

# Visual Theory

**Edited by:** Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Holly  
and Keith Moxey

**Reviewed by:** Terence King

Art historical and theoretical studies have, over the past decade or so, tended increasingly to examine their interpretative models in relation to those adopted by a widely diverse range of disciplines in the humanities. Significant re-evaluations of the processes of art history have consequently taken place, and the discipline has been enriched by its seeking contextual parallels in cognate fields of inquiry.

Much of the most valuable art historical writing in inter- and cross-disciplinary fields has, perhaps inevitably, been spread over an often intimidating assortment of publications covering a spectrum of specialisations from semiotics to religious studies. There has been relatively little published by way of comprehensive surveys and analyses of methodological diversity in art history and theory, and this compilation of essays is, therefore, a welcome and most helpful gathering together of several pithy and purposeful short arguments.

Based on a series of lectures on "Theory and Interpretation in the Visual Arts", first delivered in the late 1980s, the book explores conceptual models for art historical inquiry which embrace feminist discourses, structural linguistics, psychological processes, the phenomenology of perception, and social constructions of visual representation. The format adopted is that each of seven key essays, in which specific positions are stated and interpretative proposals explained, is followed by commentaries by other writers. The commentaries in some instances attempt to develop or apply the interpretative strategies offered in the key essay, and in others the response takes a more critically analytic form. Although very varied in length and weightiness, the commentaries do generally contribute to the readers' understanding of the central theses being proposed.

This approach results in several complex debates being set up within the specific models under discussion, as well as giving the book a sense of constant movement across a pitted terrain while yet holding a focus on one or two fundamental positions which characterise the compilation.

A lengthy Introduction to the essays indicates at the outset that the two central approaches identified by the editors over the several essays are equally distinctive and, in some respects, oppositional in nature. The editors,

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perhaps somewhat too categorically, see the positions taken by the contributors as either falling into that class of argument which holds that visual representation is always bound up with particular conditions of production and reception, or as advancing long-held theories about the essence of art. In the case of the second group of writers phenomenological experience and theories of perception and response feature predominantly in the attempts to arrive at definitions of artistic experiences.

Although there are clearly sharply contradictory starting points assumed by writers as fundamentally different as Nochlin, in "Women, Art and Power", and Danto, in "Description and Phenomenology of Perception", there are also points in their essays which reinforce, temper or amplify the other. In this particular instance, Danto's philosophical examination of language and description, and the force of these in the interpretation of an artwork, emphasizes concepts of linguistic relations in visual perception whereas Nochlin's concerns are with the historical obscuring of power relations that takes place in convention-rooted interpretation of artworks.

But emphatic as these differences of method are, when read together they act as excellent illustrations of the sheer breadth of interpretative possibility open to art historians. This is in fact a considerable strength of the book; essays need not necessarily be read consecutively nor any one argumentative position accepted exclusively. From the convincing stridency of Nochlin to the coolly analytic approach of Danto one gains a good sense of the compass of models and processes in use in art historical analysis. Where Nochlin has an admirable quality of immediacy and currency about her writing, Danto's arguments sound rarefied, but his apparent trans-historicism can be deceptive, for the conclusions reached are rooted partly in an acknowledgement of the importance of the origins of the artwork similar to that shown by several of the writers favouring a social history of art. Paths do, however, diverge dramatically at certain points, and Bryson, for example, chooses to examine art and semiotics squarely in the context of social structures, in the process largely dismissing phenomenological explanations of artistic production.

Several of the essays which deal explicitly or indirectly with the respective natures of and interactions between literary theory and artistic theory dwell on the problems of finding a starting point for art history as a discipline and in this respect several commentaries on the main essays valuably extend and enliven the debate. In a discipline at times searching for its foundations and at other times grappling with difficulties of application of theory first formulated in relation to other fields of study, it becomes important that a wide range of methodologies be surveyed to establish pertinence and relevance. The shape of the net cast by *Visual Theory*, from topics in philosophy to the political economy of art, is excellent and the book ought to hold considerable interest for persons engaged in fields such as cultural studies, literary theory, social anthropology, and related areas, as

well as having an obvious value for students of art history.

Rosalind Krauss encapsulates a major impetus of the current art historical debate in her essay "Using Language to do Business as Usual", in which she challengingly examines the merits of linguistic models in interpreting visual systems, and her concluding remark therefore acts usefully to summarise a principle underscoring many of the contributions to this book, namely the necessity now for developing appropriate methodological tools. In her view:-

...the possibilities that structuralism and the linguistic model offer for deepening our understanding of our social and symbolic systems are too real and too important not to get them right.

Given the range of positions compressed into the book's 273 pages, an equally open range of responses is invited of the reader, but in the main these essays should serve well to encourage art historians to get their working tools sharper.

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