

PERSPECTIVES ON VISUAL LEARNING, VOL. 5

Facing the Future, Facing the Screen

Kristóf Nyíri (ed.)

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Facing the Future, Facing the Screen

Perspectives on Visual Learning

Edited by Petra Aczél, András Benedek and Kristóf Nyíri

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Vicky Karaiskou

Facing the Future through the Light of the Past

This chapter explores the past-future relation by commenting the consequences of the interpretative frameworks we apply in our daily lives and their interconnection to our perceptions, assumptions and anticipations.

Alicia Eggert's neon installation "All the light you see is from the past" (2017–2019) points out a basic law of physics we are rather unaware of: light takes time to travel, therefore we are able to see and acknowledge due to a gleaming that comes from the past. However, the fundamental premise that slips through the cracks of our awareness is that our interpretative frameworks come from past conditions, as well.

In the Cave's allegory, Plato¹ underlines the power of impression and the consequent mental stiffness as a result of the fixed point of view the chained prisoners have: the prisoners perceive as real the reflection of objects on the wall they stare. Both Eggert and Plato, regardless their points of departure,² examine the illusive nature of our awareness.

Unknowingly, we face the future carrying awareness from the past in the form of mental narratives and associations.³ I stress attention on the future because it constitutes our overarching motivation that determines – and justifies – our existence and actions in the present. In its turn, our experience nourishes our interpretative filters

¹ Plato, *Republic*, book VII (514a-520a).

² On the multitude of the Cave's interpretive approaches and its core focus on goodness, see Valerie V. Peterson, "Plato's Allegory of the Cave: Literacy and 'the good'", *Review of Communication*, vol. 17, issue 4 (2017), pp. 273–287, DOI: 10.1080/15358593.2017.1367826.

³ Hal Foster (ed.), *Vision and Visuality*, Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1988. Also, Patrick H. Hutton, "The Art of Memory Reconceived: From Rhetoric to Psychoanalysis", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 48, no. 3 (1987), pp. 371–392.

and assumptions that create certainties, and populates our future in the form of expectations and affective dispositions, in a constant vicious circle.⁴

Our perceptive automatisms, anticipations and behaviours base their validity on the value and authority stemming from our cultural environment and the stereotypes it builds.⁵ The latter are the invisible, yet omnipotent, narrators, the figures that dominate the space behind the prisoners' backs, populating their impressions and determining their perception of truth.⁶ They are the identities and memories we think with, our own mediated lenses that cement the form of reality they experience. The reassuring stability and the sense of belonging they provide, objectify the perceptions of the myths that nourish us, while, at the same time, draw from them more reasons to exist.⁷ To paraphrase Susan Sontag, in our digital and media dominated visual reality, images determine the “grammar” and the “ethics of seeing”⁸ not only because they proliferate and manipulate reality, but also – mainly – because of their parallel sub-conscious, affective sub-narratives and the mental structures they provide behind their tangible forms and story-telling⁹.

Regardless whether we face a two-dimensional reality – on a screen or printed materials – or we observe the three-dimensional world around us, our assumption that we experience the real nature and meaning of things and events, our conviction that our story is the only story, encourages the surrendering to our own myths and dom-

⁴ Wulf Kansteiner, “Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies”, *History and Theory*, vol. 41, no. 2 (2002), pp. 179–197.

⁵ Jerome Bruner, “The Narrative Construction of Reality”, *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 18, no. 1 (1991), pp. 1–21.

⁶ Alex Cuc et al., “On the Formation of Collective Memories: The Role of a Dominant Narrator”, *Memory and Cognition*, vol. 34, no. 4 (2006), pp. 752–762.

⁷ Robert B. Zajonc, “Mere Exposure: A Gateway to the Subliminal”, *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, vol. 10, no. 6 (2001), pp. 224–228.

⁸ Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, New York: Anchor, 1990.

⁹ Joseph LeDoux, *The Emotional Brain: The Mysterious Underpinnings of Emotional Life*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996.

inant narratives. Consequently, we participate into making these invisible narratives even more powerful, establishing ourselves as passive observers and relinquishing real freedom, potential and choice.

The role we allow our own cultural past to hold in our lives, impedes us from posing very much needed “what if” questions. At the same time, it makes it hard to associate with the real essence that lays behind the surface of political, environmental, social and other problems and challenges we experience.

Although we cannot escape having multiple filters and lenses that shape our thought patterns, we can certainly beware of the processes that take place below the threshold of our consciousness.¹⁰ Awareness of where our mental forms come from and how we built them, carries the potential to reframe the manner we approach, interpret and react to challenges at all sectors of our lives, and to permit active choice, empowerment and agency. Being the source of every myth that nourishes us, culture has the transformative dynamic to corroborate to social, environmental and political well-being. As important as it is to know the effect that our cultural environment has on our interpretative frameworks, assumptions and anticipations, it is equally important to master our own power to transform the stereotypes in which we live. The ultimate question is whether we want to play the role of the host to our past in its quest to populate our future.

¹⁰ Marvin M. Chun & Yuhong Jiang, “Contextual Cueing: Implicit Learning and Memory of Visual Context Guides Spatial Attention”, *Cognitive Psychology*, vol. 36, issue 1 (1998), pp. 28–71. Also, Martha S. Feldman et al., “Making Sense of Stories: A Rhetorical Approach to Narrative Analysis”, *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, vol. 14, no. 2 (2004), pp. 147–170. See also Ruth Leys, “The Turn to Affect: A Critique”, *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 37, no. 3 (2011), pp. 434–472.