discourses of *Seminar XVII*, the presence of the master signifier here indicates the terms in which - despite the claims that might be made for scientific methods - there is no neutral knowledge, no knowledge behind which there does not lie an attempt at mastery<sup>18</sup>. At the same time, as Paul Verhaeghe (1999: 116) asserts, the presence of master signifier here serves to act as a ‘guarantee’ - in terms of the status of the university being sanctioned and supported by the state and the social order - of the status of this knowledge. In so doing the presence of the master signifier in the discourse of the university raises the question of the relationship of writing the visual and the academic knowledge this generates, to the political.

The Imaginary is accorded no position in the mathemes of the discourse of the university and the master (indeed in all of *Seminar XVII* Lacan hardly discusses the Imaginary at all). In one respect this might be taken as implying that the Imaginary does not matter to the functioning of these discourses (indeed, it can be argued that the Imaginary is the ‘weakest’ or least significant of the three ontological orders Lacan sets out). In another respect though it might be argued that the Imaginary is absent or excluded from these discourses because it cannot be readily co-opted into them. Indeed, the Imaginary - in its essential alterity from the Symbolic - possesses an ‘indeterminacy’ (in linguistic-Symbolic terms) that renders it beyond the determinacy associated with the Symbolic<sup>19</sup>. (As evinced, for example, in the gap between the judgment bound up with the terms ‘right and ‘wrong’ and the difficulties in determining what a right or wrong image looks like). In such terms the presence of the Imaginary threatens to destabilise the functioning of the Symbolic as it appears in these discourses and the status of the Symbolic as the domain of the Law (a contention that points, as the rest of this paper does, to the tension between the Imaginary and the Symbolic - a relatively neglected aspect of Lacan’s work). This sense of the (potentially at least) disruptive status of the Imaginary, is evident in two sets of examples from different epochs. It can be traced in the tensions that run through the history of the monotheistic religions (Christianity, Islam, Judaism) and imagery (in part due to these religions’ grammatolatory tendencies - their veneration of the Word). And in a contemporary context, it is present in the terms in which imagery in the War on Terror - in the form of images from Abu Ghraib, footage of Bin Laden, photographs of the coffins of US service personnel returning to the United States, and images of civilians killed and wounded in the conflict - have been regarded by the Bush administration as far more of a cause for concern than written accounts of such events<sup>20</sup>.

In such terms, the discourse of the university - in the transformation of the Imaginary into the Symbolic that lies at the heart of research on the visual - can be identified as working to ‘tame’, order or control the Imaginary. In so doing, and in the broader context of the drive

towards rendering what is uncertain and/or unknown certain and known, that constitutes a primary vector of science and academic knowledge in modernity - writing the visual can be configured in terms of the process which Žižek (2006: 107) identifies of, 'university knowledge endeavouring to integrate, domesticate, and appropriate the excess that resists and rejects it'.

As such we are reminded of the essentially conservative function of the university - as emphasised in the left hand side of the matheme of the discourse of the university, and the presence of the master signifier under or 'behind' knowledge. The role of the university as servant to late capitalism has been foregrounded in contemporary critiques of the institution (Bishop 2006; Turner 2006: 184; Wernick 2006: 559-560). How though might this assessment be applied to the four approaches to writing the visual outlined here? In regard to approach (a), this approach accords with the 'traditional' or 'historic' role of the university, as seat of learning and cultivation for (primarily) the ruling class (which can be seen to accord with the conservatism apparent in the type of knowledge permitted within the university, outlined by Wernick (2006: 559)). Approach (c) accords with the conception of the university as producing methodologically 'rigorous' knowledge, the findings but also methods of which are perceived as possessing a use value socially and economically. As such this approach accords with the conception of the university as a supplier of skilled labour within contemporary capitalism. Approach (d) can also be associated with this labour supplying function, whilst at the same time locating and legitimising as a source of academic knowledge the injunction to enjoy so prevalent in contemporary society. (This approach can be seen to have constituted a focus for the critique of the apparently 'frivolous' role of the university, as foregrounded in popular critiques of cultural and media studies). Approach (b) is perhaps the most intriguing in regard to the conservative function of the university, in terms of the challenge it appears to articulate to the social order. Whilst it would be wrong to simply deny the university functioning as a source of political dissent - particularly in the moment from the 1960s to the 1980s - at the same time, from a structural-functional standpoint, in this approach can be read the role of the university as a container and outlet for discontent, where political action is sufficiently kept in check (where elsewhere it might take more egregious forms) and diverted into the Symbolic in the guise of knowledge production.

In the light of this last assessment it is worthwhile to conclude by noting that *Seminar XVII* was delivered in the wake - and in part in response to - the events of May 1968, with Lacan's confrontation with student radicals at the University of Vincennes (just outside Paris) in December 1969, bringing Lacan to remind his audience of their naivety in conceiving of the university as anything other than an essentially conservative institution.

---

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The status of the visual in scientific research presents a somewhat differing series of concerns.

<sup>2</sup> Or rather, recently appearing in translation in an 'approved' form.

<sup>3</sup> Visual anthropology might be said to constitute a partial exception here, and yet even in this case photographic material requires an accompanying text to illuminate it, and in the case of film, the visual typically does not exist alone but is accompanied by speech and audio.

<sup>4</sup> The evolution of 'practice based research' - the position of which is still marginal to research within the university sector - will be discussed at various points below.

<sup>5</sup> And, perhaps it should be emphasised in a discussion of writing the visual - not 'symbolism' more generally, see 'In memory of Ernest Jones: on his theory of symbolism' (Lacan [1959] 2006).

<sup>6</sup> The third of the three orders that constitute Lacan's schema, the Real, is little discussed in this paper, but constitutes the raw, unmediated dimension of experience, which stands beyond symbolisation or representation.

<sup>7</sup> 'Translation' is not the right term, for reasons that are themselves revealing - it implies a movement between dual language systems that serves to negate the distinctiveness of the Imaginary from the Symbolic. As such I would question Shapiro's (2007) use of the term in discussing ekphrasis.

<sup>8</sup> Although as Sartre ([1936] 1991: 177-207) suggests the imaginative capacities of the subject may hinder such an undertaking.

<sup>9</sup> I say 'rarely' as I do not want to exclude digital publishing and the possibilities of including film linked to a text.

<sup>10</sup> An issue highlighted by Wells (2003: 429).

<sup>11</sup> A common complaint of practice based researchers in the United Kingdom is that they must typically submit written material with their practice output for it to constitute research.

<sup>12</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the functioning of the four discourses in *Seminar XVII* see Wajcman (2003) and Zizek (1998).

<sup>13</sup> Whilst Lacan does not use the term 'late modernity' this is the period his analysis refers to.

<sup>14</sup> For an overview of this notion and its subsequent development, see Mitchell (1994: 151-181) and Shapiro (2007).

<sup>15</sup> See also Carroll (1993) for a different approach to the eclipse of humanism.

<sup>16</sup> It is worth noting that it is at around this point in time that art itself comes to challenge the humanistic conception of itself - given its last hurrah in abstract expressionism - in the emergence of conceptual art. See Kelly (1981: 48) on Clement Greenberg's 1968 reaction to minimalism.

<sup>17</sup> See for example the University of Herfordshire's biannual 'Research into practice' conference (2000-2006) and the 'Working Papers in Art & Design', collected as a journal of the same title, that have come out of this, [http://sitem.herts.uk/artdes\\_research/papers/wpades/index.html](http://sitem.herts.uk/artdes_research/papers/wpades/index.html).

<sup>18</sup> Indeed, the discourse of the university is derived (by a quarter turn of the *matheme* anti-clockwise) from the primary or *ur*-discourse Lacan outlines in *Seminar XVII*, that of the discourse of the master, delineated with the *matheme*:

S1 → S2  
\$        a

Here, S1, the master signifier, assumes the position of active agent that seeks to define and order knowledge (S2), with the position of the *objet petit a* as the product of this discourse designating that this attempt at mastery of the domain of knowledge remains incomplete - that, in Dylan Evans' words, 'all attempts at totalisation are doomed to failure' (2003: 45).

<sup>19</sup> Derrida's (1987) critique of Lacan is concerned precisely with the question of the indeterminacy of the Symbolic.

<sup>20</sup> This assessment of the Imaginary is limited to its relationship to the Symbolic - the particular potency accorded to imagery presents a further issue. The conception of the Imaginary as a potentially disruptive presence (*vis a vis* the Symbolic and in socio-political terms) has been accorded comparatively little attention in comparison with the emphasis placed upon the capacity of the Real to function in these terms.

## References

- Banks, M. (2001) *Visual Methods in Social Research*, London: Sage.
- Banks, M. (2008) *Using Visual Data in Qualitative Research*, London: Sage.
- Barthes, R. (1972) *Mythologies*, London: Paladin.
- Barthes, R. (2000) *Camera Lucida: reflections on photography*, London: Vintage.
- Berger, J. (1972) *Ways of Seeing*, London: BBC and Penguin.
- Bishop, R. (2006) 'The Global University', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 23 (2-3) 563-566.
- Bishop, R., and Phillips, J., (2006) 'The knowledge apparatus', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 23 (2-3) 186-191.
- Blake, N., Rynder, L., and Scholder, A. (1995) *In a different light: visual culture, sexual identity, queer practice*, San Francisco: City Lights.
- Burke, P. (2001) *Eyewitnessing: the use of images as historical evidence*, London: Reaktion.
- Carroll, J. (1993) *Humanism: the wreck of western culture*, London: Paladin.
- Derrida, J. (1987) 'Le facteur de la vérité', in *The Postcard: from Socrates to Freud and beyond*, London: University of Chicago. pp. 413-496
- Elkins, J. (1988) 'Art history without theory', *Critical Inquiry*, 14 (2) 354-378.
- Elkins, J. (2002) *Stories of Art*, London: Routledge.
- Foucault, M. (1970) *The Order of Things: an archaeology of the human sciences*, London: Tavistock.
- Gombrich, E. (1995) *The Story of Art*, London: Phaidon.
- Horne, P., Lewis, R., and Norne, P. (1996) *Outlooks: lesbian and gay visual cultures*, London: Routledge.
- Jameson, F. (1985) 'Postmodernism, or the cultural logic of late capitalism', *New Left Review*, 146, 53-92.
- Jay, B. (2000) *Occam's Razor: Outside-in Viewing Contemporary Photography*, London: Nazraeli.
- Kelly, M. (1981) 'Re-viewing modernist criticism', *Screen*, 22 (3) 41-62.
- Kristeva, J. (1984) *Revolution in poetic language*, London: Columbia University.
- Lacan, J. (1974-1975) RSI, Unpublished, French transcript available, [http://nosubject.com/Seminar\\_XXII](http://nosubject.com/Seminar_XXII).
- Lacan, J. (1998) *Encore, on feminine sexuality, the limits of love and knowledge: the seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX, 1972-73*, London: Norton.
- Lacan, J. (2006) *Ecrits*, London: Norton.
- Lacan, J. (2007) *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis: book XVII*, London: Norton.
- Metz, C. (1983) *Psychoanalysis and Cinema: the imaginary signifier*, London: Macmillan.
- Mitchell, W. (1994) *Picture Theory: essays on verbal and visual representation*, London: Chicago University.
- Mulvey, L. (1975) 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema', *Screen*, 16 (3) 6-18.
- Pacht, O. (1999) *The Practice of Art History: reflections on method*, London: Harvey Miller.



- Pointon, M. (1997) *History of Art: a student's handbook*, London: Routledge.
- Pollard, E. (1986) *Visual Arts Research: a handbook*, London: Greenwood.
- Rose, G. (2000) *Visual Methodologies: an introduction to interpreting visual materials*, London: Sage.
- Sartre, J. (1991) *Psychology of Imagination*, Secaucus NJ: Citadel.
- Shapiro, G. (2007) 'The absent image: ekphrasis and the 'infinite relation' of translation', *Journal of Visual Culture*, 6 (1) 13-24.
- Silve, S. (1989) *Frans Hals*, Munich: Prestel-Verlag.
- Smith, S. (2004) *Photography on the Color Line: W.E.B. Du Bois, Race, and Visual Culture*, London: Duke University.
- Sontag, S. (2002) *On photography*, London: Penguin.
- Stokstad, M. (1995) *Art history: volume II*, New York: Harry Abrams.
- Turner, B. (2006) 'Discipline', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 23 (2-3) 183-186.
- Verhaeghe, P. (1999) *Does the Woman Exist?: from Freud's hysteric to Lacan's feminine*, New York: Other.
- Wajcman, G. (2003) 'The Hysteric's discourse', *The Symptom*, 4, <http://www.lacan.com/hystericdiscf.htm>.
- Wallace, M. (2004) *Dark designs and visual culture*, London: Duke University.
- Wells, L. (2003) 'Words and pictures: on reviewing photography', in Liz Wells (ed.), *The photography reader*, London: Routledge. pp. 428-434
- Wernick, A. (2006) 'University', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 23 (2-3) 557-563.
- Zizek, S. (1998) 'Four discourses, four subjects', in Slavoj Zizek (ed.), *Cogito and the unconscious*, London: Duke University. pp.74-113,
- Zizek, S. (2003) *The Puppet and the Dwarf: the perverse core of Christianity*, London: MIT.
- Zizek, S. (2006) 'Objet a in social links', in Justin Clemens and Russell Grigg (eds), *Jacques Lacan and the other side of psychoanalysis: reflections on seminar XVII*, London: Duke University Press. pp.107-128,

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Tine Blom and Tony Bennett for their comments on drafts of this paper.