

# Visual culture

Concept: Visual culture

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Date Entered: 2005-03-30

Description Visual culture is a term used to describe those elements of human cultural production that are perceived and interpreted primarily through visual means (such as film, painting, advertisements, and graffiti). The term also denotes the multi-disciplinary field of study that has grown up around visual examinations of human culture. The practice of understanding and analyzing visual culture relies largely on understanding the ways in which various visual elements relate to one another and shape the ways in which society perceives them. Visual culture also acts as a type of "catch-all" discipline for conceptualizing the multitude of images that we are presented with every day. The concept of visual culture also provides a unique angle from which to approach the notion of visual hybridity (the collage effect common to many current forms of imagery) that has become symptomatic of a society that places such a great importance on the image. Since there are literally billions of images in existence, it becomes impossible to absorb them on an individual basis — eventually they begin to blur together and hybridize in a mass of imagery that seems to be endlessly multiplying. This process often leads to visual fatigue or confusion.

The idea of visual culture is what John Berger has called a "way of seeing," — that is, a means of looking at the visual world through our own social, cultural, and ideological lenses. It is the study of the visual event, an instance of visual production that requires some type of analysis regarding its motive, origin, appearance, effect, and relationship to the viewer. Visual culture represents the convergence of human understandings about both what we see and how we see it.



Image courtesy of Geoffrey Rockwell from Dictionary of Words in the Wild with permission.

Since visual culture is a relatively new field, some of the boundaries and definitions of this form of inquiry are still unclear. Much of the debate centers around the understandings of visual culture and visual studies with many theorists maintaining that visual culture refers to the object while visual studies refers to the discipline. Still, some have argued that visual studies is a melting pot of unrelated theory that is used to relate unrelated ideas. Other writers like Gillian Rose present a different dichotomy where vision (the biological process of taking light into the eye) is opposed to visuality (the cultural process of understanding vision and the way we interpret what we see). Regardless of how it is divided or classified, visual culture most accurately refers to the ways in which we perceive and understand the visual world that surrounds us.

In this increasingly globalized world, visual culture has become an important area of study in universities the world over. Since culture can often be divided along linguistic lines, the visual language of logos, icons, brand images and visual media like television, the Internet and film has become the new global language — a language that everyone with access to popular media speaks. Logos stand in for ideas and a new alphabet of branding and entertainment emerges. From Nike to McDonald's to the face of Julia Roberts or George Clooney, the global language of popular imagery crosses all political and linguistic boundaries. It is this aspect of visual culture that has led to such a rapid rate of cultural flow across the surface of the globe. Aided by mass media and the sheer multitude of images that is available for consumption and interpretation, visual culture

has acted as one of the primary change agents in the move towards a globalized world.

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