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Ubiquitous Visuality

Introduction

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Introduction

Catherine Bernard and Clémence Folléa

- 1 Theoretical attempts to define our contemporary visual regime have met with renewed difficulties as images have become increasingly ubiquitous. What might, with Mike Featherstone,¹ be defined as the “ubiquitous” turn of the visual under the influence of media convergence has fostered a reappraisal of visual experience as multimodal, both dematerialized and re-embodied, technologized and newly haptic. Images can no longer be read as entities endowed with fixed iconographic traits to be identified and explored. In the distant wake of Aby Warburg’s *pathosformeln*, images have thus, since the 1980s, been apprehended as constantly repurposed, in flux, remediated.
- 2 More than that, it is the visual experience itself which has been redefined and complexified. The digital turn and the dispersal of images across media have brought visual studies to reflect more specifically on the shifting nature of the visual, as much as on its discursive and ideological grammar. Just as art, in the early 1970s, was analysed by Rosalind Krauss as entering a post-medium age, the visual seems to have morphed into a multimodal, even polysensory regime. On the one hand, digital technologies have allowed more and more image-producers to embark on a relentless quest for “transparency,” creating seamless and immersive images that “ignor[e] or den[y] the presence of the medium,”² and seemingly provide users with a “direct encounter with the real.”³ On the other hand, complex forms of visual experience have combined immersiveness with a critical awareness of the modalities of the visible. The emphasis by Vivian Sobchack, Laura Marks or Martine Beugnet on the haptic and even carnal nature of vision has opened the path for a reappraisal of the phenomenology of visual experience. The digital turn should thus also be understood as a phenomenological turn.⁴ More radically even, such a different phenomenology of visual technology and the symmetrical technologizing of visual sensation entail a redefinition of the very pragmatics of visual experience. Visual experience is thus shown to make sense in more ways than one, including in a literal way. Our senses have indeed become agents of meaning as they are embedded in a context that is technological and ideological, or, one might say, ideological as it is technological. And the ubiquity of visual experience in turn invents and produces different modalities of visual

experience beyond the here and now, beyond the specifics of a private visual experience. Thus the very fabric of the visual is being redefined.

- 3 The new visual pragmatics engineered by our ubiquitous visual economy has not so far elicited great critical interest.⁵ The essays here gathered explore and question the paradoxes of this new pragmatics of visual experience. In order to do so, they revisit some of the critical topoi of the digital visual turn; among which transparency, remediation, immersiveness, media convergence, and the phenomenological regime attached to them.⁶

Questioning immersion

- 4 The contributors to the present issue take up the topos of transparency in order to undo its supposed self-evidence. Several articles focus on the new experiences of narrative immersion available on our TV and computer screens, exploring their increasingly seamless, glossy, and absorbing aesthetics. Thus, Ariane Hudelet evokes the more and more “cinematic” quality of TV series, while Emmanuelle Delanoë explores the way series narrativize the body beautiful and the spectacle of the self. Clémence Folléa examines the videogame industry’s determination to create photorealistic storyworlds, and Diane Leblond reveals how nature documentaries work to smoothly embed their human viewers into alien ecosystems. Other articles directly address the question of how the contemporary quest for immersiveness relies on an effort to make users forget about the technological apparatuses buttressing these experiences. Thus, Cécile Beaufile shows up the fallaciously “disembodied” quality of literature on screen, and Martine Beugnet questions the “would-be seamless processes at work in digital communication.” Béatrice Trotignon and Chiara Salari turn to the political stakes of such technological obfuscation, focusing respectively on the polished design of political selfies, and on the purported transparency and neutrality of Google Earth.
- 5 On the other hand, the articles here gathered also explore how these technological “black boxes” are being repeatedly questioned and deconstructed by alternative or self-reflexive visual experiences, where viewers are heavily “remind[ed] [...] of the medium”⁷ and have an “immediate encounter with mediation.”⁸ The essays seek to explore these new experiences of hypermediacy, always bearing in mind their embodiment in a specific media context: Ariane Hudelet suggests that the glossy aesthetics of contemporary TV series have become an arena for discussions, recreations, and subversions rather than a mere locus of immersion; Emmanuelle Delanoë considers how these series engage dominant discourses on the body, opening spaces of visual resistance to the cosmetic gaze embraced by Hollywood, in a creative and politically charged inter-medial cultural dialogue; Clémence Folléa mentions “speedrunners,” who challenge themselves to finish a game as fast as possible and thus experience its images as sets of pixels to be navigated rather than as photorealistic elements of an immersive storyworld; Martine Beugnet analyses the work of contemporary artist Thomas Hirschhorn, whose staging of the swipe distances and estranges us from this seemingly neutral everyday gesture; Diane Leblond demonstrates how the cutting-edge technologies used in nature documentaries can eventually become objects of the animals’ curious gaze rather than efficient tools for epistemological immersion; Béatrice Trotignon and Juliette Melia show how most

selfies display the traces of their own often makeshift material creation, thus reminding us of their uncontrollable quality; Chiara Salari explores the ways in which artistic projects can break the illusion of transparency and neutrality attached to Google Earth's images. Therefore, the articles investigate how would-be transparent visual experiences cohabit with and sometimes turn into completely different images, which can be defined as “poor,”⁹ “uncertain,”¹⁰ or “prosaic.”¹¹ In so doing, they delve deeper into the modalities of what Andrea Pinotti is currently exploring under the notion of “an-iconology.”¹²

Towards a pragmatics of images

- 6 By focusing on the pragmatics of such various types of images, these articles examine which visual experiences are available to whom – in terms of consumption and production – in today's ubiquitous media. They therefore take into consideration the regimes of visibility structuring these images, examining the “‘logos’ (the words, ideas, discourse, or ‘science’) of icons,”¹³ and its political and ideological implications. Understanding the institutional logic of visibility opens the way for a critical understanding of the conditions of invisibility and visibility, a tension that has gained renewed purchase to fathom the cultural mechanisms of identity politics.¹⁴
- 7 While bearing in mind the dialectics of visibility and invisibility, the present collection of articles focuses more specifically on the pragmatics of image-making and image consumption.¹⁵ As one of the first issues of *ASAP/Journal* points out, the pragmatics of images should no longer be limited to the analysis of visual propaganda or advertising. Ranging across a vast spectrum of images and visual experiences, our essays seek to situate their objects historically and to gauge what is truly “new” about the pragmatics of contemporary visual experiences they entail. They examine the unstable role of the contemporary addressee or recipient of the image, who incessantly shifts from viewer to “voyeur” (Melia), “user” (Beugnet), or “player” (Folléa), sometimes brutally becoming an object of the gaze (Leblond and Hudelet), or sometimes simply disappearing from the visual equation (Trotignon). These essays also analyse the processes of remediation at work in these emergent forms: from the aesthetics of cinema to those of TV series (Hudelet), videogames (Folléa), or digital communication (Beugnet); from the modalities of the gaze defining traditional photography to those of the selfie (Melia and Trotignon) or of satellite imagery (Salari); from paper-based to screen-based literature (Beaufils); from the visual configuration of modern cities to that of pop-up projects (Gould).
- 8 Crucially, the articles pay attention to how these visual experiences expand our visual sensorium. They explore the complex and often contradictory temporalities underlying these experiences: Ariane Hudelet investigates the temporal paradox embodied by TV series, which demand exceptionally long and continuous investments in the context of a “disjunctured and fragmented culture”¹⁶; Emmanuelle Delanoë-Brun underlines the significant long-term value attached to short moments of self-examination in films or series showcasing the female body; Clémence Folléa and Cécile Beaufils show how players of videogames and readers of electronic literature are simultaneously immersed in both long-running and extremely transient narrative experiences; Martine Beugnet explores the contradictions at work in contemporary art galleries, where slow time and contemplation cohabit with “forms of zapping, swiping and

window-shopping”; Charlotte Gould examines similar tensions between slow time and temporariness as they underlie the visual experience of contemporary cities; Chiara Salari delves into the multiplicity of perspectives offered by different cartographic interfaces—Google Maps, Street View, Google Earth—whose archives of images entangle past and present moments. Thus, together, these essays develop new ways to “grasp the non-coherent, flexible and changing, where the emphasis is on nextness, happening and what is in the making.”¹⁷

Visual knowledge and embodied images

- 9 The complex contemporary network of “transparent” and “poor” images examined here is analysed as also producing a form of nascent or inchoate visual knowledge. These essays suggest that the visual knowledge here generated is an emergent one, whose destination seems ill-defined; and yet, as is also shown repeatedly, such inarticulate knowledge also hinges on the reactivation of a visual literacy that does not so much contradict the nascency of the visual experience as further complexifies it. These essays also dig further into the hypothesis that this emergent knowledge should not be thought of only in visual terms, as they reflect on the capacity of images to affect us and to engage with the entirety of our complex sensorium. Indeed, moving away from “an ontology” to a “pragmatics” of images implies not only that we understand images “as entities unto themselves” but also that we seek to investigate all their “multiple effects [...]—in the plural.”¹⁸
- 10 The “formalization and diffusion of computer-generated imagery” certainly gave pride of place to “practices in which visual images no longer have any reference to the position of an observer in a ‘real,’ optically perceived world.”¹⁹ Yet, it has become obvious that the body of the observer is more than ever implicated in and affected by the experience of contemporary digital images. Whereas the economy of ubiquitous images seems premised on the dematerialisation of images, this collection on the contrary emphasizes the embodied nature of those images and of their reception. Bodies loom large in contemporary visual culture, where they are engaged in both an “economy of permanent exposure,” and one of self-examination (Delanoë). While the bodies of TV series viewers are often “absorb[ed] into the sensory power of the presence of the image” (Hudelet), those of smartphone users are directly involved in “moving” images (Beugnet) and those of videogame players are invested in “performing” multimodal narratives (Folléa).²⁰ Similarly, electronic literature posits books not only as “devices meant to be experienced” but also often as participatory performances (Beaufils). In turn, visual objects and media affect our bodily apprehension of the world, be it through augmented reality (Salari), through the troubling effect of discovering alien ways of seeing (Leblond), or through the sheer transformation of physical spaces by urban happenings (Gould).²¹ These essays study objects and visual experiences which function “technically, bodily, and materially” while considering that this very materiality is itself a “mod[e] of knowledge production.”²²
- 11 Indeed, contemporary visual experiences invite us to further investigate forms of knowledge derived directly from the body rather than prominently based on the logic of logos, intellectual literacy, and acts of decoding. Even more than affective or affected, the inchoate knowledge of these images might productively be read as neo-

empiricist.²³ Experience is here more than the material of intellection; it is its very medium, its complex locus in which iconology is woven with technologised experience, thus inventing alternative orders of the visible. Accordingly, these essays engage in symptomatic readings of their objects: they turn specifically to the formal language of images and assert the renewed relevance of close reading for an analysis of the pragmatics of our visual sensorium.

New visual communities

- 12 As they repeatedly interrogate the role and presence of the viewer in contemporary images, these essays also examine the tension between individual acts of watching and the potential formation of visual communities around these emergent experiences. They explore the spread of collaborative practices on various platforms, such as Twitter accounts where storytelling turns into a participatory process (Beaufils); YouTube channels where viewers collectively select a TV series' emblematic "moments" by sharing, commenting on, and tinkering with their favourite scenes; streaming websites like Twitch where videogame players can share their performances (Folléa); online forums like Google Earth Community where "space is constructed as a social experience, as the result of dialogues and collaborations" (Salari); or pop-up artistic projects in which public spaces are reappropriated for a renewed sense of collective visibility (Gould). In so doing, the essays further investigate the details of how "convergence occurs in the brains of individual consumers and through their social interactions with others."²⁴ They also pay attention to collective acts of watching, be it in the case of art installations in museums (Beugnet), *in situ* aesthetic proposals (Gould), selfies posted on social media and political websites (Melia and Trotignon), or interactive online fiction (Beaufils). These essays thus seek to interrogate the "particulate vision" that seems so emblematic of contemporary visual experiences, with their "atomized" aesthetics, creators, and viewers.²⁵
- 13 Working across a vast range of media and genres and interlacing formal approaches with phenomenology and technological studies, these essays aim at offering a reflexion on the necessity to redefine the very remit of visual experience and image-consumption. Looking both at individual and collective practices, at "transparent" and "poor" images, at the embodied and dematerialised facets of digitalisation, at the epistemological and bodily nature of visual experiences, they highlight the complex modes of address of contemporary image-making and thus the complex, at times even paradoxical, pragmatics of visual culture.

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ENDNOTES

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2. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation. Understanding New Media* (Cambridge [Mass.]: The MIT Press, 1999), 1.
3. Richard Grusin, “Radical Mediation,” *Critical Inquiry* 42 (autumn 2015), 131.
4. See Jennifer Barker, *The Tactile Eye. Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009); Jason Farman, *Mobile Interface Theory. Embodied Space and Locative Media* (London: Routledge, 2012).
5. One should mention however the enlightening article by Patrick Vauday, Gabriel Rockhill, Jared Bly and Aurélie Matheron, “From an Ontology to a Pragmatics of Images: a Conversation,” *ASAP/Journal* 1, no. 3, (September 2016): 389-408.
6. On the issue of immediation that is related to that of immersion, see Boris Groys, “immediations,” *The Research Journal of the Courtauld Institute of Art* 1, no. 4 (2007): 2-19. See also Tim Markham and Scott Rodgers (eds.), *Conditions of Mediation: Phenomenological Perspectives on Media* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2017).
7. Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*, 259.
8. Grusin, “Radical Mediation,” 131.
9. Hito Steyerl, “In Defense of the Poor Image,” in *The Wretched of the Screen*, edited by Hito Steyerl (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012).
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13. W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 1. See also of course Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look. A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham [NC]: Duke UP, 2011).
14. On the specific issue of the impact of algorithms on visibility, see Magalhaes, João Carlos and Jun Yu, “Algorithmic Visibility: Elements of a New Media Visibility Regime,” accessed February 04, 2020, <https://ecpr.eu/Filestore/PaperProposal/e40a7961-0fe3-42a5-8727-f9097552f2fe.pdf>.

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18. Patrick Vauday, *et al*, “From an Ontology to a Pragmatics of Images,” 389.
19. Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge [Mass.]: The MIT Press, 1990), 1-2.
20. On the embodied experience of gamers, see Torben Grodal, “Stories for Eye, Ear, and Muscles: Video Games, Media, and Embodied Experiences,” in *The Video Game Theory Reader*, edited by Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (London: Routledge, 2003), 129–55.
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22. Grusin, “Radical Mediation,” 126.
23. Patricia Ticineto Clough, “The New Empiricism: Affect and Sociological Method,” *European Journal of Social Theory* 12, no. 1 (2009): 43–61. See also Erin Manning and Brian Massumi, *Thought in the Act: Passages in the Ecology of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), and Rebecca Coleman, “Theorizing the Present,” 600-22.
24. Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York UP, 2006), 3.
25. Grace, *Culture, Aesthetics and Affect in Ubiquitous Media*.

INDEX

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