WAYS OF THINKING. SESSION 4 AND 5.

BLIND SPOTS AND THE FICTION OF CONSTRUCTING KNOWLEDGE. SEMIOTICS.

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RECAP FROM THE SESSION ON MEDIATION AND GATHERING

In our previous session we looked into the definition of **mediation**.

We discussed art practices as **mediations** of reality and how you as practitioners position yourselves in relation to your experiences. Any form of representation such as painting, sculpture, drawing or a photograph is not a ‘portion’ of reality but rather a **MEDIATION** of it.

Visual representations are not ‘natural’ but rely on a series of conventions.

We also covered the definition of ‘**gathering**’ as a ‘**gesture**’ of **picking something up** with the intention of **preserving it**.

Finally we saw how it works in practice with a wide range of examples and the case study of Zoe Leonard *Analogue* (1998-2009).

ZOE LEONARD - GATHERING IN ANALOGUE

Zoe Leonard, *Analogue, chapter 7,* (1998-2009).

REMINDER

These sessions are meant to be an introduction to different topics. It is your job to read alongside books on the history of art, photography, and other theory and criticisms texts relevant to this field of study.

SESSION OVERVIEW

Today we will begin by looking into blind spots/ visual gaps and the fiction of constructing knowledge.

Then, taking as a framework what we learned, visual representations rely on a series of conventions they are not natural. Therefore art practices are **mediations**. You as practitioners are in the **middle.** Following on that we will learn how human experience is mediated by signs and therefore we need to know about **semiotics**.

The aim of the session is to go through semiotics and see how we can apply it to analyse visual representations.

VISUAL GAPS. BLIND SPOTS.

Have you heard about visual gaps/and or blind spots?

Are you familiar with the ‘blind spot’ sign?

ACTIVITY

Activity - 5min.

-Find the definition of **blind spot.**
-Discuss in groups how do you think we might use it for this session?

BLIND SPOT - DEFINITION

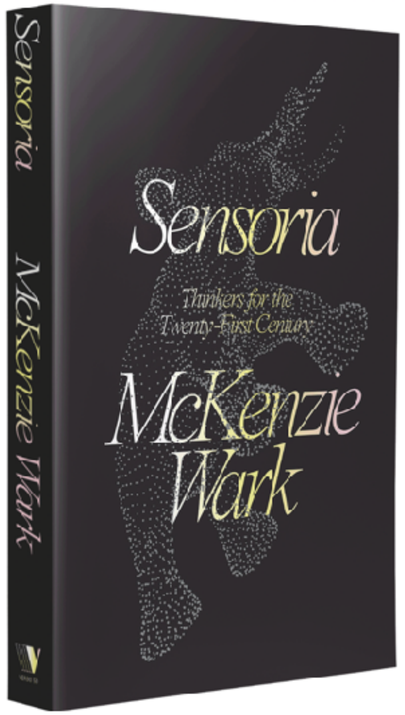
What do we mean by **blind spot**?

Following the dictionary definition, **blind spot** means:

1 an area that you are not able to see, especially the part of a road you cannot see when you are driving, behind and slightly to one side of the car:
It can be very dangerous if there's a vehicle in your blind spot.

2 a subject that you find very difficult to understand at all, sometimes because you are not willing to try:
I am pretty good at English, but I have a blind spot where spelling is concerned.

BLIND SPOT LINK TO SENSORIA



First Edition 2020.

In the introduction to *Sensoria. Thinkers for the Twenty-First Century* (2020) McKenzie Wark begins by asking the question: ‘What is the point of scholarship?’ (2020, p. 2).

Is it even relevant nowadays? Wark states that:

‘[…] scholarship is about the common task of knowing the world.’ (2020, p. 2).

BLIND SPOT LINK TO SENSORIA

Let’s pay attention to those words: ‘common task of knowing the world’.

Common is that which is shared, but also the ordinary, even the vulgar.

Task is a kind of labor, but also a kind of play.

Knowing is the verb, an action that connects the shared with the labouring but playful activities.

World perhaps we need to approach it indirectly through the parable of the blind scholars and their elephant.

BLIND SPOT - PARABLE

Itchō Hanabusa, *Blind Monks Examining an Elephant,* (1888).

The parable of the blind scholars and the elephant is about a group of scholars that try to know what an elephant is. Each of them touches, senses, and knows a part of the elephant and as a result they declare the elephant to be like what what they touch. For instance the tail, the tusk or the trunk. Each of them hears the other saying something completely incompatible with the thing that they themselves have touched.

The point of the parable is that the scholars are unable to tells us what an elephant is because their knowledge is based on a parcial perception of the animal and even if between all of them try to put all the parts together they would be unable to account for what it is. Because the parts so to speak don’t add up to a whole.

For example if you go as a group to a music festival.

Similarly the construction of knowledge is always a way of bringing different aspects together but it can never be a totality.

BLIND SPOT - PARABLE

Itchō Hanabusa, *Blind Monks Examining an Elephant,* (1888).

‘So rather than claim to see the elephant as a whole, […] let’s just acknowledge that all forms of knowing come to know only a part of the world. Every way of producing knowledge is enabling, and its particular techniques make parts of the world knowable. And yet every way of producing knowledge is also blind to what it does not perceive outside of its own form of knowing.’ (2020, p.3)

For example if you go as a group to a music festival. Experience the same thing have a completely different fragmentary version of it.

BLIND SPOT - PARABLE

Itchō Hanabusa, *Blind Monks Examining an Elephant,* (1888).

Why am I saying all this?

It is to prove that what we are going to be talking today semiotics - reading signs and images - is only one of the possible ways of understanding and knowing about those images. But there are other possible readings like images and affect/care or what those images make us feel that are not acknowledge within semiotics.

Therefore it is just a caution that semiotics like any other system is not total and here we are interested in processes not systems. That is the reason why I have called this session visual gaps or blind spots as a reminder of that. That all knowing is fragmentary and we all have our blind spots.

RESISTANCE TO ANY REDUCTIVE SYSTEM

The context for this module is to work in favour of processes and not positions, of multiple forms of becoming.

ACTIVITY

Activity - 10min.

-Have you heard about semiotics before?
-Find the definition of **semiotics.**
-On a scale to 1 to 10 do you have prior knowledge of semiotics or what does it mean?
-Key ideas proposed by **Ferdinand de Saussure**, **Roland Barthes**.

SEMIOTICS: WHAT AND WHY

Semiotics is the study of signs and symbols and their use or interpretation.

It is important to understand semiotics in order to understand contemporary culture.

As a practitioner it also provides you with the knowledge and ability to communicate effectively.

SEMIOTICS: WHAT AND WHY.

Semiotics: the study of signs

WHAT ARE SEMIOTICS?

Semiotics - connected with the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. It refers to the study of signs. A semiology of photography sees it as a language and analogous to text.

However, as we will see, signs are shaped by culture and context.

Semiotics have directed our shared understanding of what we see and how we ‘read’ any image or artwork. It provides us with meaning and context with the aim of having a critical approach towards any piece of visual information. Most significantly it effects how we perceive the world and the meanings we acquire and share from the world around us.

For this reason semiotics is the one of the models used to deconstruct contemporary images.

SEMIOTICS - MAIN FIGURES - FERDINAND DE SAUSSURE

Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913).
Swiss professor of linguistics.
Asked the question: How do languages work?
How do they communicate meaning?

FERDINAND DE SAUSSURE
LANGUAGE AS A SIGN-SYSTEM

Eva and Franco Mattes, *Ceiling Cat,* (2016).

For Saussure, language is a system of signs.
The sign is composed of two components:

The **signifier**
Material aspect of the sign (a picture, written word or verbal sound).

‘Cat’
‘Gato’
‘Chat’

The **signified**
Mental image referred to, the idea of concept of a cat. Their meaning.

Small, furry animal.

To communicate clearly, the reader must know the **signifier** and **signified.**

FERDINAND DE SAUSSURE - LANGUAGE AS A SIGN-SYSTEM

Signs are important because they mean something other than themselves. They point to a meaning beyond the surface.

FERDINAND DE SAUSSURE - KEY IDEAS

The relationship between a signifier and signified is arbitrary.
Meaning is relational it depends on the what the receiver already knows, and his knowledge of the object itself.
Language constitutes our reality.

FERDINAND DE SAUSSURE - SIGNIFIER AND SIGNIFIED

There is no ‘natural’ or ‘logical’ connection between a word and its referent.

There is no real reason why we call that animal a ‘cat’, except as a matter of cultural convention.

Saussure showed that the signs in any language are arbitrary, ‘unmotivated’, and have no particular relation to the signified objects, except cultural convention.

FERDINAND DE SAUSSURE - MEANING IS RELATIONAL

Words can only be explained by using other words.
Some words gain their meaning in relation to their opposite (binary distinctions)
What does **‘day’** mean. It seems that you can only explain it through the opposite **‘night’.**

FERDINAND DE SAUSSURE - MEANING IS RELATIONAL

Through Saussure key ideas we know that language is a **construction** and there is nothing natural about it.

Through language we construct a representation of reality.

If you speak Welsh or another language, think how the different languages construct the world differently.

For example if we think about words like
Sun
El **Sol** in Spanish is masculine
Moon
La **Luna** is feminine

Then the way we relate and the ideas that we associate with those words are different to those of an English speaker.

FERDINAND DE SAUSSURE - MEANING IS RELATIONAL

The colour ‘red’ per se is only a colour but through culture we learned to associate it with love, passion, blood, etc.

Different cultures will bring different layers of signification.

For example the colour red has an important role within Spanish culture. For example the colour red is in the Spanish flag and it is usually associated as well with certain aspects of Souther Spain, such as bullfighting. It has a significant role in the films of Pedro Almódovar.

Saying all this to prove that culturally the way I relate to the colour red might be slightly different from yours.

FERDINAND DE SAUSSURE - MEANING IS RELATIONAL

Pedro Almódovar, *All about My Mother,* film still, (1999).

FERDINAND DE SAUSSURE - MEANING IS RELATIONAL

As David Bate notes in The Key Concepts ‘even the most fundamental signified meaning of any photograph (or other sign) is partially dependent upon the viewer’s language, as well as the various codes that it employs and their cultural knowledge. In other words, the codes with which we are familiar (the English language, four-legged animals, photographs, etc.), enable messages to be transmitted, which the spectator ‘reads’ to generate meanings.’ (p. 34)

ROLAND BARTHES

Roland Barthes (1915-1980).

Roland Barthes was a literary and cultural theorist, active in France during the second half of the twentieth century.
Barthes borrowed Saussure's ideas from linguistics and applied them to analyse everyday culture.
He focused mostly on literary criticism and cultural analysis.
Barthes studied cultural phenomena: films, photographs, fashion, advertising, mass culture.
Barthes analysed the complexity of cultural artefacts despite their apparent 'naturalness'.

ROLAND BARTHES

For example:
During the 1950s, several of Barthes's essays relating to photography were compiled in a book called *Mythologies* (1957).

In *Mythologies* he offers a critique of capitalism and the use of photography in advertising. 'In particular, Barthes focuses on how photography supports consumerism while masking capitalism's exploitation of the masses; he offers incisive critiques on the use and misuse of photographs for propaganda, whether political or commercial'. (*Fifty Key Writers on Photography,* p.11)

ROLAND BARTHES

In the late 1950s and continuing into the 1960s, Barthes adapts methodologies of semiotics in his analyses of literature and cultural practices.

He proposes at first the structure of the **sign**; using the example of the **myth** (which he presents as a system of communication).

For Barthes a **sign** is comprised of a **signifier** and a **signified**. The **signifier** is the object, whether a word or a story or an image, and the **signified** is the meaning that an individual or a group associates with the **signifier**. As we have seen the **signifier** is **arbitrary**. Therefore it doesn't matter the combination of letters used to suggest a feline animal whether society agrees on the letter combination 'cat' or some other combination such as 'tac', the association is **arbitrary** and not **natural**.

ROLAND BARTHES

Barthes developed the concept of signifier and signified:

The signifier **The signified**

could be divided into:

Denotation (the literal, surface meaning)
Connotation (the secondary, deeper meaning)

The **connotations** of a **signifier** are also **arbitrary**, and culturally based.
What are the connotations of red in your culture?
What are the connotations of ‘leather jacket’ in Western popular culture?

ROLAND BARTHES - MYTH - MYTHOLOGIES

The book is an ideological critique of the language used in mass-culture using semiotics to analyse that language.

In *Mythologies* Barthes treats collective representation as ‘sign systems’ - not only unveiling them, but also the process of mystification by which they are transformed into a ‘universal’ nature.

Barthes show how the **connotations** of images can come together to create **myth,** the stories that we believe about ourselves and our culture.

Myths are often created by those in power to support their own values and re-enforce their hold on society.

Myths claim to be **natura**l, but Barthes, using a semiotic analysis, exposes their constructedness.
Therefore **myth** ‘is a system of communication, that it is a message’

ROLAND BARTHES - MYTH - MYTHOLOGIES

In *Mythologies* Barthes analyses the phenomena of mass culture by using semiotics.

He reflects on myths of French daily life such as wine, Citroën car, soap, etc.

The purpose is to dismantle **naturalness** with which newspapers, art dress up reality.

For example, roses and their association with passion. How we cannot dissociate the roses from the message they carry.

ROLAND BARTHES - MYTH - MYTHOLOGIES

In *Mythologies* Barthes reflects on representation and myth through analysing a range of imagery

ROLAND BARTHES

Roland Barthes studied cultural phenomena: films, photographs, fashions advertising.
Mass culture.
Understand the complexity of cultural artefacts despite their appartrent ‘naturalness’.

ROLAND BARTHES AND PHOTOGRAPHY

In *The Photographic Message* (1961) Barthes states that the photograph is unique among **sings** because the photograph carries its referent with it (the reflected light of the photographic subject), the **signifier** is not arbitrary in the way the word ‘cat’ is.

Barthes claims that the photograph is a **signifier** without a **signified** or a **message without code**.

Therefore the essence of photography for Barthes is the fact that the photograph is an **analogon** of reality.

ROLAND BARTHES AND PHOTOGRAPHY

In *The Photographic Message* (1961) Barthes states that photography is a **sign** that mixes forms and materials of representation.

A sign can only be meaningful in context.
Denotation - **connotation**
The photographic paradox
‘The photograph is a message without a code’.

‘Reality-effect’ - ‘realism’ of the image makes it appear to be **natural** rather than socially and historically constructed.

The claim that photography or art practices are signs is to discredit them as innocent or neutral representation.

ADS

The message without a code	*The coded message*
Denoted	Connoted
'The Literal'	'The Symbolic'
What the image shows	What is implied by the image
Objective / Natural	Invested / Cultural
Indexical	Constructed
Given by the Photographer / Sender	Invested by the Receiver / Viewer

HANS HOLBEIN THE YOUNGER

Hans Holbein the Younger, *The Ambassadors,* (1533).

THOMAS GAINSBOROUGH

Thomas Gainsborough, *Mr and Mrs Andrews,* (1750).

PAUL NASH

Paul Nash, *Dead Sea,* (1940-1941).

VISUAL REPRESENTATION - ANALYSIS

The message without a code	*The coded message*
Denoted	Connoted
'The Literal'	'The Symbolic'
What the image shows	What is implied by the image
Objective / Natural	Invested / Cultural
Indexical	Constructed
Given by the Photographer / Sender	Invested by the Receiver / Viewer

ACTIVITY

Activity - 10min.

-In groups please discuss and analyse the ads from the following slide.
-Each ad proposes a different type of masculinity, how are they constructing that message?
-Use as a reference the ‘denoted and connoted’ scheme and make a list with those aspects that you identify in the images. How gender roles are presented in the media?

ADS

SAUVAGE
Dior

JIMMY CHOO
MAN
JIMMY CHOO
MAN
KIT HARINGTON FOR THE FIRST MEN'S FRAGRANCE

COPPER
COMME des GARÇONS
COMME des GARÇONS
by Tyler Mitchell

GOYA - ROSALÍA

ROSALÍA - DI MI NOMBRE (Cap.8: Éxtasis)

86.646.278 visualizaciones 30 oct 2018 ROSALÍA - "Di mi nombre" (Official Video)

Rosalía, *Di mi nombre,* (2018).

GOYA - ROSALÍA

Francisco de Goya y Lucientes, *La maja desnuda,* (1795-1800).

GOYA - ROSALÍA

Francisco de Goya y Lucientes, *La maja vestida,* (1800- 1807).

GOYA - ROSALÍA

Tiziano, *Venus of Urbino,* (1538).

ROSALÍA - TIZIANO - VELÁZQUEZ - GOYA - MANET

Édouard Manet, *Olympia,* (1863).

JOHN BERGER. WAYS OF SEEING - EPISODE 4

John Berger / Ways of Seeing , Episode 4 (1972)

SEMIOTICS - WARNING

‘Although semiotics is necessary to the proposed theory, it is not (not would it ever claim to be) sufficient to account for the complex articulations of the moments of institution, text, distribution and consumption of photography. Confronted as it is with such heterogeneity, it is clear that photography theory must be ‘inter-disciplinary’. (Burgin, 1994, p.2)

SEMIOTICS - WARNING

Thinking about images: how images achieve meaning, their rhetorical status, social value and ideological functions.

Following Victor Burgin in *Thinking Photography* we are going to consider photography and by extension art as a practice of *signification.* (Burgin, 1994, p.2)

Images are omnipresent in everyday social life, and their main function is the production and dissemination of *meaning.* (Burgin, 1994, p.2)

Photography and art practices in its relation to society as a whole.

SEMIOTICS - HOMOGENIZING SYSTEM

Semiotics is a critical theory that began in the 60s and it is useful to think about different cultural manifestations as ‘constructions’.

However like any system that homogenises knowledge there is always something that get lost. My concerns about semiotics is that it reduces everything to signs, but from my experience when we encounter an artwork or a cultural manifestation we are always ‘negotiating’ two aspects - one ‘objective’ and concerned with the reading of signs - as explained by semiotics and other ‘subjective’ and related to our own experiences and embodiment - what it is call a phenomenology of experience as in Merleau-Ponty.

SUMMARY

Some of the ideas that we discussed today are:

-Language is arbitrary. Historical dependent on social structures and collective practices to create meaning.

-Signs and visual representations are shaped by culture and context.

-Semiotics can help you to understand how language and visual representations are constructed and not natural.

ACTIVITY

Activity - 10min.

-Write down one thing that you have learned today and share that idea and discuss it with your group.
-Do you see how mediation and semiotics are related?
-Are they a useful toolkit to learn about visual representations?

SUMMARY

Today we looked into the definition of **semiotics**.

We discussed how language is arbitrary. And the way in which it is historical dependent on social structures and collective practices to create meaning.

Using examples we analysed how signs and visual representations are shaped by culture and context.

We also covered semiotics as a toolkit that can help you to understand how language and visual representations are constructed and not natural.

Finally one of the aims of the session was that you were able to see how **mediation** and **semiotics** are connected since there are both ways of analysing visual representations as **conventions** charged with meaning through culture among others.

NEXT SESSION

Session 6 - Tue 5 Nov 2024

Engaging with the World Differently: Manifestos.

THANK YOU

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