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Skilled Vision

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The edited volume *Skilled Visions: Between Apprenticeship and Standards* (Grasseni 2007) gathered contributions from anthropology, history of science, and the visual arts in light of ethnographic research on visual apprenticeship. *Skilled Visions* investigated how visual apprenticeship takes place in different “communities of practice” (Lave and Wenger 1991): from the cultural construction of beauty in drag clubs to the social complexity of producing and reading functional magnetic resonance imaging. Since visual competence is often embodied and tacit, skilled vision is per se invisible: we do not wear it for everyone to see; skilled visions are a *modus vivendi*—the embodied result of inculcation, training, and acculturation. The skills needed to competently interpret a number of visual arrangements—whether (photo)graphic artifacts such as computer tomography scans or objects in space—are not spontaneously developed or acquired mechanically: visual skills are learned within specific communities of practice through processes of “enskillment” (Ingold 2000).

Enskillment is a matter of apprenticeship. For example, with proper training, a surgeon will read a magnetic resonance image at first sight and—if a good communicator—will be able to articulate relevant information to a lay person, directing their eyesight to the relevant features of the scan. Following the contour of anomalies, showing where exactly to pay attention to in the visual field, is fundamental to convey relevant information with clarity. Through such interaction and movement, the information that a patient receives from a doctor can be made *evident* even to untrained eyes. But apprenticeship progresses in degrees of contextualization and complication of initially straightforward instructions. The example of a practitioner–patient conversation helps one to imagine how visual apprenticeship may begin. In this case, one would receive the relevant training only to accept one single fact as evident, but not enough to dispute it or to recognize a similar one. This is why novices follow authority to know what to look for and to be able to distill, compare, and contrast relevant information in the data-rich but fuzzy artifacts they deal with. Unlike the flash inculcations such as the one imagined between the patient and the doctor, during a lifetime people may undergo fewer, longer periods of visual apprenticeship. To learn to use one’s senses—not necessarily just eyesight by itself—in a skilled way defines people just as much as learning a language or living in a specific place. Similarly to identity, skilled vision is not monolithic: it depends on how many exposures each individual has had to relevant apprenticeships—professional, artistic, social. “Skilled visions” in fact are by definition plural: specific ways of mastering professional and relational domains through distinct visual skills are different for different places, people, practices, and periods.

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Skilled vision is a form of tacit knowledge. Common assumptions about vision presume that it is the action of individual spectators, who process visual data or, vice versa, project their own social expectations onto sensory experience. This model limits our understanding of how people actually look at each other and at the world. Vision is not a form of representation per se, but a complex relation between attention, habit, and representational capacities. An anthropology of vision does not necessarily produce visual artifacts, but it includes an ethnographic analysis of the material settings, the institutional contexts, and the social actors involved in continuous apprenticeships of ways of looking. Training, exercise, context, peer monitoring and feedback, hierarchy, custom, and repetition play a part in acquiring them and maintaining them. An anthropology of vision contributes an analytical but context-relevant approach to what goes on when we use our eyes in competent ways in real-life settings: these are social and multisensorial settings that enroll a number of artifacts.

The skilled vision approach builds on relevant studies of situated learning and distributed cognition, considering how structured contexts enable specific cognitive and social relationships and especially considering how humans learn to relate to tools, models, and values within sociotechnical networks. Charles Goodwin (1994), a linguistic anthropologist, used techniques of discourse analysis to study “professional vision” in scientific and professional sites of interaction, for example in airports and laboratories, among the police force, and in archaeology fieldwork sites. In this and following studies, he observed how relevant amounts of hesitation and discursive negotiations happen around the situated practices of identification, classification, and ordering of visual data through coding and highlighting techniques. Even in laboratory practice, apparently self-evident states of things are debated, focused, and confirmed through a number of devices and mediations, including conversational, artifactual, often multisensory cues (such as auditory *and* visual). The skilled vision approach owes much to this investigation of “professional vision” as a form of practical and contextual engagement, analyzing the distinctive routines of action and discursive interactions that enable specific acts of looking. Standards and models need to be made *operational* in context, through hands-on solutions, tinkering, and recognized gestures. In other words, there must be an *apprenticeship* of standards.

However, skilled vision does not only pertain to the anthropological study of scientific knowledge and practice. A *skilled vision* approach considers vision as a realm of social expertise that depends on trained perception within a structured environment. Looking is a culturally inculcated and socially performed “technique of the body” in the Maussian sense. Learning how to look at the world is a complex form of apprenticeship. Learning how to decipher objects, events, and environments is a social and relational, as well as a cognitive, form of apprenticeship. Different communities of practice engage differently with seeing and knowing. Any “schooling of the eye” thus results in a sensibility that is developed and confirmed through repeated *acts of looking* and is at once aesthetic, moral, functional, and normative.

Grasseni (2009a) developed the concept of skilled visions with regard to her ethnography among dairy farmers in northern Italy, studying the educated capacity of breed inspectors and cattle-fair judges to visualize the animal body in terms of “functional” beauty (see Figure 1). Criteria of bovine beauty are not abstract—in the



Figure 1 A cow fair in Val Taleggio, Italy, October 2010.

trade, they respond to productivity requirements, what is called “morpho-functional evaluation.” This determines the desired shape of the animal (which traits are selected for progeny) but also which angles the animal is viewed from (typically from behind, to evaluate the udder and the so-called structural width). This corpus of technical knowledge is codified in international standards that direct and orient the looks of breed experts. A number of artifacts—from posters to professional magazines to actual textbooks—mobilize and translate such standards. However, they are especially incorporated and socialized in small talk, public events, and private spaces such as those of visits and play. Models render perceptual expectations adequate to prescribed standards. On the other hand, reality itself (in this case animal shapes) is ordered, improved, and ranked according to those expectations. This is of course not just a “professional” vision but a moral vision, which performs hegemonic expectations about what animals are for (e.g., milk or meat) and what they *should* look like, often offering a language to categorize the world beyond dairy breeding. At cattle fairs, judges rank animals in their order of preference and explain to the public which trait makes each animal superior to the one just following. Such veritable lectures confirm the authority of the breed expert and inculcate functional criteria in the audience (mostly practitioners themselves).

Aesthetic apprenticeship shapes and articulates an entire “ecology of belonging”—namely the environment, both social and material—that allows, encourages, and confirms membership of a specific community of lookers. These will share, often tacitly,

certain techniques, standards, and gestures: ways of looking. Visual apprenticeship does not deal with the eye alone but also with a concurrent multisensorial “enskillment.” In the ethnographic example already mentioned, even though judges only look, they are ready to touch if they feel that something is amiss—an udder swollen with mastitis, for instance, would feel hot at the touch. Some farmers claim that they not only know each of their cows by name but also can tell how they are by the way they return their looks. Visual expertise endorses certain preferences and sensibilities. In the circles of progeny breeding, cattle that are not “improved,” namely cross-bred with progeny bulls, elicit a gut-feeling reaction not only of aesthetic repugnance but also of outright moral disapproval. Conversely, high-yield cows are dismissed as “anorexic pin-ups” by the critics of agricultural intensification, which they say turns cattle into “milk machines.” This animosity extends beyond animal shapes to an entire worldview: for example, to Brown breeders, Friesians look “stupefied,” fragile, and deformed by excessive udders. The point about developing a skilled vision approach to such localized and sometimes parochial ways of looking is that—like everything—these ways of looking have a history. For example, the history of agrarian change and agricultural development is relevant to the skilled vision of progeny breeders, since their models build on a tradition of animal portraiture that was established in the England of the agricultural revolution. Since the end of the eighteenth century, the representation of bovine shapes has followed and documented a normalization of breeding aesthetics geared toward “functional” bodies.

This and other examples show how looking is a culturally situated capacity that is learned, embodied, and socialized in specific ways in heavily layered and structured sociohistorical contexts. Each task defines a community of viewers that receive a sensorial and cultural apprenticeship, through intense practices of narration, evaluation, and standard setting involving experts, peers, and novices. To study skilled visions in a social anthropological way is thus radically different from seeking to decipher and model the workings of visual perception. We “see” in certain ways: not only due to the physiological wiring that we share universally, not only thanks to habituated resonance with distinctive environments, but also according to how we have been taught to look at the world. Looking is not just perception but a form of cultural orientation in the world. As a result, specific forms of skilled vision can be esoteric or even exotic for the outsider, but are spontaneously applied on an everyday basis by the initiated. Rethinking vision as a daily practice of competent looking allows one to trace the contours of multiple ecologies of belonging, situating visual knowledge in complex social and historical settings, shaped by hegemony, subjectivities, and stereotypes. These configure collectively held rules—often tacit—of performative, intentional, and discerning looking. They require one to position oneself: to define and articulate what is being seen in prescribed ways. As such, skilled vision is both historical and phenomenological, social and embodied.

Sensory studies, as an expanding field featuring volumes on sonic, olfactory, and tactile cultural histories, still feature a limited number of ethnographic investigations of visibility. In fact, the reappropriation of the sensorium as a legitimate object of study has somewhat gone hand in hand with equating vision to the Western “gaze” *tout court*. Vision is often described as a distancing, domineering, or “perspectivalist” sense: inevitably enacting surveillance, or mapping and cataloging other cultures in

anachronistic ways. In contrast, visual ethnographers study how visual apprenticeship actually takes place: people learn to perceive in ways that remain opaque to those who do not share the same apprenticeship. Ethnographers ask: How do people learn to decipher their professional, material, and social environment? Further, how do specific ways of looking harness perception to a sense of identity and belonging? This is often a fuzzy, complex, hard-to-pin-down process and frequently entails issues of power, hegemony, and hierarchy.

A number of practicing ethnographers use the skilled vision approach to analyze and describe relevant dynamic and relational accounts of how sensescales are informed, structured, and managed. Kenny Fountain (2014) points out how the “trained vision” of anatomy students learning from postmortem examinations is shaped by a number of relevant rhetorics: professional, moral, and aesthetic. Barry Saunders identifies the “narrative of intrigue” (2007, 148) and the language of beauty with which instructors orient their trainees in diagnostic imaging in US teaching hospitals: “social structures of pedagogy” are set by the standards of charismatic teachers in the computed tomography reading room, inculcating “rules of thumb” and anecdotal testimony in social settings that are both peer-supported and competitive. Rupert Cox (2011) describes the “tactile vision” characterizing his Zen apprenticeship into arts practices such as the tea ceremony. In contrast, Thorsten Gieser (2014) critiques the neoliberal configuration of labor organization, which actively inhibits “enskillment” in horticulture and forestry because it does not allow time for apprenticeship and the acquisition of relevant embodied knowledge. Doctoral research in food activism by Silvia Contessi (2015) in northern Italy shows how alternative provisioning schemes are not always informed by the necessary skills that allow one to appreciate paramount issues in organic farming, such as soil contamination. Conversely, Contessi explains, technicians working in environmental pollution control tests confirm that what we expect to be “objective” and “standard” measurements in scientific practice are down to operational, “subjective” decisions. First there is the *calibration* of the instruments, which are set up to look for certain molecules and not others. One should know what kind of pollutant one is looking for beforehand. Second, it is ultimately a decision of the operator whether the spectrometer reading obtained from sampled water mimics the curve of a model pollutant, or another, or none. Such comparisons are made at sight. One should consider that, when substituting this decision with a calibrated instrument, the subjectivity of judgment is simply delegated to the act of calibration itself—once and for all—and thus becomes invisible.

This scholarship shows how expert judgment, decision, and action require enskillment across multiple perceptual sensescales and give rise to localized moral and aesthetic sensibilities. “Visual anthropologists” are often ethnographic filmmakers or practicing photographers; alternatively they may be scholars of visual culture, or they may cultivate the anthropology of photography or of sound. The skilled vision approach takes stock of the methodological approach of sensory ethnography to develop an anthropology “of vision,” which requires the development of congenial methods, adapted to specific contexts and fields, in order to carry out “visual ethnography,” the participant observation of human practices of watching. For example, Anja Dreschke (2011) develops a skilled vision approach through film, exploring how communities of amateurs reenact the lifeworld of the Huns in a dialectic relationship with German

carnival traditions. The characteristic styles of clothing and of assembling period artifacts in each band are subtly differentiated and only detected by the initiated—a phenomenon described as achieving a “hunnische Blick” (Hunnic eye) (Dreschke 2016). In her research, Dreschke employs the concept of “skilled vision” to describe this internal perspective and its making.

Since skilled vision is shared by members of a community of practice (the surgeon’s discernment, the “hunnic gaze,” the breeder’s “functional aesthetics” of bovine beauty), it is literally commonsensical: like stereotypes and “common places” (Grasseni 2009b), it is tacitly applied as a shared sensory framework *and* a pair of conceptual glasses—unless questioned, internally debated, or otherwise articulated and staged in the effort of passing it on to apprentices. Thus the concept of skilled vision categorizes the processes of naturalization of very locally defined ways of looking, which can be ethnographically described. These are relevant to the understanding not only of professional activities but also of belonging, identity, and ultimately stereotypical expectations.

SEE ALSO: Caste; Corporeal Vision; Embodied Cognition; Embodied Learning; House Societies; Montage; Senses, Anthropology of; Techniques of the Body; Visual Anthropology

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