

THE MYTH OF EMMETROPIA: PERCEPTION IN RHETORICAL STUDIES

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This thesis sets up the problem of sight in a visual society, with the aim to answer how the visual makes itself known. The conversation starts on visibility, and where there are gaps in understanding. The first of two case studies examines the absence of sight, or blindness, both literal and figurative. Through a study of blind photographers and their work, this chapter examines the nature of perception, and how biological blindness may influence and inform our understanding of figurative blindness. The second case study examines what the improvement of damaged sight has to say about the rhetorical nature of images. This chapter examines various means of improving sight, using literal improvements to sight to understand figurative improvements in vision and perception. The fourth and final chapter seeks to sum up what has been discovered about the rhetorical nature of sight through the ends of the spectrum of sight.

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CHAPTER 1

SUNDAY BRUNCH, BLINDNESS, AND SIGHT: INTRODUCING THE PROBLEM OF PERCEPTION

Georges Seurat's *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of the Grande Jatte* is perhaps one of the most well known paintings of modern times. It depicts a number of figures at play and work at a coastal setting. The spectrum of colors convey a number of emotions and feelings in the figures depicted. However a closer inspection of the painting reveals there are no brush strokes to convey feeling, emotion, or structure, only a series of colored dots. As the most used example of pointillism, it is known as a collection of dots. However, the painting serves as an example of a conversation still unresolved today, conversation about the nature of perception and this painting.

La Grande Jatte was painted in 1884, and exhibited for the first time in May of 1886.¹ The painting stayed in the Seurat family for about a decade after the artist's death before being sold to the Bru family in 1900, and then sold to Frederic and Helen Bartlett in 1924, who gifted the painting to the Art Institute of Chicago 1926, where it has remained.²

John House from the Courtland Institute of Art, in discussing *La Grande Jatte*, explains how:

Any viable social history of art has to assign a central role to the frameworks in which meanings are attributed to works of art and the conventions by which particular groups of viewers make sense of them. In particular we must avoid the tendency to juxtapose works of art with ostensibly objective, neutral information about the subject they depict. The non-visual sources we cite in order to document a subject are never objective or neutral.³

House, along with many other art historians, skirts around the issue of perception without really addressing it. There is an understanding that there is cultural context, and that meaning plays into reality in some way, but the nature of perception in relation to the painting is largely ignored.

Jed Pearl does take up the issue of perception in *La Grande* as he explains how “perception segues into metaphysics. The blues and greens that suffuse the scene suggest an idea of wholeness that Seurat’s famous dots and dashes of paint confound, for this atomization of color in turn bespeaks division, breakdown, a perpetual principle of conflict.”⁴ This breakdown, and as this paper argues, absence, creates the very image it disrupts. These layers of perception, noise and interaction create the very messages they distort.

Art historian Jonathan Crary explains *La Grande Jatte* as “an ambiguous puzzle, in Durkheimian terms, of the problematic nature of social association. Is the assemblage pictured here an image or harmony...? Or is it a statistical distribution of isolated and categorized united, the result of a merely additive principle of formal adjacency, in which depleted, anomic relations predominate?”⁵ The nature and role of perception in this situation greatly influences the message of the painting.

Jonathan Crary identifies “perception was not a matter of relatively passive reception of an image of an exterior world, but that the makeup and capacities of an observer contributed to the making of perception.”⁶ He further explains that, to Seurat, “the experience of color was never given or unmediated ... color was instead always a construction, a complicated inference.”⁷ Crary goes on to explain that when Seurat deconstructed color, he “undermined the identity of even the last kind of “natural” sign available to a visual artist: the one sign that might still have seemed to operate within a logic of resemblance instead had its “unnatural” or constructed character laid bare.”⁸ In taking apart color, Seurat sought to create a work cleared the meaning added by color, but instead, created a work whose specific way of coloring adds the most meaning of any aspect of the painting.

All of this talk of art and its properties is relevant to rhetorical theory as rhetoric turns to

study and theorize the visual aspects of the world. Seurat's painting is a particularly good illustration of why perception is already at play in this work. However the study of images within the field of rhetoric is turning more often to a study of the visual, pictorial elements of society in order to examine and critique messages presented that have the ability to both influence as well as constitute their audiences.

The Pictorial Turn: Visual Rhetoric

Sonia Foss notes that "a rhetorical theory once restricted to linear linguistic symbols thus explodes into one characterized by multidimensionality, dynamism, and complexity as visual units of meaning are taken into account in rhetorical theory."⁹ Not only are visual units valuable to rhetorical study, but visuality in itself is important to rhetorical theory.¹⁰ Understanding how the visual makes itself known in various ways influences how communication happens, and how society understands and interprets messages.

Scholars who study visual rhetoric look at "the many ways in which visual elements are used to influence people's attitudes, opinions, and beliefs."¹¹ Because images are so prevalent in the perception process, they hold a great deal of influential potential. However, method and object have often complicated visual rhetoric, and "the iconophobic dominance of text remains unquestioned, and visual rhetoric is forever subordinated to the traditional artifacts of public address."¹² Cara Finnegan claims that visual rhetoric should be a project of inquiry instead of a product of inquiry and calls for rhetoricians to "do rhetorical theory in such a way as to recognize the ways in which visuality affects, challenges, or changes our understanding of rhetoric."¹³ Finnegan goes on to explain how visual rhetoric should study visual artifacts in their cultural contexts, and understand them in a reflexive dialogue between the textual and visual

realms. Visual rhetoric, then, is an evolving study testing its own boundaries as scholars continue to develop cohesive theories surrounding it.

This growing study of visual rhetoric is particularly relevant for our culture. Kress and van Leeuwen note that “seeing has, in our culture, become synonymous with understanding. We ‘look’ at a problem. We ‘see’ the point. We adopt a ‘viewpoint.’ We ‘focus’ on an issue. We ‘see things in perspective.’ The world ‘as we see it’ (rather than ‘as we know it,’ and certainly not ‘as we hear it’ or ‘as we feel it’) has become the measure of what is ‘real’ and ‘true’.”¹⁴ This emphasis on a singular mode of knowing can be problematic. Visuality has caused contemplation for quite some time. “The visual arts, according to Plato, triply obscure our knowledge of Reality by twice removing it through their two-fold copies and then by offering pleasurable diversions from our proper attention to that Reality.”¹⁵ So visuality has been a disputed understanding of reality since classical times. Because visuality will play a large role in society’s perception for the foreseeable future, it is important to understand that the visual, and the ways that people understand it—which are not always optical in nature.

The Problem of Perception

Jonathan Crary argues that “[v]ision and its effects are always inseparable from the possibilities of an observing subject who is both the historical product *and* the site of certain practices, techniques, institutions, and procedures of subjectification.”¹⁶ So vision is tied up in so much more than just the objects we see.

According to Martin Jay, Jacques Derrida “seemed to imply that insofar as there was no pure perception, no unmediated ‘natural’ interface between mind and world, it was necessary to understand the latter as a text to be ‘read’ or more precisely, read doubly.”¹⁷ If there is no pure

perception, there cannot be pure messages either. What is the relationship between blindness and visuality? Is blindness the absence of vision? Vision's parasite? Or a necessary limit of visuality itself? Through this study, I argue that blindness is everything not seen accurately. Thus, there are degrees of blindness, and times of blindness, and areas of blindness. Blindness could be caused by memory, biology, or a focus elsewhere. It is simply impossible to see everything – blindness is inevitable. Understanding blindness, in its physical and mental forms is important to the field of communication as it influences the flow of messages. A major problem in visual studies is the assumption of emmetropia (or normal vision) without proving its existence. As a helpful counter-point to emmetropia, blind photography will aid in the misperception of normal perception.

Perception and Blindness

This study deals with these questions of perception as they relate to rhetorical messages. This study explores the nature of sight as a rhetorical device through two case studies on opposite ends of the spectrum of vision. The first examines vision by its absence—by seeking to answer how the visual makes itself known through or despite blindness. The second study looks at ways to improve vision, and appearances of visual objects that could not previously be seen. This study concludes by inquiring as to the rhetorical nature of seeing absence or appearance, (non)sight or insight. The move in rhetorical studies and other disciplines to study the picture, the image, and the visual necessitates further study of those areas to better understand them. Included in further study should be ways in which the visual interacts with other disciplines and how it is integrated into the world in relation to other senses.

How does perception influence the visual messages we receive? Everything about communication is changed by how the message is perceived, and yet, it received very little study. In the medical field, normal sight is not taken as a given – instead, steps are taken to discover how perception is distorted, and how to make it more accurate. What if communication took such steps? What if we didn't assume that everyone's perception was the same, and took steps to understand the differences in order to communicate more effectively with one another?

Immediacy and Relevancy of Study

Amazon offers seventeen textbooks under the search “visual rhetoric.” all but one published since 2002, up until as recent as 2011, the odd one out published in 1999.¹⁸ Many universities offer courses in visual rhetoric. The University of Minnesota offers an undergraduate class entitled *How Pictures Persuade*;¹⁹ Indiana University offers *Visual Rhetoric* to undergrads²⁰ and *Rhetoric and Visual Culture* to grad students,²¹ the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign has an undergraduate course in *Visual Politics*,²² and a graduate level course in *Rhetoric and Visual Culture*.²³

Visual rhetoric is often a topic of study within communication studies, but perception is largely still unaddressed. Cara Finnegan talks in her book, *Picturing Poverty* about the Farm Security Administration photographs and their relationship to print culture. While there is great attention to the context of the photograph in the culture, there is not much attention given to perception.²⁴ In their book, *No Caption Needed*, Robert Hariman and John Lucaites have a number of opportunities to address issues of perception with statements like “as images change, the public becomes reconfigured.”²⁵ Here would be a great chance to explore how the perception

process plays a role in the change of the images or the public, but neither is brought up, and the question of perception remains unaddressed.²⁶

Indeed, it has become the norm for visual scholars in communication studies to discuss the form and content of their visual artifacts with little attention to how visibility and perception interact in the cultural context.

Blindness as a Metaphor for the Limits of Visuality

The nature of what is visible is tied to the nature of what is not visible. Without understanding blindness, we cannot understand vision. As Peggy Phelan notes, “Visibility and invisibility are crucially bound; invisibility polices visibility and in this specific sense functions as the ascendant term in the binary.”²⁷ What we see is determined by what we do not see. What then is the role of perception?

Blindness is linked to sight because “human sight is not merely partial blindness or selective seeing but a determinate trading of blindnesses and insights.”²⁸ Seeing itself relies in a way on blindness—the mind could not possibly process everything there is to see. Phelan notes “learning to see is training careful blindness. To apprehend and recognize the visible is to eliminate as well as absorb visual data.”²⁹ So vision, from the start, stems from and relies on blindness. Emmetropia, or the normal state of the eye, then must rely on some sort of blindness.

American deconstructionist Paul de Man notes in his essay “The Rhetoric of Blindness” that “insight exists only for a reader in the privileged position of being able to observe the blindness as a phenomenon in its own right—the question of his own blindness being one which he is by definition incompetent to ask.”³⁰ From this understanding, vision, or insight, exists only for those able to recognize what is not; for those who are able to see what is blind.

To understand what vision is, it is beneficial to understand what vision is not. James Elkins claims that “we have arrived at the point where we can say what seeing is *not*: it is not merely taking in light, color, shapes, and textures, and it is not simply a way of navigating the world.”³¹ So while vision does take in all of those things, it is not *merely* the taking in of those things. Vision is so much more. “The visual system transforms transient light patterns on the retina into a coherent and stable interpretation of a three-dimensional world.”³² But seeing is so more than what the visual system does.

Looking at the philosophy of sight, the literal and figurative natures of sight, ways to improve vision and the ethics of those improvements will create better understanding of sight and its improvements, literal and metaphorical. This paper explores those facets of vision with the goal of understanding how knowledge of literal improvement in vision may inform figurative or metaphorical improvement in vision.

Because sight provides the dominant route of perception and understanding in the world, it has been discussed and theorized by many, in many ways. Only a few are discussed here. However, by beginning to understand some of the facets of the philosophy of sight, we can begin to understand the implications of improvement, both good and bad.

Jordynn Jack, while discussing Crary, explains that “conveying knowledge through images involves far more than representational practices.”³³ Images are always more than just images; images also interact with their context in the world. “[I]mages and their descriptions partake of and produce ideological commitments, leading viewers to see things in accordance with scientific, political, and aesthetic values.”³⁴ In this way, Jack joins the argument that images are a kind of discourse in that “a specific visuality will make certain things visible in particular ways, and other things unseeable, for example, and subjects will be produced and act within that

field of vision.”³⁵ Being a discourse situates images as powerful, because “discourse produces the world as it understands it.”³⁶ Thus, images, as discourses, produce the world (and the human subjects within it) as the discursive images understand the world.

Phelan, echoing Jacques Lacan’s work, explains the visual field as a trap, in that the visual field “seems to promise to show all, even while it fails to show the subject who looks, *and* thus fails to show what the looker most wants to see.”³⁷ Failure of sight, literal or figuratively, creates a desire for improving sight.

Regarding the nature of physical sight and how it functions, Tessier-Lavigne explains that there are two stages of visual perception: first, “light entering the cornea is projected onto the back of the eye, where it is converted into an electrical signal by a specialized sensory organ, the retina.”³⁸ Next, “these signals are then sent through the optic nerve to higher centers in the brain for further processing necessary for perception.”³⁹ While visual perception may have steps that are easily broken down, there is much more that goes into making sight work.

Martin Jay notes the marvel of eyesight as he notes that the optic nerve has “eighteen times more nerve endings than the cochlear nerve of the ear, its nearest competitor.”⁴⁰ Jay continues to explain that

the optic nerve with its 800,000 fibers is able to transfer an astonishing amount of information to the brain, and at a rate of assimilation far greater than that of any other sense organ. In each eye, over 120 million rods take in information on some five hundred levels of lightness and darkness, while more than seven million cones allow us to distinguish more than one million combinations of color.⁴¹

The eye requires such advanced ability to be able to process the visual images that it takes in.

Even beyond the intake of visual information, the brain has to process and interpret that information to make it meaningful. “Visual images typically are built up from the inputs of parallel pathways that process different features—movement, depth, form, and color.”⁴² In order

for the visual image to be processed, “independent groups of cells with different functions must temporarily be brought into *association*.”⁴³ By the nature of this interaction, “there must be a mechanism by which the brain momentarily associates the information being processed independently by different cell populations in different cortical regions. This mechanism, as yet unspecified, is called the *binding mechanism*.”⁴⁴ This binding mechanism takes different bits of visual information from different places, and creates a unified, cohesive image.

Not only does the image itself need to be unified, but the interpretation should also make sense. According to Gestalt theory, this occurs when we rely on the “contextual interaction” of the visual element with its environment.⁴⁵ Gestalt theory is based on the idea that what we perceive depends on the context. Gestalt psychologists explain this process happens by “processing sensory information about the shape, color, distance, and movement of objects according to computational rules that are inherent in the system.”⁴⁶ Based on expectations from both experience and neural wiring “the brain makes certain assumptions about what is to be seen in the world.”⁴⁷

Clearly eyesight is a highly developed and complicated process, and relies on an amount of information unmatched by any of the other senses. Human eyesight is also still ahead of that of computers. “Studies of artificial intelligence and of pattern recognition by computers have shown that the brain recognizes form, motion, depth, and color using strategies that no computer can achieve.”⁴⁸ While computers still cannot equal human sight, another technology, also compared to sight, still lags behind the human eye.

The camera, while similar in many ways to vision and often used by visual scholars to approximate vision, is not always an accurate analogy. “It does not capture what the visual system really does, which is to create a three-dimensional perception of the world that is

different from the two-dimensional images projected onto the retina.”⁴⁹ It also does not reflect the cognitive nature of vision.

However, as imperfect as technology may be, many human eyes are far from perfect as well. “The most common visual problems are not total blindness but ordinary nearsightedness, astigmatism, and other difficulties we have bringing the world into focus.”⁵⁰ These problems of focus cause many problems with the accuracy of vision.

To go back to basic eye functioning for a moment, “Three components of the eye work together to determine the refractive power of the eye: the shape of the cornea, the power of the lens, and the length of the eye.”⁵¹ When these three components “combine and produce no refractive error, emmetropia is achieved.”⁵² This would be considered the normal state of the eye, or the state of the correctly functioning eye.

However, the eye does not always function normally or correctly. “In myopia, the secondary focal point is anterior to the retina. In other words, the refractive power of the eye is greater than that required for emmetropia.”⁵³ This is also known as nearsightedness. “A hyperopic eye’s secondary focal point is posterior to the retina.”⁵⁴ This is also known as farsightedness. “Astigmatism refers to a refractive error in which the curvature of the cornea, or less commonly the curvature of the lens, varies in different meridians.”⁵⁵ Each of these three refractive errors can be corrected through laser procedures.

What cannot be corrected by laser procedures is the natural blind spot in each eye. Each eye has a blind spot because there are no photoreceptors where the retina and the optic nerve meet.⁵⁶ When both eyes are open, they usually compensate for the blind spot, making it rarely noticed. Elkins notes that the blind spot is “an absence whose invisibility is itself invisible.”⁵⁷

Phelan claims that, “by seeing the blind spot within the visible real we might see a way to redesign the representational real.”⁵⁸ The idea that literal sight or lack of it has been expressed before. Literal problems with seeing, or ophthalmologic conditions, “have parallels in ways that we ordinarily see and think about the world.”⁵⁹

Elkins addresses three refractive errors that can be addressed by LASIK (Laser in situ keratomileusis) surgery when he makes the correlation that

some people also *think* as if they were nearsighted or farsighted: they comprehend only the most immediate problems or the most distant abstractions, and they remain oblivious to the bulk of the world. Astigmatism and other aberrations are also analogues of problems people have seeing things correctly—some people distort everything they think about, like the idiosyncratic flaws in an astigmatic’s eye.⁶⁰

Elkins goes on to explain that there are correlations in more serious problems as well. Glaucoma, where the eyes develop a narrowing tunnel of blackness are similar to people who become obsessive in their focus on something; having tunnel vision in the figurative sense. Other conditions like cataracts or macular degeneration “create black spots where we want to look,”⁶¹ similar to situations in which people avoid seeing certain objects, perhaps because they are too painful.

The correlation between refractive errors and ways of seeing has a definite rhetorical nature. Charles Hill, in a discussion of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, explains how “the rhetor’s ultimate goal, whenever possible, is to make the relevant object, concept, or value fill the audience’s entire ‘field of consciousness’.”⁶² Hill continues: “In other words, when particular elements are given enough presence, they can crowd out other considerations from the viewer’s mind, regardless of the logical force or relevance of those other considerations.”⁶³ Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca use the term “presence” to refer to this idea.⁶⁴ This persuasive action takes advantage of an error in the way that we see, and seeks to enhance particular and specific

blindness. Would it be rhetorical as well to remove this blindness and allow the eye or the mind to see more accurately?

Recalling the binding mechanism of sight mentioned earlier, there are disciplines other than ophthalmology or neurological science that recognize such a force at work. Crary notes, in reference to a painting by Manet, two forces at work, one of which “is a binding together of vision, an obsessive holding together of perception to maintain the viability of a functional real world.”⁶⁵ This binding thus appears to take place both inside the physical brain and inside the nonmaterial mind.

Moving from the nature of sight, and into ways of improving vision, the literal, physical action of seeing is essential to an understanding of visual rhetoric, as “perception is a highly interlinked process, starting at the retina. Retinal images are coded signals, become symbols (sic) like words in a language.”⁶⁶ Amm notes that the eye’s refractive ability, and the technology to correct refractive errors can symbolize changes in perspectives. The eye then, can be utilized as a metaphor for perception, and corrective action taken, like lenses or LASIK, can take the metaphor further down the path of improved vision/perception.

Improving Vision as Metaphor

There are various ways to improve vision. Human vision that is deficient can be improved through the utilization of glasses or contact lenses, or permanently corrected through medical procedures like LASIK. Already good human vision can be aided through the use of other types of lenses, like that of a camera that captures moments of time to replay later. Lenses can look at things too large and far away or too small for the human eye. Telescopes direct vision

far away to objects that could not otherwise be seen, while or a microscope that examines visible aspects of the world that are too small or too detailed to be picked up by the normal human eye.

Jack discusses an improvement to normal vision by the use of a microscope in a discussion of Robert Hooke's *Micrographia*, noting how "Hooke shows that the microscope reveals beautiful sights not visible to the naked eye."⁶⁷ This revelation leads people to trust in the image that they cannot see by themselves, the image that they must improve their sight to see. A microscope improves the ability of the eye beyond its normal capabilities, however, it does so without modifying the structure of the eye.

There are, however, procedures that do modify the structure of the eye. LASIK "involves creating a corneal flap so that midstromal tissue can be ablated directly and reshaped with an excimer laser beam."⁶⁸ This procedure allows a doctor to correct refractive errors by reshaping the eye to focus more correctly. Studies show that after undergoing LASIK surgery, "97% of patients achieved uncorrected visual acuity (UCVA) of 20/40, and 67% of patients achieved UCVA of 20/20."⁶⁹ So LASIK is a highly effective surgical method of improving vision in a variety of different eye types.

LASIK may be considered a Foucauldian technology of the self, which permits: individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.⁷⁰

This ability to better oneself allows an individual to, in a way, constitute themselves in a rhetorical nature.

Procedures like LASIK that modify the eye permanently have a different effect than temporary improvements, like glasses, contacts, telescopes, or microscopes. Each of those types of vision improvements supplement the physical, while laser surgery corrects the physical. There

are obviously physical differences between the two, but if the metaphor of improvement is extended out in a similar way to that of the refractive errors, there is a clear difference between rhetorical methods that change a way of understanding for a time or in a particular situation, and rhetorical methods that permanently alter a mode of perception. These distinctions need to be addressed.

As discussed previously, vision and sight are intimately connected with blindness, and blindness in turn is intimately connected with how vision is and can be improved. The nature of sight and the visual play a fundamental way in which the world is understood on multiple levels for a variety of people. Literal sight provides an opportunity to explore metaphorical sight through refractive errors like nearsightedness, farsightedness, astigmatism, glaucoma, and cataracts that each have parallels in ways of looking at or understanding events. Improvements in vision through technologies like lenses and LASIK allow for certain types and situations of blindness to be lessened or removed.

Modifying metaphorical sight in any way has rhetorical implications, and those implications are not often discussed in visual rhetoric, or visual studies. However, the question stands: how does modifying the image in detail, magnitude, or focus alter or influence the message? Further discussion at a later point will hopefully expound on the issue in a way that aids in the development of visual rhetorical theory.

Preview of Chapters

In order to understand how perception functions rhetorically, this paper contains two case studies, each from different ends of the spectrum when it comes to vision. The first chapter sets up the problem of sight in a visual society, with the aim to answer the question: how does the

visual make itself known? A review of applicable literature reveals where the conversation on visuality stands, and where there are gaps in understanding before previewing the conversation to take place throughout the chapters.

The second chapter examines the absence of sight, or blindness, both literal and figurative. Through a study of blind photographers and their work, this chapter examines the nature of perception, and how biological blindness may influence and inform our understanding of figurative blindness. The case study looks at photographs taken by Pete Eckert, Bruce Hall, and Henry Butler, how they have been displayed, and what people say about them in order to take up how visual images produced by someone who is blind may act rhetorically about the nature of perception. This study seeks to answer: how is blindness talked about in the context of these photographs, and how does that constitute vision, sight and perception?

The third chapter examines what the improvement of damaged sight has to say about the rhetorical nature of images. This chapter looks at various means of improving sight, using literal improvements to sight to understand figurative improvements in vision and perception. Using a combination of medical literature on ophthalmology and literature in the field of visual rhetoric, vision enhancements like LASIK are considered and analyzed. The paper looks at promotional materials from laser eye surgery centers as an artifact of persuasive material about sight that can be understood metaphorically as well. The paper seeks to understand the improvement of sight or vision as a rhetorical action that is inherently visual in nature. This part of the paper seeks to answer the question: how does detail (focus) influence the message?

The fourth and final chapter seeks to sum up what has been discovered about the rhetorical nature of sight through the ends of the spectrum of sight. This chapter utilizes the artwork of Wayne Gonzales to explain the rhetorical nature of perception.

Conclusion

The nature of perception and focus in images, visible or invisible, is an important and understudied portion of visual rhetoric. In order to understand how changes in perceptions influence meaning in messages, relevant case studies will be examined to elaborate on important aspects of perception.

Seurat's *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte* illustrates the problem in a simple manner. You simply cannot perceive everything. If the dots are the focus of the painting, the image of the Sunday brunchers is unclear. However, if the people in the scene are the focus, then the viewer must be blind to the dots. Communicators are blind to many messages in order to receive others. However, the blindness not only enables certain messages, but also creates them.

The application of the color to the canvas is important as well. "Seurat's technique [...] was based on his unifying pointillist surface and his decomposition of local color. Rather than an immediate transcription of the world, Seurat's dots are a dense accumulation of abstract signs that only indirectly represent it."⁷¹ Further, for Seurat, color "is not a property of objects but a construction out of elements that individually do not refer to anything other than themselves. The world is not something passively received by the senses; it has to be rebuilt and synthesized artificially."⁷² Color, and perception, is something that is influenced and modified through various factors. This paper seeks to explore those factors through two case studies, concluding in a better, more developed understanding of the role of perception in visual messages.

CHAPTER 2

SEEING BLIND PHOTOGRAPHY: EXPLORING HOW VISION IS CONSTITUTED THROUGH ABSENCE

Kenneth Burke begins an exploration of the often misunderstood relationship between vision and visuality when discussing his concept of “terministic screens.” He notes when observing a group of photographs he saw, “They were different photographs of the same objects, the difference being that they were made with different filters. Here something so ‘factual’ as a photograph revealed notable distinctions in texture, and even in form, depending upon which color filter was used for the documentary description of the event being recorded.”⁷³ The difference between photographs, where one photograph may place focus on particular parts that are present and others that are absent in other photographs from the same group begins to challenge the ideas of what it means to be present and absent, and what value is placed upon those distinctions. And, further, “we *must* use terministic screens, since we can’t say anything without the use of terms; whatever terms we use, they necessarily constitute a corresponding kind of screen; and any such screen necessarily directs the attention to one field rather than another.”⁷⁴ So this choice, this selection, this screen filters attention to certain aspects of whatever the focus is, leaving other aspects out. In that sense, a terministic screen deals in the market of what gets seen and what does not, what is present and what is absent, the positives and the negatives of reality.

Sight itself acts as a terministic screen, filtering reality in a very literal sense. As Douglass McCulloh notes, “Vision is so strong that it masks other senses, other abilities; it even overrides visualization. Sighted photographers always talk about the difficulty of what they call ‘seeing.’ I tell them ‘If you can’t see, it’s because your vision is getting in the way.’”⁷⁵ While we rarely think of these things as opposed, vision and sight, it is perhaps worthwhile to examine the

possibility that if not opposed, the relationship between vision and sight is unnecessarily passed over by too many scholars. Or as Derrida says, “We are thus not blind to the visible, but blinded by the visible.”⁷⁶ What is seen, the visible then, acts as a terministic screen, the filter that determines how the focus appears.

Individuals who are blind experience the realm of the visual differently from those who see it with their eyes. The terministic screen through which they see, understand, and describe reality is different. For example, blind children do communicate visually, though in ways sometimes different from sighted children. In order to demonstrate action, “they draw people with more than two arms and legs ... They repeat objects ... This is action. A walking boar, drawn 50,000 years ago on the wall of a cave in Altamira, Spain ... shows action in the same way. He has eight legs.”⁷⁷ This way of drawing action demonstrates an experience of the visual that may be different from that of a sighted person, but is an experience of the visual nonetheless. Because a blind child may have never actually seen motion, they understand how it is represented differently. While a sighted child may represent motion with lines to indicate path of motion that they have seen, a blind child understands kinesthetically that movement places the same thing in several places, and they illustrate it in that way.

A blind individual may experience motion differently, just as they may experience any aspect of the visual through a different terministic screen. Each different screen, however, relies on both presence and absence, vision and blindness. Someone who cannot see with their eyes may utilize different screens to visualize and photograph the visual world and interpret their realities. What an individual does not see informs what they do see. Presence and absence in both sight and perception are intimately intertwined.

But what is vision? And, for that matter, what is blindness? The concept of “normal” vision, or emmetropia, is unrealistic in many situations, and unnecessary to live as a functioning part of society. Visuality is not constrained to vision and the dialogue about blind photography reveals how visuality and vision are often placed in a dichotomous situation. This dichotomy is a rhetorical move of marginalization, and yet, the dichotomy, like most binaries, is socially and linguistically constructed, and thus the reality of the relationship is open to critical discussion. “The very category of identity implies the line of that necessary difference that distinguishes self from the other.”⁷⁸ Because blindness entails a separate cultural identity (of “being blind”) than that of having sight, there is an understood difference between blindness and vision, or sight.

In order to understand how visuality works in images, this chapter looks to understand the phenomenon of blind photography, by examining first how photographs are both unremarkable and remarkable, second, how they function as writing and speech acts, and finally examine the binaries found within and created by the photographs. In order to do this, we turn to Jacques Derrida, Kenneth Burke, and Roland Barthes, as well as Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Specifically we look three blind photographers: Pete Eckert, Bruce Hall, and Henry Butler.

Photography: Blind, Sighted, Situated and Otherwise Visual

Douglas McCulloh, the curator of an exhibit of photographs taken by blind photographers called *Sight Unseen* claims:

Photographers, therefore, internalize a lengthy set of conventions: traditional subjects (or rebellious countermoves), suitable angles, appropriate lenses, depth of field choices, proper color balance, correct compositional techniques (and vague countermoves), geometric balances, effective crops, ephemeral gestures, decisive moments. The list is—click by click—a successive ratcheting down, a narrowing of vision. It is, in fact, a progressive blindness.⁷⁹

This blindness is created by absence—by what is not seen, what is not present is the screen, or

frame of sight. The choices that go into a photograph not only play into possible progressive blindnesses, but those choices, in fact, make up the very message of the image. The screens, or filters through which something is seen or understood necessarily rule out other options. Each of those options carries implications along with it. Roland Barthes notes that “connotation ... is realized at the different levels of the production of the photograph (choice, technical treatment, framing, lay-out) and represents, finally, a coding of the photographic analogue.”⁸⁰ All of the particularities of the photograph that make it different from every other photograph not only give it a reason to be seen, but also intrinsically isolate the photograph, so that everything outside the focus or screen is blind to the viewer.

A photograph, as an application of a terministic screen, functions as a sort of writing. To understand how a photograph functions like a text it is useful to first better understand what writing is. French philosopher Jacques Derrida gives several parameters for what exists as “writing.” First writing is “[a] mark that subsists,”⁸¹ one that continues to exist after the moment of creation, “which can give rise to an iteration in the absence and beyond the presence of the empirically determined subject who, in a given context, has emitted or produced it.”⁸² A photograph, once created, exists independently of its creator, and continues to do so. Unlike a speech act, it does not cease to physically exist upon conception. Second, this mark holds a force that breaks context; it can be taken out of context. A photograph, as writing, may be created in one context, and read in another completely different context. Thus, it cannot be held to only a single context. Third, this mark is tied to both physical space and exists in time. A photograph exists in some mediated space, whether on paper or on a screen or projected on a wall, and its existence in that space spans time. With these given parameters for writing, photography is a furthering of Derrida’s discussion of writing.

However, even though photographs function as writing by Derrida's definition, a photograph communicates differently than other, related forms of writing. Roland Barthes identified three different ways in which a photograph conveys meaning – linguistic, denoted, and connoted. A linguistic message is made up of the text in or around the image that either interacts with the image or informs a viewer how to interact with the image. A denoted meaning or message in general is a natural understanding; something that persists across time and through different cultures, the reality of the image. Denoted messages in photographs posit themselves as a “recording” at the conjunction of here-now and there-then, so as a having-been-there. This is the representation of “reality” that separates photography as a visual medium, distinct from mediums like drawing or painting. As a recording, it appears to be a neutral, accurate portrayal of reality, something that is. The connoted message, on the other hand, is a cultural, coded message that adds meaning to the denoted message. This is the message that Barthes calls “the rhetoric of the image” because, particularly when the connoted message is covert, it is the most persuasive or believable. For example, in cosmetics advertisements, beauty products may be displayed in cases and applied to models with slogans like “Maybe she’s born with it. Maybe it’s maybelline.”⁸³ The denoted message of the image is that there is a woman, wearing makeup. The connoted message however, is always more complicated, that the makeup makes an individual more attractive, that it will help a woman find a man, that no one will know a woman wears makeup, etc. However, while a connoted message cannot exist without a denoted one, rarely does a denoted message actually exist without a connoted message. It is clear from advertisements that there is an added layer of cultural meaning, particularly meaning that is placed there on purpose. However, even family photographs have connoted meaning, based both on what is in the photograph, where the photograph, and what is excluded from the photograph

in how it is framed. A simple photograph is not simple. As Barthes notes, “it is precisely the syntagm [or the sequence of linguistic units, the construction] of the denoted message which ‘naturalizes’ the system of the connoted message.”⁸⁴ So the photographic message comes from the connoted message that is naturalized by the denoted message. The rhetorical ability of a photograph, whether artistic, or documentary, or advertising in nature, comes from the ability of the added, cultural, not factual message of the photograph to be understood as factual anyway.

So a photograph has a message that is received on several different levels of awareness, and it can be understood as a text or a kind of writing. At this level, photographs function as sites of meaning, although that meaning is not set in stone. How does a photograph set aside some meanings from other meanings? Much of the meaning making in an image is created and understood through the perception of presence and absence; what is there and what is missing. What is not in the photograph is just as important as what is in the photograph. Because of the presences and absences at play in the photograph, a photograph in its context—any photograph, is both remarkable and unremarkable.

Remarkable and Unremarkable Images

The photographs taken by blind photographers are both remarkable and unremarkable. Each photograph must be understood “in relations that are always contingent, context-bound, and historically specific.”⁸⁵

First, photographs taken by blind photographers are unremarkable – generally and specifically. No matter whoever takes a photograph, the image remains a composition on a surface. From the most well known photographers – think of Ansel Adams or Dorothea Lange – to a child with a snapshot camera, the way a photograph works is taking something that was

there, and transposing it to another medium: film, paper, canvas, or screen. Photographs by blind photographers are no different. A blind photographer, like any other, can aim a camera lens, and click a button to capture a frame.

Pete Eckert's photographs are unremarkable – he uses lightpainting⁸⁶, a popular technique among photo enthusiasts and amateurs. One of his most well known photographs, “Electroman,” features the figure of a person created from and surrounded by lines of light.⁸⁷ The first known use of this technique for artistic purposes was by the photographer Man Ray in 1935. Among other pioneers were Eric Staller and Kamil Varga.⁸⁸ Artists used to other mediums experimented with this technique as well, including Pablo Picasso with the help of Gjon Mili.⁸⁹ Using a long exposure, and some form of light source, any photography can create a lightpainting photograph with a camera on a tripod. A popular online photography store even sells a can of “glow graffiti” – “a super-bright LED light housed in a very convincing spray paint can.”⁹⁰ In reference to his photograph “Electroman,” *Time Magazine* notes that Pete's method “involves using a composite body view camera mounted on a tripod. Focusing with notches carved into a focus rail, he throws his studio into total darkness, opens the shutter, and roams the space “painting” his image with light, using flashlights, candles, lasers and other devices.”⁹¹

Bruce Hall's photographs are also unremarkable – he takes pictures of his children playing in the yard, like countless other families around the country, and around the globe. While he also takes underwater photos, “Hall has more recently been working with his wife on a long-term project, documenting the lives of his profoundly autistic twin boys and advocating for autism awareness.”⁹² His autism collection shows images of his autistic sons going about their daily routine, particularly playing with water.⁹³ Hall is not the only photographer to be involved in this cause. Organizations like Special Kids Photography of America exist solely for the

purpose of training photographers to take pictures of children with special needs.⁹⁴ Heather Swanner is a photographer certified by the organization, who especially looks to take pictures of children with autism alongside her wedding, family, and commercial photography.⁹⁵ Swanner notes that taking portraits of autistic children in environments they are comfortable in is “entirely different from those created in the studio by using surroundings familiar to you or your child – allowing the child to be relaxed and comfortable so their true essence can be captured on film.”⁹⁶ Another photographer, Melissa Jill specializes in wedding photography, but like Bruce Hall, documents how autism affects her family—in this case her nephews.⁹⁷ Melissa Jill not only photographs their daily lives, but photographs and participates in autism walks to raise money and awareness. So while Bruce Hall’s photographic advocacy for autism is admirable, that in and of itself does not make his photography remarkable.

Henry Butler’s photographs are unremarkable – he takes snapshots of life around him – a person, a shoe, parts of clothing. There is seemingly no special framing, and just about anyone can point and shoot a camera with digital technology. “Butler often walks the streets of his hometown accompanied by a friend, who points out people and scenes of interest. He’ll then take the time to set up and take several shots. “I want to know the color scheme,” Butler says. “I want to know about distance between me and the person or object. I want to know about the sun, if we’re outside. All of those things are important to me.”⁹⁸ Similar framing and focus can be found in the photographs of projects like Kids with Cameras which gives children in Calcutta, Haiti, and Cairo cameras to document their experience of the world.⁹⁹

To say these photographs are unremarkable is of course, obvious. Indeed, as both Barthes and Derrida agree above, in order for a photograph to be viewable to a spectator, it must be unremarkable: it must use the same codes of meaning in order to communicate to a viewer, or,

as Derrida might say, it must be iterable, repeatable, and thus capable of being understood as one of a series of iterations or utterances of light on film. Indeed, the ultimate condition of a photograph is its ability to be unremarkable, to be recognizable as a photograph, which according to both Barthes and Derrida attempts to reproduce a snapshot of reality. One must conclude that in order for a photograph to participate in the codes Barthes mentions, the connotative, the denotative, and the linguistic, it must be repeatable and must signify itself as a photograph in addition to any content it might have. Or, as Derrida might say, the photograph must be a “mark that persists.”¹⁰⁰

Each of these photographs taken by the blind photographers is remarkable. Is this quality found in the photograph because of the photographer? Is the difference in the photographs found in the photographer? Does their difference spring from their source of immanation? No, we must resist this simple definition that the adjective blind when applied to photography makes the image itself unrecognizable. Instead, the difference lies in the photograph, in its different, and changing spaces, as it is viewed and inscribed with meaning. Each photograph interacts with the context in which it was taken, as well as being iterated and transcribed into new contexts each time it is seen. It is this context, in which the photograph is viewed by another, sighted subject, that blindness makes the photograph quite remarkable.

Pete Eckert paints with light he will never see. He creates wonderful images of light that he must create and execute entirely from his mental understanding and memory of light. He makes a point of describing how he uses his own voice -- like a bat uses its sonar -- to bounce off of the model's form, “so I could get an idea of her silhouette” and imagine her pose, her position in relation to other objects in the room, and so on. “Think of a rock and a river. The sound wraps around her. If there's a sound behind her, it wraps around her and comes to me.”¹⁰¹

When Eckert's work is displayed, this feature of the photographer becomes infused with the image. The creation of the image is engrained as part of the image itself—the light in the image formed by understanding wrapping sound is seen by people who may have no understanding of the sound involved in the image, but see the light that the photographer could not.

Bruce Hall takes pictures of his autistic children in order to see them as he cannot see without the aid of optic devices, with other underwater works published in places like *National Geographic*.¹⁰² Hall notes of his first “good” underwater photograph: “I got a camera and a plastic housing,” Hall recalls of his first venture into underwater photography. “And of the thousand pictures I took, 999 of them were awful. And then I got what was, for me, my first good underwater photo. And that was the day I knew -- I'm going to get serious about this.”¹⁰³ Hall continues to produce clear, focused, bright, and interesting underwater photography off the coast of California, winning awards for his photography,¹⁰⁴ as well as having work purchased by the Library of Congress.¹⁰⁵

Henry Butler's photographs are remarkable because he is a New Orleans musician who was inspired by Beethoven to take pictures by feeling the vibrations around him.¹⁰⁶ “Henry Butler, who lost his sight to infantile glaucoma, takes pictures by feeling vibrations. It's an idea inspired by Beethoven, he says, who held a stick in his mouth to feel the vibrations of the music he could not hear.”¹⁰⁷ While he does not see his shots, he feels them. Butler's photographs are made remarkable by their creation. While Pete Eckert hears sounds, Henry Butler feels sounds and transcribes them into a visual medium: photography. Henry Butler cannot see, but he has vision through his feeling of the world around him. Each of his photographs are contextually remarkable as they reside in the space between sight and blindness.

Here, these photographs are remarkable because of something that exists outside of the photograph, but which is ever present inside the image itself: the absence of vision. These images capture a scene and yet they do so without being able to capture a scene at all. Indeed, while the condition of possibility of the photograph is the presence of the codes of connotation and denotation, these codes are themselves absent from the photographer. Likewise, while the photographs themselves exist beyond the individual photographer who took the images, like Derrida's mark that persists, the codes that make these images mean are wrapped up in the fact that the photographer's fingerprint, not necessarily in name, but in sensory perception, stays with the image. While the image is meant to mark the presence of a certain scene, captured by a trick of the light and film, these photographs constantly remind the viewer that what they view inside the image was absent to the photographer. A photographer, which, we might add, is also absent at the time of viewing the image, and yet their presence guides a number of discourses surrounding the photographs themselves. These images not only trade in the codes of connotation and denotation, the cultural meaning of light, child, and pose, for example, but also ask viewers to imagine a viewer robbed of these very codes and scenes. Thus the image, while presenting a scene, communicates to its viewer, the radical absence of that scene and indeed all vision, through its absent blind photographer.

The remarkable quality of the photographs has to exist at the same time with the unremarkability of the photographs. Why? Because they deconstruct what it is to see, to perceive. If a blind person can be visual, what does that mean for visual studies, or visual rhetoric?

Because the photographs make difficult the binaries of present and absent, visible and invisible by their very act of creation, they call attention to the paradox inherent in their trace.

They are remarkable and unremarkable, and the same time they show what is seen and make known what is unseen. Seeing one through the lens of the other places one in the situation Kenneth Burke terms perspective by incongruity, “a constant juxtaposing of incongruous words.”¹⁰⁸ This juxtapositioning of terms like presence and absence, visible and invisible, violates the “‘proprieties’ of the word in its previous linkages”¹⁰⁹ redefining what each of the terms means. The contradictory nature of these combinations is not itself not hidden from the viewer of blind photography. Consider the titles of exhibits, *Sight Unseen*, and the documentary *Dark Light*. Indeed, the exhibitionary complex of blind photography attempts to make this juxtaposition known to viewers, each in a different context.

Each photograph exists in its own context, which, according to Kobena Mercer and Derrida, means that the significance of the photo also changes. Because every audience is difference, and every viewer is different, and even the same viewer is different in different moments, every statement, including a photograph “cannot possibly have an identical meaning in each instance, because, while it retains the same denotative sense, the racial and gendered identity of the speaker inevitable “makes a difference” to the connotative value of the utterance, which thus takes on a qualitatively different “sound” in each instance.”¹¹⁰ Mercer explains in his essay that “posing the problem of ambiguity and undecidability in this way not only underlines the role of the reader; it also draws attention to the important, and equally undecidable, role of context in determining the range of different readings that can be produced from the same text.”¹¹¹ Mercer’s analysis is applied to the interpretation of Robert Mapplethorpe’s photography, in the form of two essays, with a “partial revision” of thought in the second essay.¹¹² However, the same effect of context on meaning applies to all photographs and images.

Each of the photographs taken by the blind photographers demonstrates the relationship between different binaries like presence and absence, blindness and sight, but they also provide the context for deconstructing them. The photographs not only provide facts and truth about the contexts in the mark and the trace, they also perform in J.L. Austin's conception of speech acts, and as performatives, create an environment in which we can deconstruct what it means to see, and what the relationships mean between binary terms.

Derrida notes that "What is re-markable about the mark includes the margin within the mark. The line delineating the margin can therefore never be determined rigorously, it is never pure and simple. The mark is re-markable in that it 'is' also its margin"¹¹³ The photographs are re-inscribed, re-iterated, and re-marked in different places, each time in their particular context remarkable. Tied together in each image is not a separation of sight and blindness, visible and invisible, presence and absence, but instead each are inseparable within the image. Both what is present and what is absent in an image are and must be intimately connected. You cannot know what is present without knowing what is absent.

Derrida explains the connection between presence and absence through his idea of the trace. He explains in detail in an interview with Jean-Louis Houdebine and Guy Scarbetta that:

...no element can function as a sign without referring to another element which itself is not simply present. This interweaving results in each "element"—phoneme or grapheme—being constituted on the basis of the trace within it of the other elements of the chain or system. This interweaving, this textile, is the text produced only in the transformation of another text. Nothing, neither among the elements nor within the system, is anywhere ever simply present or absent. There are only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces.¹¹⁴

A trace is tied to both material space and exists through time, and thus, must be defined by the places in which it is not, both in time and space. The idea of the trace, helps to make sense of the

relationship between presence and absence in the photographs from their creation to their viewing.

With presence and absence, where there are traces of what was there, the relationship is always interconnected. The relationship is never simple however, because the type of text that the photograph is, it can never simply say something. Instead, whatever the message of the photograph, it has a complicated relationship with boundaries and borders, and the types of contexts in which it was viewed and created. For each of the blind photographs, the context of the creation is tied to the photographer, and the photographer's relationship to sight, vision, and blindness. Each viewer's interaction with the photograph will be different however, including the distinction of the type of utterance the photograph makes.

John Austin makes the distinction between the constative utterance, which is a descriptive utterance, and the performative utterance, which is an utterance that *does* something. For example, in a marriage, the words, "I do" are the action of the marriage, and when a person says, "I bet you," the action done is in fact, the words themselves.¹¹⁵ In his essay, "Signature, Event, Context," Derrida takes up conversation with the idea with the performative utterance, all speech is citational and can be quoted.

Derrida's response to speech act theorists notes that "[t]he performative is a "communication" which is not limited strictly to the transference of a semantic content that is already constituted and dominated by an orientation toward truth."¹¹⁶ Derrida further argues that *différance* is "the irreducible absence of intention or attendance to the performative utterance, the most "event-ridden" utterance there is,"¹¹⁷ sealing his claim that the performative utterance need not have intention. As he claims that a performative utterance could be iterable, it would thus be

subject to changing contexts. A statement that has truth value could be performative to one person, and not to another, “two speech acts in a single utterance.”¹¹⁸

Photographs taken by blind photographers can both tell us something that is true or false, and act to change something and may do one or the other or both simultaneously which Derrida claims depends on the context of the utterance.¹¹⁹

Each time a photograph is seen, or experienced again by another person, it is iterated again, Derrida’s term for its ability to be repeated in different contexts, in the absence of the author.¹²⁰ Derrida defines iterability as “the possibility of repeating and thus of identifying the marks implicit in every code, making it into a network [*une grille*] that is communicable, transmittable, decipherable, iterable for a third, and thus for every possible user in general.”¹²¹ The same photograph can be reprinted, reframed, or reprojected in any number of ways or in any number of places, leaving the same implicit mark, or trace, identifiable to any possible user or viewer.

Each of the photographs taken by the blind photographers works in different ways, and each photograph will read differently in each context. For example, Pete Eckert’s photograph “Electroman” is a vivid long exposure capture of a figure surrounded by light. The light is made of different forms, and comes from different sources. However, while Pete created the image, he never physically saw the light, or the photograph. The image exists in his mind, transposed onto the physicality of the photograph, and yet, both the image and the photograph are visual in nature. W.J.T. Mitchell makes the distinction that an image is different than a picture in that “a picture refers to the entire situation in which an image has made its appearance.”¹²² He elaborates further that “you can hang a picture, but you cannot hang an image”¹²³ One type of visual is seen,

the other is not; one is visible, the other invisible. Yet, the picture cannot exist without the image. The visible is dependent upon that which is not always visible.

Photographs by blind photographers then, acting in multiple contexts, function in a multiplicity of ways, both constative and performative. As constative utterances, they inform truths, or facts, like the blindness of the photographer (dependent upon the contexts in which they are displayed – but they are consistently connected to the blindness of the artist) and the subject matter of the work. The photographs also perform, challenging an audience to reconsider notions of sight, vision, blindness, and perception. For example, Pete Eckert's *Electroman*, recognizable to its audience as such, reminds the viewer of Eckert's blindness because it is visually connected with its creator. It also performs, challenging its audience to think about the process involved with the photograph, the light the viewer sees that is never seen by Eckert, the artist. Likewise, Bruce Hall's photographs of his autistic sons and underwater explorations, or Henry Butler's snapshots declare a truth about their creators as they are tied to them, but move beyond that as well, creating a new space between blindness and sight for viewers to enter.

So each of the photographs is unremarkable – we understand how a photograph works, and the fact that someone who is blind can take one should not be surprising. However, the photographs are also remarkable in how they allow us to deconstruct what sight and vision are, and what it is to see, or to perceive the world.

What Is In the Image?

Sight and vision are difficult terms to work with, as they are utilized in a fluid manner. Primarily, when the word sight is used in literature surrounding blind photography, it refers to the physicality of sight, the biological ability to see through your eyes.¹²⁴ Vision is more often

used to refer to visualizing, or the nature of being a visual person – a more mental, perceptual state. However, there is crossover between the use of the two terms, and sometimes “to see” does not refer to anything having to do with the eyes, and terminology like “visually impaired” or “tunnel vision” refer to biological irregularities in the functions of the eye.¹²⁵

Blindness, particularly in its physically understood sense, is often described as a sort of marginality. As Georgia Kleege explains, “the average blind person knows much more about what it means to be sighted than the average sighted person knows about what it means to be blind. The blind grow up, attend school, and lead adult lives among sighted people. The language that we speak, the literature we that we read, the architecture that we inhabit, were all designed by and for the sighted.”¹²⁶ Even in this situation, “the sighted” are separated from “the blind” in the language used to describe them. As groups, they are constituted by the language that describes the ability of their eyes to function “normally.” Maurice Charland notes that for a group of people to be constituted, two things must happen. They “must be successfully interpellated,” or hailed, and they must also act freely to embody their constituted subject position.¹²⁷ For “the blind” to be constituted, they must first recognize themselves in the term, and then embrace the term as a part of who they are to enact their identities. However, as Kenneth Burke notes, inherent in identification is division: “To begin with ‘identification’ is, by the same token, though roundabout, to confront the implications of *division*.”¹²⁸ By addressing a group of people who are blind, or who are sighted, it necessarily divides and separates those who are not included in that term.

Even more confusing, from time to time, both “sight” and “vision” are often described along with the biological process of seeing, and often both terms are used to describe the mental process of visualization.¹²⁹ However, neither term accounts for the dichotomy between “the

blind” and “the sighted.”¹³⁰ Despite this, or perhaps because of it, people who are blind, and people who are sighted are always placed in separate linguistic categories. This occurs even though there are multiplicities of terms to refer to both blindness and sight. Blindness and sight, perhaps should be understood as more of a spectrum. Blindness is described by terms ranging from totally and completely to permanently, incurably blind, congenitally blind, legally blind, nearly blind, night blind, to acute, and lifelong.¹³¹ Sight as well has a spectrum like normal, and limited. Vision has a spectrum of perfect, good, normal, and limited, to visually impaired. However, even with all of these variations, there is still a strong distinction between “the blind” and “the sighted.” Separate from sight in most cases, physical blindness is situated as a binary to sight. There is a “sighted world” as well as a “world of the blind.” This binary contributes to the marginalization of blindness that Kleege describes.

So this dichotomy between sight and blindness is difficult, as clearly the terms are not as simple as “able to see” and “not able to see.” Blind photography in a way bridges that binary, deconstructing what it means to see, and what it is to have vision. Because the camera stands in as a sort of artificial eye, blind photography is a site where what is seen, and what is perceived is broken down and reconstructed in new and different ways as visuals can be perceived through sound, touch, and memory, and implemented in ways that people experiencing the visual through sight can perceive as well. Merry Foresta illustrates this change as she notes:

Sight, vision, focus, view: all the words we attach to the photography seem challenged by the idea that a photographer might use more than his or her eye to decide on the picture. Images by photographers who are blind expose us to another aspect of photography: photography led by the imagination, sentiment, and indeed, all the senses.¹³²

Complicating the way that sight and vision are understood in terms of themselves, and in relation to other aspects of the visual will develop a fuller understanding the way we perceive things, even for those in the “sighted world”.

Seeing Derrida, Again

In *Memoirs of the Blind*, Derrida undertakes a discussion between a blind individual and a curious interlocutor. The blind speaker explains to the other individual several hypotheses about sight, or what it means to see. One hypothesis is an abocular hypothesis in which “drawing is blind, if not the draftsman or draftswoman.”¹³³ In this situation, drawing, like writing or photography, all mediums that involve a trace, “would have something to do with blindness, would in some way regard blindness.”¹³⁴ A second hypothesis notes that “a drawing of the blind is a drawing of the blind. Double genitive.”¹³⁵ The speaker continues to deconstruct blindness and claim that language is blind, because

the word, the vocable, is heard and understood, the sonorous phenomenon remaining invisible as such. Taking up time rather than space in us, it is addressed not only from the blind to the blind, like a code for the nonseeing, but speaks to us, in truth, all the time of the blindness that constitutes it. Language is spoken, it speaks to itself, which is to say, *from/of blindness*. It always speaks to us *from/of the blindness* that constitutes it.¹³⁶

While I argued above that blind photography inhabited the unique features of writing that are described in the trace, this statement implies that what is closer to the mark is not that blind photography is a kind of writing, but that all writing is a kind of blind photography, always in that remarkable and unremarkable state of deferring context and relying upon it for meaning. Indeed, writing, and language itself, is given to us as a blind photograph, offered from a source that cannot see what we witness, even as we use its vision to see. This also expands what blindness might be understood as. The blind speaker moves through different works of art to discuss blindness, in both its biological and perceptive states. The blind individual concludes that in weeping, blind eyes have sight. While “two eyes can always become dissociated from the point of view of the view, of sight ... it is the ‘whole eye,’ the whole of the eye that weeps. It is

impossible to weep with a single eye when one has two.”¹³⁷ Tears, then, are a performative action of the eyes.

This confusion makes itself felt in Kenneth Burke’s work also, as he claims that “a ‘negative image’ would be a contradiction in terms.”¹³⁸ Referring to the presence/absence in a photograph, he comments that “even a photographic ‘negative’ is ‘positive,’ so far as its effect upon the retina of the eye is concerned.”¹³⁹ However, he continues to explain that there is a negativity associated with our ideas of the place of the image. The negativity, or absence, in the image comes from its relationship to presence and positivity; only when we see what is there can we see what is not.

What can we say of this taking of the absence or negativity and bringing it to presence? What more is made visible with the knowledge that language is itself like blind photography? Nothing less than the nature of perception itself. It is worth remembering here that the root of perception, in Latin perception, is “to seize.” Is this seizure of perception not itself described as the taking of absence and negativity and making it present in the photograph? Can we not say that perception, like the unremarkable photograph made remarkable by its placement as a blind photograph, is always a seizure of blindness to vision?

In order to engage these questions, I turn to Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Sight and blindness are complicated binaries, but they are not the only binaries at work in blind photography. As Douglas McCulloh noted, every photographic choice and framing creates another sort of blindness – even while accentuating particular visuals. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty notes

every visible is invisible, that perception is imperception, that consciousness has a “*punctum caecum*,” that to see is always to see more than one sees—this must not be understood in the sense of a *contradiction*—it must not be imagined that I add to the visible...a nonvisible—One has to understand that it is visibility itself that involves a nonvisibility.¹⁴⁰

Perception includes both the visible and the invisible. However, both exist together in a complementary, not contradictory state. Merleau-Ponty continues to state that “the proper essence [*le proper*] of the visible is to have a layer [*doublure*] of invisibility in the strict sense, which it makes present as a certain absence.”¹⁴¹ Under the visibility of the photographs, and under the visibility of all of visuality, is invisibility. Rather than thinking of the nature of these concepts as diametrically opposed, instead, it is more productive, albeit more complicated, to think of them as intrinsically tied together, inexorably linked. To think of it in other language, the essence of sight is to have a certain blindness, and the essence of blindness is to have a certain sight. For example, in the phenomenon of change or inattention blindness, something that occurs in the line of sight remains blind to perception, while in the situation of the blind photographers, their lack of physical eyesight gives them vision and ways to otherwise visualize the world around them. Perception then, is not so much a mental process as a contextual process similar to that which occurs in the process of meaning. We, as perceivers, creates our perceptions out of the presences and absences around us, in an act akin to meaning-making. The blindnesses and visibilities are not situated at far ends of a spectrum, but instead are intertwined with each other in the perceptive process, each influencing and making up the other.

Upon Seeing Blindness

Within the discussion of the photographs taken by the blind photographers, there are clear linguistic binaries at play; primarily sight/blindness and presence/absence. These binaries, often thought to be oppositional, are themselves the conditions of possibility of perception. Photographers who are blind interact with the visual, and with images. So while perhaps the photographers cannot see the pictures, they can see the images. W.J.T. Mitchell differentiates

between a picture and an image by explaining that a picture belongs as a subset of image. “You can hang a picture, but you cannot hang an image.”¹⁴² The perceptual distinctions include the use of other senses to interact with the visual, as well as working from a memory image.

If working with binaries like blindness and sight is inadequate, what does that mean for the way that we understand perception? Roland Barthes asks “how can we look without seeing? One might say that the Photograph separates attention from perception, and yields up only the former, even if it is impossible without the latter”¹⁴³ The temptation with the photograph is to have attention in the direction of the photograph, but not any actual perception of the photograph or its meaning. This is to look without seeing – similar to listening without hearing. There is a biological process that may occur, and yet, the biological process does not suffice. Perception is a process that occurs on a visual level, but not necessarily a biologically visual level; the two are not mutually exclusive.

When studying images and pictures, it is important to understand that the visual is complicated, and when we as critics and scholars conceive of “normal vision” or a type of emmetropia in our scholarship, we call for a narrowing of our understanding of the visual field. Vision is not normal. Vision, and visibility exist in states of change and difference that vary from person to person. Biological sight varies to extreme degrees between “perfect” vision and “total” blindness, and perceptual vision varies as well. Studying the visual as a communicative and visual process cannot rely on assuming a solid context, a particular creator or type of creator, or a determinate audience with a particular perceptual ability. Vision and perception are more complicated, and contextual.

CHAPTER 3

THE VISION MYTH: HOW VISION IS CONSTRUCTED THROUGH LASIK SURGERY ADVERTISING

How does the way you see change what you know? What is the connection between the choice (or non-choice) to undergo laser vision correction and the way individuals understand the world? Each of these questions holds important implications for vision and perception. While much can be learned about vision from blindness and blind photography, much also can be learned about vision from the steps individuals, as well as society, takes to improve it, both biologically and perceptually.

A refractive error is the name for deviation from emmetropia, or normal vision. When an eye processes light at a different place and distance, it is categorized by what sort of refractive error it belongs to. Glazer and Azar, in their textbook chapter “Refractive Errors and Their Treatment” explain that “four major types of naturally occurring ametropias, or refractive errors, have been described: myopia [nearsightedness], hyperopia [farsightedness], astigmatism [variations in curvature], and presbyopia [age related vision loss].”¹⁴⁴ These errors stand in contrast to emmetropia, “when the cornea, lens, and length of the eye combine and produce no refractive errors”¹⁴⁵ These refractive errors, along with the understanding of “normal vision” or emmetropia, which is essentially seen as vision free from error, while biological, also set up perceptual parallels.

As noted in the first chapter, James Elkins addresses parallels to the three main refractive errors that can be addressed by LASIK (Laser in situ keratomileusis) surgery when he makes the correlation that:

some people also *think* as if they were nearsighted or farsighted: they comprehend only the most immediate problems or the most distant abstractions, and that they remain oblivious to the bulk of the world. Astigmatism and other aberrations are also analogues

of problems people have seeing things correctly—some people distort everything they think about, like the idiosyncratic flaws in an astigmatic’s eye.¹⁴⁶

These deviations from the medically prescribed normal vision (emmetropia), are the source of an entire industry of vision correction, through the use of lenses and lasers.

Laser eye surgery is a popular option for people who want to change the way that they see. Patti Neighmond of NPR reports that as of January 2010, “more than 17 million people worldwide have had LASIK eye surgery in hopes of relegating glasses and contacts to the waste bin. And each year, an estimated 700,000 Americans opt for the procedure.”¹⁴⁷ LASIK, and other laser corrective surgeries, comprise the largest evolution in vision with the ability to change a person’s biological vision, potentially eliminating the need for glasses or contact lenses to see.

The commonplace, ubiquitous nature of LASIK surgery culturally redefines vision—what it means to see, and even further, what it means to perceive. Sight and vision are constructed as things that can be biologically or mechanically engineered—that if you don’t have sight naturally you can create it as a function of yourself. This constructive process is often convoluted with ideas of what it means “to see” that go further than being able to read text around you, but instead relate to an ability to perceive and experience life itself. Perception then, is constituted by sight, and sight is constituted by social ideas surrounding what it means to see, an idea that is often created and perpetuated in advertisements for laser eye surgery.

These connections between biological sight and perceptual vision are important through much of the analysis of the improvement of sight. This chapter examines the rhetorical nature of improving sight; how I argue that there exists, along side Naomi Wolf’s beauty myth, a vision myth, that 20/20 biological sight is necessary for success. This myth pervades culture through advertising, and thus, this chapter examines some of the advertising utilized by LASIK surgery

clinics and providers before looking at the implications of the push for surgical vision enhancement through LASIK.

Myths

Naomi Wolf claims there is a pervasive myth told to men and women about how women need to look, called “the Beauty Myth.” She explains that “the beauty myth tells a story: The quality called ‘beauty’ objectively and universally exists.”¹⁴⁸ This myth makes women think they need to consume beauty products in order to become beautiful, so that they can be acceptable as people and as productive members of society.

Part of the beauty myth is the “professional beauty qualification,” or PBQ as Wolf calls it, which pressures women into looking a certain way. For women, expensive clothing, makeup, accessories, skincare, and in some cases even plastic surgery becomes necessary to keep your job. The necessity of an optional surgery, and the pressure to get the surgery in order to be acceptable is part of the reason why the beauty myth is a problem.

Wolf makes a point to clarify that “the beauty myth is not, ultimately, about appearance or dieting or surgery or cosmetics [...] no one who is responsible for the myths of femininity in every generation really cares about the symptoms at all.”¹⁴⁹ What the beauty myth is about is the lack of choice—the pressure that women need to look a certain way, not because they want to, but because they have to. Because the myth is not really about the symptoms, Wolf claims that “the questions to ask are not about women’s faces and bodies but about the power relations of the situation.”¹⁵⁰ The power dynamics at play coerce certain viewpoints, that women should look a particular way, both culturally and economically.

The beauty myth is not the only myth working in society. There is a new sort of myth that

is saturating society: the vision myth. The vision myth claims that it is important for an individual's success and enjoyment of life that they see with 20/20 vision or better – without contacts or glasses. The vision myth constructs vision as incomplete without correction. In order to see better, more accurately, and even more perceptively, consumers need to purchase a product, in this case laser surgery. Perfect or better than perfect vision is pressured into the norm, as demonstrated by the “more than 17 million people worldwide have had LASIK eye surgery in hopes of relegating glasses and contacts to the waste bin.”¹⁵¹ That in conjunction with the nearly three-fourths of a million people in America who choose to get laser vision correction every year demonstrates a remarkable shift in the norm; surgery to improve vision is an often chosen solution for eye care.

The vision myth both takes from and extends the beauty myth. The vision myth draws on the idea that laser surgery will make an individual more attractive, as well as extending “the self-interested promotion of ideals”¹⁵² not only to how a person is viewed, but how a person views. Like the beauty myth, it is grounded in some legitimacy, which makes it seem plausible—acceptable even. Just as there are some professions where appearance is very important, there are also professions where good vision is important, like fighter pilots or surgeons. Also, just as Naomi Wolf does not make the argument that beauty is bad or that basic concern for appearance should not be taken in any profession, I am not making the case that corrective vision is inherently a bad thing, or that individuals should not take care that they can see appropriately for the tasks which they undertake. There is however, a problem when vision becomes a commodity to buy and sell, and perception, linked to vision, becomes consumable.

As in many cases plastic surgery, as an optional procedure, may not be the best option for every individual, neither may elective surgical vision correction. However, the marketing of that

optional and elective procedure most often does not reflect that. Advertising for LASIK procedures attempts to gather as broad an audience as possible, portraying LASIK as the right option to anyone and everyone with less than 20/20 vision without glasses or contacts.

Advertising LASIK

The advertising for laser vision correction reflects much of the myth that is pervasive in society about how important naturally correct vision is to success, enjoyment, acceptance, freedom, and power. Sturken and Cartwright explain that “advertising often presents an image of things to be desired, people to be envied, and life as it ‘should be.’ As such it necessarily presents social values and ideologies about what the ‘good life’ is.”¹⁵³ John Berger explains that publicity or advertising “proposes to each of us that we transform ourselves, or our lives, by buying something more.”¹⁵⁴ In advertising LASIK, as clinics attempt to sell sight and vision, they also commodify perception as something that can be bought as well. While there are numerous examples of LASIK advertisements, only a few exemplars will be discussed here.

In one advertisement sent to recipients by mail there is the inscription “You’ve waited long enough. You deserve LASIK!”¹⁵⁵ The advertisement makes it seem as if LASIK is something not only that you need for that you deserve, it is something that you have earned, even though you have to pay substantial amounts of money for this elective surgery that could cause damage to your eyes. John Berger notes that “Capitalism survives by forcing the majority, whom it exploits, to define their own interests as narrowly as possible. This was once achieved by extensive deprivation. Today in developed countries it is being achieved by imposing a false standard of what is and what is not desirable.”¹⁵⁶ By noting that LASIK is something that the consumer deserves, the advertisement bypasses that it is something that the consumer wants, and

should want. This want pays no concern to what may be for the actual benefit for the consumer, but rather, what benefits the system of capitalism. As a function of the vision myth, this advertisement works to make it culturally normative that LASIK is something that everyone deserves, and further, LASIK is something that everyone should get.

Another ad bears the inscription “UPGRADE your vision,” with three different images.¹⁵⁷ The first image shows an outdated television set with a caption: “Before Flat Screens.” A second image shows a mix tape with the caption: “Before MP3s.” The third image has a pair of eyeglasses with the caption: “Before Laser Vision Correction.”¹⁵⁸ The advertisement is comparing your eyes to outdated television set and a tape as if laser surgery were comparable to buying an HDTV or an iPod. Text on the LASIK clinic site where the banner advertisement is found reads: “Eyeglasses were first invented in the Middle ages alongside inventions like the spinning wheel and the hourglass. Meanwhile, contact lenses have been a daily nuisance for people for over a hundred years. Step into the 21st century, and upgrade your vision with laser vision correction.”¹⁵⁹ This ad connects to the technological drive of the modern and post-modern world—encouraging people to keep up, including biological functions in the group of things to be technologically improved. Within the vision myth, this advertisement separates people into parts to be upgraded as needed.

Keeping with the theme of the technological improvement, an advertisement for the Laser Surgery Clinic in the Philippines features an individual who is bird-watching, but instead of using binoculars, the individual looks through their hands.¹⁶⁰ The birdwatcher does not need to use technology like binoculars—they are the technology. Instead of using binoculars, the birdwatcher in the image cups their hands to their eyes, as if their eyes themselves are binoculars. Again, the individual becomes less a whole person and more biological parts to be upgraded and

replaced as the technology becomes available. All of these parts must be purchased and the labor must be paid for.

Several LASIK advertisements play on the idea that people you look up to are doing it, like superheroes or athletes. One ad in Spanish shows two contrasting images of Clark Kent and Superman. Clark Kent wears eyeglasses and Superman does not. The caption in Spanish shows before and after LASIK as if LASIK can turn you into Superman and LASIK gives you superpowers, or super-human powers. In the vision myth, it is important that everyone reaches emmetropia—or normal vision. However, since emmetropia is actually 20/20 vision, this is not naturally attainable for everyone. Within the vision myth, LASIK provides the means for individuals to overcome their natural selves, their natural sight, and become superhuman—with super sight.

A LASIK advertisement aimed at golfers features a testimonial from Tiger Woods who received a LASIK surgery in 1999. Tiger Woods tells golfers and anyone looking for LASIK that he knows what it is like to have bad vision and what it is like to have good vision – after LASIK. He urges anyone reading to “trust me”¹⁶¹ that having LASIK surgery makes all of the difference, and “life is much better”¹⁶² after LASIK. Because Tiger is a pro golfer, a public figure, and someone that people generally trust when it comes to having authority in the sports world, he has credibility when influencing people to think about LASIK surgery. Other advertisements feature specific celebrities or refer in general to the fact that athletes and celebrities and anybody who really values their eyes would clearly choose LASIK as the better option for their eyes. The vision myth holds celebrities up as examples to emulate, as if getting LASIK would make you a better gold player like Tiger Woods.

Other advertisements make the claim that laser vision correction has an element of freedom. Glasses and contacts hold you captive, set yourself and your life free by getting LASIK. One such advertisement shows an image of a man with handcuffs over his eyes instead of eyeglasses includes the caption “Unrestrained Vision” with the name of the Laser Correction Center attached to a handcuff key.¹⁶³ The message of the ad notes that seeing with eyeglasses is holding you down, keeping you from being able to see the world you are supposed to see. You are supposed to see the world in a certain way and you need to pay money to the economic capitalistic system to be able to see and perceive the world in the correct way. Your glasses however are not allowing that to happen and you need to take correct and appropriate measures to make your self able to see the world the way you were supposed to.

Utilizing the iconic “Rosie the Riveter” war poster, another LASIK advertisement, this time an internet banner ad, encourages individuals, not that “We Can Do It!” but to “Schedule a Free LASIK Exam.”¹⁶⁴ Getting laser vision corrective surgery is the new thing to do to improve your self. It is the important thing to do for your rights. The advertisement claims within the myth that this is something you can do to set yourself free. Of course, you need to pay money to do it, it could cause you harm, and it's an unproven potentially ineffective long-term solution, but this will set you free. “We can do this!” the ad calls out to viewers, hailing them into the vision myth. Sharp and Wade make the claim that the original Rosie poster wasn’t used in a feminist context at all, and “ironically, the iconic image that we now imagine as an early example of girl-power marketing served not to empower women to leave the domestic sphere and join the paid workforce, but to contain labor unrest and discourage the growth of the labor movement.”¹⁶⁵ However, this alternative understanding of control works within the understanding of the LASIK industry as well. LASIK advertising works on the population to convince them that an optional

surgery is necessary. Economically, an expense that may not otherwise be incurred is developed as a privilege to spend, and a status to achieve.

An ad for the Key Whitman Eye Center reads, “Improved vision is a work of art.”¹⁶⁶ This slogan connects people with the idea that the actual ability to see clearly in the biological sense is what art is made of, not the mental state of being able to understand or perceive the world around you. Implications are both that the mechanized surgery is a work of artistry, and that changes in your sight allow for changes in your perception—the world you see after LASIK will be more beautiful, creative, and artful.

Not only are individual LASIK ads telling about the nature of the laser surgery industry; groups of advertisements are as well. Branding is important because there are implications for how both the function of sight and the idiographs connected to it can be connected to a specific place, or logo, and become commodities in a consumer society. In particular, the Millennium Laser Eye Centers in Florida have have created advertising campaigns – not just solo advertisements – to create their image and their brand.

One ad by Millennium Laser Eye Centers has a background image of diamonds with the caption “Eyes are forever”¹⁶⁷ playing on diamond mogul De Beers’ slogan that “Diamonds are forever.”¹⁶⁸ The De Beers slogan was “the number one rated advertising slogan of the 20th century.”¹⁶⁹ The Millennium ad was featured in a magazine called *Ocean Drive*, which claims to be “the quintessential fashion and lifestyle magazine for South Florida.”¹⁷⁰ This combination of factors places laser surgery on the same social level as owning diamonds. Both having LASIK surgery and owning diamonds are socially constructed concepts of privilege and higher social position, related to the expense required to attain the status. For those who can achieve this,

societal approval will ensue, and the receiver of sight will be the envy of all those who are still lacking.

Another Millennium Eye Center advertisement features the back of a bride in a wedding dress as she looks out of a window. The text reads, “He’s never done a manicure. He’s never designed a dress. He’s never done an ‘up-do.’ But he’s made countless brides even more beautiful.”¹⁷¹ Millennium published this ad in the Bridal section of the yellow pages.¹⁷² Sturken and Cartwright expound on Michel Foucault’s idea of docile bodies, “bodies that are socially trained, regulated, and managed by cultural norms. Consumers are incited by ads to seek individuality by conforming to particular standards of beauty ... We are addressed as if we can choose our bodies and reshape them into new forms and sizes.”¹⁷³ In this advertisement, it is important to look a particular way, and if surgical reshaping is necessary to attain these standards, then it is wise and practical to go forward with the procedure.

A third Millennium Eye Center advertisement, “Vision = success”¹⁷⁴ is written under the eyes of a sports figure in a close up shot of his face as a stadium glimmers in the reflection in his eyes; because seeing (biologically) equals success. The vision myth condones that individuals are supposed to get laser surgery in order that they can see in order that they can be successful. This ad is printed in the Miami Dolphins program.¹⁷⁵

Another sports related advertisement shows a whizzing hockey puck with the text “you can’t stop what you can’t see.”¹⁷⁶ This advertisement ties athleticism and well known sports stars to LASIK surgery, and in turn to sight itself. To emulate the sports icons, and thus be more athletic, an individual needs LASIK. Getting LASIK will make you more athletic, and better at sports. You cannot play sports well if you cannot see, and according to the vision myth, you cannot see as well with glasses or contacts as you could with LASIK.

A holiday print ad for a magazine urges viewers to “give the gift of sight” while a billboard of the same campaign notes laser surgery is “the best gift you can give this holiday season. Clearly.”¹⁷⁷ While this may indeed be a touching sentiment, it furthers the idea that vision without laser corrective surgery is incomplete. It is typical to give a gift to a person that they don’t already have, thus prompting the question “what to get for the person who has everything?” If LASIK is the gift of sight, there is some level of assumption that there was not sight, or incomplete sight before LASIK.

A billboard ad for Millennium shows three images: one female in glasses with the subtext “Good,” one female putting in contacts with the subtext “Better,” and one female, next to the Millennium logo peering at the viewer with the subtext of “Best.”¹⁷⁸ This advertisement connects to the idea of the technical drive as technology moves from older to newer, and correspondingly, gets better, not with age, but with novelty.

Another Millennium billboard makes a major slip in whether they are selling sight or perception as it shows part of a woman’s face with the text “see what the new year brings” with the center’s logo on the side.¹⁷⁹ By making a phrase that typically refers to perception stand in for literal sight, it becomes convoluted which one is being sold with the surgery. Both sight and perception are being commodified as sellable products.

In 1992 a commercial aired for Gatorade featuring Michael Jordan with the theme “Be Like Mike,” urging viewers to drink Gatorade in order to accomplish this, complete with a catchy theme song. Now, however, sports figures and celebrities are being used to endorse expensive optional surgical procedures like LASIK, where the slogan, instead of “Be Like Mike,” becomes “See Like Mike.” Just as athleticism was commodified and sold, so now is sight, and in turn, perception.

Sight and perception are commodified in the advertisements through several different appeals, primarily novelty, beauty and status, and biological ability. Novelty appeals like upgrading vision from older technology to newer technology, and newer is best play on a system of values that undermines anything that could be considered “outdated.” If newer sight is better, the commodification follows that perhaps we can judge the accuracy of perception on how new it is. Beauty and status appeals like looking good as a bride, or having the “right” look (no lenses) creates a status level that places LASIK at the top. Higher status and more beauty is better, which is a dangerous playing field for perception. Appeals to biological ability, or athleticism, call out to viewers that LASIK will make you more able-bodied, more capable of performing athletic tasks, and thus being successful. Perception commodified in this manner seems to be “more accurate” or “more correct” the stronger it is, or the more successful it is. If a perception is widespread, or is particularly poignant, it could be commodified as better than other perceptions, that are perhaps not so widespread.

Perception

The vision myth, and the marketing of the vision myth are linked to perception. However, biological vision and perception are not directly connected. The way surgical standardization of vision has become a pressure in society (and it is an “elective” surgery), compares to a narrowing of the way that we perceive the world around us occurs as well. Yet, the way the world appears through a person’s eyes is not necessarily the way that person does or should perceive the world. Jacques Derrida notes in *Memoirs of the Blind* that within the framework of “the hypothesis of sight [...] one generally disassociates conjecture from perception. One even opposes hypothesis to intuition, to the immediacy of the ‘I see’ (video, intueor), ‘I look at’ (aspicio), I ‘have an eye

on' [je mire], I am astonished to see, I admire [...] and so right here, and this is a paradigm.”¹⁸⁰

This paradigm notes the cultural and often linguistic connection and confusion between vision and perception. While vision can play a role in perception, the two terms are not synonymous.

Vision, even 20/20 or better vision, does not equal perfect perception. Psychologists and biologists research a phenomenon called change blindness, which is essentially the concept that no matter how acute an individual's vision may be, they are incapable of processing all of the details around them. There is debate about how the brain processes that information, whether it creates an illusion of what the eye cannot see, or whether the eye merely selects some details over others, but there is general agreement that change blindness exists.¹⁸¹

Daniel Simons and Christopher Chabris created an interesting test of change blindness and perception in an online video that features two teams of players: one team wearing white shirts, and one team wearing black shirts. Viewers are asked to count how many times the players wearing white shirts pass a basketball back and forth, as the team wearing black shirts passes a basketball as well. All of the players are moving around as they pass the basketballs. As the viewer counts, someone dressed in a gorilla suit walks into the frame of the video shot, stands for a moment in the middle of all of the players, looks at the camera, does a chest thump, and then walks out of the frame. At the end of the clip, the video asks viewers how many times the basketball was passed. After the video gives the correct answer, the video then asks, “But did you see the gorilla?!”¹⁸² Many people viewing the video for the first time do not see the gorilla suit, even though it is clearly present. The video ends by rewinding and showing the clip again to show that the gorilla was, indeed, in the clip.

The creators of the video, after utilizing it to study inattention blindness, come to the conclusion that “in studies of inattention blindness, when observers are attending to another

object or event, they are less likely to notice the unexpected event. In studies of change detection, people are better able to report changes to attended than unattended objects.”¹⁸³

Daniel Simons explains about his studies in change blindness that

by using different methods (e.g. saccades, flashed blank screens, mudsplashes, movie cuts, etc.) to obscure the motion transient caused by the change, these studies show that visual details, even those for naturalistic displays, are not preserved following a disruption to the local transient. [...] The inability to detect changes to such images suggests that detailed visual representations do not provide the basis for integration across views, even for complex, naturalistic stimuli.¹⁸⁴

So being able to see a scene does not mean one is able to perceive the scene. There are clear situations where sight and perception do not occur at the same time. Change blindness demonstrates how something may fall in the field of vision, but somehow remains unperceived by viewers.

There is a danger in advertising, marketing, and selling vision. The commodification of vision sets forth the risk of commodifying perception. If you can buy emmetropia, or normal, appropriate vision, you risk thinking you can buy a “correct” understanding of the world and its events. The distance between vision and perception is often a thin terminological line. LASIK advertising blurs these terminological lines in its attempt to market elective clinical surgery to a mass public.

Conclusion

As demonstrated, vision and perception should not be considered synonymous. So then, in selling sight, it is not accurate to be selling perception as well. However, as sight is commodified to be sold, perception gets thrown into the mix, like a 2-for-1 deal, which also happens with LASIK.

With pressure to obtain a surgical type of “natural” sight, in order to correct some sort of imperfection, some sight that is not right, how does that correlate to perception? Much of the way in which we perceive the world is channeled in specific ways, and there are pressures to see the world in the correct or approved ways. Deviants who see things differently may be seen as having inappropriate or flawed views. This can already be seen in communication situations in which two sides disagree. The situation is understood to have a correct view and an incorrect view, and whoever’s view is incorrect or imperfect must be modified. This dichotomy is often unhealthy for both sides of the created binary.

Just as the pressure to correct imperfect vision surgically is problematic, so is the communicative nature of imperfect perception, as if one can understand how someone else perceives the social reality around them. Instead, it is important to begin to understand what factors go into perception, into sight, into vision, and how we may communicate with others despite perceptual differences. If those differences are discarded, or ignored in the search for better accuracy, perception becomes aimed at a single point, instead of allowing perception to address a multiplicity of options, addressing differences in culture and ideology. Perception is and should be complicated, and should require consistent attention to viewpoints and positionalities. Instead of a simple outpatient procedure with relatively quick recovery time, perception should not reach a point of stagnation, where it is the best it can be and no longer needs to be attended to. Instead, perception requires change and modification as information interacts in different and varying contexts.

CHAPTER 4

SUNDAY BRUNCH ON A SCANNER: WAYNE GONZALEZ AND THE CASE FOR PERCEPTION

This study has examined the constitution of perception through blind photography and the advertising surrounding LASIK surgery. While these case studies deal with different ends of the conceived spectrum of visuality (blindness and sight), each contributes to a more complicated understanding of perception. This chapter reviews the previous chapters, as well as introducing a concluding artifact to wrap up the discussion of perception.

While the thesis began with a discussion of Seurat, we will end with a modern artist who has a new method and take on Seurat's style of painting: Wayne Gonzales, a New Orleans artist whose art "consistently involves some form of mutation from the original image, whether it be cropping, altering, adding, eliminating, or zooming in."¹⁸⁵ Gonzales' artwork is a contemporary exploration of perception through form and color—similar to and still very different from the work of Seurat. Further, as Gonzales manipulates digital images, our understanding of perception in our increasingly technological world is addressed.

Where We Have Been

In the first chapter the topic of perception was introduced, with Seurat's *Sunday on La Grand Jatte* utilized as an artifact. *La Grand Jatte*, as an exemplar of pointillism, serves as an artifact of the constitution of perception in art. After discussing a need to examine perception from the position of visual rhetoric, the chapter reviews applicable literature on visuality and the pictorial turn before introducing the two case studies for this thesis: blind photography and LASIK advertising.

Importantly, this first chapter connects refractive errors in physical sight with correlations in perceptive understanding. Because “images and their descriptions partake of and produce ideological commitments, leading viewers to see things in accordance with scientific, political, and aesthetic values,”¹⁸⁶ Jordynn Jack argues that images are a kind of discourse that “will make certain things visible in particular ways, and other things unseeable, for example, and subjects will be produced and act within that field of vision.”¹⁸⁷ Being a discourse situates images as powerful, because “discourse produces the world as it understands it.”¹⁸⁸ Thus, as argued in the introduction, images, as discourses, produce the social world.

Problems in perception are also introduced, both biologically and metaphorically. Biological refractive errors like near and farsightedness occur when the eye is not in a state of emmetropia – or normal vision. Normal vision, however, is assumed to be 20/20, or perfect vision, when the eye is seeing correctly.

In chapter 2, the first case study, on blind photography, examined how blind photography was talked about, and how those conversations established a binary between sight and blindness. Three blind photographers works were utilized: Pete Eckert, Bruce Hall, and Henry Butler. This misleading binary between sight and blindness puts perception in an awkward place, as people who do not see through their eyes still experience and perceive the visual world, through varying ways. Utilizing Derrida as a theoretical base, this chapter determined that vision and perception were contextual, and belong more in line with meaning making than seeing things as they are *per se*.

Sight itself is revealed to be a Burkean terministic screen, where what you see determines how you see. As well, the binary between sight and blindness is complicated and broken down as each is determined to rely upon the other. Sight creates blindness, and blindness enables sight.

Chapter 3 shifts the focus to LASIK surgery and the advertising surrounding it, and connects how advertisements for the elective surgery construct biological sight as something that is important to have without the aid of outside lenses. This correlates in ways to the way beauty products are marketed to women through the beauty myth, except now, 20/20 or better vision is marketed to everyone as something necessary for success. The vision myth turns vision, and in turn, perception, into a product for consumption, something to be purchased—a consequence of capitalism.

Wayne Gonzalez

“They say that hindsight is 20/20, the argument being that with time, distance, and experience, circumstances become clearer and easier to understand”¹⁸⁹ claims Miranda Lash, curator of the Wayne Gonzales *Light to Dark/Dark to Light* exhibit at the New Orleans Museum of Art. Lash notes that Gonzales’s painting style, resembling a modern modification of pointillism, while requiring distance to interpret the always liminal space between representation and abstract found in his paintings, “is no *Sunday on Las Grand Jatte*. Rather, as we walk toward Gonzales’s paintings, the dissolving images elicit a variety of questions and uncertainties.”¹⁹⁰ Stepping back from the paintings allows patterns and meaning to emerge from shapes, spots, and strokes. Looking closer, the subject matter becomes increasingly lost in the stenciled details of the paint itself. Gonzales employs scanned photographs and “a succession of stencils” to create many of his paintings.¹⁹¹

In Seurat’s paintings, like *Sunday on La Grand Jatte*, “perception was not a matter of relatively passive reception of an image of an exterior world, but that the makeup and capacities of an observer contributed to the making of perception”.¹⁹² In Wayne Gonzalez

provides in his paintings “clues to a multiplicity of potential narratives and psychological tones, then leaves it to the viewers to fill in the dots.”¹⁹³ In the work of each artist, perception differs in the contexts where it is employed. One person’s perception may differ from the perception of another. Unlike the consumption model of vision, there is not one right way to understand the works, or a more correct, accurate perception of them. Instead, the context, and thus the meaning changes in the different contexts in which they are encountered. The problems created within the communicative nature of imperfect perception lead to rhetorical problems addressing and creating audiences who understand perception as something seen, and something to be bought.

The title of the exhibit (*Light to Dark/Dark to Light*) reflects “Gonzales’s interest in painting within specific color spectrums, creating compositions that appear to dissolve upon closer inspection.”¹⁹⁴ Darkness and light, or perhaps vision and blindness dissolve into each other in a middle ground distinct from either. Against more traditional painting techniques, rather than paint from memory or from direct personal experience,

Gonzales’s imagery is often drawn from images circulating in popular media: newspapers and magazines, as well as images pulled from the Internet. Breaking apart these images into components of light and shadow, Gonzales obscures the specific context of these images, and focuses instead on the subjects’ conceptual and political resonance as typologies and historical icons.¹⁹⁵

With the context obscured, the viewer is left to insert context, assume context, and interact with the ambiguity of the image.

Lash notes that “many of us think nothing of looking at hundreds of images a day on our television and computer screens. It seems only fitting that Wayne Gonzales employs painting, one of the oldest mediums in the Western tradition, as a means for re-examining the significance of this image explosion.”¹⁹⁶ This image explosion calls into question the relationship of vision, and further, perception, to technology and our changing mediated experiences with the world.

Re-examining this proliferation of images is indeed important, but even more important is the role that perception plays. Peter de Bolla explains that “the science which sets out to explain light, and how light falls upon the retinal surfaces of vision, neglects the cultural dimension to the subjects insertion within visuality.”¹⁹⁷ This neglect leaves out an important dynamic of vision, and what is seen, processed, and understood.

Perception, Complicated

As is demonstrated by Gonzales’ paintings, perceptions are created in their specific contexts, and their creation is both remarkable and unremarkable – like the photographs of the blind photographers. Not only that perception is sometimes obscured, even when something is within sight, so that the commodification of perception is misleading. So as it has been developed throughout this thesis, perception is not nearly as simple as what is in front of our eyes, as if that was even simple in the first place. Not only is perception a complicated combination of presence and absence, visible and invisible, perception is an activity of meaning making.

Further, as perception is closely associated with vision, and vision becomes commodified and sold in the form of elective laser eye surgery, perception can become dangerously commodified as well. Perception is always partial and incomplete (individuals never have a full idea or conception of a particular situation), and whenever perception becomes something like biological vision, thought to be developed or enhanced by a consumer purchase, it becomes more distorted, while the consumer who made the purchase potentially continues to think it is improved. Recognizing the partiality and incomplete nature of perception is crucial particularly

as improved and “more accurate” vision is more and more often something that can be bought for the right price.

Understanding how perception is unique from vision allows a more complicated and nuanced understanding of perception. Perception is often conflated with vision, and yet, the two are distinct from one another. While biological vision is often understood in relation to blindness, whether in opposition of or in cooperation with, perception operates in both vision and blindness, and creates a space in which each are utilized, but neither have monopoly. Further, perception is not always related to the eyes—the accuracy or lack of vision. Vision or blindness both may play into perception, but neither are perception in and of themselves; perception involves other senses as well. Neither is perception a commodity to be bought and sold, even as vision becomes a consumeristic endeavor where accuracy and effectiveness of vision can be purchased and improved in the buyer.

Conclusion

Discussing Gonzales’s work, Lash explains that “there are no truths in Gonzales’s paintings, only lenses layered upon lenses, with the formal process of investigation manifested through paint, indicating that the process of inquiry and illumination is often as important as arriving at the answers themselves.”¹⁹⁸ Gonzales’s work is designed to leave the perceptions of the viewer somewhat out of focus, and always incomplete. His paintings point to the multifaceted nature of perception, and the inability to perceive all of the nuances of the painting that could be developed by its varying audiences. The layers of lenses can also be understood as perceptive terministic screens as developed by Kenneth Burke.¹⁹⁹ These terministic screens act as filters, or lenses, that change the perception of whatever is perceived, in this case the artwork,

and in general, experiences with the world. Because this perception is co-constitutive with the audience, its articulation is acutely rhetorical.

As perception is articulated, the audience involved in the co-constitutive relationship face the potential to commodify perception in the same way vision is commodified. As well, perception can be caught up in vision, and fail to take blindness into account. Either way, perception is solidified, taking away the opportunity of the audience to examine the multifaceted positions of understanding. It is important to maintain the partial and incomplete qualities of perception in order to have room for change and development. Some part of perception is always out of focus or unseen, and it should remain that way—not caught up as a commodity to be bought and sold or a biological factor dependent upon sight.

ENDNOTES

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³ John House, “Reading the Grande Jatte,” *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 14, no. 2 (1989): 117.

⁴ Jed Pearl, “Seurat's Sight,” *The New Republic*, July 26, 2004, 22.

⁵ Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 179.

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⁹ Sonja K. Foss, “Framing the Study of Visual Rhetoric: Toward a Transformation of Rhetorical Theory,” in *Defining Visual Rhetorics*, by Charles A. Hill and Marguerite H. Helmers (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2004), 308.

¹⁰ Many scholars have heralded visual rhetoric as the beginning of the recognition of the pictorial turn in social theory, where theorists had once discussed the linguistic or even rhetorical turn, the pictorial was now examined as such. But what was entailed in this turn? W.J.T. Mitchell explains that the “living image” is “both a verbal and visual trope, a figure of speech, of vision, of graphic design, and of thought. It is, in other words, a secondary, reflexive image of images, or what I have called a “meta-picture.” Also, an image can “pass over the boundary between vision and hearing in the notion of an “acoustic image.” Visual images then, can be auditory and linguistic at least, crossing over modes of perception. W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?: the Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 2.

W.J.T. Mitchell explains this focus on the visual as the pictorial turn. He continues to explain that it is “a postlinguistic, postsemiotic rediscovery of the picture as a complex interplay between visibility, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies, and figurality.” The pictorial turn then, while including visibility, is not encompassed by visibility, and understanding the picture or the visual requires a more in-depth look at the nature of perception. W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 16.

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- ²⁶ Hariman and Lucaites, *No Caption Needed*, 413.
- ²⁷ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: the Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), 26.
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- ³⁰ Paul De Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 106.
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¹¹⁰ Mercer, “Reading Racial Fetishism”, 204.

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Derrida clarifies to D.Searle/Sarl in ABC that while a writing/speech act “must be capable of functioning” (8) in the absence of the author, that that doesn’t mean that the author cannot be there. He does however make the point that perhaps the author may never be there, as the “you” that wrote something or created something is always changing, and would be different from the “you” utilizing the writing. This goes all the way back to Heraclitus’ argument that you cannot step into the same river twice.

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¹²⁹ Of this process of visualization, John M. Kennedy notes that "evidence gathered in recent years shows that pictures and representation are a deep quality of the mind, even with the congenitally blind," he said. "You can reach them through vision, but you can reach them in other ways too." Chris Colin, "The Vision to Depict It Their Way," *The New York Times*, November 25, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com>.

"Martin Elkort, in an article on the late blind photographer Michael Richard, puts it this way: "If a blind person can take a photograph with merit and beauty, then he or she is no longer blind. Supported by the remaining senses, imagination triumphs, bringing visual beauty to a soul that otherwise would be denied this pleasure others take for granted. This is the stuff of poetry and heroism.'" Scott Baradell, "Blind Photographers Teach Us New Ways of Seeing | Black Star Rising," *Black Star Rising: Photography and Design*, August 1, 2008, accessed October 27, 2011, <http://rising.blackstar.com/blind-photographers-teach-us-new-ways-of-seeing.html>.

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