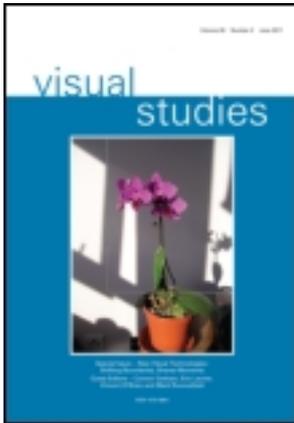


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### Introduction to visual culture: 2nd edition

Steve Hanson <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Hereford College of Arts and Goldsmiths Sociology

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*Reviewed by Steve Hanson, Hereford College of Arts and Goldsmiths Sociology*

I refer students to the first edition of this book constantly and now the new second edition has been extensively revised. It has been given a more historical structure, but also colour images throughout, plus an improved layout and additional studies, for instance on the Abu Ghraib atrocities. Mirzoeff begins the new edition by marking its changes, a more historical timeline being the main one, but he also flags up the geo-political shifts right from the start, signalling his deep engagement with them:

Since 1999, when this book was first published, we have collectively seen more and less than we could have imagined. We saw a peace dividend disappear. We watched hijacked planes fly into buildings. Once again, people accused of crimes began to “disappear,” rather than appear in court. We were shocked and awed by the live broadcast of the bombing of Baghdad. We gazed in horror at photographs and videos of torture and execution. (1)

Mirzoeff does not pretend to occupy some fake position of neutrality, but manages to bring our attention back to the media and make the seemingly transparent opaque, again and again. The new edition also provides screen grabs, and I have long been arguing that such things are as historical as a Victorian post card, but remain transparent to us, evaporated by everyday ubiquity. A shot from *The Sims* shows a preppy, middle class restaurant scene, and a screen grab from the *Orient Express* website demonstrates how the invention and re-invention of ‘the west’ is not ‘back there’ in Marlborough cigarette adverts, but ever-evolving. Bad visual culture courses and texts rest on old examples, but Mirzoeff avoids these shortcomings.

Again, the inclusion of Mark Wallinger’s *State Britain* (2007) is very welcome, and illustrates the benefits of revising this kind of resource thoroughly, although as I write, the obituaries of the associated peace campaigner Brian Haw are still on my desk, another reminder of the need to constantly refresh works. History and mortality never wait.

The section on monarchy and representation, particularly around Princess Diana’s life and death, is an excellent exemplification of the way visual culture can be tackled by someone who is tooled-up with theory, and this aspect makes the book a crucial one for my students, and for visual sociologists. As Mirzoeff puts it, comparative visual culture as a subject ‘is not a lofty gaze from the ivory tower but a place in the midst of conflict’ (2). We cannot stop at theory, the whole point is to move

back out into everyday life (I refuse to say ‘the real world’) and employ our knowledge there, in an engaged and ethical manner. Mirzoeff provides a solid guide to this practice.

This introductory text weaves many key references and works into an insightful, detailed overview of what Chris Jenks called ‘the centrality of the eye’ in western, post-enlightenment culture. But what is exceptional about Mirzoeff’s book is that he refuses to rest on this lofty theoretical platform, marching on into more contemporary texts and issues: gender and sexuality as well as images and conflict.

Mirzoeff understands the social dimensions well, which again recommends his book to visual sociologists over some of the more general introductory texts. Multiple lines run through the writing, coming out of Marxism and Dubois, via Fanon and Lacan, and on into Judith Butler, repeatedly delineating how power and the visual are tangled together at all times. Theorising a hybrid, everyday multi-culture is the positive goal here, but Mirzoeff also understands how visual culture itself can be employed negatively against this utopian urge.

If there are omissions here, I think the absence of real note has to be the sprawling reach of pornography, which the Visual Culture academic world has begun to explore with the same seriousness as its other, more traditional aspects (if one can use the word ‘traditional’ at all in relation to such a young subject). To be fair to Mirzoeff, he also begins by saying that the project cannot be – and is not intended to be – comprehensive, but the very ubiquity of pornography and the way it saturates so many other dimensions of contemporary life puts it in line for a full chapter in edition three. It is the elephant in the room, occasionally brushed-against, but not explored in full. There are already excellent chapters on sexuality, the fetish and the gaze, which could pre-figure it.

But these are pedantic quibbles. This book provides everything I look for when choosing introductory texts: I always demand that they provide their own sort of positive double-consciousness; they must be simultaneously accessible and challenging, contemporary and deeply historical, entertaining and pedagogical, politically-engaged, yet objectively measured. Somehow, Mirzoeff manages all of this with an easy style and flourish which will make the book a core resource for visual sociologists for some time yet, as long as this kind of thoroughgoing revision keeps taking place.

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