

1997

Book Review: Barbara Maria Stafford: Good Looking: Essays on the Virtue of Images

David Keck
Ateneo de Manila University, keckd2@erau.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.erau.edu/publication>



Part of the [History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology Commons](#), and the [Illustration Commons](#)

Scholarly Commons Citation

Keck, D. (1997). Book Review: Barbara Maria Stafford: Good Looking: Essays on the Virtue of Images. *Budhi: A Journal of Ideas and Culture*, 1(2). Retrieved from <https://commons.erau.edu/publication/555>

Permission to post this article to ERAU's institutional repository was given by the Office of the Dean of Research and Creative Work at the Ateneo de Manila University.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact commons@erau.edu.



Barbara Maria Stafford, Good Looking: Essays on the Virtue of Images. Cambridge. MIT Press. 1996. 259 pp., 100 illustrations.

This book's author boldly places an illustration on page 1, and commences her text on page 3, in an inversion of text and image that epitomizes its agenda. Barbara Maria Stafford, an art historian known primarily for her work on the eighteenth century, here seeks to develop a manifesto that will, as she puts it, "disestablish the view of cognition as dominantly and aggressively linguistic," and allow us to reconceptualize education through a recognition of the particular values (and dangers) of visual representations. To this end, she presents eleven "unfashionably positive and frankly polemical" essays in three major areas: the critique of modern and postmodern aversions to images (which link graphic expression to "an unnuanced dominant discourse of consumerism, corruption, deception, and ethical failure"); the application of art history to contemporary concerns about the information age; and the analysis of the implications of recent technologies for imaging the human brain. Throughout the book these three themes are interwoven by Stafford in order to display "case studies, stretching from the lens to the computer era, presenting an alternative view of the pleasures, beauties, consolations, and, above all, *intelligence* of sight" (emphasis hers).

Reading the Introduction, "Visual Pragmatism for a Virtual World," makes the reader feel as if he or she is tagging alongside Stafford in a shoot'em-up video game. In her critique of contemporary estimations of the epistemological status of images, she fires her guns rapidly at Plato, Adorno, and Foucault, then blasts away at Saussure, Chomsky, and Derrida, before finally wheeling rapidly to strafe cultural studies and anthropology. For, in her view, most of the major intellectuals of the last several centuries have contributed in different ways to the "totemization of language as a godlike agency in western culture," a process which has entailed the denigration of images as insignificant or, worse, their characterization as vehicles of fraud and delusion. She

writes: "Modeling comprehension as a kind of ascetic, even anaesthetic, information processing allowed influential academic areas such as semiotic and deconstructive literary theory or interpretive anthropology to reconceive the material subjects of their inquiry as decorporalized signs and encrypted messages requiring decipherment." Everything becomes a "text," resulting in the hegemony, within the academy, of the textual paradigm for communication and knowledge. Moreover, texts are decoded according to "[r]ecent academic rhetoric [which] is saturated with terms of rejection, revision, [and] revolution." It is in face of that that she argues for the "fundamental task of remaking the image of images," of seeking their "emancipation," in and through the construction of a new paradigm which will rank "seeing intelligently" alongside of "reading critically" as a pedagogical goal.

Throughout the work, Stafford maintains this critical perspective on modern iconoclasts, and she does so in large part because of her concern for the future of the academy. If, in fact, the advent of cable television offering 500 channels and the Internet are bringing about the continual increase of the roles of images in the lives of non-academics, then an academic posture that remains focused on texts and dedicated to radical critiques would only serve to isolate those who inhabit universities – and make their work in the classroom increasingly irrelevant to the lives of their students. "Being digital requires designing a post-Gutenbergian *constructive* model of education through vision. . . . Today's instructional landscape must inevitably evolve or die, like biological species, since its environment is being radically altered by volatile visual technologies." (emphasis hers) Thus, iconicity and graphicity need to be integrated with school curricula, and academics need to articulate "to a wider public that an understanding of the communicative modes and tactics of images is essential to a thorough humanistic education."

While Stafford overstates her case against modern and postmodern thinkers (the diverse studies of the paintings of Turner, Picasso, and Dali, for example, demonstrate that many intellectuals of the last two centuries have recognized distinctive communicative capacities for the visual arts), she may well have earned the right to indulge in rhetorical excess. For regardless of the precise accuracy of her claims concerning the negative estimation of the visual by moderns and postmoderns, it is clear that many scholars in the humanities remain disinclined to dis-

cuss images in any depth. As Alfred W. McCoy observes, there are a great many historical monographs that contain illustrations which are never discussed or referred to in the text, and which, presumably, do nothing but confirm what written sources already make clear. They are merely ornamental.

The second major theme of the book concerns the ways in which art history can contribute to problems confronting us in the information age. Contemporary debates about pornography, television, the dangers and opportunities of the Internet, imaging pedagogy, and medical ethics, Stafford argues, need to be informed by the experiences of the eighteenth century, a transitional age when Enlightenment thinkers sought to establish the supremacy of words over images for serious intellectual work. This turn to "a deep logocentrism" was itself a reaction to the development of new forms of visual presentation and dissemination in the period (including new forms of color printing). The crux of several essays is that "it was precisely in the eighteenth century that the persisting rationalist philosophical attitude towards images hardened into systems." It is to this period that postmodernism must trace its "antiocular suspicion that all forms of representation are voracious, dominating, and duplicitous simulacra." Consequently, understanding these developments provides perspective on contemporary fears about the use and abuse of visual media. Thus, in chapter 1, "The Visualization of Knowledge from the Enlightenment to Postmodernism," Stafford offers three examples which "epitomize how understanding an outmoded visual acuity [formed during the early eighteenth century but denigrated by the century's end] might shape more astute observers of the contemporary scene . . . [namely] the preservation of fragmented cultures; the exhibition of biodiversity; and the externalization of somatic experience." Each of the earlier styles of depiction, she argues, can inform our own efforts to understand and represent these important phenomena. The MIT Press well deserves Stafford's commendation in her Preface. The layout, design, and illustration of the book indeed allow her to "incarnate [her] arguments visually." Thus, she is able to juxtapose effectively eighteenth-century prints of anatomical figures and dissections with contemporary brain scans, skin diseases with corals and polyps, and Macintosh computer screens with the candle-powered Eiduphusikon.

Stafford's third main project – incorporating into these essays ethi-

cal, aesthetic, and philosophical issues concerning new imaging technologies for depicting the brain – serves both to illustrate the importance of thinking about images seriously and undewrite the construction of her manifesto. Not only do MRIs, CTs, PETs, and other forms of bodily scans illustrate the ways in which particularly visual information has become part of contemporary scientific knowledge, but they also illustrate the dangers of uncritically looking at images. Pictures of brain functions, she argues, may come to replace the reality of the human patient's unique personality unless scientists bring to these new and powerful tools a humanistic perspective. As she notes, "an impersonalization and objectification of the body through mapping makes it easier to counsel invasive surgical interventions." Moreover, the incorporation of brain imaging allows her to formulate her defense of images in terms of cognitive psychology. The brain itself, she argues (following certain, but by no means all, modern schools of research), seems to "picture" information – brain processes are thus more akin to a mapping process across neurons (a spatial-visual model) than to the functioning of language or the raw computation of data. "[T]hinking involves scenography, the staging of a flow of perceptions and a warehouse of memories into the spectacle of ideas." Taking consciousness seriously, therefore, requires taking imaging seriously.

In its totality, her manifesto offers a strong vision for what one essay calls "the new imagist – an expert who does not yet exist – in order to help anticipate, illuminate, and interconnect unsuspected visualization issues arising across the spectrum [of disciplines] and accompanying the global pictorialization of knowledge." She calls for a visual theory which will help train "informed observers (not just literate readers)" capable of understanding how "visualization [can be] an innovative, integrating, and bridging field spanning the arts, humanities, and sciences." Such men and women will be better able to distinguish between "imagery used as equivalents to discourse (or as illustration) and as an untranslatable constructive form of cognition (or as expression)." Moreover, the re-valuation of images will allow us to leap back over Kant and Descartes and recover the ways in which perception as an "integration of mental activity with feeling" will enable us to rediscover perception's "pragmatic capacity to bridge experience and rationality, emotion and logic."

The difficulty with all manifestos, including this one, is the prob-

lem of "Show, don't tell." The success of her argument depends less on a reasoned articulation of possibilities and more on precise demonstrations of how visual modes of cognition and visual presentations are qualitatively different – even superior – to linguistic constructions. While the most effective of the examples offered in the book include an explication of how observers become peculiarly engaged with the dynamics of Piranesi's eighteenth-century etchings or of two recent paintings by James Rosen, the most important example comes from her discussion of the *Wunderkammer*. The cabinet of curiosities (and images which drew upon its style of presentation) juxtaposed "[a]rtificial and natural, pagan and Christian, ordinary and exotic artifacts [and] provoked an immediate awareness of the miscellaneous and chance act of finding itself. These elaborate three-dimensional collages demonstrated how we learn painstakingly by gathering and arranging bits and pieces in the dark. . . . Instead of concealing the absence of connections, the dynamic layout summoned the observer to fill in the gaps." (The interactivity required for fathoming such cabinets, she suggests provocatively, mirrors the ways in which we interact with Macintosh monitors, Win'95, and Netscape.) The visual presentation of the wonderful, strange, and marvelous, engages our curiosity both because these things themselves defy quotidian experiences and because their uncategorizable presence challenges ordinary modes of perception and comprehension. This example appears in several essays, and, on the whole, more such sustained examples would have strengthened her arguments and made the book more compelling.

This is a challenging, important book. While the essays are at times repetitive and uneven in quality, they all sparkle with the vibrant prose and seriousness of purpose of one with a distinguished track record of writings in body criticism, the presentations of art, science, and medicine, and the transformations of the use and estimation of such images in the Enlightenment. The result is an engaging, provocative whole that accounts for why anyone who turns on his or her television set today may recognize within himself or herself the "feeling [of being] adrift in phantasmagoria." This calls for a sustained, intelligent reflection on the creation of images and on their use, as well as for sparking genuine insight into their own special potential for artistic and moral integrity.

Barbara Maria Stafford's *Good Looking* is a stimulating work which promises to ignite such reflection and insight in many.

Reviewed by David Keck, Ateneo de Manila University, Philippines



Daniel Jonah Goldhagen. Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust. New York. Alfred Knopf. 1996.

If one is going to read only one book on the Holocaust of Jews under the Third Reich, this is the book to read. The author does not spare his readers. The horror of the murder of 6,000,000 men, women, and children is told in brutal detail. And it should be.

But it is not the author's purpose simply to tell a story that has been told before. He has a thesis: "The entire German nation participated in the murder of the 6,000,000 victims." Methodologically proving the thesis is impossible, because it can only be proved by a complete induction. How can one show that 80,000,000 people participated in 6,000,000 murders?

In attempting the impossible the author resorts to defective methods. He takes statements critical of Jews made by unquestioned anti-Nazis, e.g. Bishop Dibelius, Pastor Niemoller, and others, and asserts that they contributed to the climate that made the Holocaust possible. Proving causal connections between one person's statements and another person's actions is an all but impossible task. Harry Truman, when among friends, often used the word "nigger." Would anyone be justified in accusing this President, who did so much for civil rights, of contributing to the murders of Emmet Till or the three civil rights workers in Mississippi?

I spent the academic year 1959-60 as a special student at the University of Vienna. One summer evening I was strolling around the *Ringstrasse* with a brother Jesuit who had made two mistakes in life. He was born a Jew and became a Catholic and Jesuit to boot. When Hitler seized Austria he was spirited out of the country and spent the next ten

years in Sao Paulo, Brazil. A year before I met him he had returned home. We stopped in front of the monument of Karl Lueger, the flamboyant mayor of Vienna in the early years of this century.

My companion told me of how Lueger would often lace his campaign speeches with attacks on Jews. "Well, well," I commented, "so Hitler had his predecessors." "Not really," my companion replied. He said that Lueger's attacks were for popular consumption. He would often turn around and appoint Jews to responsible offices. When accused of inconsistency he would reply, "*Ich bestimme wer ein Jude ist*, meaning, "I decide who is a Jew. And if I appoint a Jew to high office (and he often did) then he is not a Jew." Cynicism could hardly have gone further.

My companion then went on to tell me that Hitler believed to the marrow of his bones the murderous rubbish he mouthed about Jews. Then he stunned me. "I am convinced," he continued, "that if a group of Jewish scientists went to Hitler in 1943 and offered him the atomic bomb in return for his halt of all persecution of the Jews, he would have refused." Hitler's anti-semitism, and that of his closest followers, e.g. Goebbels, Bormann, etc. was qualitatively different from that found in statements made by Dibelius, Niemoller, et al. Hitler and his henchmen got their anti-semitism from other sources..

To prove the "willing" in his title Goldhagen dismisses all talk of fear of reprisals on the part of those who did Hitler's dirty work. There can be no question that thousands of the executioners went about their work willingly. They liked it. But was this the attitude of all Germans? Here again the demands of complete induction raise insuperable difficulties.

A ruthless regime has dozens of ways of inducing fear. This writer was told by a man, who served bravely in the *Wehrmacht*, that his parents would never discuss the regime in the presence of their children. Like almost all young Germans he was a member of the *Hitler Jugend*. The officers of that organization would engage their young charges in conversation and, in an off-hand way, inquire what their parents thought of Hitler and his policies. An unguarded remark could lead to the loss of a food ration card or a work permit. There must have been thousands of families like his.

Nazi racism, under a veneer of scientific eugenics, directed its organized murder also against Gypsies and Poles. Probably more of the former, proportionately, were murdered than the members of any other

single race. And over 1,000,000 Poles, the nation's cultural leaders, were murdered in an effort to enslave the rest. But Goldhagen points out that one does not usually encounter the sadism in the campaigns against these two peoples that one almost always does in the murder of the Jews.

Italy, Germany's axist partner, enacted anti-Jewish laws but never carried them out. In fact most of Italy's Jews were protected throughout World War 2. And Denmark, Germany's northern neighbor, has an honourable record of saving Jews.

When all qualifications are introduced, when all nuances are considered, although Goldhagen's efforts to indict the entire German nation fall short of their goal, they come much too close for comfort. Can the crime of the Holocaust be rationally analysed? Or is it something that defies human comprehension?

Reviewed by Bartholomew Lahiff, Department of History, Ateneo de Manila University.