Critical Perspectives on Visual Imagery in Media and Cyberculture

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> Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak. John Berger

I would like to thank Keith Owen and the College of Visual Arts & Design for organizing this conference and inviting me to speak today. The conference is on visual literacy and is concerned to engage the relation between images and power with conference description on the website noting:

I'm going to suggest that gaining power over images so we construct their meanings and they don't construct us requires a critical visual literacy.

> Visual literacy has been described as "referring to a group of vision-competencies a human being can develop by seeing and at the same time having and integrating other sensory experiences. The development of these competencies is fundamental to normal human learning. When developed, they enable a visually literate person to discriminate and interpret the visible actions, objects, symbols, natural or man-made, that he encounters in his environment. Through the creative use of these competencies, he is able to communicate with others. Through the appreciative use of these competencies, he is able to comprehend and enjoy the masterworks of visual communication."

This is a definition by John Debes in 1969 and is frequently described as the first academic definition of the term and opening a new field of inquiry; of course, others, including myself, have a somewhat different conception, but I think we can agree that gaining a critical literacy approach involves develop certain competencies with visual imagery.

Developing a critical approach to visual culture requires, first of all, recognizing the central importance of visual imagery in contemporary culture, taking it seriously. Actually, visual imagery has long been central to human life as John Berger has noted in his book *Ways of Seeing:*

> Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak.

As this epigram suggests, visual images have long been of utmost significance for human life and our ways of seeing. Indeed, how we interact with and interpret visual images is a basic component of human life. Today, however, we are living in one of the most artificial visual and image-saturated cultures in human history which makes understanding the complex construction and multiple social functions of visual imagery more important than ever before.

Secondly, developing critical visual literacy involves seeing that there are different sorts of visual images and image technologies and thus developing competencies in critical visual literacy will involve grasping the construction and effects of different kinds of images in disparate realms of art, photography, cinema, television, advertising, the Internet and multimedia media and other realms of image.

Thirdly, by now, however, we should be aware that all technologically-mediated visual images are constructed, that photography, film, television, and other media are technologies of image production that have their codes, conventions, and biases and that every technologically mediated visual image is the product of image-producers who themselves have agendas and biases that should be subject to scrutiny. Likewise, we should be aware that in a digital culture, images can be constructed, transformed, refined, and modified through technical means and that not everything one sees in visual culture is an exact copy or replication of the object or event portrayed.

Proliferation of images, and particularly media images and new digital technology images has led an increased number of theorists, like many of us at the conference, to take images more seriously and has led to what W.J.T. Mitchell has called the "visual turn" where cultural theorists take seriously and careful scrutinize images;
Earlier in the 1960s there was the linguistic turn where it was language that philosophers and cultural theorists focused on.
Review of Mitchell's *What do Pictures Want?* IjofC

I've theorized this world of visual imagery in many works but will focus on limited aspects today, in particular I'll focus on photography and photojournalism since I am partnered in this session with Melanie Burford. While I'll focus on visual literacy and photojournalism I want to first present some more general

remarks to contextualize the discussion.

The Rise of Visual Culture of the Image and Spectacle

As we enter a new millennium, it is clear that we live in an era in which mass-produced and multimedia visual imagery is ever more central to our culture. From the computer and television screens that greet us as we wake up in the morning, to the headlines and images in the daily newspaper, to the billboards and advertising that clutter our cities, to the movies, television, and multimedia cyberspaces that instruct and entertain us, we find ourselves in a highly saturated culture of the image and spectacle (Kellner 1995 and 2003).

This rise of the image and visual culture to cultural centrality arguably began with photography in the 19th century, and migrated into newspapers and advertising by the turn of the century. It accelerated with film, that became one of the major art forms and sources of visual imagery in the 20th century, and exploded to the omega point with the rise of television, one of the most powerful image machines ever created. Today, the long march of visual culture to hegemony continues apace in the multimedia terrain of the Internet and cyberspace where images quickly joined words and sounds to help constitute a new digitized and interactive multimedia culture.

Computer culture, for many of those of us who started off in the late 1970s or early 1980s, was initially text-based and constituted an intensification of print culture, albeit in a different mode of digitization -- a word now central to all computer-mediated forms of culture and communication. With the spread of Apple computers and then Windows, however, images, graphics, sounds, video, pop-up animations, and various forms of visual and moving images came to the fore requiring visual literacy as one interacted in the new multimedia environment as well as technical computer literacy and language literacy.

Much of my own work has focused on visual imagery in entertainment and news and information, analyzing the politics of representation and media spectacle, Television too has been proliferating media spectacle ranging from ever more high-tech sports spectacles like the Super Bowl, NBA basketball championships, or World Series, to political spectacles like the

Gulf War, the O.J. Simpson trial, the Bill Clinton sex and impeachment scandals, and the Battle for the White House in the spectacular aftermath of Election 2000 (Kellner, forthcoming).
I'll return at the end to reflect on media spectacle but want to focus now to provide a segue to Melanie on photo journalism and will make some general comments and raise questions about how to address the issues of developing critical visual literacy in response to photojournalism.

First, historically, photojournalism has existed in a contested space between government censorship and harassment and corporate control and commercialism.

In work on an Introduction to a book by Ernst Friedrich War against War of censored images of World War I I learned of extent to which images have been censored during war; WWI,

History of photojournalism: see notes

Contemporary culture of images: moving images and still images associated with photography or art

Wikipedia in its entry on photojournalism cited timeliness, objectivity, and narrative as defining components of photojournalism, but I'd add two normative ideals of
Normative ideal of photojournalism qua journalism:

   personal witnessing and *truth telling*.

   Aesthetic goals or commercial ones but I think that *personal witnessing* and *truth telling* is an ideal for some photojournalists

   I came up with these criteria in a study of war correspondents and photojournalism, just published in IjoC, and noted the function of witnessing for war journalists is often dangerous, hence part of the romanticism of war correspondents and photojournalism is that some correspondents and photographers risk their life to witness and document military actions, or natural catastrophes.

   Further, truth telling is also difficult since there are a lot of lies and spin and confusion in the fog of war and it is

often hard to discern the truth or to communicate truths when censorship is at play. Raymond Williams (1982: 14) suggests that in a media age the media produce a "culture of distance" through which we are distanced from the horrors of war; he used this concept to describe experience of the 1982 Falklands/Malvinas war, and certainly in the two U.S. wars and Afghanistan war there was an even more striking abstraction and distancing, with media sanitizing and idealizing the conflicts. Hence, in Williams' terms, one challenge would be for war correspondents or photojournalists to break down the culture of distance and provide witnessing and truth, however disturbing, to put it in your face.

I would cite the decisive role of war correspondents and photojournalists in Vietnam in helping to create an anti-war consensus, forcing Lyndon Johnson not to run again, and then pressuring Richard Nixon to withdraw troops in a "Vietnamization" process that ended with the U.S. pulling out in the face of the collapse of the South Vietnamese government.

Examples of key images, I might cite Eddie Addams's picture of a South Vietnamese soldier shooting point-blank in the head a suspected Viet Cong prisoner, Ron Haeberle documented the infamous Mai Lai incident, and Malcolm Browne took many famous pictures in Vietnam, including the one of the naked Vietnamese girl running from war, an icon of the horrors of war and how it was impacting innocent civilians. These resonant images can generate critical views of specific military interventions that can help shape a society's picture of war and can help turn the public against a war, as the cumulative pictures and reports coming out of Vietnam by the mid-1970s may have done.

Indeed, one of the reasons for the pool and then embed system in the 1991 and 2003 U.S./Iraq wars was to control images and reports that could help turn publics against the two Bush administration Iraq incursions, as we will see below.
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Hence, war correspondents are caught up in a matrix of conflicting pressures between journalistic norms, media institutions, the state, the military, and public responses to various wars. Some correspondents have distinguished themselves with critical and independent reporting, while others have served the instruments of state and military propaganda, as I will illustrate below. After these introductory remarks I want

to give examples of U.S. journalists/war correspondents transmitting war propaganda leading up to both the first and second U.S./Iraq wars. I also give examples of war correspondents doing an exemplary job, and conclude with some comments concerning war correspondents in the age of digital media, and new sources of images, information, and commentary that constitutes a significant expansion to military journalism and creates the possibility for more critical views.

Media spectacle: moving images/photojournalism involves still images, stopping the flow and rush of images, freezing social reality, highlighting certain aspects of it, forcing attention perhaps on things not seen, making one aware of things that one wasn't aware of…

I'll suggest some criteria in conclusion for developing critical visual literacy in the realm of photojournalism but before you can do that all, one needs to know the nature of the specific type of visual image at stake, its history, its determinants, and its ideals and I hope I've provided some background to set up Melanie's presentation and then have a discussion.

Finally, I should note that I have my own construct of the construct of photojournalism and Melanie may seen it differently as an insider, a participant, so I just threw out these ideas for discussion.

Critical visual literacy:
Grasping the specificity of the specific type of visual imagery; photojournalism
Secondly, grasping that each type is constructed, seeing the differences being different types of photojournalism; and articulating different goals or ideals of photojournalism: personal witness and truth-telling
But seeing that photojournalism is caught up in a matrix of not only technology, but institutions, practices, norms, power, and ideology and that every photographer is inevitably going to have their own biases in terms of what they choose, how they frame it, how they edit and present it, so critical visual literacy is putting together all of these components.

For a viewer, critical visual literacy is question of getting competency of analyzing the type of image but also contexualizing it; contextualization is key part of critical visual literacy; Photojournalism: history/different roles photojournalism has played; some of the models and key types
Understanding the technology and its potential for objectivity or truth telling or of simulation; postmodern position everything is constructed and a point of view; there is no objective truth

Critical Visual Literacy

After the eras of modernism in the arts and its succession by postmodernism (see Best and Kellner 1997), it would be pedantic and futile to criticize visual images for masking, distorting, or simulating reality, although in some cases one could, and should, make such criticism. For example, one could deploy criteria of truth and falsity in a critical perspective if corporations or political institutions or figures consciously manipulate images to fool or exploit the public. Likewise, if news institutions begin simulating visual imagery and not telling viewers or readers, then one could and should deploy an epistemological critique using criteria of truth and authenticity in opposition to simulation and fakery.

Hence, I would focus the critical approach on, first, contextualizing all image production in the matrix of its production and reception to help decode its biases, ideologies, and intended effects. Critical approaches have classically been

grounded in the political economy of cultural production, analyzing the system of production and distribution, and raising questions of who is producing, promoting, and disseminating the images in question and for what purposes. So, if one is criticizing a specific website, and if one is interrogating the images and design, one needs to ask if this is a commercial site, if the images are promoting certain products and are a form of advertising, and what values, messages, and ideologies are being communicated by the specific images under scrutiny. If it is a political or informational site, one needs to raise questions concerning the perspectives of those producing the site, their biases, and the actual content of the images and information portrayed.

Moreover, the critical approach involves systematic examination of the politics of representation, of the images of class, race, and gender in a specific arena of visual communication. Hence, after engaging the production and political economy of images, the critical perspective focuses on the politics of representation: do the visual images advance class, racial, gender or other forms of domination, or are they empowering to oppressed groups? One would, in this case, criticize images and representation that promote such things as racism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of oppression and would valorize representations that presented resistance to oppression and the empowerment of oppressed groups, or that promoted positive values such as democratization, individual rights and freedoms, social justice or other positive values.

A critical cultural studies sees society as a contested terrain, as a battleground for domination and hegemony between competing gender, race, sex, ethnic, class, and other forces (see Kellner and Ryan 1988 and Kellner 1995). Images and representations often reproduce and circulate competing social discourses, as when positive and empowering images of women transcode feminist discourses, and thus contest sexist stereotypes that promote the oppression of women. Of course, images can be ambiguous, as we will see below from the example of Madonna who some see as an icon of pop feminism undermining and opposing traditional images of women, while others see her as embodying traditional stereotypes of women as sex objects, or, as I would do, stress the contradictions in the politics of Madonna's texts and their reception.

In any case, a critical cultural studies situates visual imagery in terms of an ongoing contest of representations between opposing social forces. From the perspective of the politics of representation, the critical approach grounds its standpoint of critique in measuring whether images promote oppression or empowerment, whether they further the subordination of oppressed groups according to gender, race, class, sexuality, and other criteria, or the empowerment of these groups, thus undermining oppression. This is the original sense of ideology critique developed by the Frankfurt School and notions of the politics of representation developed by the Birmingham School of contemporary cultural studies, as well as feminists, gays and lesbians, multiculturalists, and various oppositional groups. From this perspective, critique is motivated by political goals and values such as equality, empowerment, democracy, or other positive values, while opposing negative phenomena like oppression, domination, or subordination.

Thirdly, however, since not all images and representations are overtly political, one needs to get at the multiplicity of values, meanings, or messages encoded into the form and content of visual images, and explore the multiplicity of ways in which audiences decode visual images and media texts according to their own subject-positions. Visual images and media texts are often polymorphous, containing a wealth of meanings; images function in contexts and their meanings evolve in terms of narratives, sequences, and resolutions. A critical approach would not, therefore, reduce visual images or media texts to one singular interpretation, although one could well privilege a certain reading. Yet one also needs to know how various audiences process visual images and the variety of ways in which images can be read.

Reading images critically thus involves cultivating visual literacy, that enables one to situate images in social and political contexts and grasp their range of meanings and effects, and to criticize images that promote blame-worthy phenomena such as sexism, racism, or homophobia. This critical approach requires fluency in a multiplicity of critical and hermeneutical theories, in what I've called a multiperspectivist approach, combining qualitative and quantitative, hermeneutical and critical, semiotic and structural, and the various critical theories to get at the full range of meanings of visual images (Kellner 1995).

Moreover, one might deploy critical perspectives engaging not only the politics of representation, but the moral, philosophical, and aesthetic dimensions of cultural texts in which case the critical project becomes vastly richer and more complex depending, obviously, on the magnitude, goals, and scope of the project at hand.

Cyberculture and Multiple Literacies: The New Frontier

Moving into the cultural forms of the new millennium, I would argue that as cyberculture evolves further into the multimedia and interactive culture, notions of critical visual literacy developed in relationship to photography, film, television, or art could be deployed in analyzing the visual dynamics of cyberculture. Reading cyberculture critically involves multiple literacies including the ability to read hypertext, to read and contextualize visual representations, graphics, and now moving images as well (Kellner 1998).

Indeed, I would argue that developing critical visual literacy is an important part of computer literacy, that as cyberculture becomes more multimedia and interactive, the role of visual images in cyberculture is growing in importance and so becoming cyberculture literate will involve learning to read, interpret, contextualize, produce, edit, position, and organize visual imagery as part of cybercultural hypertexts. Thus, just as there is a technical literacy required to use computer programs and the continued importance of print literacy necessary to navigate and communicate in cyberculture, so too will visual literacy be part of the multiple literacies necessary to navigate and negotiate cyberculture.

Cyberculture is indeed emerging as a central cultural site that is rapidly absorbing all other media -- print and hypertext; archives and sites of visual imagery ranging from photography and art to pornography and advertising images; graphics, including moving ones; and, forthcoming, I would predict, proliferation of television, film, and video imagery in cyberculture. Thus, the literacies developing in reading visual imagery in art, photography, film, and television can be used in cyberculture, as well as developing new multiple literacies for multimedia and hypertext culture that requires one to read together images, text,

graphics, and moving images.

Hence, as part of critical computer literacy, I would include the skills of deciphering and analyzing the visual components of cyberspace, of grasping the growing importance of images and multimedia, and developing appropriate critical and hermeneutical perspectives on new modes of visual representation. This procedure engages the issue of visual design in cyberculture, the question of aesthetics, and the role of visual images in cybercommunication.

Consequently, critical visual literacy emerges as a key element of the multiple literacies needed to read both media culture and cyberculture. Just as print literacy takes on new saliency in cyberculture, so too does the issue of visual literacy. Thus, gaining the skills of critical visual literacy provide competencies that will help individuals participate and succeed in the new economy, and will also provide access to participating in new modes of cultural production, political engagement, and interpersonal communication and social relations. Providing these skills to all, through a reconstruction of education, thus provide preconditions to producing a more democratic society, to overcoming the digital divide, and thus to producing a better and more egalitarian society of the future (Kellner 2000).

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