The Business of Visual Culture

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For the Fifth Critical Management Studies Conference (11-13 July 2007, Manchester Business School) we convened a new stream ‘The Visual Culture of Business’. It was a speculative endeavour: inspired by our ongoing, though wholly informal pursuit of cross-disciplinary interests, there was no real certainty how (indeed if) scholars in business and management would respond. As it turned out, we had a number of interesting submissions and a very enjoyable, engaging session during the conference. Shaun Bertram’s paper on the ‘art’ of management,
found here in the same issue of the *Electronic Journal of Radical Organization Theory*, was one of the contributions to the stream. It ably demonstrates how visual culture – in this case kitsch motivational art for the workplace – both intersects with issues of management (on operational, commercial and aesthetic levels) and engenders the need for proper critical visual methods of analysis and interpretation. This, of course, is where developments in visual culture studies can offer important insights.

Interest in ‘visual culture’ comes from all quarters, cutting across disciplinary boundaries in the arts, humanities, social sciences, and pure sciences. Whether described as a discipline in its own right, sub-discipline or even ‘interdiscipline’ this new field of interest has – since the mid-1990s – made its mark in intellectual life (most certainly in the UK and USA), with numerous academic books, articles, journals, exhibitions and degree courses now in evidence. Yet, it is quite evident the proliferating debates have tended to open up more questions than appear to be answered (Bal, 2003:5). Inevitably, this has made it very difficult to establish any core foundation or direction. It is certainly the case that public debates about visual culture have hardly reached any decisive conclusions. In fact, in some cases these have only resulted in stark contested positions being drawn up (the somewhat infamous Visual Culture Questionnaire conducted by the *October* journal in 1996 is a pertinent example). Yet, the difficulty in pinning the subject down can also be seen as its particular strength, seeming to be grasping at something significant and ever evolving in our lives. Nonetheless, what unite those engaged in the subject are perhaps the following three main assertions:

1. *There is a need to test and explore the claim that we live in an ever more visual environment.* Digital technologies and culture has really prompted the idea that we are somehow living in ever more visual times. Mobile phones, for example, have enabled
ever more pictures to be taken and disseminated. Equally, visual branding is central to all kinds of activity. Even university departments now find themselves needing to visualise the degree course they run for prospectuses and websites. Yet, for all its apparent growth, visual culture has always been a part of our intellectual history (Manghani et al., 2006), indeed our very humanity; the earliest European cave paintings, for example, date back 32,000 years. So, what’s so special about the visual today?

(2) There is an important distinction between image and text, which in turn questions the validity of linguistic-based interpretative methods, most notably semiotics. W.J.T. Mitchell (1994) suggests a ‘pictorial turn’ is in process, whereby the dominance of textual approaches to understanding culture and society is challenged. Importantly, he argues that unlike the theory of the text, there is no single theory of the image, instead all of the metalanguages (or modes of analysis) for representation need to considered mediums in themselves. The UK’s Arts and Humanities Research Council’s (AHRC) major new funding scheme, ‘Beyond Text: Performances, Sounds, Images, Objects’, is a good example of current attempts to get to grips with the full ramifications of a supposed pictorial turn. The £5.5 million programme, to run for 5 years until May 2012, states a specific aim to bring together ‘those who create works and those who preserve, display and study them, the programme will break down traditional boundaries between practice-led or practice-based research and other forms of investigation’. Critical engagement with visual culture is now increasingly seen to need to find new ways of looking, to collaborate across fields to secure new methodologies and means of dissemination.

1 See: <http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/apply/research/sfi/ahrcsi/beyond_text_sounds_voices_images_objects.asp>
2 A search on the ‘visual’ on the website of the UK’s Economic and Social Research Council (comparable to the AHRC, though with a longer history) does come up with various projects, including an examination of ‘visual short-term memory’, the role of visual materials in the evolution of business knowledge, and ‘visual engineering’. Yet, to date there are certainly no dedicated funding schemes specific to interests in visual culture or visual knowledge.
(3) An important current in the field is the notion of interdisciplinarity: to engage with other parties and perspectives rather than simply observe things from the sidelines, from the safety of one’s own disciplinary framework. With reference again to the aforementioned AHRC funding scheme, in addition to those who preserve, display and study ‘works’ (of all kinds, cultural and academic), it would be appropriate to include amongst those who create them, those who design, manufacture, promote and sell them too. Dialogue between those working in the arts, social sciences and sciences has certainly become more noticeable. Artists and art historians are going into imaging labs, geographers and sociologists are using visual methodologies, and scientists are increasingly making us aware of the importance of creativity and ‘visioning’ in their work (see, for example, Ihde, 1998; Ehrenzweig, 2000; Damasio, 2004; Hockney, 2001; Galison, 2006; Zeki, 1999; Latour and Weibel, 2002; Stafford, 1996). Yet, interestingly, despite all the talk of interdisplinarity, there is very little evidence of a cross-faculty exchange with those engaged in the area of business, management and marketing. Following the session at the Critical Management Studies conference, one panel member has started work on a Visual Business Network with the express aim of raising the profile of business-related debates and collaboration. It will be interesting to see how this network can develop and, crucially, to see to what degree it can foster an interdisciplinary culture.

Taking these three broad interests into account, our stream for the Critical Management Studies conference sought to elucidate connections with the key debates and contemporary issues as seen from the perspective of business and management. We wanted to begin a process of inquiry into the linkages, challenges and differences at stake.
The Visual Culture Industry

In some quarters (particularly with respect to art history and practice, media and cultural studies) visual culture studies has given rise to complaints over collusion with business, or more specifically the logic of global capitalism. Nicholas Mirzoeff – a key scholar and proponent of visual culture – has become an ambivalent figure. His edited volume *Visual Culture Reader* (1998) and accompanying textbook *Visual Culture: An Introduction* (1999) have been seen to privilege transnational, mass media forms and not only that but to be too accepting of the fluidity of systems of meaning and information. Regarded a post-structural approach to visual culture, a key criticism is that the overall effect is to conflate a number of important concerns, crucially to privilege an *abstract*, somewhat kaleidoscopic interest in the visual. As Armstrong (1996:27) has argued, the objects of study in this respect are ‘viewed not as particularized *things* made for particular historical uses, but as exchanges circulating in some great boundless and often curiously ahistorical economy of images, subjects, and other representations’.

The anti-capitalist movement of the late 1990s, as documented by Naomi Klein’s *No Logo* (2000), protested head-on with brand identities and their visual, fluid mediation, leading to what is referred to as a practice of ‘culture jamming’, whereby established logos are subverted for critical – and even on occasion violent – ends. Advocates of visual culture studies argue for the need of new strategies and tactics that account for the complexities and concerns of our postmodern environment and modes of thinking, which are based increasingly in visual and digital technologies. Arguably, however, Klein’s highly successful book (in commercial terms) has in effect come to epitomise a new ‘brand’ of unbranded and counter-culture books, films,
magazines, music and clothing. Of course, marketing – and the business arena in general – makes great use of visual technologies and it is undoubtedly from this use that we gain so much of our social and cultural meanings and values. It seems hardly to make any sense to try to map the ideological divisions between those in favour of visual culture and those not. Visual culture is our culture, for all that is good and bad and we speak from within this culture when we comment upon it. Thus, whether we refer to those engaged in the production of products and services, those who consume these things, or some other supposed ‘external’ place of the critic, there is no privileged position from which to observe visual culture. We are all in it, we are all it.

Of course, there is nothing new in seeing a conflict of interests between art (or more generally creativity) and commerce. Yet, regardless of whether visual culture is taken to be a further expansion of the ‘culture industry’, it is a vital aspect of our lives, making it surely more important we attempt to engage with it seriously. Added to which, concerns over a flattening out of history are hardly new. The advent of pop art in the 1950s and 1960s is a good case in point. Perhaps best epitomised by Richard Hamilton’s collage piece *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?* (1956). Pop art explicitly mixed up elements of contemporary popular culture with historical elements, creating a fun, explosive re-valuing of all sorts of aspects of culture. The themes and collage techniques of pop art (as a
radical art movement) have lent themselves well to more recent commercial phenomena such as MTV-style music and youth culture TV and film productions. Like pop art, MTV has managed to picture our desires, visualised through gesture, logos, fashion icons and consumer items. Again, the line between art and commerce is difficult to ‘fix’, but as much as one might want to argue media output to be commercial and manipulative, it is equally – like political satire – able to indulge in the very subject it brings into critical view, to offer skilful, revealing accounts of our own culture and subjectivity. Susan Buck-Morss, a notable scholar of politics and critical theory, urges we continue to believe ‘[a]esthetic experience (sensory experience) is not reducible to information’ (Buck-Morss, 1996:30), added to which she reminds us that visual culture is indeed in the hands of its ‘producers’ of tomorrow; these being, she notes: ‘the camera-women, video/film editors, city planners, set designers for rock stars, tourism packagers, marketing consultants, political consultants, television producers, commodity designers, layout persons, and cosmetic surgeons’ (1996:30-31). What is it these people need to know, she asks – though she leaves it open to decide whether an educational programme or degree course can be of any specific benefit. The sense, then, is that visual culture is going on outside (and regardless) of the academy. Yet, it is perhaps evermore important that the scholars of visual culture (i.e. those ‘cultural studies’ type scholars engaged with the visual) actually go out and engage with visual culture; including, of course, engaging with those who make visual culture their business.

Questions of visual culture are certainly of importance and interest to those working in the areas of business, management, marketing, communications and organisational theory etc. Yet, interest from these quarters would seem to go unnoticed by those who describe themselves specifically as scholars of visual culture. Two key scholars in the field of marketing, Professor Jonathan Schroeder and Professor T. C. Melewar, for example, have been examining the importance and significance of the visual for sometime now. Schroeder (2005; and with Salzer Morling (eds.)
2005), for example, is concerned with all aspects of advertising, branding, marketing communications, tourism marketing, visual communication and identity. Schroeder’s key research questions ask how value is made through visual communication; how brands, consumption, and communication contribute cultural meaning; and how image relates to identity. Schroeder’s areas of interest are undoubtedly very similar to many of those working in cultural studies and visual culture studies, yet his name is not generally found in visual culture bibliographies. A similar case can be made of Melewar (2007; and with Karaosmanoglu, 2008) who has published extensively in academic journals on the topic of corporate identity and marketing communications. Perhaps one reason why his work has not been picked up by scholars outside of business relates to the way in which journal articles tend to be read only by those working in the same or related disciplines. In the arts, for example, more emphasis is placed upon books than on scholarly articles, which in turn leads to a potential imbalance in the way subjects migrate and exchange. A more fundamental argument is that business-related fields are only applying already existing visual theories, not generating or refining them. So, whilst Andy Warhol famously bridged the gulf between high art and commercial product design, enigmatically placing actual commercial products (such as the Brillo Box) into the gallery with the effect that the art world and commerce were never the same again, there has yet to be any such ‘revolution’ coming from the other direction. Art has a means to ask questions of itself and the culture in which it is found, whereas business really only works on and with art, seemingly unable to pose new or searching questions. As will be discussed below, it currently remains the task of critics in arts and humanities to probe the theoretical underpinnings of visual research, and with results which are increasingly difficult perhaps to apply in business, without at least the need for much more critical reflection or meta-analysis. It is this very difficulty that makes any call to bring business and visual culture studies together all the more relevant, if not important.
The Pictorial Turn

At the heart of pronouncing a visual culture is the assertion of something special about the visual, something different for example between image and text. Whilst any specific ‘theory’ of the image can hardly be said to have any definitive articulation, the ‘text’ and ‘textuality’ (even ‘intertextuality’) are concepts deeply embedded in the practices of the human sciences, as well as extending into wider popular discourse. In fact, the ‘text’ has come to underpin a whole way of thinking and interpreting our world, situating us in what Rorty (1979) has described, in his account of the history of philosophy, as the ‘linguistic turn.’ In response to this (and in light of the recent trend in visual culture), Mitchell (1994) reflects upon what can be considered a new challenge to this history. He suggests, ‘that once again a complexly related transformation is occurring in other disciplines of the human sciences and in the sphere of public culture’ leading to a shift towards what he calls a visual or ‘pictorial turn’ (Mitchell, 1994:11); the full implication of which is that ‘visual experience or “visual literacy” might not be fully explicable on the model of textuality’ (16).

However, unlike the ‘linguistic turn,’ the pictorial turn does not mean we now have ‘some powerful account of visual representation that is dictating the terms of cultural theory’ (Mitchell, 1994:13). In fact it is rather the opposite; there is no single theory of the image, no underlying terms. Mitchell’s own professed ‘economy’ of theory is the result of a conviction (borne out by his own ‘logic’ of the pictorial turn) ‘that we already have an overabundance of metalanguages for representation and that no “neutral” or “scientific” vocabulary (semiotics, linguistics, discourse analysis) can transcend or master the field of representation’ (417) – indeed, each of these metalanguages are in themselves a medium, like any other mode of representation. Thus,
Mitchell’s ‘picture theory’ is not meant to finalise a particular understanding, but rather allow the scene of academic, interpretative engagement to be recognised for what it is, in hope of keeping open a critical awareness of the exchanges and translations being made in the name of visual culture/studies. This is what he describes as a de-disciplinary exercise whereby focus on the ‘visual’ helps illuminate what is left out by one disciplinary mode of analysis or another, and how specific interpretative frameworks codify and articulate the visual in relation to what is otherwise passed over or bracketed.

Business and the scholarship of business is arguably nowhere near entering such a de-disciplinary exercise, it is rather bound up in using the mediums of theory that Mitchell writes of, indeed often still applying to advertising, for example, the outdated ‘mediums’ of structuralist semiotics or Freudian psychoanalysis. Yet, equally, Mitchell, for all his clarity on the subject, is really only providing a watch over methodologies, rather than refining them for future use. Thus, a particular problem that arises from this so-called de-disciplinary exercise (and one Mitchell himself alerts us to), is that clarification with respect to methodology is made only in terms of what is not achievable. It is suggested, for example, that what is not meant is ‘a return to naïve mimesis, copy of correspondence theories of representation, or a renewed metaphysics of pictorial “presence”.’ Instead the pictorial turn is supposedly ‘a postlinguistic, postsemiotic rediscovery of the picture as a complex interplay between visuality, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies, and figurality’ (Mitchell, 1994:16). As we know from the earlier postmodernism debates, such a ‘post-’ definition is by default a negative one, either folding back in upon itself (critically or not), or simply unwilling to posit future direction. Of course – whether we like(d) them or not – the postmodern debates have been extremely significant and far-reaching, just as in this case it would seem so are the current debates with respect to a pictorial turn.
What we are left with is evidently an unsettled, or unhinged site (or sight) of inquiry. On the one hand, there is the potential to enable a radical critique (in both form and content). On the other hand, it remains the case that without knowing what might come after (or even besides) the ‘text,’ we can not easily determine any specific new approach. The difficulty in defining visual culture, whether as a theory or methodology, has repercussions for academic discourse, not least the re-evaluation of scholarly expectations. Thus, whilst we may recognise the importance of the de-disciplinary operation of visual culture (certainly politically in devolving boundaries and calling for genuine collaboration, even outside of the humanities), the obvious, yet oft neglected criticism is that what is lacking is responsibility for getting involved more directly with the visual, for allowing the visual to contribute critically as a form of knowledge or intelligence in itself. Thus, given the espoused transformation in the human sciences and the sphere of public culture that Mitchell writes of, it would seem ever more important that the visual as a ‘form of knowledge’ (and of power) in the sphere of business be given serious attention. In part, this means, as suggested here, to reconsider approaches to research and indeed the objects of research (see, for example Warren’s (2005; 2006) innovative attempts at using visual methodologies). It also means, however, as discussed below, rethinking the contours of research paradigms and the interrelationships that arise between them.

**Doing Business with Intedisciplinarity**

Arguably, rooted in the ‘problem’ of the visual culture of business is the age old concern – even iconoclasm – of the image. Critical theories have, until more recently, always been quick to critique images and visual representations. In this sense, it is argued images are nothing but
illusions, illusions that advertisers and marketers (amongst others) have been only too keen to promote. Yet there is surely a greater complexity and sophistication at play in contemporary society. To take one key example, semiotics has been a long standing critical methodology applied (across many disciplines) as a means to unmask the illusions of businesses and other such organisational ideologies. The French cultural critic, Roland Barthes (1993), is perhaps the most widely known figure related to the development of this theory. His book *Mythologies* (originally published in French in 1957) remains a classic read by arts students and marketers alike. Barthes is typically viewed as having provided a scientific approach for the critique of the bourgeois or petit-bourgeois world of products and services, yet, curiously, even at the time of his writing, he was well aware his ideas had developed into something of a ‘mythological doxa,’ an almost democratic ability or right to unmask our own living culture (whilst simultaneously remaining ensconced, ever happier within it). The idea behind his method was not to become producers of myths (as we find with journalists, media producers, advertisers and marketers), nor was it even to be a mythologist, a stern critic standing up against the tide of mythological mass culture. Instead, it was to be engaged in the very ambiguity and dynamism of myth itself, to be, as Barthes suggests, ‘a reader of myths’ (1993:128) – by which he means we both read and write with the culture we analyse.

Jean-Marie Floch’s (2005) *Visual Identities* is a useful example of such an approach. The book marks an important contribution to the growing field of ‘industrial’ semiotics. Floch’s real strength is his analysis of signs in a way that is both industrially relevant and textually complex – he moves between perspectives with a fluidity that would seem to come from a genuine interest and understanding of the various perspectives at stake. Generally, it can be argued there have been two dominant approaches to the understanding of commercial signs, such as logos and advertisements – both tending to be reductive. From within industry, marketing is frequently only
really explained in term of the mass psychology of ‘appeal’ and often based upon limited audience research (very little is said, for example, of the ‘uses and gratifications’ model of audience research whereby audiences are understood as complex, heterogeneous and/or lacking in comprehension). Similarly, however, textual or semiotic analysis of commercial signs is limited to issues of identity politics and criticism (Marxism, feminism, etc.). Floch, however, would seem to generate a more ‘interdisciplinary’ approach, if only in that he is willing to listen to various and even competing discourse. In so doing, he brings together (and so makes for a shared readership) the interests of industrial practitioners in advertising, marketing and design, as well as students and academics in semiotics. For further consideration, it would certainly be useful to begin to understand how Floch’s work maps together with the work of the scholars Schroeder and Melewar noted above.

Overall, with domestic, public and professional spheres becoming increasingly media-rich environments, and with digital technologies providing us evermore with the means of production, we are all now readers and makers – of one form of another – of myths and of a very vibrant visual culture: whether as individuals, organizations, businesses, or governments. It would seem all too obvious that a critical synthesis is required if we are to truly understand our visual order or community. Indeed, the interest in interdisciplinarity has perhaps been one of the most striking and productive aspects of visual culture studies. In *Images: A Reader* (Manghani et al. 2006), for example, a survey of critical texts on the image from Plato to the present, the editors assert the need to go beyond any ‘niche in the humanities’. They urge a ‘holistic field of inquiry’, but one that does not then seek the creation of a single ‘interdiscipline’. In fact, drawing on writing ‘from art history to neuroscience, from political science to cultural studies, it cannot be assumed,’ they argue, ‘that the interdisciplinary terrain is already mapped out’ (Manghani et al., 2006:1). Our panel at the Critical Management Studies conference, ‘The Visual Culture of Business’, was
certainly inspired by such sentiments. Like the art theorist James Elkins, who urges the current remit of visual studies to ‘be even more general’, we too understand his call to welcome ‘scientists from various disciplines’ and to move beyond ‘premodern Western visuality and into non-Western art, archaeology, and the visual elements of linguistics’ (Elkins, 2003:41). Yet, strangely enough, rarely, if ever, in such grand pronouncements of interdisciplinary exchange does the world of business seem to figure.

In 2003, we organized an international conference event at the University of Nottingham, under the title of ‘Image & Critique: Image - Thought – Text’. A host of well-regarded scholars of visual culture gathered at a pre-conference dinner. Amongst them, one person in particular (who will remain nameless here, but who undoubtedly has done a huge amount to break down disciplinary barriers) looked over at the two of us with a certain degree of suspicion. Our assertion that our two wildly different specialisms – critical theory on the one hand and business ethics and marketing on the other – could somehow become natural bedfellows in the pursuit of understanding contemporary visual culture, appeared to stretch things a little too far. It was a moment of some disappointment in which it became apparent that the purported openness of debate within visual culture studies (at least from within the arts and humanities) was in fact potentially a circular debate. If a line is drawn as a circle to signify the inclusion of those inside as a community, a ‘roundtable’ as it were of debate, it still does not get over the fact that that same circle designates those outside its boundary as being outside the debate. If anything, then, our panel at the Critical Management Studies conference was a modest, though equally long-overdue attempt to respond to an engrained suspicion that business and management studies are unable to contribute to the critical discourse of visual culture.

3 See: <http://manghani.free.fr/imagecritique/imagecritique.html>
As anthropologists ‘at home’, cultural studies critics have placed themselves in close proximity to the actual businesses of culture – the multinationals, the media outlets and the shopping arcades. Whilst the underlying intent has generally been to offer a critique of contemporary culture (in the fashion of the critical theory of the Frankfurt School), a very much more complex picture has been drawn up. There is no clear dividing line between producers and consumers – everyone who works to sell a myth, are equally consumers within that same society. Furthermore, with the rise in corporate social responsibility and ethical and social business models (engendering a greater degree of reflexivity and transparency in business), there is seemingly evermore reason why the very business of visual culture – and the insights it can yield – ought to be welcomed into dialogue with existing debates. If the arts and sciences have been able to begin to map out shared territory and debate constructively over their differences, it is surely possible the same can happen with those working in the field of business and management, and with equally productive and fascinating results.

Bibliography


