



---

## INTERVENTION ROUNDTABLE

# On the Need to Ask How, Exactly, Is Geography “Visual”?

**Gillian Rose**

Faculty of Social Sciences, The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK;  
g.rose@open.ac.uk

---

### **The Question**

Over the past few years, it's become commonplace to hear the verdict passed that geography is a “visual discipline” (see eg Gregory 1994; Smith 2000; Sui 2000). These geographers are surely correct in making this claim; with the exception of anthropology, geography is unique in the social sciences in the way it has relied and continues to rely on certain kinds of visualities and visual images to construct its knowledges. However, while there is currently a great deal of critical interest in the visual in anthropology, both as an object of study and as a means of interpreting and disseminating knowledges about cultures, geographers appear to be much less concerned with pursuing the implications of their claim that geography, too, is a form of visual knowledge. Indeed, rather than produce work that might parallel recent studies such as Lucien Taylor's *Visualising Theory* (1994), Marcus Banks and Howard Morphy's *Rethinking Visual Anthropology* (1997), Elizabeth Edward's *Raw Histories* (2001), Sarah Pink's *Doing Visual Ethnography* (2001) or Jay Ruby's *Picturing Culture* (2000), those geographers asserting the ocularcentrism of geography are doing so only as a prelude to studies of other sensory articulations of knowledge, most commonly aural. Clearly, this move has produced much valuable work. However, it seems to assume that since we, as geographers in a “visual discipline”, already understand “the visual”, it is now important for us to analyse the geographies of other senses. This assumption is surely mistaken. In fact, with the exception of David Matless's (1996) study of “visual culture and geographical citizenship”, “the visual” hasn't been analysed in any sustained way in relation to geography as an academic discipline.<sup>1</sup> There are, of course, important works on the histories of cartography, topographic painting and colonial photography (see eg Cosgrove 1998;

Harley 1992; Pinney 1997; Ryan 1997; Schwartz 1996; Stafford 1984), but the relevance of these to thinking about academic geographies in the 20th century—let alone in the 21st century—is not, as far as I know, being explored. We just don’t know how, exactly, geography is a visual discipline.

The most obvious way of characterising geography as a visual discipline, I suppose, would be to point to the plethora of visual images used by geographers when producing, interpreting and disseminating geographical work: all those maps, videos, sketches, photographs, slides, diagrams, graphs and so on that fill textbooks, lecture halls, seminars, conference presentations and—to a much lesser degree—published papers and books (see Martin 2000 for a comment on the latter point). Sheer numbers do not signify much, however. The more important issue, I think, is the ways in which particular visualities structure certain kinds of geographical knowledges, knowledges—and thus visualities—that are always saturated with power relations. Hal Foster (1988:ix) uses the term “visuality” to refer to “how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see, and how we see this seeing and the unseeing therein”. The visualities deployed by the production of geographical knowledges are never neutral. They have their foci, their zooms, their highlights, their blinkers and their blindnesses, for example, and these are central to both the subject of geography as a discipline and to its human subjects—to those it studies and to those who study it.

The importance of certain kinds of visuality to the ways the world is seen has been addressed by the discipline already, of course. Much of the “new” cultural geography follows Gordon Fyfe and John Law’s (1988:1) claim that “[A] depiction is never just an illustration ... it is the site for the construction and depiction of social difference”. Fyfe and Law (1988:1) elaborate the need to consider the effect of images critically in these terms: “To understand a visualisation is ... to enquire ... into the social work that it does. It is to note its principles of inclusion and exclusion, to detect the roles that it makes available, to understand the way in which they are distributed, and to decode the hierarchies and differences that it naturalises”.

This agenda is not news to many cultural geographers, or to many radical geographers. In this essay, though, I want to reread Fyfe and Law in order to shift their argument away from how images “themselves” represent “hierarchies and differences” and to consider instead the ways in which geographers and their images and audiences also intersect in ways that produce hierarchies and differences. When geographers use images in the lecture theatre, book or website, that, too, produces roles and positions, hierarchies and differences, in the academic locale. It produces difference, for example, around what can and cannot be seen, around what remains invisible and what is turned into shadow by particular strategies of display, and around who can and

cannot interpret the visible and how. It is these kinds of disciplinary visualities that most concern me here, not least because they have thus far been given so little attention by geographers interested in the visual.

In discussing what I've just called "disciplinary visualities", I want to acknowledge that there is more than one visuality that structures geographical knowledges, since there are, of course, different sorts of those knowledges, each with different ways of claiming—and visualising—a relation to the world. In this short essay, I can't do much more than acknowledge this diversity, however. It's not possible to detail just how exactly geography is a visual discipline, because that question needs careful empirical work that can acknowledge the varied modalities taken by the visual in the discipline. Instead, here, I only want to sketch some of the theoretical parameters a critical answer should have. I want to argue that questions of power and performance must be central to thinking about geography's visualities, and that so, too, should questions of space.

To make that argument, I'll discuss an aspect of academic geographical practice that seems to me to be strikingly uniform, in fact, whatever the kind of geography being done through it: the use of slides in teaching and conference presentations. My comments will be based on my own experiences over the last fifteen years of teaching at the university level in Scotland and England and of attending conferences and seminar presentations, mostly in the UK and North America (although I've been to some in western Europe, too), and on conversations with colleagues about slides. From that experience, the use of slides seems overwhelmingly uniform: the speaker stands in front of their audience, the slides are projected in a darkened room on a wall or screen also facing the audience, and the speaker speaks about them. This scenario contains the three elements the intersection of which, as I have argued at much greater length elsewhere (Rose 1997, 2000, 2001), produces a visual image's effect: the image, its audiences and its space of display. I'm not, then, going to pay attention to any slide display in particular. Instead, I want to consider the effects of the use of slides in general—their slideness, if you like. What happens when the lights are dimmed and the projector at the back starts whirring and the glowing images appear? What else is produced when the slideshow starts?

### **The Terms of an Answer: Images**

At a recent conference I attended, a sociologist was handing out to her audience colour photocopies of stills from the video diaries that she'd asked her interviewees to keep. As she did so, she said, "[S]ociologists don't do slides". In contrast, geographers do do slides. A survey undertaken in the late 1990s by John McKendrick and Annabel Bowden (1999) of the use of audiovisual teaching aids in higher-education

geography departments found that all respondents used slides in their teaching (nearly all also used recordings of TV programmes).

Most geographers—particularly when knowledge is being disseminated through conference papers, seminars and lectures—use slides simply as faithful signs of what was photographed, whether that referent was a glacier in the Antarctic, a dataset, an 18th-century oil painting or a contemporary urban street. It is assumed that the slide accurately represents whatever the camera was pointing at, and the fact that it is being shown as a slide goes unremarked. Yet there are, of course, huge differences between the photographed referent and its image on the slide. Very obviously, being in the Antarctic or a gallery or a street is not the same as seeing an image of a glacier, canvas or street in a lecture theatre or seminar room. Slides always have a certain flatness; they can't convey taste or smell, and they're also always still. They are rarely projected to show their referent at its “real” size, even if that were possible, and they have a luminosity of colour which is often very striking, glowing in the darkened room like jewels of disciplinary data, gorgeous and compelling. These sorts of differences are so obvious that it may seem silly to point them out. But what sort of effect do they have?

Robert Nelson (2000:433) argues that these differences between slide and referent accumulate to produce a particular effect, what he describes as the extreme decontextualisation of the academic slideshow. In darkened teaching, conference and seminar rooms, slides shine out, surrounded only by darkness. Their very form seems to disallow any discussion of their production or truth status. They have no framing that suggests any kind of technical or aesthetic—let alone social, economic or institutional—constraint on the image. So slides are powerful things to use. Their lack of context focuses the audience's gaze towards them. To paraphrase Norman Bryson (1991:71), “[T]he power of the [slide] is there, in the thousands of gazes caught by its surface, and the resultant turning, and the shifting, the redirecting of the discursive flow”. Think of the way that when a slide or an overhead is projected in a lecture or seminar, the speaker so often seems to feel compelled to turn towards the screen and talk to the projection rather than to their audience. Or how, for some speakers, it's a relief when the slides are shown and the audience's attention is diverted towards the screen. Perhaps this is why, despite all the recent work on representation and textuality and so on, the difference that being shown as a slide makes to an image's referent is so rarely explored. The formal qualities of slides discourage it. Instead, dazzled, we are invited to believe in what they show ...

### **The Terms of an Answer: Audiencing**

... and in who shows them. In talking about the audiences for slides in academic teaching or presentations, I want to include the

geographer-lecturer or paper-giver as well as their audience in the rows of seats in front of them, because academics, too, are seduced by these images. Our enthusiasm for them needs problematising as well. Nonetheless, the use of slides makes a fundamental distinction between the geographer displaying the slides and the people watching them. For the most important distinction between a slide and what it pictures is less visual, I think, than it is relational. That is, it has less to do with size, colour, stillness, framing and so on, and much more to do with the difference of relation between the geographer and the slide's referent and the geographer and the slide. The relation between the geographer and the slide in a lecture or conference setting is—usually—not the same as that between the geographer and what the slide shows, whether that be Antarctic ice, a canvas in a gallery or a street. In those latter places, the relation between geographer and the photographed referent may take all kinds of forms, not least those forms that position the geographer as uncertain of what they know: fearful, bemused, puzzled, anxious, curious. In contrast, in the academic setting, slides usually work to bestow authority on their expositor. Because the specificity of the slide is not acknowledged, and because it still seems to be assumed that such photographic images simply show truthfully some aspect of the object of observation itself,<sup>2</sup> the slide becomes the real that is there in the presentation. The geographer showing the slide, then, appears to have a quite direct connection to that real, standing so close to it there at the front of the lecture theatre, close to the images, telling you what's there and becoming as much its witness as its interpreter. The geographer mediates between the audience and the image by explaining it to them, and the apparent truth of the photographic image produces a truth-effect in the geographer's words as well. Maybe this, too, is why we geographers find slides compelling: they confirm the truth of our words.

Of course, varied and various audiences watching the geographer's performance will react to specific slide displays differently. I've been in many presentations in which someone in the audience offers an interpretation of an image that's been shown that differs from that of the speaker. Does this mean that showing slides or overheads opens up the interpretive process in some way? Of course, and I repeat the point below.

Still, showing slides is powerful, and its truth effect is enhanced by another aspect of geographers "doing" slides: the number of slide projectors used. I remember my surprise the first time I went to a seminar given by an art historian and two slide projectors were turned on and used together, sometimes consecutively and sometimes in parallel. Until that moment, I'd assumed that using just one slide projector was simply how the process worked—not so, I now knew. Nelson's (2000)

essay on the use of slides in art history is useful again here. He notes that the use of double projectors was established in academic art history by 1900, and argues that this practice was encouraged by the importance to several contemporary approaches to art history of comparison between images; comparisons were achieved most effectively by showing two images side by side. Nelson thus locates the rationale for two projectors in the foundational methodologies of art history, and it might be instructive if geographers did the same for our discipline. We should ask if the single slide projector is hegemonic in geography because it reiterates the vision of the “seeing-man” described by Mary Louise Pratt (1992:7): “he whose imperial eyes passively look out and possess”. If such “seeing-men” were the discipline’s founding explorers and their panoramas its founding fields, if early meetings of the Royal Geographical Society in London regularly included lantern slideshows and films, if contemporary popular geographical societies also frequently offer speakers with slides (but maybe that should be slides with speakers), if the field-trip coach-trip tradition continues during which students (and academic conference participants) look through coach windows at a landscape while a lecturer explains to them what they are seeing, if even key theoretical texts written as recently as 1989 can be critiqued for their voyeuristic proclivities (Deutsche 1996)—then perhaps the single slide projector is indeed performing, with the lecturer, a double act fundamental to the discipline’s epistemology. Despite other fieldwork traditions (see eg Merrifield 1995), the single vision of the projector and the monovocal voice of the lecturer or paper-giver work together to reproduce the vision of the geographer as witness to the real.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Terms of an Answer: Space**

The practices of audiencing vary significantly, however, and their performance constitutes the final term I suggest must be central in thinking about how, exactly, geography is a visual discipline: the spaces of visual images’ display. Image, geographer and audience encounter each other in particular ways that have their effects. Images are not shown or seen the same way regardless of where they are screened; the geographer presents—and their audience views—images differently depending on the location of their display. Thus, there is a need to interrogate the ways images are tied (more or less closely) to the speech and gestures of the geographer presenting the images, which themselves usually follow (more or less) particular conventions deemed appropriate to particular settings (“the research seminar”, “the inaugural lecture”, “the conference presentation”) and thus reproduce those settings in their doing. And watching a video clip of a Hollywood movie while sitting in a lecture theatre is very different from watching the film in a cinema; looking at an advert reproduced

on a tutorial handout is not the same as encountering the same ad in a magazine.

Jonathan Crary's (1999) study of the historical emergence of the idea of "paying attention" may be relevant here. Crary (1999:1) notes that "Western modernity since the 19th century has demanded that individuals define and shape themselves in terms of a capacity for 'paying attention', that is, for a disengagement from a broader field of attraction, whether visual or auditory, for the sake of isolating or focusing on a reduced number of stimuli". His Foucauldian account concentrates on the spaces of attention-paying subjectivities in terms of "the production of separate, isolated, but not introspective individuals" (Crary 1999:79), currently produced in relation to TV and PC screens.

I'd suggest, though, that there are other spaces that are produced by and encourage the practice of attention; lecture halls, seminar rooms and conference venues are also spaces in which attention is demanded, and this spatiality refracts the images displayed through it. They are seen differently when seen attentively, and, of course, attention is given to the lecturer or paper-giver, too. For example, the question of whether I like an image—which I might ask myself in a gallery, for example, or a poster shop—is not so appropriate in a seminar. Instead, I would ask what the image or scene shown by a slide *means*: to what is it a witness? And my answer would not be that it bears witness to the geographer's desire for truth and authority, but that the slide of a glacier shows something about ice flow, or the slide of a street shows something about public space. The mode of viewing academic slides in academic spaces abets the radical decontextualisation of the slide and the invisibility of geographers' practices of display.

### **Towards Better Questions**

I've been speculating in this paper, more or less tentatively, about the relations between geographers and slides. When images and geographers get together—and, as several geographers have recently pointed out, they often do—it's a kind of performance, and, as in all performances, effects follow. Using the example of displaying slides, I've suggested that the type of image, the practices of audiencing and the spaces of display can intersect to produce the academic geographer as a powerful producer of knowledge. Their power is based on the position given to them by image, space and performance as witness. The truth of the slide, the vision of the projector and the refusal by the geographer to problematise either, collaborate to position the geographer and their vision as authoritative, as demanding attention.

If this analysis is in any way correct, the question those concerned to enact more participatory and democratic teaching and disseminating methods will be asking is, so what do we do? I think that the particularity of slides needs to be acknowledged and discussed: their

pull, their decontextualisation, their referentiality. As with textbooks (Johnston 2000), their constructedness needs to be opened up. And here it's important to note that these spaces of display are not defined only by their visuality. The slideness of the image of the glacier or painting or whatever does not entail the reduction of all other sensory feeling to the visual; things like an uncomfortable lecture bench, the whirr of the projector, the feel of the pen you're holding and, especially, the voice of the speaker also contribute to the “slideness” of the academic slide display.<sup>4</sup> As Crary (1999:3) says, perception consists of “irreducibly *mixed* modalities”. A sensitive exploration of the discipline's visualities would not be concerned only with the visual.

But, of course, as anyone who has taught or given conference presentations with audiovisual aids will know, the authority of the geographer is very often undermined, not by their own carefully considered reflections on their practice, but by the visualising technologies themselves. Projectors that melt slides or get slides jammed or mysteriously show them in the wrong order, video players with the tracking wildly out, overhead projectors with a fan louder than your voice—these are the reasons every student giving a presentation for the first time is warned by their supervisor to check the audiovisual aids before they have to speak. Moreover, the audience may not always position itself as persuaded by the authoritative speaker. There are those students who refuse the demand of attention made by the lecture theatre and turn up only to sit in the back row and fall asleep after five minutes. There are students who can, perhaps only momentarily, assert more authority than the lecturer. There are academic audiences in which it seems that the whole point of the audience is to question the authority of the speaker. And then there are what might be called category slippages that undercut the authority of the lecturer, when visual images slip from the category of disciplinary data to something less authoritative. I remember how my own perception of a regional geography course I took as an undergraduate shifted when the lecturer said that it was he who had taken the slides he was showing; in my eyes, they shifted from “evidence” to “holiday snaps”, a not uncommon slippage among student audiences, apparently, and one that produces, not the same authoritative witnessing effect as I described above, but instead something rather more dilettantish.

Perhaps, then, the critical use of slides is already present in contemporary academic practice in ways to which my account here has not paid sufficient attention. In that case, I can only reiterate my opening and main point: that critical geographers need to explore the visualities of the discipline more carefully. There's a need for careful, empirical research that explores the dynamics of image, audience and space in ways that remain alert to the power relations that inhere in all of these.

## Acknowledgments

I'd like to thank Neil Brenner, Nigel Clark, Catherine Nash and Michael Pryke for their very useful comments on an earlier version of this essay.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Driver (2000) comments on the lack of interest in fieldwork practice as well.

<sup>2</sup> For discussions of the status of photography as a technology that truthfully records the visible, see Tagg (1988) and Sekula (1989).

<sup>3</sup> I have heard of—though never seen—conference presentations in which slides are shown that are not directly related to what the speaker is saying concurrently. The text and images in this situation are often described as commenting on each other, rather than affirming each other—an example of the polyvocality advocated by Linda McDowell (1994), perhaps. It's interesting, though, that this doesn't seem to happen in a teaching context. This is an example of the specificity needed in order to explore academic geography's visualities.

<sup>4</sup> See Delph-Janiurek (1999) on academic voices.

## References

- Banks M and Morphy H (eds) (1997) *Rethinking Visual Anthropology*. London: Yale University Press
- Bryson N (1991) Semiology and visual interpretation. In N Bryson, M A Holly and K Moxey (eds) *Visual Theory: Painting and Interpretation* (pp 61–73). Cambridge, UK: Polity Press
- Cosgrove D (ed) (1998) *Mappings*. London: Reaktion Books
- Crary J (1999) *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle and Modern Culture*. London: MIT Press
- Delph-Janiurek T (1999) Sounding gender(ed): Vocal performances in English university teaching spaces. *Gender, Place and Culture* 6:137–154
- Deutsche R (1996) *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press
- Driver F (2000) Fieldwork in geography. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 25:267–268
- Edwards E (2001) *Raw Histories: Photographs, Anthropology and Museums*. Oxford: Berg
- Foster H (ed) 1988 *Vision and Visuality*. Seattle: Bay Press
- Fyfe G and Law J 1988 Introduction: On the invisibility of the visible. In G Fyfe and J Law (eds) *Picturing Power: Visual Description and Social Relations* (pp 1–14). London: Routledge
- Gregory D (1994) *Geographical Imaginations*. Oxford: Blackwell
- Harley J B (1992) Reconstructing the map. In T J Barnes and J S Duncan (eds) *Writing Worlds: Discourse, Text and Metaphor in the Representation of Landscape* (pp 231–247). London: Routledge
- Heyman R (2000) Research, pedagogy and instrumental geography. *Antipode* 32:292–307
- Johnston R (2000) Authors, editors, and authority in the postmodern academy. *Antipode* 32:271–291
- Martin R (2000) In memory of maps. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 25:3–6
- Matless D (1996) Visual culture and geographical citizenship: England in the 1940s. *Journal of Historical Geography* 22:424–439
- McDowell L (1994) Polyphony and pedagogic authority. *Area* 26:241–248
- McKendrick J H and Bowden A (1999) Something for everyone? An evaluation of the use of audio-visual resources in geographical learning in the UK. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* 23:9–19

- Merrifield A (1995) Situated knowledge through exploration: Reflections on Bunge’s “geographical expeditions”. *Antipode* 27:49–70
- Nelson R (2000) The slide lecture: Or the work of art *history* in the age of mechanical reproduction. *Critical Inquiry* 6:414–434
- Pink S (2001) *Doing Visual Ethnography: Images, Media and Representation in Research*. London: Sage
- Pinney C (1997) *Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs*. London: Reaktion Books
- Pratt M L (1992) *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. London: Routledge
- Rose G (1997) Engendering the slum: Photography in East London in the 1930s. *Gender, Place and Culture* 4:277–300
- Rose G (2000) Practising photography: An archive, a study, some photographs and a researcher. *Journal of Historical Geography* 26:555–571
- Rose G (2001) *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Interpreting Visual Objects*. London: Sage
- Ruby J (2000) *Picturing Culture: Explorations of Film and Anthropology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- Ryan J (1997) *Picturing Empire: Photography and the Visualization of the British Empire*. London: Reaktion Books
- Schwartz J M (1996) The geography lesson: Photographs and the construction of imaginative geographies. *Journal of Historical Geography* 22:16–45
- Sekula A (1989) The body and the archive. In R Bolton (ed) *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography* (pp 342–388). London: MIT Press
- Smith S J (2000) Performing the (sound) world. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 18:615–637
- Stafford B M (1984) *Voyage into Substance: Art, Science, Nature and the Illustrated Travel Account, 1760–1840*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press
- Sui D Z (2000) Visuality, aurality and shifting metaphors of geographical thought in the late twentieth century. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 90: 322–343
- Tagg J (1988) *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories*. London: Macmillan
- Taylor L (1994) *Visualising Theory: Selected Essays from VAR, 1990–94*. London: Routledge

Photography, Visual Revolutions and Victorian Geography. In Livingstone DN, Withers CJ (Eds.) *Geography and Revolution*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 199-238. Ryan J (2004). On Visual Instruction. In Schwartz VR, Przyblyski JM (Eds.) *The Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture Reader*, London: Routledge, 145-151. Ryan J (2003). Who's afraid of visual culture? a response to Gillian Rose's Intervention: 'On the need to ask how, exactly, is geography visual'. *Antipode*, 35(2), 232-237. 2002. In geography, the kinds of evidence and way that it is used will vary quite a bit depending on context, so be sure to understand the appropriate types of evidence for your assignment. Discussing your evidence in the text. It is important to directly discuss in the text the evidence you include in your work. Depending on the assignment and course you may be required to make your own maps and tables, which if done effectively will enhance your argument or main point. Some geography and GIS courses focus entirely on making and using visual information. These courses will have specific and detailed assignments to guide you, as well as specific requirements. Find, read and cite all the research you need on ResearchGate. Several generations later and geography's enthusiasm for visual methods has continued apace. Over a hundred years after Carter's advice on the 'uphill task' of teaching geography, academics would once again be positioning the discipline as inherently 'visual' (Rose 2003; Driver 2003; Thornes 2004). Geography has of course changed dramatically since the publication of 'Amateur Photography as an Aid in Teaching Geography' (Carter 1901), not least the jarring gendered language in the above epigraph. ... Keywords: geography education, visual communication, geography textbook, textbook analysis grid, eye tracking research, visual competencies. 1. geography as a visual discipline cultivating visual communication. How is information (visual input and text) visually linked in geography textbooks? Every test subject was asked to complete five test tasks (one per test spread) by observing the page on the screen and additional in written form. The trial duration data (five test spreads, three test stages) shows the time (in seconds), which every test subject needed in order to solve the test tasks (stage 1 what exactly is explained on the textbook spread, stage 2 completing one task from the exercise section). Use flashcards to learn key geography terms. Geography has quite a lot of special terminology that it is important to get clear in your head. A good way to learn and remember terms and words is by using flashcards. Write one term onto a small piece of card or paper, with the definition and brief explanation written on the other side. Create these as you go and eventually, you will build up a good library of cards with key terms which you can then revise easily. Once you have the cards then pick one at random and try to remember what it means, checking the back if you can't. Once you have done this a few times you will find you can remember a lot more than before. For example, you could write 'Oxbow Lake' on a card with an explanation of what this is on the reverse side.