



Who's Afraid of Visual Culture?

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Gillian Rose's intervention, "On the Need to Ask How, Exactly, Is Geography 'Visual'?", is a welcome contribution to current debates around geography and visual culture. The place of visual images, language and technologies within the discipline of geography is a topic worthy of greater attention, and Rose certainly challenges us to engage more fully with questions about specific interactions between images, audiences and spaces of display.

Such questions are, as Rose acknowledges, not entirely new. Indeed, there now exists a substantial body of literature—particularly within historical geography, cultural geography and the history of geography—that focuses on various visual cultures of geography, from the making and viewing of landscape to the practice and language of mapping (see, for example, Alfrey and Daniels 1990; Cosgrove 1998; Harley 1992; Matless 1998). I am surprised, however, that Rose claims that geographers working in this broad area (often with diverse perspectives and different agendas) share an assumption that the visual is well understood and therefore unworthy of further scrutiny.

In addition, I would disagree with her claim that geographers are generally unconcerned with the implications of such work in relation to the development of geography as an academic discipline. This latter concern seems implicit within many recent explorations of "geographical imaginations" and "imaginative geography" (Gregory 1993, 1995), even if they examine the broader discourse of geography, rather than the academic discipline *per se*. Moreover, such a concern lies at the heart of studies of specific strategies of visualisation in geography, from textbooks and school teaching (Ploszajska 1999) to photographic representation (Ryan 1994; Schwartz 1996). Rose has provided ample evidence of such concern in her own critique of cultures of landscape within geographical science (Rose 1992; for a different view, see Nash 1996). Interest in different visualisation practices in geography is also a major motivating factor within the recent flourishing of work on cultures of fieldwork (see eg Driver 2000). Certainly, much of this work has been historical in emphasis, and it is true that relatively less

attention has been paid to specific visual practices within academic geography as practised today. However, ever since geographers began discussing a “crisis in representation”, there has been evident concern with the politics of representation within the discipline, from its implications for individual subject positions (Jackson 1991) to the visualities inherent in its epistemologies (Deutsche 1995) to the moral and ideological implications of displaying historical imagery (Livingstone 1998). Furthermore, many accounts of the changing technical and metaphorical modes of visualisation in geography stress the need to chart their evolution over time and space; if we wish to understand how, exactly, contemporary geography is “visual”, then we need to appreciate both the continuities and discontinuities between different disciplinary formations in the past and today (Driver 1995; Sui 2000).

Nevertheless, Rose is certainly right to point out that questions of the visual within geography today should command greater attention. I would argue that they tend to be overlooked not, as Rose suggests, because of assumptions on the part of geographers that such questions have already been answered, but because of a range of factors. This would include, for instance, the fact that many histories of geography have not, until fairly recently, gone much beyond the 1950s. In addition, despite its professed position at the cutting edge, much geographical work associated with the “cultural turn” has remained conservative in its choice of methods (see also Thrift 2000). Even attempts at experimentation in geographical writing are limited to precisely that—*writing*—and, despite challenging some conventions around the visual display of text, remain remarkably logocentric in character. In addressing questions of the visual, then, geographers need to think more deeply and imaginatively about the methods they employ in both teaching and research. This is a point to which I will return below.

As Rose points out, there are different sorts of “disciplinary visualities” in geography. Moreover, these require different forms of analysis in specific settings. Most importantly, Rose argues for the careful exposition of particular and interconnected domains of production and consumption: the author, image, audience and space of display. Rose is surely correct to claim that there is a politics of seeing and of sight in geography; the question of power and performance is always implicated in “disciplinary visualities”. However, her analysis of the slide lecture as a kind of “disciplinary visuality” in Anglo-American geography tends to caricature an interesting set of questions and is worth considering in more detail.

Rose assumes, mistakenly, that slides are “photographic” and that the cultural assumptions she claims are made about photography—its truthfulness, accuracy and transparent status as representation—are therefore simultaneously characteristic of “slidiness”. There are two problems with such an argument. First, photographic realism should

not be taken as an implicit part of “slidiness”. Slides—in their modern 35mm form, as well as in their earlier glass incarnations—have always been used to project a variety of graphic signs, including maps, graphs, charts and texts, not only photographs. Second, the effects that Rose identifies as characteristic of slides might be said to result from the use of other projection devices, notably overhead projectors, but also machines such as epidiscopes (essentially a light box of mirrors used to enlarge and project an image of an object—from an open book to a rock specimen—onto a screen). Epidiscopes were once as prevalent in university geography departments as “data-projectors” are today. Indeed, they performed a similar task in projecting data to viewing audiences. Moreover, this graphic data, as most users of Microsoft PowerPoint will appreciate, is not simply “photographic”. Therefore, the compelling power of “slidiness” to which Rose refers stems not from some inherent “photographic” quality of slides but from their being visual projections and part of screen technologies whose compelling effect on audiences derives from various operations of the complex cultural and perceptual connection between seeing and believing, visualisation and cognition.

Understanding the currency of slides must involve analysis of their rhetorical utility. Rose refers to Robert Nelson’s essay on the use of the slide lecture in art history. As Nelson notes, an image does not remain a mere projection; it is part of “a performative triangle consisting of speaker, audience and image” (Nelson 2000:415). An answer to questions of visual strategies in geography, as Rose points out, should certainly consist of analysis of the image, audience and spatial setting of rhetorical performance. However, Nelson usefully elaborates different kinds of rhetoric (deliberative, forensic and epideictic) employed in the slide lecture. In so doing, he (2000:418) shows how a professor using slides “gains legitimacy through the cogency of her arguments, the acquiescence of the audience, and the performative frame that enables her to mold the audience’s vision”. Gaining credibility for statements, as Latour (1987) has long observed in the context of science, thus depends crucially on the rhetorical strategies (of which “visual” devices are just one element) used to introduce and legitimate particular forms of knowledge.

Rose’s reading of the slide lecture as a form of “disciplinary visuality” seems to me to be symptomatic of an iconoclastic tendency in geography to conceive of images as suspect illusions, the truth behind which can be exposed only with appropriate theoretical tools. Yet a mistrust of the visual as a mode of geographical knowledge—ranging from concerns about its superficiality to fears of its seductive power (Rose herself warns of being “seduced by these images”)—is as much a part of geography’s visual culture as is the reliance on visual evidence that Rose wishes to problematise. I do not wish to caricature Rose’s

position here; much of her work is concerned with the careful and creative interpretation of visual imagery (Rose 2001). However, I would like to point in the final part of this response to some alternative forms of engaging with questions of the visual that take their initiative from the creation, rather than merely interpretation, of visual imagery.

A number of geographers are grappling with these issues through a sustained dialogue with visual artists and curators. Visual artists have long been interested in notions of place, nature and environment and have begun to draw upon academic geography in their own explorations of these themes. Geographers have tended to see the work of visual artists as merely illustrative of textual ideas or, at best, something to be deconstructed from a distance. However, there has been increasing recognition that there is much to be gained from a sustained dialogue between these two spheres. Take for example, the recent creative research project "Visualising Geography", developed at the Department of Geography, Royal Holloway, University of London by geographers Felix Driver and Catherine Nash and artist Kathy Prendergast (with Swenson 2002). The project, funded by an Arts and Humanities Research Board Innovation Award, develops longstanding connections between geography and the graphic arts that have been fostered through a range of initiatives in recent years (see eg Nash 1998). As part of this project, a recent exhibition titled "Landing", curated by Ingrid Swenson, displayed work produced through a series of collaborations between academic geographers at Royal Holloway and practising visual artists (Driver et al 2002) (see Figure 1).

Other recent collaborations between geographers and artists are worth noting. Geographer Fraser MacDonald has recently participated in the work of Makrolab, a mobile laboratory, designed by Slovene artist Marko Peljhan and his team Projekt Atol, for fostering arts-science collaborations in remote environments. In partnership



Figure 1: "Landing", a work-in-progress exhibition staged in June and July 2002 as part of the Visualising Geography project at Royal Holloway, University of London. Photo: Stephen White

with London-based artist Abigail Reynolds, MacDonald is completing a short film, to be released on DVD, that explores the role of technology in the experience of the sublime in the 18th and 21st centuries (Makrolab 2002).

By fostering positive engagements between geographers and visual artists, such projects produce new understandings of visual art as a form of conceptual and practical enquiry and academic geographical research as creative practice. Such projects are perhaps especially fruitful given the location of the discipline of geography between different intellectual traditions in the arts, humanities, social sciences and natural sciences. Such a location should also enable geographers to take seriously the potential of new expressive media, particularly those based on digital and computer technology, in the generation of new research methodologies and representational strategies (Gilbert 1995).

The potential for geographers to reconsider their own image-making practices does not necessarily involve vast amounts of new technology. The “photo-essay”, for example, used to great effect in much geographical journalism since the 1930s, is vastly underutilised and underappreciated within academic geography publishing. A recent example of its potential can be found in the work of geographer and Magnum photographer Stuart Franklin, whose recent study of trees (1999) combines photographs and texts to produce a photographic essay that gives a striking evocation of the symbolic and material power of the natural landscape. Yet another model of creative practice might be found with Iain Sinclair, the writer and psychogeographer of London, who incorporates photographs, along with maps and text, in his recent multidimensional mapping of the M25, *London Orbital* (2002). These works use visual images not simply as illustrations or as some foil for textual theory but as a mode of argument and creative performance.

Rose’s intervention is certainly a valuable one; we do need to ask questions about how, exactly, geography is visual. And in so doing we will necessarily have to engage with issues about images, authors, audiences and spaces for the performance of knowledge. But we also need to think more deeply about how geography *ought* to be visual. Despite my reservations about her interpretation of the slide lecture, Rose has done much to outline the kinds of terms central to exploring geography’s visualities. The other ventures noted above are examples of work that engages directly with questions of geography and the “visual”, not only by offering new interpretative possibilities but also by actively performing and recreating geography’s visual cultures.

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