Sight, Insight, and Out of Sight

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Sight, Insight, and Out of Sight: From Light as Information to Colour as World

Mark Titmarsh

Lecturer in Interdisciplinary Studies

School of Design

University of Technology, Sydney, Australia

mark.titmarsh@uts.edu.au

mark.titmarsh.com.au

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Abstract

The current understanding of the expanded image is based on visual experiences provided by information turbulence in contemporary convergent media. We are therefore challenged to rethink everything we have come to understand about visuality, including the very physics of light and the physiology of the human eye.

This essay will develop an alternative philosophy of visual perception based on hints given by Martin Heidegger and partially developed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty. It involves devising a new language for seeing that looks into the light of the technological world as a way of apprehending the self-luminous. This results in the creation of an ontological sight capable of looking beyond the objectification of what is, revealing the way humans come into contact with other beings, both natural and technological.

Exploring the ideas of Herbert Damish and Jacques Taminiaux, this essay will show that we can no longer cling to contemporary notions of sight that say we have, on the one hand, things identical to themselves—things that give themselves to sight— and on the other hand, vision that is at first empty and that then opens itself to the visible. These ideas somewhat deconstructed by Merleau-Ponty will be shown as remnants passed down to us from the ancients, who developed a primary language to describe the accuracy of looking and ideal representations of sight.

Alternatively, another kind of looking, latent in our reductive techno-vision, will be invoked such that the so-called primacy of perception will be made secondary to the opening of presence. Ultimately, this results in an ontological tension between being looked at by the world, and gazing at things therein. This results

in a chiastic overlapping of active and passive modes of being that goes beyond the completion of an optical process.

Keywords

Light, seeing, phenomenology, representation, apprehension, clouds, city, electronic screens

Introduction

Contemporary modes of looking and seeing are derived from visual experiences given by all those electronic screens in our hands, or on our desks, that provide access to work, play, social media, gaming, and data storage. Yet the language we have for articulating this kind of visual moment is still conceptually stuck in Cartesian perspectivism. We are consequently challenged to rethink and restate everything we have come to understand about visuality, particularly the physical properties of light and the biological function of the human eye.

Cloud computing, or 'the cloud,' comes as the latest challenge to our concept of media, posing the question: how is information, particularly visual information, to be categorized, experienced, and conceptualized? What is 'the cloud'? One response is that the cloud does not exist; it is simply a marketing tool, a new name for something that the internet has always done: provided access to a decentralized virtual environment of peer-to-peer hardware, software, and storage. Another response is that the cloud has a peculiar from of existence that verges on nonexistence, but that nonetheless has a massive impact on how we do business, make art, and socialize. It ushers in a new way of thinking about ourselves, of imaging how the world appears and what visual experiences can be had there.

Apprehending Light

In everyday experience, for something to be present—for us to be aware of it—it must be apparent; that is, it must be accessible in some way. Our current understanding of sight relies on a model of perception that is based on the laws of representation and the

physiology of the eye.

Other cultures, as far back as Ancient Greece, had no such concept of sight. For them, vision was more democratic, in that "the one who looks shows himself and appears" [1] in the act of seeing. Thus, objects that are seen, as well as those who see them, "emerge in the double sense that the object rises in self-showing and the essence of the looker is collected in the look." [2] Looking is the way humans come into presence with other beings, all sharing the commonality of appearance, each drawing out and revealing something of the other in the moment of appearing.

It is hard to make sense of this without conforming to the modern scientific view of willful looking, lens-based perception, and representational mapping. In addition, so much of our language is woven with visual metaphors that equate sight and seeing with understanding and sense. Therefore, some *nonsense*, in the form of poetic ellipsis, is required in order to describe another kind of seeing-looking that is latent in historical thinking on visuality, and that remains relevant to our current techno-optical environment.

Seeming and mere appearing are demoted by the modern mode of seeing that takes what is seen and scrutinizes it scientifically. This is emphasized in aspects of film theory, where the 'look' or 'gaze' captures the viewer's target. In feminist film theory, the grasping male gaze ensnares and sexualizes the feminine appearance, seeing women as nothing more than objects to be visually consumed. [3] This kind of penetrating gaze, which presupposes the model of active subject and passive object, is "the look of a being that advances by calculating…the look of a predatory animal" [4] This gazing—or, perhaps more accurately, glaring and gawking—pushes beyond visual engagement into a form of entrapment. Heidegger invokes another, less violent and more contemplative style of looking by avoiding the contemporary terminology for light and vision, using such terms as "shining" and "lighting," and saying, "what shines is what shows itself to a looking." [5]

Those who can see point towards what shines, and in doing so, their looking also shines; a 'fire from the eyes,' as Empedocles would have it. In the fifth century BCE, Empedocles believed that the Goddess Aphrodite placed fire in the human eye so that light would shine out making objects visible. Even up to the time of Descartes it was believed that cats eyes projected light enabling their ability for night vision. [6]

Empedocles's theory (called 'emission' or 'extromission' theory) has since been replaced by intromission theory, which states that visual perception is based on something that comes from the object; namely, rays of light that reflect off the object and enter the eyes. Yet some part of this concept, that looking involves emitting, lingers in modern psychology and psychoanalysis, where looking is a kind of subjective projection that goes beyond the mere physics of light entering the eye. Thanks to Empedocles, we retain a primordial sense of extromission where looking is an encountering that meets a shining out.

To return to contemporary media, we might ask, how do things show themselves in the cloud, and how does the cloud shine out? Technologically, the cloud is a type of computing architecture that can be roughly divided into differentiated layers of hardware, infrastructure, platform, and application. When we access it using applications on our personal devices, it seems ephemeral and intangible. But from a hardware perspective, it involves huge data centers and warehouses with racks of interconnected servers, routers, switches, power supplies, and vast cooling systems. While the cloud has many commercial applications, in visual terms, it is particularly interesting as a place of vast image storage for services such as Facebook, Dropbox, and Google. Facebook famously invented their own storage software—called Haystack—to address their massive photo management needs, which include uploading hundreds of millions of new photos per day and storing hundreds of billions of photos. In this context, cloud computing demands a new understanding of visuality and a new aesthetic of the image. The cloud as image reservoir has a kind of layered or archeological relation to all previous media, since it also contains all those

other media—photography, cinema, television—all of which rely on various concepts of image, vision, sight, and looking. In some ways, the imagery and archaeology of the cloud goes as far back as Western thinking about sight.

The Idea of Light

In Greek thinking, light played a special role in physiologic and ontological understanding. Plato used the terms *eidos* and *idea* to determine a hierarchical relationship between superficial appearances and a higher realm of ideas. He reduced appearance to "mere seeming," while "at the same time *idea* was elevated to a supersensory realm…[creating] a chasm between merely apparent beings here below and the real Being somewhere up there." [7] We continue to exist in this kind of visual hierarchy, maintaining an almost ethical split between transient particulars and universal forms. Yet the relationship between surface and depth has been radically changed by our visual devices, but in a way our language cannot yet perceive; indeed, we have no words for our new eyes.

Hubert Damish's book, *A Theory of /Cloud/*, written decades before the arrival of the internet or cloud computing, fills this gap by developing a general ontology for cloud beings. When we ask the question of what it is to genuinely be in the cloud—visually or otherwise—we also ask the question, is the cloud a genuine being? Damisch's writing on painterly clouds reveals a history of thinking about clouds that goes some way towards providing an answer. When he writes about the paintings of Correggio, he claims that clouds "contradict the very idea of outline and delineation and through [their] relative insubstantiality [constitute] a negation of the solidity, permanence and identity that defines shape…[clouds] defy the laws of gravity, the principles of linear perspective." [8] Furthermore, a "cloud cannot be depicted by means of geometry: such a body 'without a surface' cannot be 'described' or reduced to coordinates of a set up that only reproduces objects as the clearly delineated shapes that are apprehended by an observer at a particular spot." [9]

So the cloud, as both an ephemeral, meteorological phenomenon

and a hardwired technology of storage, demands a new geometry of observation and new coordination of the image. With cloud consciousness, the emphasis shifts away from the physiologic eye and active subject towards the object and the open place in which appearance happens. As Heidegger suggests, "the open and lighted determines what appears and makes it comply with the essential form of the look that looks into the light." [10] Until now, we have tended to understand 'the open' in contemporary scientific terms, as an extension of space and time, ready to receive data and distributed objects, "yet the open does not mean space or time." [11] Rather, it is a form of freedom that discards the concepts of space and time. When one ponders this, the old mode of thinking begins to crack, potentially resulting in a moment of essential reversal: "we do not see because we have eyes, but we have eyes because we can 'see'." [12] The active subject as master of seeing and looking gives way to a space between what sees and what is seen, as if light can indeed emanate from the eye, an object, the sun, or any active combination thereof. As Bachelard puts it, "Everything which casts a light sees." [13]

Cloud Sites

It still remains unclear whether we can see or perceive the cloud, whether it can be said to exist in a particular place, or whether it remains wholly immaterial and virtual. Damisch, summarizing Leonardo, suggests that a "cloud is a body without surface but not without substance…like a mist, it is the product of a thickening of the atmosphere." [14] It also has significant physical properties, since "a large part of the sea will escape into the sky (into clouds), and not return for a long time. Cloud provides a good illustration of the universal liaison that links all the parts of nature, and of the mixture and ceaseless permutation of the elements." [15]

Clouds, as natural forms, are bodies without surface that continue to defy the compositional devices that are part of a western representational system. Similarly confounding is the main enabling technology for cloud computing—namely,

virtualization—which displaces the logical division between form and content, inside and outside, entry and exit. Virtualization generalizes the physical infrastructure—the hardware—which is the most rigid component, and makes it available as a soft component that is easy to use and manage. In this way, the cloud is really a subset of the internet; or, the internet is itself a cloud, a distributed architecture without the need for central coordination. Users are both suppliers and consumers of resources who can connect from anywhere via a web browser, whether they use a computer or phone.

Other Looks

So if we struggle to see the *cloud*, does the cloud find it easier to see *us*? For Jacques Lacan, this kind of duality-in-looking was no joke. He argued that looking was not a one-way street; that human looking exists in a field of looks, whereby that which is looked at is also an active looker. "I am not simply that being located at the geometrical point from which perspective is grasped." [16] "In the scopic field…I am looked at, that is to say, I am a picture" [17] looked at by the world. A kind of banal anecdote, Lacan claims he originated this idea while on a fishing trip in Brittany, when he noticed a floating can: "It was looking at me at the level of the point of light, the point at which everything that looks at me is situated—*and I am not speaking metaphorically*" (my emphasis). [18]

Unusual support for the counter intuitiveness of this idea comes from the world of science, and in particular quantum physics, where a reversal of the dynamic relationship between seer and seen has been documented. The Heisenberg uncertainty principle [19] suggests that simply looking at something causes it to change its behavior. This was based on the observation that subatomic particles, entities that do not have sight or emotions, were affected by the act of human inspection, regardless of the accuracy of the technology being used. Quantum systems are infinitely vulnerable to the presence of observational technology, showing that observer and system cannot be separated; that the observer must be considered part of the system being observed.

The uncertainty principle was found to be inherent in all wave-like systems, of which light is one.

By treading around the extreme edges of what is currently understood about the eye, light, and subjectivity, old certainties begin to give way. New possibilities beyond the scientific quantification of light and lens-based metaphors begin to take shape. Heidegger, who wrote at roughly the same time as Einstein and Heisenberg, reflected a similar quantum shift in the world of philosophy, particularly in the phenomenology of perception. He argued that even though we look upon the things of the world and represent them as a way of understanding them,

> that which is, does not come into being at all through the fact that man first looks upon it, in the sense of a representing that has the character of subjective perception. Rather man is the one who is looked at by that which is, he is the one who is—in company with itself—gathered towards presencing, by that which opens itself. [20]

In contrast, 'representing' establishes a system for measuring and guiding, calculating everything that is: "Man as representing subject…pictures forth, whatever is, as the objective, into the world as picture." [21] Whatever is 'pictured forth' in representation is tamed, made into an object, especially for the subject who manages a world. Heidegger posits apprehending as the counterpoint to representing. It is the moment when humans experience that other look "of being looked at by that which is." In 'apprehending,' humans are "maintained within openness," beyond the 'closedness' of calculated representation.

Thus, apprehension is not simply a passive absorption or active consumption by a knowing subject, for it takes place beyond any mode of sensory perception: "Apprehension is not a way of behaving that the human being has as a property; to the contrary, apprehension is the happening that has the human being." [22]

Human beings are intrinsically oriented towards sight and visibility as ways of knowing the world: "All human beings strive to see," and "to existence there belongs a pursuit of seeing,

of being familiar with." [23] Apprehension falls outside the contemporary understanding of "modern looking, in which we direct ourselves to an object of representation and thereby 'grasp' it." [24] A grasping look is a fallen kind of looking that crushes what is seen with a predetermined intention, while apprehending is "not yet a 'looking at' but is a more subliminal and pre-discursive 'catching sight' of something." [25] In the moment of apprehending, the seer is no longer one who sees and knows, since they are momentarily blinded by a deeper, more appropriate receptivity in their moment of looking. As Heidegger puts it, "in having seen there is always something else at play other than the completion of an optical process. From there… seeing is not determined by the eye." [26] It is a brief experience, in which there is sight, insight, and something out of sight, something that has not been determined by the actions or thoughts of any individual. In this way, the visible world appears to have *us* rather then we having *it*. Something more primordial than an optical mechanism enables an encounter with things wherein the one who looks is more correctly looked upon by that which is seen. This exchange of roles between looking and seeing can be described as a moment of shine in a field of looks. These shines comes into sight by virtue of an opening where presencing—the appearance of something—can take place. The seer can only see what appears because in their moment of apprehension they have, to some extent, already gotten out of the way, as it were. The seer, in this moment of shine, has laid down a nominal subjectivity for the sake of a captivating absence; namely, the immediate withdrawal of that which appears in favor of a shining out. In doing so, it shimmers and iridizes, constantly revealing different facets of appearing and being. [27] It is literally and metaphorically a hole in vision, a blindness that is a precondition to sight and that occurs at the point where the optic nerve connects with the retina, requiring a second sight to occult its absence. [28] This withdrawal from the optical coincides with the flash of radiance, occurring in that brief instant before presence is dulled down to a functional availability. It remains only as a lingering hint, an after-image, that is strangely fascinating and 'enchanting.'

Clouded Vision

The same challenge to the optical occurs in the journey from the natural clouds painted by Renaissance masters, like Correggio, to the metaphorical clouds evoked in contemporary information space. As Damisch puts it, speaking historically about the former and presciently about the latter, the cloud is a " new conception of space directed towards infinity…in favor of the magic spell of light…It is an unstable formation with no definite outline or color and yet possesses the powers of a material in which any kind of figure may appear and then vanish." [29]

Damisch's historical research into a particular instance of the word provides us with an archaeology of the cloud. This enables a productive engagement with the 'magic spell of light' given to us by the layers of historical media and thinking inherent in the internet, interactive media, mobile communication, social networking, gaming, and data mining. What we once called 'looking' and 'seeing' become a 'looking-being-seen,' an apprehending, that moves out beyond the physics of light and the physiology of the human eye into a new "science of the image." [30]

Cloud City

This new science of the image momentarily disrupts the passive mode of absorption so engrained in our contemporary media environment. This landscape extends from the relationality of the screens at our fingertips to the digital interfaces that populate the surfaces of our urban environments.

Rapidly changing media platforms have produced a series of new techno devices, media facades, and smart buildings that map the city's movement through its daily rendition of transport, business, and entertainment via a convergence of public screens and mobile networks. [31] As a few buildings become the support surface for media facades, so do selected blocks become media precincts, and eventually the whole city becomes an architecture of light-as-information. Much like the cloud— indeed, as an extension of the cloud—the city has become a place

where "media and communication technologies have the capacity to reconfigure the spatial and temporal parameters of perception and experience." [32] Pixel by pixel, diode by diode, there is a shift from the "substantive, continuous and homogenous space of classical geometry to the relativity of accidental, discontinuous and heterogenous space" of electronic screens. [33] The media technologies we hold in our hands, extended via the cloud into the real-time luminosity of street ware, displace traditional social space into a new perceptual habitus. The city, like the cloud, has become an "ecstasy of brightness," [34] where every social "surface becomes an active membrane" [35] projects light-as-information to the point of a "non-localisable saturation." [36]

The cloud, raining down in all its forms both painterly and technological, washes away the old physiologic view of world-watching in favor of an ontological sight. This kind of sight looks beyond the objectification of what is, revealing other ways we come into presence with other beings, both natural and technological. This results in an ontological tension between a being that has the capacity to see and a world that looks back, a world that offers light as an original state of being. Ultimately, a third kind of looking, an apprehending latent in our reductive techno-visions, is invoked, standing at the vanishing point of both and making both kinds of looking possible—even if the price of one is the invisibility of the other.

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Author Biography

Mark Titmarsh is a visual artist working in painting, video and writing. He has an international reputation as an experimental and award-winning filmmaker in Europe and the Americas, while in Australia he is a significant contributor to the development of the Expanded Painting debate in the visual arts. Since the 1980s, Mark has had influential involvement with several publications

and organisations: On the Beach magazine, Art Hotline, Loose
Projects Gallery, WAAR (Working Artists Against Ralph) and
PEAASS (Promoting Electoral Awareness of the Artist's Status
in Society), Group 3 three, Australian Art Collector magazine,
the Super 8 Film Group, Metaphysical TV and the New Image
Research program at the Australian Film Commission.