IT'S NOT ABOUT THE LOOKS, BUT ABOUT THE LOOK

COMMON CLAIMS REGARDING IMAGES TO REFUTE

“IMAGES, UNLIKE LANGUAGE, ARE EASY TO UNDERSTAND ACROSS CULTURES”
Source: http://www.michaelbach.de/ot/
THE LOOK IS THE MEDIUM OF IMAGES
"[E]NDOGENOUS IMAGES, HOWEVER, REACT ALSO TO EXOGENOUS IMAGES, WHICH TEND TO TAKE THE RULING PART IN THIS COOPERATION. IMAGES NEITHER EXIST ONLY ON THE WALL (OR ON THE TV) NOR ONLY IN OUR HEADS. THEY CANNOT BE EXTRICATED FROM A CONTINUOUS EXERCISE OF INTERACTION, WHICH HAS LEFT SO MANY TRACES IN THE HISTORY OF ARTIFACTS."

(BELTING, 2005: P. 51)

"IMAGES EVOLVE [...] IN OUR LOOK. THEY CANNOT BE LOCATED ONLY “THERE,” ON A CANVAS OR IN A PHOTO; NEITHER ARE THEY LOCATED ONLY “HERE,” IN THE HEAD OF THE BEHOLDER. THE LOOK CONSTITUTES THE IMAGES IN THE RANGE BETWEEN “HERE” AND “THERE”"

(BELTING, 2007 – TRANSLATION A.L.)
CAN PROFESSIONALS DISTINGUISH CGIS FROM PHOTOGRAPHS?

▸ "Is the picture shown a photograph, or is it generated with a computer?"

▸ "Please justify each decision in writing"

▸ Oral interviews after test

▸ Focus group discussion on results

▸ N = 20, shown 37 pictures

Skilled vision. An apprenticeship in breeding aesthetics

The recent anthropological commitment to the rediscovery of the senses has sparked a critique of visualism in the discipline. Visualism is meant as ‘a cultural, ideological bias toward vision as the noblest sense’ (Fabian 1983: 106). As a representational medium, as one of the senses, and even as a metaphor for ‘understanding’, the use of vision in anthropology would convey a rationalist and ethnocentric paradigm (Fabian 1983: 105–23; Bahba 1994: 48–51), coming under attack as ocularcentric and perspectivalist. Here I wish to show how vision is not always characterised as gaze, but as a way of looking at the world: in other words, skilled vision is not necessarily ‘visualist’. In fact, vision is not always identifiable with ‘detached observation’, and should not be opposed by definition to ‘the immediacy of fleeting sounds, ineffable odours, confused emotions, and the flow of Time passing’ (Fabian 1983: 108). Vision, like the other senses, needs educating and training in a relationship of apprenticeship and within an ecology of practice. Among cattle breeders, vision certainly plays a paramount part: not as a disembodied ‘overview’ from nowhere, but as a capacity to look in a certain way as a result of training. Consequently, I argue that we should reconsider vision as an embodied, skilled, trained sense that characterises (certain) practices.

In what follows, I present an ethnographic example based on the process of shadowing breeding experts of the Alpine Brown breed in dairy farms in northern Italy, comparing it with an analysis of cattle fairs as settings for displaying cows. The breeder’s skilled vision is never detached from a certain amount of multisensoriality – especially from tactility. Touch and vision work together in certain cases – even in the highly regimented context of cattle fairs. Nevertheless the rituals, grids and protocols of cattle evaluation seem to aim precisely at removing those ties with lived experience that allow the training of vision in the farming context. This contradiction is typical and internal to this ‘community of practice’ (Lave and Wenger 1991). In other words, farmers do make an argument about vision as part of their professional practice: this goes along with their classificatory system, but contradicts the multisensoriality of their everyday practice.

I refer to recent ethnographic and ethnomethodological studies of cognition, vision and inscription in professional practices (Lave 1988; Goodwin and Ueno 2000) as well

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1 I wish to thank Peter Pels, Andreas Roepstorff and two anonymous reviewers for their constructive criticisms and advice, Tim Ingold for the helpful conversations, and Jonny for buying me a plastic toy cow.

2 The ‘anti-ocularcentric’ neologism was coined by Jay (1993), whose history of ideas from Plato to Levinas reveals a consistent and insistent anti-visual streak in Western intellectual history.

3 Western perspective, especially in landscape painting, would intrinsically demonstrate and enforce a visualist bias (for an anthropological introduction to the debate, see Bender 1993; Hirsch 1995).
Seeing with special requirements

This video is about Conrad's way of seeing the world. See the accompanying article at Journal of Aesthetics & Culture, Vol. 7, 2015, http://dx.doi.org/10.3402/jac.v7.28228
"In popular terminology, Hindus say that the deity or the *sadhu* 'gives *darsan*' (*darsan dena* is the Hindi expression), and the people 'take *darsan*' (*darsan lena*). What does this mean? What is given and what is taken? The very expression is arresting, for 'seeing' in this religious sense is not an act which is initiated by the worshiper. Rather, the deity presents itself to be seen in its image, or the *sadhu* gives himself to be seen by the villagers. And the people 'receive' their *darsan*. One might say that this 'sacred perception,' which is the ability truly to see the divine image, is given to the devotee, just as Arjuna is given the eyes with which to see Krsna in the theophany described in the Bhagavad Gita."
NYTimes, What Self-Driving Cars See, May 25, 2017,
https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/25/automobiles/wheels/lidar-self-driving-cars.html?_r=0
Thank you for your attention!

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