

Visual Culture 2nd edition: Fully Revised and Updated

RICHARD HOWELLS and JOAQUIM NEGREIROS, 2012.

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pp. xiii + 346; illus; index; bibliography; preface to the first edition: a note for lecturers, tutors and faculty (Howells); Preface to the second edition (Howells and Negreiros).

The study of visual culture is a growing area in media and cultural studies which has come some way since the publication of Richard Howells's *Visual Culture* (Polity, 2003). This second edition, now co-authored with Joaquim Negreiros, has been revised and updated while retaining the structure and chapter headings of the original. In *Part I: Theory* six chapters review key theoretical paradigms: *Iconology*; *Form*; *Art History*; *Ideology*; *Semiotics* and *Hermeneutics*, each chapter concentrating on one central scholar. Thus, Erwin Panofsky's work provides the basis for the chapter, *Iconology*, which begins with an extended discussion of Constable's *The Haywain*. This sets the tone for the subsequent chapters: key scholars in art history are associated with each theoretical paradigm which in turn is discussed in relation to central works in the history of art with a side glance at some more 'popular' cultural artefacts, such as the Beatles' *Abbey Road* album cover. The second edition includes more extensive references than the first; in this chapter, for example, W.J.T. Mitchell's important output on visual culture and iconology is considered, albeit rather briefly under the heading 'further reading'. One is left wishing for a more sustained reading of Mitchell in relation to Panofsky.

The chapter on *Form* focuses on Roger Fry and the 'imaginative life' through reference to abstract painters Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko via Cézanne, Puccini and Oasis. The chapter on *Art History* (Chapter 3) places Ernst Gombrich centre stage in an affirmation of his being 'typical' of an art historical approach. An extensive summary of Gombrich's 'art history' approach is presented before the authors declare: 'There is something very cosy about art history, and that cosiness needs to be exposed to the icy blast of interrogation' (p.75). However, the next sentence reads: 'On the other hand, there are occasions in which placing a work within both its historical and biographical context can genuinely add to our understanding of it' (p.75). They then go on to place Picasso's powerful painting, *Guernica* in its art historical context by discussing Picasso's own biography and his relationship to the Spanish Civil War.

In the first three chapters Howells and Negreiros rely heavily on an art school curriculum and draw on familiar examples from mainstream art history. The fourth chapter on 'ideology' moves into an area where readers of this journal might expect to see more engagement with Media and Cultural Studies. The key author around whom this chapter is structured is John Berger—whose book, *Ways of Seeing*, will be well known to readers although not necessarily as a guide to understanding ideology. Berger's great contribution in this book was to transfer critical debates about fine art and issues of representation to a sustained discussion of advertisements and popular culture. The discussion of what they label 'Marxian'

approaches could benefit from closer engagement with ideas of propaganda, power, acculturation and interpellation. We are presented with Berger mainly; Laura Mulvey and Pierre Bourdieu in passing. But no Gramsci; Althusser scanned; Foucault is pushed past to discuss Jeremy Bentham's panopticon. Theories of gender and representation are scantily addressed.

The chapter on semiotics takes Roland Barthes as its central theorist and adds consideration of Peirce to the 'further reading' section when Peirce's work is often more insightful in the analysis of visual culture and codes. In the discussion of hermeneutics 'our intellectual guide' (p.138) is Clifford Geertz. Coming from anthropology to the study of contemporary culture, Geertz is most praised by Howells and Negreiros for his contribution to the idea of culture: '...in a book about visual culture it is Geertz who has most concerned himself with the vital question of not simply how cultural texts communicate but, still more crucially, what culture is and why we create one at all' (p.148). And it is perhaps here that the work seems most in need of a serious reading of some of the key cultural studies texts. For to adopt from Geertz the idea that culture is a 'way of life' without reference to Raymond Williams or consideration of the Cultural Studies tradition seems remiss. In fact, Williams is mentioned only in relation to his work on *Television, Technology and Cultural Form* (Williams, 1990) in the later chapter about television. His foundational work on culture and meaning is not mentioned.

In a book espousing suspicion of the art historical approach for its focus on biography it is perhaps ironic that we should be given so much personal background to our six 'intellectual guides'. Howells and Negreiros present an approach to visual culture more recognizable to art historians than to scholars of the media.

In the second part each chapter is devoted to a different 'media' form: fine art; photography; film; television and new media. Throughout these are discussed in relation to theories of the real. This pushes us back on the central art historical concern with verisimilitude and the representation of the real. Each chapter includes a section on further reading clearly aimed at the undergraduate reader. It is here that some of the more significant revisions have occurred but here also where the authors highlight works that one wishes they had considered in greater detail.

At the heart of the thesis is the affirmation of the importance of visual literacy within pedagogic discourse about art, culture and the media. The clarity of writing and purpose distinguish *Visual Culture* favourably from some more obscurantist texts. We can look forward to a third edition which may engage with some of the broader paradigms of scholarship relating to the study of visual culture.

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