

**An Interview with W.J.T. MITCHELL,
Gaylord Donnelley Distinguished Service Professor of English and Art History,
University of Chicago,
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Note: MD is Margaret Dikovitskaya and TM is W.J.T. Mitchell.

MD: What does visual culture “want” and what does it lack? (To paraphrase the title of your article published in the *October* magazine in 1996.)

TM: As you know, the *October* essay originally posed this question in relation to pictures, not to visual culture as such. I raised the question of what pictures “want” in the sense of what they lack, and suggested a number of answers that are part of both vernacular and systematic theorizing. One of the things that pictures are said to lack is the ability to negate or to say “no.” (There is a classic essay by Sol Worth entitled *Pictures Can’t Say Ain’t*, that spells out this claim in detail.) The argument is that pictures can only represent some state of affairs affirmatively. The “no smoking” sign has a picture of a cigarette (which immediately awakens my desire to smoke, of course) and it has to interdict the positive message of the image with a bar, signifying negation. Magritte’s well-known picture *This is Not a Pipe*, puts the negative inscription under the image of the pipe as a way of interdicting or negating the positive message of the image – “this is a pipe.” Magritte is playing on the idea that the picture lacks what it represents. It does not *have* what it *shows*; it offers a presence, and insists on an absence in the same gesture.

If we take this question more generally as addressing visual culture and what it “wants,” my first answer would be that it lacks a great many things which are attributed to language. I don’t know, ultimately, whether it actually lacks them in some metaphysical sense; I am interested rather in the prejudices that are built in to people’s attitudes about visual culture, imaging, visual experience, and so forth. One factor to consider here is that visual culture as an emergent discipline or field lacks (at least so far) the kind of scientific, systematic character that, for instance, linguistics has. The concept

of visual culture as a discipline or field is quite comparable to linguistics. Linguistics is the general science of language, of all languages; more narrowly, linguistics is the science that deals with the structures of language that underlie any particular speech act or textual formation. The aims of visual culture as a discipline are somewhat analogous. It has the same relation to works of visual art, as linguistics has to literature; visual *art* is to literature, painting to poetry (a very traditional comparison) as visual culture is to language in general. What visual culture – the visual process of seeing the world as well as making visual representation – “lacks,” then, is a structural, scientific, systematic methodology. There is no Chomsky or Saussure for visual culture (unless you think of Panofsky and the Warburg school as aiming in this direction, toward a “bildwissenschaft,” a science of images). And this lack of a scientific theory of visual culture may be the result of a fundamental difference between visual perception, imaging and picturing on the one hand, and linguistic expression on the other. Language is based on a system (syntax, grammar, phonology) that can be scientifically described; pictures and visual experience may not have a grammar in this sense. Bishop Berkeley argued in the 18th century that vision *is* in fact a kind of language, doubly articulated between ideas of sight and touch, but if it is a language, it is one that has so far eluded the net of linguistics. There is some kind of excess, density, and plenitude in visual culture that escapes formalization – which is not to rule out the possibility that some genius will come along and produce such a theory. My own intuition is that this excess of the visual, the “surplus” of images, is an intractable feature of visual culture, and it would be better not to aim at formalizing it within the straitjacket of linguistics. (Nelson Goodman’s argument that images are dense, analog symbol systems, in contrast to the differentiated, articulated schemes of language – and argument that I discuss in *Iconology* – is relevant here. The infinitely nuanced variability of the analog sign, the lack of finite differentiation between characters, as in an ungraduated thermometer, puts limits on our ability to formalize the rules of pictorial representation). Indeed, some theorists have argued that language itself is not completely formalizable without a reduction that loses all the life of words, and that linguistics is not really a science at all. I remain agnostic on that debate.

MD: Why is art history not enough by itself for the study of the visual? In your article, “Interdisciplinarity and Visual Culture” (1995), you wrote that visual culture is an “inside-out” phenomenon in its relation to art history. Would you please expand on that thought?

TM: Art history is not sufficient because it is focused – quite appropriately – on the history of art. It is concerned with works of visual art as certified and legitimated by some aesthetic tradition or institutional practice – sculpture, painting, photography, the museums, collections, galleries that house works of art – i.e. the fine arts, and visual representation. Visual culture addresses a much broader field, just as linguistics claims to occupy a broader field than literature in the realm of language. Just as the study of literature forms a subset of the study of language, so visual art is just one area of visual culture. Art history – at least in its traditional formations (and this is changing today) – is not enough by itself for the study of visual culture because is grounded in a distinction between (for instance) mass media, mass culture, kitsch, commercial art and “fine art” proper. Art history is not concerned with ordinary everyday practices of seeing, what I call “vernacular visuality,” all the social constructions of the visual field that lie outside image-making, and artistic image-making. Before people make images, much less works of art, they look at each other and look at the world. Visual culture, I think, is the study of that aspect as well as the study of visual arts; so the latter (art history) clearly does not determine the boundary of the field, although visual art can certainly have an impact on visual culture by exploring novel ways of seeing and representing the world. In the early stages of the development of art history, it was closer to being what I call visual culture, as can be seen in the work of Riegl, Panofsky, and Aby Warburg.* The Warburg school of art history was interested in general iconography and in non-artistic modes of visual representation. Panofsky also made it clear that in order to study iconology one has to go beyond the masterpieces and engage with vernacular forms of visual representation like cinema. Gombrich was a pioneer of visual culture in his resolute insistence on studying “everyday seeing” and the psychology of visual perception. So visual culture in some ways comes directly out of a certain tendency in art history,

* Horst Bredekamp makes this argument quite convincingly in an article in the spring 2003 issue of *Critical Inquiry*. [info added in February 2003]

many departments of art history in the U.S. are now adding “visual culture” to their names. Many of the more ambitious art historians have always been interested in areas beyond the traditional boundaries of the fine arts. There has been interest in vernacular modes and spectacle, and space, and performance, especially if you include architectural history as a part of art history. Architectural history has always been involved with visual culture because it takes a broader view. To me it seems paradoxical that architectural history is seen as a subfield of art history, since in fact most works of art – sculptures, paintings – are located in architectural spaces. It seems to me that architecture is the master art in that it is the study of the whole spatial environment where all the other kinds of works appear.

MD: That’s why, probably, I was taught not to use the expression “the painting decorates the wall” by my professor of architecture when I was a student in Russia. He would remind us that architecture itself is art, a master art, and one can’t “decorate” a work of art with another artwork. Thus he would encourage us to find another, more appropriate, verb. You were the first to offer a course on Visual Culture at the University of Chicago. I wonder what happened to the course whose syllabus you published in 1995? In an interview with Orin Wang (published in *Romantic Circle Praxis Series*), you referred to it as “free-standing course offered from time to time.” What kinds of skills is the course intended to impart?

TM: The first time I offered a course on visual culture, I started by revising Art 101, our introductory course in Art History for non-majors – a kind of hybrid formation that had elements of methodology, interpretation, historical survey, and (above all) a generous dose of what used to be called “art appreciation.” I know that some people will regard art appreciation with contempt, as a very low-level, undemanding sort of enterprise. We live in a time of relentless professionalization, specialization, and an urge to claim a serious, scientific method for any intellectual endeavor. But science, like philosophy, begins in wonder, and my aim was to expand the field of art appreciation into *visual* appreciation, to defamiliarize the process of looking at the world as well as visual representations of the world, and to elicit a sense of wonder at the visual process. When I joined

University of Chicago's Art History department, the first thing I wanted to do was teach the fundamental introductory course, the most basic course in art offered; but I wanted to do it differently. I called my course "Visual Culture" because it concerns all the media, and treats the history of art as just one topic for reflection. It is not an introduction to the history of art, but rather an introduction to the study of visual culture, the way people see the world, how they mediate the world through various forms of representation and how images come into being, how they circulate. In the framework of visual culture, the electric light may be just as important as the painting that it illuminates, a point that Marshall McLuhan also emphasized in *Understanding Media*. I thought of visual culture as subsuming art appreciation within a broader field for appreciation. Thus it would not simply concern the arts, but the whole process of seeing the world. We would discuss, for instance, forensic analysis, eye-witness testimony, voyeurism, or the blind spot, as much as works of art. I felt that the important thing was first to get away from the notion that works of visual art determine the limits of the field of study, and second, that more generally even the larger domain visual images does not define its limits. The question of spectatorship as such must also be raised. There are many things we look at that are not images: for instance, buildings, landscapes, people, indeed, the "world," though represented in images, are not themselves images in any ordinary sense (unless you believe, with Heidegger, that we now live in "the Age of the World Picture," when the world has *become* an image). I wanted visual culture to break out of the fixation on image-culture, and for this purpose Joshua Taylor's book *Learning to Look* – which I found inspiring a long time ago – was useful. It used to be an art appreciation textbook. Suppose you ask yourself the question "How do I learn to look?" without restricting it to painting or sculpture; for example, "How do I look at other people?" or "Why do I look at landscapes?" or "What is it that we are seeing or trying to see?" These are much more fundamental questions, though not at all intended to displace art history or make it irrelevant, but simply to expand the range of questions, so that when you go on to study art history, you have a broader framework to think within. Also, Art 101 is a freshmen course, an introductory course, and it is addressed to students who are not aiming to become art historians. Some students intend to become scientists, and I wanted them to see that the visual process – image-making, visual observation – is as

crucial to scientific knowledge as it is to the artistic expression. Some students are aiming at careers in anthropology or sociology, and I want them to see that visuality is important in those areas as well. Thus, the aim of the course is to provide an interdisciplinary platform for the students to move from into almost any field. The content of the course is of a general nature which the students might find useful in their more specific disciplines. For me, it started as a way of updating and expanding art appreciation in the wake of a whole revolution in the human sciences – semiotics, structuralism, post-structuralism, feminist theory, critical race theory, psychology, cultural critique – that could now be brought to bear on the whole visual field – the “scopic regime,” as Martin Jay has dubbed it – not just visual art. Although associated at the outset with art appreciation, then, it was not confined to visual art, and it was not limited to appreciation.

At the same time that I was introducing visual culture to our introductory, foundational curriculum, then, I was also interested in exploring its possibilities at the graduate level, in a way that would bring more advanced researchers in art history, literary studies, philosophy, anthropology, and so forth into dialogue around new theories of visuality. I gave a series of seminars on topics like “The Eye and the Gaze” (focused on the Freudian critique of vision and imagination), “Totemism, Fetishism, Idolatry” (devoted to the study of “hypervalued” and “demonized” images in religious discourse and colonial encounters), and “Theories of Media” (aimed at reclaiming the general scope for media studies that had been offered by the classic works of Marshall McLuhan).

MD: How did you hit on the title for the new undergraduate course?

TM: I chose “Visual Culture” instead of “Visual Studies” because I wanted people to understand that the aspect of vision that I was interested in was its constructedness, its symbolic and imaginal formations. The name Visual Studies seemed to me too vague, since it could mean anything at all to do with vision, while Visual Culture (and this is an utterly commonplace notion) suggests something more like an anthropological concept of vision as artifactual, conventional, and artificial – just like languages, in fact, which we call “natural languages,” in the same breath we admit that they are constructed systems on the borderlines between nature and culture. By calling the field Visual

Culture, I was trying to call attention to vision as itself prior to consideration of works of art or images, and to foreground the dialectics of what Donna Haraway calls “nature/culture” in the formation of the visual field. Vision itself is a cultural construction; it is like a language that you have to learn how to speak. We talk a lot about blindness in this course, and about what happens when eyesight is restored to a blind person. As you know, vision is not at all automatically restored by the repair of the physical eye; people have to learn to see, and they probably have to learn to see at an early age when the physical development of the brain is still adaptable – just like the learning of language. What is it that you learn when you learn to see? What are the parts of the visual process that have to be installed in the mind’s software? I generally have students read Oliver Sacks’ classic essay “To See and Not See,” along with the reflections of Bishop Berkeley and Diderot on the famous “Molyneux problem,” the question of what a blind person whose sight is restored after a long period of blindness will see. (The answer: very little, because vision is not a simply a mechanical operation of the eyeball, but a complex cognitive process that has to be learned.)

MD: Your definition of visual culture has been adopted by many researchers who use “cultural” and “social” interchangeably (they may use either “social construction of vision” or “cultural construction of vision” in the definition of visual culture). I am always struggling with this interchangeability. Are these terms the same?

TM: Not in theory, but sometime yes in practical usage. We do not have a perfectly appropriate word for the theoretical object of visual culture as a discipline (if, in fact, it is one). Should it be “visual sociality”? That would express what I mean, namely the social formation of the visual field, and (equally important) the visual construction of the social field. I don’t want to simply replicate the clichés of “social constructivism” which are now rampant in every field of the human sciences and hardly need reinforcement from me. I see my own contribution more as a “visual constructivist,” one who asks what it means to social formations that human beings are sighted animals. The way we “see the world” – the problem of visual epistemology, cognition, or perception – is important, but I think it misses the really foundational moment of visual culture, which is the *seeing of other people, and the*

experience of being seen, what Lacan called the field of the “eye and the gaze” and the domain of the scopopic drive. Visual culture demands, then, that we not remain locked in some technical or mechanical account of seeing or visual representation, but recognize it as a field of anxiety, fantasy, and power. Visual culture is the field in which social differences manifest themselves most dramatically. It is the site, in Levinas’s terms, where we encounter the Other and produce templates or search mechanisms for discriminating types of people. So an inevitable topic of visual culture is the process of stereotyping and caricature – the recognition of gender, race, sexual orientation, class, tribal or sub-cultural identity, etc. In fact, the visual field is the place where racial difference and sexual difference get inscribed most conspicuously (though not exclusively; one’s manner of speaking is probably a close second in the perception of stereotypes, according to Franz Fanon). Clothing is particularly important here – fashion, the way people display themselves, presentation, bearing, and performance. The difference between culture and society, to return to your original question, is for me best captured by Raymond Williams in his essay on these terms in *Keywords* and in *Culture and Society*. Williams suggests we think of society as designating the whole realm of relations among persons, classes, groupings, i.e. so-called “face to face relations,” or immediate relations. Culture is the structure of symbols, images, and mediations that make a society possible. The concepts are interdependent: you could not have a society that did not have a culture, and a culture is an expression of social relations. However, the culture is not the same thing as the society: society consists in the relations among people, culture the whole set of mediations that makes those relations possible – or (equally important) impossible. Visual culture is what makes possible a society of people with eyes. Imagine a society that is going blind, as Jose Saramago does in his great novel, *Blindness*, and you will suddenly see what visual culture – and its loss – does to a society. Read Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and you will see how a racist scopoc regime renders whole classes of people both *hypervisible* as a class (“Look! A Negro!” is Fanon’s symptomatic utterance) and *invisible* as an individual.

MD: Coming back to what you said before, I think, it is interesting that visual culture is concerned with things that are not images, that are not representations. I had the impression, from my study of art history, that we always look at and talk about representations and thus double the world.

TM: Yes, but you can't have re-presentation without presentation. Thus, presence and re-presence or presence and absence constitute the fundamental dialectics of not just visual culture, but also of audio- and textual culture. Incidentally, at some point we should talk about the audio-visual. This brings to mind another important issue. One of the criticisms that I hear is expressed by the question: "Why do you isolate vision – visual culture – from the rest?" I respond with: "The reason for isolating it is that then one can then determine much more precisely the boundaries and interactions between the way we construct the world through sight and the way we construct the world through sound and touch, in fact through all of the senses other than sight." Thus visual culture is interesting not just for isolating or singling out vision, but because in fact it allows the whole manifold of perception to become an object of study – what Diane Ackerman investigates in her superb book, *A Natural History of the Senses*. I cannot imagine talking about vision or visual culture without dealing with touch and hearing, and with the special worlds of the blind and the deaf that intersect at such strange angles with our "normal" perceptual world. I often ask students whether they would rather be blind or deaf, and their answer is almost invariably that they would prefer deafness, that they have a horror of blindness which is complete in excess of the practical importance of vision. After a half-hour's discussion, however, many of them come to realize that deafness is by far the greater disability from the standpoint of social interactions. To be deaf is to be imprisoned in an exclusively visual (and tactile) culture, a culture of hands and eyes, without ears or sound. An even more radical condition is the one explored by John Varley in his classic short story, "The Persistence of Vision," about a community called "Keller" in which the inhabitants have lost *both* sight and hearing, and have evolved a complex society based in tactility and telepathy.

MD: Why is the emergence of visual culture a challenge to "traditional notions of reading and literacy" and "as much a revolution in verbal culture as it is in the study of the visual image"?

TM: I would answer this in several ways. Firstly, once you foreground the question of visibility in relation to literature, a whole set of considerations suddenly emerges that you may have neglected before, for instance, the visibility of the text. The literary text is quite literally made up of visible signs, so that the alphabet and mode of inscription become an issue. One thing that students often come away with from this course is an interest in typography, graphology, calligraphy, etc. Many students involved in the study of non-phonetic writing systems, in Mayan, Egyptian, Chinese or Japanese writing, for instance, find the field of visual culture especially congenial to their research, because it encourages them to revisit the entire field of visual experience in which writing and the arts subsist. My colleague Wu Hung teaches Chinese art history, in fact, as “Chinese Visual Culture,” and emphasizes the role of visual practices in daily life, as revealed in textual narratives, descriptions of ritual practices, and poetic expressions as equally important to the visual artistic monuments themselves. The problem of the image-text and the relation of the visual and the audible is inscribed directly into the notion of the text. It is not something that you have to invent or to import from somewhere else – it derives from the set of invisible conventions that make literature possible. Even language itself, if we adopt the Saussurean model of the sign, with the signifier indicated by a word (“tree”) and the signified by a graphic *image* of a tree, is a mixed audio-visual, symbolic-iconic medium, which is why Saussure admits that language may not be completely arbitrary and conventional.

When one goes beyond that “literal,” say, or graphic level of literature, one finds a whole realm of virtual visibility that is implied by the text, consisting of images, figures, inscriptions, projections of the space, etc. And there are specific literary genres that seem to “court” the visual, as it were, entering into an effort to rival or appropriate, conjure up or speak for, the visual world. Poems about pictures, literary texts that are heavily descriptive – “ekphrasis,” or what Jim Heffernan calls “verbal representations of visual representations” – all that suddenly seems much more important in literature than before. Literature becomes not just a temporal art (as Lessing claimed in the *Laocoon*) but also as spatial art, involving the projection of virtual spaces, places, and landscapes. I think that the study of visual culture causes all those aspects to come in to view: you no longer look at literary

texts in quite the same way; you start looking at them and actually seeing *through* them – though what exactly readers see is the subject of fierce debate. (I recommend here Ellen Esrock’s pioneering book, *Envisioning the Reader*, and the important studies by Mary Ann Caws, among others.) Because we live in a culture where modern media surround us with visible signs, an era of what I have called “the pictorial turn,” students are often very well prepared to think in this way, and one needs simply to call their attention to what they are already doing, to help them reflect on their pre-theoretical knowledge of seeing, the way a linguist reflects on the competence embedded in the act of speaking. Finally, I would like to say that I think of visual culture as not only referring to the world of external vision, but to internal visualization as well: imagination, memory, fantasy, etc. In some versions of this course, I have used Frances Yates’s excellent book on memory systems, and coupled it with the heavy emphasis on memory, visualization, and description in the literary tradition of the slave narrative, or in cinematic renderings of amnesia like Christopher Nolan’s *Memento*. In the classic systems of mnemotechnics described by Yates, memory is encoded both visually and verbally, in audio-visual, textual-graphic combinations, and has a connection to rhetoric and oratory. The memory and retrieval of a flow of spoken discourse is grounded in a visual-graphic-iconic discipline of the psyche. All the psychological notions of vision – the interior vision, imagining, dreaming, remembering, etc. – are activated by visual and literary means. Visual culture can thus help us give more content to the notion of imagination; instead of treating it as a vague synonym for “creativity,” we can begin to think analytically and concretely about what Lacan called the Imaginary Register of the Psyche, along with the verbal domain of the Symbolic and the traumatic or indexical Real.

MD: I remember reading that once Carl Jung, on a train somewhere in Central Europe, saw a few words written with the use of the Cyrillic alphabet causing him to imagine descending into hell. For me, the most interesting language is Czech, because there words with Slavic roots (which I am accustomed to, but in Cyrillic) are written in Latin. Does visual culture require interpretative methodologies that are different from those which art history and cultural studies are employing?

TM: A lot depends on what you mean by “methodologies.” I tend not to be greatly interested in the question of methodologies – Paul Feyerabend’s *Against Method* influenced me very strongly at an early stage, and I’ve never quite gotten over it. I prefer an anarchist epistemology, in which the interesting thing is what is in question, i.e. the problems themselves, and I am willing to be quite eclectic and unsystematic about methods. The strategies of structuralist and formalist analysis, of allegorical reading, psychoanalytic or historical materialist models of explanation, all seem fair game to me, and I am inclined to follow these approaches as long as they seem productive, and (more important) to watch for the moment when they seem to break down or encounter a limiting case. I don’t think that visual culture has some kind of distinctive methodology peculiar to it. If somebody would come up with such a methodology and want to communicate it to me, I would be willing to listen; however I myself just don’t quite see what it could be. One methodology that I find quite problematic is the comparative method, in which, for instance, you take a literary text from the seventeenth century and you take a painting from the same century, and you say: “These are both produced in the same period, they are both Baroque works of art, one of them is verbal, one is visual, so we will compare them and demonstrate how they share the properties of Baroque culture.” I think this is a very bad method that represents a primitive precursor of the study of visual culture. To me, in interdisciplinary studies, it seems very risky to use comparisons, i.e. comparative methodologies. I’ve written about this in an essay (“Why Comparisons Are Odious”) in *World Literature Today* (Spring 1996, 70 (2), pp. 321-324) and in “Beyond Comparison,” chapter 3 of *Picture Theory*. The problem is that comparison always assumes that you have reached some plateau of generality where you have a framework for comparing two things, in the Baroque period, say, or even for choosing, say, a poem and a painting as objects of comparison. Why stop there? Why not a mathematical equation, a musical score? There is no particular reason for choosing just an image and a text for comparison, and conducting a methodical inventory of similarity/difference observations. It is an exercise in which the method is fool-proof: it guarantees “results,” but rarely produces discovery or surprise. Thus most of what I’ve written about method is skeptical. I don’t think that visual culture represents a methodology. I think of it rather as a field of inquiry, a very broad field, as broad as language which

is now in the process of defining its object.** For more than a hundred years, since the rise of philology and linguistics, scholars have recognized the need for a general study of language. Human languages have a number of common features that allow a very broad inquiry into, for instance how languages change, what their expressive resources and limitations are, etc. We don't have anything corresponding to this for the visual field, as a result of which I tend to think of visual culture as the linguistics of the visual field, and not determined at the outset by whatever methodology might be used. One could of course invent methodologies, in the sense of describing specific procedures used to solve problems and answer questions of interest. I really don't like to begin by deciding on methodologies. I want to keep the question of methodology open, taking rather the tack that "this is my field of inquiry, here is where I will focus my attention, and these are the questions I will ask." I am not going to tell anybody that, for instance, they should use a Freudian methodology or Lacanian terminology in the inquiry, though I find these approaches indispensable in my own work.

MD: In your contribution to *Meaning in the Visual Arts: Views from the Outside* (1995) you wrote that it was not self-evident what visual culture's leading questions should be, or whether it constituted an emerging field with a potential curriculum and disciplinary identity or a transitory and ad hoc development. What would you say now?

TM: I think it does look somewhat different now as compared to seven years ago. There are new anthologies coming out every year: the Bryson, Moxey, Holly collection called *Visual Culture*, Nicholas Mirzoeff's *Visual Culture Reader*, Stephen Melville's anthology of essays on textuality and vision, and many other collections of essays. I am not sure how to assess all of that, but I do feel slightly ambivalent about it. In general, I think it a positive thing that some universities have started up programs in Visual Culture/Visual Studies; however, I make fairly sparing use of those anthologies in my own courses, partly because they consist mainly of essays that have been written in the last five or ten years, and although some of them may turn out to be really good, many of them are

** A project that Mieke Bal is currently urging on us in an essay about to appear in *The Journal of Visual Studies*. [info added in February 2003]

very ephemeral. In my own introductory courses, I take a very conservative approach to texts, focusing mainly on classics and “primary” texts, and bringing in the recent literature as background. We read the Bible, Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Diderot, and Bishop Berkeley; my modern canon of visual theory generally runs from Freud to Lacan, Merleau-Ponty to Sartre, with the idea that you need to have read these basics before you go on to Kaja Silverman or Laura Mulvey. I put some of the visual culture anthologies on reserve in the library and while students may use them as a background, I want them focusing on texts that I am certain will repay re-reading and reflection. The anthologies of contemporary writing on visual culture are really addressed, I think, to the advanced research seminar where one can (hopefully) assume some prior expertise in literature, the arts, and specific cultural archives, and the aim is to enter into an emerging professional conversation around the topic of visual culture. But as a teacher of pre-professional courses in visual culture, the appearance of all those anthologies has not changed much for me. I persist in asking the same questions. You may have noticed that my courses are in fact structured around a series of questions: What is vision? What is an image? What does vision do? How does the distinction “high – low” in visual arts come to being? What are the visual media? What are the differences among the visual media? Does vision have a history? These are very general questions and there are many different texts relevant to them. My choice is to stay with those very important authors whose writing will remain valuable for the foreseeable future. Thus even though I have a great respect for Norman Bryson’s pioneering work in visual theory and art history, I don’t feel a compulsion to teach his latest essay to my undergraduates. I’d rather have them read Aristotle. One thing I often do, as you may have noticed, is to circulate the notorious *October* “Questionnaire on Visual Culture” to my class, along with some of the responses, so the students gain an awareness of visual culture as an academic formation with a certain history over the last ten years. They should certainly know about this. I don’t want them to be naïve in the sense of not knowing that there are many people working on visual culture from different angles: via cultural studies and anthropology, gender studies, critical race theory – there are many different fields involved. However, I like to try to create a kind of central core made up of the basic questions and use some of the basic and classical texts addressing those questions.

MD: If there is no “high” and “low” art, how are we to define “the finest productions” of visual culture?

TM: But there is “high” and “low” art! I have never said there is no high/low distinction in visual culture. On the contrary, I think the high/low distinction is a crucial topic within visual culture. I believe that this “leveling” statement comes from the Bryson-Moxey-Holly anthology, where it is stated that a Kantian distinction of the fine arts is obsolete, and we are now in a position to replace the history of art by the history of images. In my opinion, the distinctions (whether Kantian or not) between high and low art remain valid and forceful, and I have no interest in “replacing” the history of art with the history of images. I think the history of images is important; but it is different from the history of art, it involves broader issues. And, as I have said, visual culture is even more general than the history of images. It is about seeing, not just about images. Anybody who says there is now no distinction between high and low visual culture needs to undertake a reality check. Of course, there are *mixtures* of the high and the low, and of course there are instances of transgression or border-crossing. But the critical point is that *you cannot cross a non-existent border*. You can’t transgress a boundary that doesn’t exist! When images from mass culture find a place in museums, the border is thereby re-drawn as much as it is erased. I think that the boundaries high, and low, and middle all still exist, although they are continually being redefined or redescribed, and Kantianism is not the only basis for them. To say there are no such distinctions any more, is like saying that there no longer exist social classes – no middle class, no upper class, and no lower class, or that the color line has been erased because Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice are powerful figures in the U.S. government. Of course, these boundaries still exist – as one can verify by simple observation, or some reading of Pierre Bourdieu’s sociological classic, *Distinction*. The question to ask is where and how the boundaries are being drawn in some specific situation or historical period. But the notion that Pop Art or mass culture have somehow abolished the distinctiveness of the aesthetic sphere or artistic institutions is, I think, deeply muddled. Art and mass culture, avant-garde and kitsch, are dialectical pairings, and one

could argue that the emergence of distinctive institutions of fine art actually *required* a sense of popular or mass culture from which they could be differentiated.

Your second question, namely how the “finest productions” are to be defined, is a very good one, but very difficult. The main problem here is the common assumption that “the finest productions” of visual culture – the best things – are uniquely located in the sphere of “fine art” as opposed to low or popular culture. This is simply not the case, and words like “fine” and “finest” lead us astray in this matter. The question of value – of what is finest – is independent of the distinction between high and low. “Fine art” is not necessarily fine in any sense of qualitative excellence. A very high percentage of so-called high art is bad or mediocre, yet it is still high art in that it aspires to a certain status, it is intended for museums, it aims to get established in the fine arts system, although being in itself of doubtful value. There is nothing surprising in this. The good-bad distinction is independent of the high-low one; and this independence is really fundamental for understanding the subject of value in visual culture. There are certain movies and television shows (the *Sopranos* is everyone’s favorite example), which on any scale of values are masterpieces, they are very fine “works of art,” in some sense, yet they are not *high* or *fine* art and do not aspire to be regarded that way, but lie rather comfortably within the sphere of mass culture. If I were to consider the topic of television commercials in my course – television often being a topic for discussion there – then one question for debate would certainly be which of them are really good and which are not so good and why.

MD: So how to distinguish between good and bad art? I’ll tell you how I define it. There is a saying in Russian: “to get lost among the three paper-birch trees,” meaning that, for some reason, someone is unable to find a way out of a very simple situation. (Obviously three trees do not form a forest where one could get lost. Notice also that the number “3” appears, implying that an element of magic, or the extraordinary and even divine in Christian tradition, might be involved. Another connotation would be that only a foolish person could not find his/her way out). For me, good art is the art that can “take me prisoner.” I know I can “lose myself” among three sculptures of Archipenko or Henry Moore (my

favorite sculptors). Thus, for me art is good if I don't need the whole museum (forest), but just a few pieces (three trees) to be captivated, to disappear as an independent being in order to start living their life, to explore their inner space, and so on. That's my definition of good art – a very subjective one, of course.

TM: I like the example of the three trees as a way of focusing the question of value. It appeals to my dialectical or should I say "trialectical" instincts. But I would want to say that it applies to "low art" and mass or popular culture as well as to fine art. The high/low distinction is one of kind; the "fine/finer/finest" distinction is one of degree. (A real discussion of this, of course, would lead us into the nature of "kind/degree" distinction as such, and lead us to ask about those dialectical moments when a change of degree amounts to a change of kind.) But, since the best way to get oneself out of difficulties is always to draw yet another distinction, I would want to suggest that the value of *images* is somewhat different from the value of specific *pictures* or works of art. The same image or motif (say, the figure of the crucified Christ) may appear in innumerable works of art, yet about one of them you say "that's wonderful" while the others seem less wonderful. What makes the difference? There are highly traditional comments one might make about this situation: one concerning a kind of formal rightness, whether the object is arranged in the right way according to formal criteria, whether everything fits, everything is suited; there is then the question of skill in the handling of materials, virtuosity; and then the consideration of some kind of mysterious principle of animation that makes the work of art look as it does – whether the image seems to come alive in the work, so that it has a soul, anima, aura, or presence. These are all very old-fashioned notions. What I want to say here is that the reason for so much uncertainty about what the value of art is derives from the fact that too often we have made the decision beforehand as to whether or not something is valuable – i.e. as if we had a methodology already in place for coming to a decision. I think that in fact we learn what the finest things are, what the good things are, by actually looking at the works of art, and sometimes we change our minds about what counts as goodness. Leo Steinberg's *Other Criteria* is my guide here, especially his recommendation that we come with an open mind to works of art, not relying too much

on what your criteria already are for estimating their value. Steinberg maintains that the key thing in looking at works of art is to keep open the question of criteria of value, because, he asks, where do we get those criteria in the first place? The answer can only be that we get them from works of art. After you have looked at a hundred works, you may have formed certain criteria, but if you wish to develop your appreciation you need, at least in principle, to keep those criteria open for revision on the basis of further experience. It is not just that you come to value new works of art, but that new works of art may lead you toward new values. With images, by contrast, as in a repeated motif like the crucifixion, the question of value is not located in the individual picture or work, but in the circulation of the image, its proliferation and durability in the whole sphere of visual culture. The image in itself will, in this sense, probably be familiar and utterly banal in direct proportion to its value *as image*, even though it may appear in thousands of mediocre works of art.

MD: Yes, I agree. I think this is very important, especially for art historians who often inherit their vision criteria from their mentors and then just use them, without any revision. There seems to be a lot of interest in the study of visual culture in academia today. In your opinion, what will happen to the field in the next ten years?

TM: I really don't know what is going to happen to it; it does seem that it is becoming institutionalized. That may be a good or bad thing, depending very much on how it comes about. I can tell you what I hope for, and that is – whether the subject is called Visual Culture or Visual Studies or whatever else – that students in many disciplines will come to realize that the visual process, visual experience, media, representations, images, works of art, all this in its totality, is well worth studying. The way I see this as being best effected at the present time, in my university, is by teaching visual culture as an introductory-level course, like an art appreciation course. Since this is a course that entering graduate students can take, my classes are attended by students from art history, cinema studies, comparative literature, philosophy, anthropology, religious studies and the sciences (biology, physics, and so forth). I like the idea that the topic is broad enough and important enough to be really relevant to just about any field of human knowledge. As I see it, there is no field of human knowledge

that does not involve some engagement with the visual field; it is a crucial part of technology, for example. I like to think about the course as a kind of introduction to seeing, or to the problems of seeing, and not necessarily as an isolated discipline.

What will happen over the ten years? I don't know. I can tell you what I want students who take the course to get out of it. I want them to have the very broad understanding that visual culture has a history, that the way people look at the world and way they represent it changes over time, and that this can actually be documented, and not just in the visual arts, but in literature as well. These changes are related not only to changes in technology, but also to social transformations, changes in social structures. I want them to start thinking anew about many seemingly ordinary problems.

MD: What are some of the topics that your students have written on?

TM: The variety of these is astonishing. Of course, some have written about photographs, paintings, poems, sculptures, installations, museum displays, etc., but they've also written on "stranger" topics, such as postcards, twins and doubles (the idea of visual resemblance, where one person looks like another), and clowns. I have one student who wrote about mime and who actually performed a mime show for the class while describing verbally the inner sensations of the mime in the act of performance. Another wrote about the history of the viewmaster, those little devices that people once used to document their vacations. Some have written about things like sunglasses and mirror shades, asking why people like to wear sunglasses, why they signify glamour and "cool," beyond the obvious practical reason of protecting the eyes from intense light. And the question is: why is that so often coded as attractive, appealing, or (sometimes) menacing. (Sartre and Lacan on "the gaze" are of course very helpful here). Some students have focused on the problem of *face* as fact and metaphor (losing face; face-offs; "face-to-face" relations, and the question of the *sur-face*), which can lead on to discussions of cosmetics and face paint, clothing and fashion. In connection with this particular topic I usually direct them to Roland Barthes' introduction to the fashion system. Some have even written about eye color, or about blindness or deafness – the deaf live in an almost purely visual and tactual world. So my inclination is not to offer the students a particular methodology or discipline, so much

as an archive of cases and questions. The exciting thing about this topic is what I have called its “indisciplinary” moments, when a kind of intellectual turbulence occurs as the result of a convergence or clash of the many disciplines that come together around the issues. So students sometimes write about mirrors – mirrors in literature, magic mirrors, or real mirrors, the laws of optics or the lawless anarchy of mimesis. They write about computer screens, and the difference between a screen and a painted surface. No other course that I know of allows this range of topics to come together around the specific focus of human visual experience.