Visual frictions

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Visuality is an increasingly contested phenomenon. Rarely stable and never “pure,” the visual is always intertwined with other senses and expressive forms and is often implicated in multiple power relations.

Whether as part of social and cultural practices, or as utilized in social scientific inquiry and investigation, the visual exerts a power that continues to challenge and be challenged by other ways of...
knowing. This power is especially apparent when we consider visuality in its digital manifestations: as visually based media expand their purview across social, cultural, and geographic space we find they are often in “friction” with established norms, structures, and modes of expression.

In this themed issue of the Journal of Aesthetics and Culture, the authors have been invited to explore these issues, under the rubric of “Visual Frictions.” The authors have responded with a rich array of texts and visual materials, analyzing phenomena ranging from Instagram photographs of the empty pink chairs that adorn LA’s Grand Park, to different productions of Wagner’s Der Ring des Nibelungen, to the filmed experience of a young man who describes himself not as visually impaired, but as “seeing differently,” to mash-ups of Astrid Lindgren’s stories and characters, to educational settings where different modes of learning and knowledge come into conflict. Before introducing this diverse set of papers, however, we must unpack more precisely the meanings embedded in the notion of “visual frictions” and its implications. Here we raise these as questions, rather than givens.

We begin with visuality, understood here following Hal Foster’s distinctive use of the term, as referring to those aspects of the visual that are socially and culturally constructed. As opposed to vision, the physiological substrate of seeing, visuality is historically reproduced through material, sociotechnical infrastructures, devices, practices, and discourses. The argument that visuality is increasingly contested rests on two assumptions: first, that we are concerned with a phenomenon that is continually expanding and, second, this expansion brings visuality into more frequent and greater conflict with other “forces.”

There are several possible dissenting responses to this account. First, as Foster himself points out, there is no clean division between vision and visuality; vision, too, is social and historical, and visuality is intertwined with the psyche and the corporeal. Further, the notion of visuality as involving a constant state of expansion assumes the teleology of historical amplification, making any “frictions” more evident or of a greater magnitude than in the past. Can we assume that this is the case? And third, why assume that any such expansion inevitably involves frictions between visuality and other forces? Interrogating this assumption could, for example, reveal interrelations involving smooth transitions, shifts, and mutual exchange between norms, structures, and forms of expression on the one hand and visuality on the other. Mitchell’s variable categories of relations between image and text, which he identified in his tracing of the “pictorial turn,” certainly support a more nuanced view of histories of visuality, not necessarily riddled with conflict.

Further, can we assume that conflict arises and becomes manifest in particular and distinctive ways when visuality intersects with the digital? This assumption rests on the claim that digital remediations of previous “visual” media and forms constitute a kind of resistance to the convergence that is performed within and by virtue of the digital. The friction suggested by this argument would be the antithesis to the rhetoric of convergence and hybridity, making a claim that, again, deserves critical interrogation. As we have each argued elsewhere, alongside the social construction of photography as a digitally networked practice and the incorporation of photographic components into hybrid devices, we also see clear evidence of the reaffirmation of photography as a separate, distinctive domain of technical expertise and artistry and where analogue photography is used as a legitimating structure for medium specificity.

Nor do the authors here accept at face value the rhetoric of visuality as a contested domain inherently in friction with other ways of knowing or forms of expression. Their varied interrogations of visuality as a contemporary social and cultural interface also point to a number of methodological implications of using friction as a conceptual point of entry. First, while friction is often used as a metaphor for imminent conflict or seen as a hindrance in the administrative preference for “smooth” functioning of operations and social relations, the presence of friction may also be a positive force. It is, as we know, central to critique and dialectical thought. In addition, as an expression of contradiction, friction becomes a device to expose hidden structures and the conflicts concealed therein. This points to the possibility of using friction as an intervention, and several of the papers discuss practices and phenomena where this is clearly the case.

A majority of the papers are structured as intersections between theory and empirical analyses,
where speculative sight—theory—touches upon concrete examples, and vice versa. In this sense, the possibility of friction is used to frame the author's argument, as an attempt (paraphrasing Nietzsche) to rub the abstract against the concrete in the hope of producing sparks. That said, the papers cluster around different dimensions of visuality—and its potential for friction—to form three somewhat distinct themes: 1) visuality as a sense perception, 2) expressions of visuality and cultural practice, including aspects of power, and 3) epistemology and the possibility of visuality as a form of knowledge.

On the terrain of sense perception, visuality is often conceptualized as distinctive from and in competition with other senses. Yet, the very distinctiveness of visuality depends upon a discursively ordered ecology of corporeal sensing agencies: sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell, proprioception. This dependence is already implied in the very name *visual frictions*, with its suggestions of a transfer of sense modes between the optical and the tactile and the slippage between vision (as physiological) and visuality (as sociocultural). We are confronted head-on with this duality in Asko Lehmuskallio’s account of his friend Conrad, who argues that our visual surroundings “are designed for average eyesight” and who has developed “social hacks” to live out visuality in socially meaningful interactions that do not reduce him to being treated as visually “impaired.” In Lehmuskallio’s accompanying film, they show us how vision and visuality are intertwined when “seeing with special requirements.”

Understanding the visual as sense perception is additionally complicated by the presence of the digital, in its simultaneously virtual and physical manifestations. In her paper investigating the sensory aspects of teenagers’ mobile phone practices, Vaike Fors advances the concept of *mundane frictions* to discuss the experience, meaning-making, and pedagogy generated through the operation of these screen-based technologies. Her research shows how the tangible frictions involved with habitually touching, rubbing, clicking, etc., media technologies are pivotal to understanding digital visuality as more than visual and are part of a sensory emplacement process establishing people as situated learners.

Turning to the terrain of cultural practice and expressive form, friction is already apparent in the term *visual media*. Following Mitchell’s argument, it is evident that there are no visual media, only hybrid forms, or “mixed” media. Further, the possibility of translating in anything approaching meaningful terms between different media is unattainable. Kosta Economou and Anne-Li Lindgren explore this as a creative “frictional” encounter between classic films based on Astrid Lindgren’s narratives of childhood with YouTube mash-ups by young videographers, in which the idealized children in the Swedish films are replaced with monstrous children from well-known films such as *The Exorcist*. In the next article, Jason R. D’Aoust takes on the special effects and interactive devices of multimedia and digital scenography in three productions of Wagner’s *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. Relying on the critical reception of each production and framed in a methodology of historical discourse and media archeology, D’Aoust examines the political side of the intermedial interactivity in the 2010 production for the Metropolitan Opera in New York, reading it against Wagner’s speculation on the mimetic origins and destiny of art.

Erin Despard’s point of departure is the designed landscape, and specifically the city park as a form of visual media, in interaction with other media forms. She examines a set of Instagram photographs (of very pink and mostly empty chairs) from the renovated Grand Park in Los Angeles to argue for these social media images as disrupting the reciprocal shaping of urban visibilities and suggests how they might become politically productive as points of intervention on behalf of alternative visibilities. In an additional instance of cultural practices that intervene in and possibly reshape relationships of power and politics, Paula Uimonen addresses the rituals of mediated mourning that took place during the funeral of Nelson Mandela, focusing on social relationality and public displays of visual memory as the event was broadcast on a large public screen in the Grand Parade in Cape Town. She discusses how digital visuality, weaving together the broadcast from the FNB Stadium in Johannesburg with local public displays and interactive performances, “mediated a sense of global communitas,” temporarily overcoming historical frictions between the global north and south, while positioning Mandela as a pan-African icon.
The article by Edgar Gómez Cruz and Helen Thornham examines the phenomenon of the selfie. The authors argue against the growing corpus of literature that regards these digital photographs, especially for posting on social-networking or photo-sharing websites, as “documentations” of the self or as identity affirmation. These interpretations result from reading intention off of these images, a reading that prioritizes the visual over the power relations and practices in which they are embedded. Examining the selfie instead as embedded in practice, they locate it as a reflection of the dominant ideologies of a shifting digital culture, where combinations of visual, material, and digital elements are creating new forms of surveillance and sousveillance, generating softer and more effective forms of power.

On the terrain of epistemology, we find visuality proffered as a particular kind of knowledge, or supporting different ways of learning and knowing. Alternatively, we may consider the ways visuality is already embedded in institutionalized and discursive modes of inquiry through the metaphors used, where visuality is the actual basis for theory, as derived from the Greek word theoría, “to consider, speculate, look at.” This implicit link between theorizing and seeing may account for the disjuncture Marianna Michalowska analyzes in her paper, between on the one hand, the imaginings produced by the ideal forms and spaces of computer-generated images (CGIs) in architectural practice and, on the other, the conflicts that arise when these are realized in the public space. Confronted with the material execution of the digital utopia that was anticipated, we may experience “dystopian disillusion,” a very different form of knowledge, and which may motivate action. Lindsay Anne Balfour critically examines the cultural and commemorative production of the museum with its “philosophy of hospitality.” Her case is the National September 11 Memorial and Museum and its incorporation of a brick from Bin Laden’s Abbottabad compound in Pakistan, examining the ways the visuality and materiality of this object defy and contradict the expected narrative of the museum.

Mark Westmoreland analyzes a pedagogical video project carried out in the wake of the 2011 Egyptian Revolution, which complicates assessments of the Arab Spring as a manifestation of digital democracy and the “Arab Street” as populated by a volatile mob. The critical visual methods used in the project allowed students to apprehend modes of lived experience that, although not “political” in the normative sense, nevertheless form a basis for people’s experience of political life and also reveal forms of affective knowledge for the participants, both people on screen and those behind the camera, as well as distant viewers.

Finally, Margareta Melin explores the cultures and learning practices in academic environments where bridging the gap between traditional academic and practice-based learning is a primary goal. Despite the often destructive conflicts that consistently arise around issues of epistemology and pedagogy in these environments, interviews with students reveal that they have appropriated an embodied knowledge of a double perspective that they have retained and found useful in their work and in their lives.

The collection of articles is the product of the Nordic Network for Digital Visuality (NNDV), a 4-year research network funded by Nordforsk and administered by the Section of Journalism, Media and Communication in the Department of Media Studies at Stockholm University. The network was designed to bring together researchers, primarily from the social sciences and representing primarily the Nordic countries, who were working on questions regarding visualization and digitally mediated communication. “Visual Frictions and Their Futures” was the theme of the network’s final workshop in February 2015, held at the Ethnographic Museum in Stockholm. A majority of the contributions to this volume were presented as drafts for discussion in that forum. These drafts were then supplemented by contributions from several researchers who responded to a wider call for papers on this theme. As coordinator of this network and respondent to the workshop papers, we welcome this opportunity to present this exciting body of work to a wider public.

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Notes

1. Hal Foster, “Preface,” in Vision and Visuality, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle, WA: Dia Art Foundation, 1988), ix.
2. Ibid.
3. William John Thomas Mitchell, Picture Theory. Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994).
4. See, for example, Karin Becker, “Gestures of Seeing: Amateur Photographers in the News,” Journalism—Theory, Practice & Criticism 16 (2015): 451–69; Karin Becker and Patricia Tovar, “Awakening the Past, Expressing the Present: Stories of Photography, Migration and Belief in a Mexican Village,” in Photographic Powers—Helsinki Photomedia 2014, eds. Mika Elo and Marko Karo (Helsinki: Aalto University, 2015), 309–34; Paul Frosh, “Beyond the Image Bank: Digital Commercial Photography,” In The Photographic Image in Digital Culture, 2nd ed., ed. Martin Lister (London: Routledge, 2013), 131–48; and Paul Frosh, “The Gestural Image: The Selfie, Photography Theory and Kinaesthetic Sociability,” International Journal of Communication 9 (2015): 1607–28.
5. Mitchell, Picture Theory.