

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE



EMBODYING VISUAL CULTURE

A Multidisciplinary Inquiry

Abstracts

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A Multidisciplinary Inquiry

Siri Hustvedt

Fascist Masculine Bodies and the Terrors of Dependency

The vast trove of videos from the January 6th violent insurrection at the U.S. Capitol offer insights into the MAGA movement as a form twenty-first century fascism. Like earlier iterations of fascism in Europe, MAGA employs the visual and rhetorical tropes of an invulnerable heroic masculinity embodied in a figure of the Great Man, a quasi-mystical being, whose spectacular image is crucial to marshaling collective feeling into a powerful movement. The misogyny, xenophobia, and racism that characterize fascism cannot be disentangled from one another but are linked in a political drama of retribution that turns on perceived violations of the good, pure body politic by evil, polluting, murky, alien, forces. Because diplomacy, negotiation, and compassion are all gendered feminine, part of an encroaching Wokeness, the fantasy of a glorious male body with strong delineated borders that can fend off attacks is essential to a mobilizing fascist aesthetic. Repetitive propaganda in pictures and words are needed to maintain mass feeling of imminent, if fictional, threats, without which popular support for the draconian acts of authoritarian governments could not be played out. I will argue that the paradox at the bottom of fascism is that the feminine forces identified as weak and disgusting are simultaneously configured as powerful enemies in a Manichean battle between good and evil because they evoke what must be continually repressed: the helplessness and dependency of early human life on the female body during gestation and in most cultures, on female bodies after birth.

EMBODYING VISUAL CULTURE

A Multidisciplinary Inquiry



Carlo Severi

Innumerable Illusions: Anthropology, Aesthetics, Embodiment

The great merit of an entire line of art historians that have followed Warburg's perspective, has been to look to artworks as images generating relational spaces. I argue in this paper that this redefinition should include beauty itself, which would thus pass from an abstract ideal to the description of a very real experience. Whatever the abstract "soul" of beauty (in Baudelaire's terms) might be, the presence of its bodily component generates specific experiences. We would better understand "aesthetic objects" if we could appreciate the degrees of intensity and the cultural forms they live in, both in a purely mental dimension, where imagination and memory interact, and in a relational space, where thought and images are shared.

EMBODYING VISUAL CULTURE

A Multidisciplinary Inquiry



Vittorio Gallese

Radical Aesthetics and the Digital Self: Embodied Onto-Phenomenology in the Age of Digital Mediation

In this talk, I will explore how digital technologies are transforming not just how we communicate, but how we perceive, relate, and exist. Drawing on the concept of radical aesthetics, I argue that aisthesis—our embodied, affective, and relational experience of the world—is the ground where subjectivity and reality take shape, including in technologically mediated environments. Rather than viewing the digital as a site of disembodiment, I propose the idea of digital embodiment: a mode of being-in-the-world shaped by interfaces, images, and platforms.

Central to this framework is the body as a radical mediator—a plastic and responsive interface whose sensorimotor and affective capacities are reconfigured by digital dispositives. Supported by research in embodied simulation, I suggest that the digital self is not disincarnate but a techno-aesthetic transformation of the analogic self, enacted through gestures, attention, and affect. I will conclude by outlining an embodied onto-phenomenology of the digital, where mediation is not a loss of the real, but the very condition of its contemporary appearance.

EMBODYING VISUAL CULTURE

A Multidisciplinary Inquiry



Ruggero Eugeni

As Time Goes By: A Neurofilmological Approach to Temporal and Rhythmical Dimensions of Audiovisual Experience

This presentation outlines a research framework developed at the intersection of audiovisual semiotics and the neurocognitive sciences, referred to as Neurofilmology. As a contemporary reconfiguration of interpretative semiotics, Neurofilmology seeks to conceptualize the audiovisual viewing experience by foregrounding the embodied interaction between the viewer-as-organism and its environment. The proposed model operates at a meta-empirical level, synthesizing empirical findings from both semiotic analyses and neuropsychological research.

The presentation focuses in particular on two research projects – one completed and one ongoing – that investigate the perception of time and rhythm in the context of audiovisual media. The underlying premise of both studies, supported by the findings, is that temporal and rhythmical qualities are not intrinsic or absolute properties, but rather emerge from the perceptual attribution of structure to visible transformations and movements. The distinctiveness of filmic temporal and rhythmical experience, therefore, lies in the complex simultaneity and multiplicity of such flows, which the viewer must negotiate through sensory processing.

EMBODYING VISUAL CULTURE

A Multidisciplinary Inquiry

Wanda Strauven

Rethinking the Body as Part of the Basic (Cinematic/Mediatic) Apparatus

Somehow reversing Marshall McLuhan's concept of the media as extensions of man, this talk will discuss how parts of the human body become an integral part of the basic apparatus, for instance, when filming with a smartphone or clicking on online images. I will draw on Jean-Louis Baudry's notion of the "basic apparatus" (*appareil de base*), which is to be distinguished from the more generally adopted term "apparatus" (*dispositif*). While Baudry's writings from the mid-1970s were foundational for the so-called apparatus theory, based on the ideological effect of cinema, I will focus on the materiality of cinema's (and, more generally, media's) basic apparatus and its reconfigurations through mobile and touch-based devices that allow for (or lead to) an integration of the human body. From the filming practices by young children, whose small bodies often function as a tripod, to the "clickwork" by our fingers, essential to the (AI) apparatus of datasets, I will reflect on multiple issues of "embodying visual culture" as a human-machine practice. This discussion will be placed in the larger framework of media archaeology and its inherent dichotomy regarding the role of humans in technology: from the non-anthropomorphic Kittlerian approach to the more humanistic study of techniques as an intertwinement of technical objects, procedures, and gestures.

EMBODYING VISUAL CULTURE

A Multidisciplinary Inquiry



Paolo Pecere

Philosophy in the Cave

Since the discovery and recognition of Paleolithic art in the 19th century, scholars have struggled to understand the meaning of engraved and painted images and signs. A major strategy has relied on the analogy between prehistoric people and “primitive” people: ethnographic evidence of rituals and myths concerning rock paintings might provide a key to the understanding of the earliest images produced by humans, conceived as early documents of “art”, “magic” and “religion”. However, these approaches are at risk of displaying what Giambattista Vico called the “conceit of nations” and the “conceit of scholars”, by projecting present views back to people that lived tens of thousands of years before, with no evidence of any cultural connection whatsoever.

In this paper I will develop a different approach, based on fieldwork, focusing on a number of case studies. I will argue that the experience of Paleolithic cave paintings can be connected to shared human cognitive and emotional capacities and propensities, such as the aesthetic dimension of experience, symbolic thought, recognition of temporal and spatial patterns and mental time travel. In this perspective, Paleolithic paintings do not merely document the origins of “art”, “magic” and “religion”. They provide evidence of the beginning of a broader minded investigation of the world, involving sensory exploration of the environment, philosophical questions and scientific classifications.

EMBODYING VISUAL CULTURE

A Multidisciplinary Inquiry



Joerg Fingerhut

An Enactive Media Theory of the City

The population living in cities will grow from over 4 billion today to nearly 7 billion by 2050 (70% of the global population); already today 75% of Europeans live in urban areas. It will be in cities that our future is decided. In my talk, I will describe how artifactual, embodied habits related to urban and architectural design entrain our perceptual engagement and shape cognitive and affective capacities. These habits govern how we interact with the multiple interfaces the urban environment provides, which I will explore as part of a New Cognitive Media Theory of the city.

To better understand the impact visual cultures of cities, I will focus, in the second part, on aesthetic evaluations of specific urban designs and practices, as well as public art and interventions that aim to break habitual ways of engaging in the city. I will highlight the role of aesthetic emotions such as interest and wonder in enabling more expansive engagement, discussing a set of studies conducted within the Research Platform Neurourbanism in Berlin.

EMBODYING VISUAL CULTURE

A Multidisciplinary Inquiry



Ute Guenkel- Mascheck

Embodying Touch: Self-Touching Gestures in Minoan and Mycenaean Figurines

From the Middle Bronze Age onwards, Minoan culture in Crete developed a rich repertoire of “naturalistic” human representations, with a wide range of gestures employed across different media. These include clay figurines placed in burials and sanctuaries, which depict self-touching gestures commonly interpreted as gestures of worship. Some of these gestures were subsequently adopted in Mycenaean Greece, where, in the course of a general trend towards a more abstract style, they lost the ‘touching’ effect that was so characteristic of their Minoan predecessors.

In this paper I will employ an interdisciplinary theoretical framework drawing from archaeology, phenomenology, psychology and neuroaesthetics with the aim of deepening our understanding of the experiences involved in the Bronze Age perception of and engagement with Minoan and Mycenaean figurines. The focus is on figurines depicting self-touching gestures. We will explore how the bodily ‘felt’ effect of these gestures relates to the contexts in which the figurines were used, and how the gestures fulfilled their role as part of the visual repertoire. Against this background, we also address the question of what might have made Minoan self-touching gestures attractive to the Mycenaeans, who adopted them into their own visual culture. Finally, we will trace how the “touching” nature of the early Mycenaean figurines with self-touching gestures diminished in the course of increasingly abstract stylization, and consider what this might mean for the meaning, function and use of Mycenaean self-touching figurines in particular, but also with regard to deeper differences between Mycenaean and Minoan visual culture.

EMBODYING VISUAL CULTURE

A Multidisciplinary Inquiry

Marco Maggi

Baroque Galleries: Embodiment and Remediation

According to an accredited etymology, the term gallery derives from the Middle High German wallen, which means ‘to go’, ‘to walk’. Written and visual evidence from the early modern period unanimously attest to a reception of such architectures in movement. Through the movement of the spectator, the gallery fulfils purposes that do not exclusively concern the celebratory and recreational sphere or the collecting and exhibiting sphere, but also and above all the cognitive (affectively connoted) sphere. The gallery is the space of an embodied cognition, it is a “relationscape” in Erin Manning’s sense, that is, a place of interchange between bodily perception and thought. The act of walking also has the effect of dynamising spaces, which is amplified by the animation attributed to the images (sculptures and paintings) that adorn the galleries. In this regard, Thomas Kirchner speaks of the gallery as a precursor of visual devices such as the panorama, the diorama and even the cinema. What characteristics and affordances does the gallery have as a medium of embodied cognition? And by what means do the representations of the gallery (textual, iconic, iconotextual) strive to convey the immersive experience that characterises them? I will answer these questions through an Italian case study of the first half of the 17th century and its textual, iconic and iconotextual remediations.

EMBODYING VISUAL CULTURE

A Multidisciplinary Inquiry

Michele Cometa

What is it like to be a Vermin? Kafka and the Embodiment

Kafka is the poet of embodiment. Scholars have recognized that his work integrates elements derived from evolutionary theory, ethology, and both human and animal psychology – components subtly embedded within what has been described as a peculiar form of cognitive realism. It is no coincidence that critical discourse has referred to a poetics of biology, zoopoetics, and biopoetics. At the heart of this discourse lies the persistent comparison between the human and animal body, a comparison that endows Kafka's work with a distinct theoretical curvature. This curvature anticipates, by several decades, key phenomenological concerns and problematize foundational categories such as action and simulation, proprioception and language/ writing, the construction of the self, and intersubjectivity. Kafka's entire oeuvre may ultimately be read as a sustained attempt to respond to the question famously posed by Thomas Nagel: whether a being other than a bat – such as a human – can genuinely claim to know what it is like for a bat to be a bat. Many of Kafka's major works, beginning with the short story *Die Verwandlung* (1915), as well as *Bericht für eine Akademie* (1917) and *Der Bau* (1923), reflect on the cognitive limits imposed by human and animal perception, doing so through a narrative deployment of the concept of embodiment. Yet the notion of embodiment in Kafka cannot be fully grasped without also considering the visual dimension. Drawing on a “subversive” reading of *Die Verwandlung*, prefigured with remarkable insight in Vladimir Nabokov's lecture on Kafka, this paper explores the implicit and foreclosed visual and architectural structure of the story.

EMBODYING VISUAL CULTURE

A Multidisciplinary Inquiry



Elisabetta Canepa

Dwelling as Feeling: Embodied Encounters with Space

Dwelling is feeling. Both the physical components that configure and functionalize space – such as boundaries, surfaces, and objects – and the affective qualities it reverberates – its atmospheres – are essential to defining the identity of the staged architectural event. These are complementary elements that mutually integrate and reinforce one another. Much of the literature on architectural atmospheres emphasizes their inherent ineffability: they are invisible and incorporeal, ephemeral and unstable, subjective and vague. One effective way to grasp the complexity of architectural atmospheres is by focusing on the transitions and contrasts between places. Since we constantly move through distinct environments, we are highly sensitive to their liminal variations – differences that multisensorially shape our first impressions and influence our emotions, memories, and behaviors. This contribution brings together insights from an enactive-embodied approach to architectural experience, findings from neuroscience-informed research on atmospheres, and design knowledge drawn from a typology-inspired study of entryways, in order to better understand the atmospheric potential of our embodied encounters with space.

EMBODYING VISUAL CULTURE

A Multidisciplinary Inquiry

Andrea Pinotti

Whose style is this? Name and Anonymity in the Age of the Neural Style Transfer

«The painter takes his body with him», stated Merleau-Ponty quoting Paul Valéry. Such conception of an embodied style is radically challenged today, when the field of artistic practices is being transformed far and wide by the possibilities offered by artificial intelligence. There is a widespread tendency to delegate to the AI apparatus, which impacts on key concepts of the aesthetic tradition, especially with regard to the notions of authorship and creativity, with repercussions also at the legal level. In this context, the concept of “style” undergoes radical transformations by algorithmic filters – the Neural Style Transfer (NST) –, which make it possible to transpose a painting, once digitised, from one style to another. We can easily process a Mona Lisa as if Van Gogh had painted it. And today, one of the greatest forgers ever, Han Van Meegeren, would undoubtedly commission a Vermeer filter. What about the risks of unconscious plagiarism that the algorithm, scanning datasets of millions of pre-existing images, may end up producing without asking for prior consent from their authors? To take precautions, some artists are already resorting to programmes such as Glaze or Nightshade, which allow them to disguise their style, making it elusive from algorithmic “fishing”. How should the theorist, the critic and the viewer equip themselves in the face of this rapidly evolving scenario? Are we really facing a novum? Or is it instead yet another variation on a theme that has always been familiar to art history and visual studies? Survival, circulation, imitation, homage, copy, cover... These are just some of the key concepts that have long questioned the very idea of original creation. If we consider the point of view of art historians such as Riegl and Wölfflin, who insisted on style as the *koinè* aisthesis of an era shared by a plurality of artists, should we really be concerned about those forms of algorithmic stylisation? And if we place ourselves in Warburg’s perspective of the posthumous life of images, should we not admit that the practice of sounding out the dataset has always been the way artists and image-makers more generally operate?