

***Farewell to Visual Studies* — Review**

Edited by: James Elkins, Gustav Frank and Sunil Manghani
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Is it Time to Say Farewell to Visual Studies?

If someone is familiar with previous titles in the series *The Stone Art Theory Institute*, in which the volume that I will be referring to is published, then the book's exclamatory tone and task of bidding farewell to one of the most recent topics within the humanities will come as no surprise. *Farewell to Visual Studies* is a very unusual book, not just in terms of its seemingly denigrating attitude toward the subject it wishes to describe, but also in terms of its structure. It consists of a transcript that was created after a week-long discussion in which participants at the roundtable deliberated on different issues regarding visual studies: its alleged "protohistoric" beginnings during the period of the Weimar Republic in Germany, all the way to its contemporary resurrection that occurred inside the North American academic community at the beginning of 1990s and to the present day. The discussion was later transcribed and scrutinized by a dozen assessors, who commented on what has been said with the opportunity to make their remarks, both agreement and dissent in the form of a short essay. Then all this was eventually further assessed by another group of people who made comments on the previous comments. In this way the book not only unfolds in a literary sense, but also metaphorically: The arguments that are presented are inscribed as a new layer that is visible in the previous one.

One of the assessors has summarized the prevailing impression that visual studies has of itself by saying that this discipline "shows almost insatiable appetite for disciplinary self-examination since its inception, for making the theories, methods and practices that define the field a primary object of study" (A. Grønstad). Indeed, various troubling questions seem to accompany visual studies, from the (in)famous issue of the magazine *October* published in 1996 in which the new discipline was accused of promoting, among other things, a reactionary turn from high art toward popular culture, to still unresolved disciplinary traumas: what visual studies does, what its primary interest should be, how it should be taught (if at all), what it should be called, and even—the question that has been articulated in the book—"is it a cure for art history or a poisonous side-effect?" (P. Frosh). I do not think that this book will help in answering any of these questions, but it does excellent job in putting them all together, which should be considered a significant accomplishment *per se*.

For the first time, many different aspects, including divergent histories and genealogies of visual studies, have been confronted and compared in a single volume; even some bold and unexpected "archeological" accounts have been brought up. For example, one of the editors, Gustav Frank, contends that visual studies does not have roots in art history but, rather, in a less-known movement called *visuelle Kultur* that flourished in the early decades of twentieth-century Germany. This critical practice was informed mostly by the 19th century interest in vernacular visuality—which was followed by early experiences in making and watching films and study in perception and psychology—rather than art. Following the same direction, Charles W. Haxthausen reminds us, in his assessment, that the pictorial turn got its contemporary name back in 1924 in the book *Der sichtbare Mensch* in which its author, Béla Balász, said: "At

present a new discovery, a new machine is at work to turn the attention of men back to a visual culture and give them new faces". Balász uses the term *Neue Wendung zum Visuellen*—new Visual Turn—to refer to the cinematographic camera. What is more important to us is that, if we take this "early turn" seriously and we accept Frank's claim, then many of the disciplinary uncertainties and institutional skepticism that visual studies confronts would be more easily justified and addressed.

One of these uncertainties is the case of two neighboring phenomena that are practically unknown to the Anglo-American scholarly public, and to which a fair amount of space is devoted, for very good reasons, in the volume: German *Bildwissenschaft* and a sort of its "Swiss school" gathered around the extremely important and systematically conducted project called *Eikones* led by Gottfried Boehm. The book makes it very clear that what differentiates visual studies from the European image studies is not only the language, but also the fundamentally different attitude in relation to images and, consequently, to the intellectual enterprise that has been undertaken on both sides. The participants at the roundtable seemed to share the opinion that the study of images should engage in principles that organize human interaction, instead of deciphering individual pictures. In that sense, from both viewpoints—Anglo-American and German—visual studies has a firm, anti-semiotic stance and, therefore, subscribes to five common terms: "interdisciplinary, postdisciplinary, interdisciplinary, subdisciplinary, transdisciplinary," leading eventually to a self-proclaimed status of "ambiguous inclusiveness" (J. Elkins).

Based on differing historical paths, English-speaking tradition is grounded on social and political issues and German-speaking tradition owes its thematic and methodological spectrum to communicative and media aspects of images. It is then all the more convincing that, despite different and sometimes conflicting disciplinary interests, both intellectual streams have almost contemporaneously led to a proclamation of a phenomenon called the pictorial or iconic turn. Bearing in mind the book's broad reach and fairly systematic approach based on decades and geography (to the extent allowed by a free dialogic form), it is a bit surprising that the discussion doesn't bring to the fore anyone from the long list of popular philosophers pertaining to the French tradition of visual analysis, as was noticed by few assessors (E. Alloa, V.R. Schwarz, I. Decobeq). The only exception to the rule is Georges Didi-Huberman, whose role and significance in relation to images in the field of *Bildwissenschaft* and/or visual studies have even been contested by a few interlocutors. This exclusiveness is in a paradoxically sharp contrast with the information brought up by James Elkins when he enumerated as much as five different "kinds" of visual studies: Anglo American, German-language, Latin American, Scandinavian and even Chinese, in which all of the other versions are mixed. The idea that visual studies, after all, literally cannot accommodate everything and everybody within its (in)disciplinary borders (as is largely believed in the realm of art history, for instance) speaks for the still contestable and uncertain area of study that visual studies is willing to claim.

But then, who is wishing visual studies farewell and why? In contrast to the implications of the title of the book: nobody. In regard to the discipline in question, a predominant tone was perhaps the one of inadequacy, rather than redundancy. Sunil Manghani said in the introduction that visual studies has not yet discovered its true nature or key findings—he calls it a "diagram moment"—when the dissemination of new specific knowledge can be easily accepted by many other disciplines within the humanities. There was a strange line of occurrences that led to this book, especially its title. James Elkins first named and advertised the academic event of the same name as a sort of provocation in 2006; then it actually took place in Chicago in 2011, while the

book saw the light of day only in 2015. So, this decade of both the fruition and contestation of visual studies is ominously reflected in the title of the book. One of the assessors, Mark Linder, stated in a somewhat psychoanalytical vein that the discussions betrayed a desire for discipline: If any sense of departure or separation (or farewell, for that matter) is implicit in the talks, it is that “visual studies can no longer easily refuse or defer disciplinary identity”. On the other hand, Tom Mitchell, who took part only in one day-long discussion, said following the line of Fayereband’s *Against Method*: “humanistic knowledge is best fostered by speculative experimentation and rigorous questioning of received ideas and procedures. I want to prolong the interdisciplinary status of visual studies as long as possible”. As for the reviewer, this book is doing just that.

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