

Sight Unseen

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The paper explores some of the ways in which the culture of the image, of hyper-visibility, in particular the expansive reach of aestheticisation, actively creates and at the same time, works to conceal a substrate, a base or structural condition of unsustainability. Here, unsustainability, which is at best a problematic term, refers to a situation in which the possibility of the continuity and flourishing of the diversity of all that we and much else depend upon is ever diminishing as the result of human actions. The term unsustainability is most often associated with negative biophysical impacts like the polluting of water and air, destruction of forests, climate change induced by accumulative emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases. It is not as well recognised that unsustainability is multifaceted. It can also be seen as the impacts of all kinds of everyday modes of thinking and acting, and especially in the ways in which we design, make, dwell in and use the artificial materiality of our dependence.¹

In its concern with questions of the visual and visibility, this paper has some parallels with the contemporary theoretical enquiry into the nature of visibility and ocularcentric culture (see, for example, the work of David Michael Levin, Martin Jay²), the project of which is to better understand the hegemony of the visual within western culture, its systems of representation and the implications of the privileging of ocular observation as a path to knowledge (i.e., ocularcentrism). This paper also seeks to explore some of the consequences of the dominance of visibility, but it is more specific — it is about unravelling the ways in which certain kinds of learnt and inducted ways of looking, certain dispositions of seeing, act to conceal. This unravelling is an essential part of unmaking (one of this conference's themes) — it is tempting to say, while recognising the contradiction — to make certain ways of seeing visible.

What follows comes out of the context of the EcoDesign Foundation's theoretical work on seeking to understand unsustainability as materially inscribed in the designed objects, environments, infrastructures and systems of the everyday, and thus, unsustainability as something that is lived, rather than 'out there'. The contention is that there cannot be a shift towards sustainability (as direction, process or outcomes) while the nature of unsustainability remains unexamined, or while it is defined exclusively in terms of empirical measurement of biophysical impacts and sought to be dealt

¹ A detailed exploration of the nature of unsustainability is beyond this paper's scope. See instead Tony Fry *A New Design Philosophy: An Introduction to Defuturing* Sydney: UNSW Press, 1999.

² David Michael Levin *The Opening of Vision* New York: Routledge, 1988 and in particular the essays by Levin and Martin Jay in Levin (ed.) *Modernity of the Hegemony of Vision* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.

with solely by politically expedient means (such as the Rio Earth Summit and the now-in-tatters Kyoto Protocol). Sustainability as a theoretically informed, cultural project has hardly begun.

The other compulsion to embark on this enquiry comes from a sense of the circumscribed way in which the visual has been rendered as a problem of engagement by cultural theorists such as Jay and Levin. Certainly their recent critique of ocularcentrism has productively destabilised assumptions about the-image-as-truth (as did the project of semiotics) and has brought to a wider readership some important philosophical debates concerning the limitations of the sight-based model of knowledge (not least of which is the erasure of the body and its immersion in the world). But there are significant limitations to the potential agency of Levin et al's critique of the culture of the image, arising from:

1. A failure to take the enquiry beyond academic concerns, this linked to a lack of recognition of the material implications of different kinds of visual practices and ways of seeing, and of how they are formative of subjectivities that act in the world with further material consequences;
2. A collapsing of seeing, the visual and the image into each other, this sometimes connected to a preoccupation with a politics of representation which puts faith in aesthetic strategies of 'deconstruction', defamiliarisation ('making strange') and the like. Thus the critique of the visual never escapes the frame of the image. (One could say, to be fair, this is more characteristic of the work of artists and art theorists who have appropriated the critique of ocularcentrism.)

While acknowledging these limitations, it has to be admitted that any attempt to think about the visual is fraught. It seems impossible to get a distance on 'it' because of the inescapable tendency to rely on visual metaphors. This proposition itself falls into the ocularcentric assumption that truth/knowledge is basically a matter of finding the correct manner of observation. So even when it is the image or images that are designated as the problem, it is very difficult to escape the ocularcentric mode of thinking, especially for westerners who have had it inscribed into their consciousness since antiquity.

Everyday language is full of designations which equate seeing with knowing: 'I see'; 'I get the picture'; 'insight'. The visual is everywhere in language as much as images are present materially and immaterially as part of our environments of living. Furthermore, the ocularcentric tradition we have inherited (and which thinks through us) privileges sight as the path to truth: 'the evidence of one's eyes', 'seeing is believing', etc. This comes from the early Greeks who established 'beholding as the royal route to primordial and genuine truth'.³

³ Martin Heidegger *Being and Time* (trans. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson) Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962, p. 215.

In his reading of early texts of Greek thought, Martin Heidegger identified a key moment, which was when “there comes to the fore, the impulse . . . of a looking-at that sunders and compartmentalises”.⁴ The Greeks were acquainted with two senses of truth: first as unconcealedness (openness of beings) and then as the assimilation of a representation to beings (correctness).⁵ In his reading of Plato’s allegory of the cave as ‘Plato’s Doctrine of Truth’ Heidegger made an important distinction — that ‘as unhiddenness, truth is still a fundamental trait of beings themselves. But as the correctness of the ‘gaze’, it becomes a characteristic of human comportment towards beings’.⁶ In the cave allegory, thinking goes beyond those things that are experienced in the form of mere shadows and images, and goes out towards these things, namely, the ideas.⁷ This allegory, according to Heidegger is an outline of the basics of metaphysics.

Many centuries later, truth as correctness of the gaze became the basis of Cartesian rationalism. Vision was the model of knowledge for Descartes, and the theory of consciousness his thinking inaugurated was one in which there is a clear divide between observer and the observed, ‘a disembodied observer seeing with his mind’s eye’ as Jay puts it.⁸ ‘The look that sunders and compartmentalises’ became normative and integral to the development of Western culture (as cause and effect) — the foundation of science, exploration, art, technology and much else. Framed by modes of representation, correctness became a question of correspondence between sign and referent, and was codified into realist representational practices from classical sculpture, then later, with the invention of perspective, through to painting, photography, then moving image, then moving image plus sound . . . and so on. The drive was towards ever more ‘accurate’ techniques of the real which reached their apotheosis in analogue systems of representation, but which today have mutated into digitised simulations of themselves. (Images generated by binary code no longer have any ‘organic’ link to their referents, unlike photographic images which are ‘caused by’ light bouncing off things and registering via chemical processes on film — today correctness of appearance still rules, but no longer with any contiguity between image and referent.)

What is significant from this quickly sketched account is not the question of ‘where does truth lie?’ or whether some totally other representation system (if we could even imagine it) might be truer. But what is significant is the continuity and the gathering pace of the domination of appearance, and its material consequences.

⁴ Quoted by Martin Jay, ‘Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and the search for a new ontology of sight’ in David Michael Levin *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, p. 146.

⁵ Martin Heidegger *Basic Questions of Philosophy* (trans. R.Rojcewicz & Andre Schuwer) Indiana University Press, 1994, p. 95.

⁶ Martin Heidegger *Pathmarks* (ed. William Mc Neill) Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 177.

⁷ *Ibid* p. 180.

⁸ Jay *op cit* p. 171. The precise nature of Descartes ocularcentrism is complex and a matter of debate, some arguing that his faith in vision undoes itself as he elaborates his theory of rationality. See different interpretations in the essays by Judovitz, Houlgate and Romanyshyn in Levin’s *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*.

‘The domination of appearance’ is perhaps a clumsy way of naming a significant part of the contemporary cultural condition. Let’s try to be a bit more specific:

1. First, there is *appearance as knowledge*: truth as correspondence, as a cultural substrate, a basis of western rationalism.
2. Then (and this is more contemporary, able to be traced back a number of decades, but probably not much more than a century) there is *appearance as desire*. What is meant here is the Aristotelian notion of desire depending upon an external object of attraction, as linked to the rise of the sign-driven economy with its creation of desire through the look, the image, style, brand identity; here too is the dominance of the televisual, of spectacle, of the hyper-real.

Actually, appearance-as-truth and appearance-as-desire are harder to separate operationally. They fuse in and as the sign-driven economy of late hyper-capitalism, in which occularcentric rationality observes behaviours, quantifies trends and accordingly rationally constructs the commodity world of appearances on the basis of calculated appeal. Market intelligence, trend-spotting, categorisation of demographics and niche markets — there is a panoply of para-empirical techniques for mining the shifting sands of desire in order to ‘hit the spot’ and create products with the right look, colours, sights, sounds and meanings. The political economy of the sign may be calculated and rational, but is built upon the foundation of the irrationality of desire.

The economy of appearances is vast and diverse, ranging from the mass appeal of techno-realism (such as computer games and cinema special effects) through to the more subtle imagery and precious objects that capture the appreciative gaze of the art critic or connoisseur. These are two extremes deliberately cited for juxtaposition. Others could substitute just as well to evoke aesthetic incommensurability — the DIY home decorator and the avant-garde film-maker, for example. The key point is that diverse types of cultural production and the dispositions associated with them in fact share a condition of increasing rupture between worldly appearance and the material relations of worlds. By implication, the economy of appearances is not limited to visual representations of things, it also includes manufactured products, materials, buildings and whole environments as they are designed to appeal to the eye.

Contemporary environments of dwelling are increasingly becoming worlds of appearance. In a certain way, we live within the televisual and the computer screen as they are designed (and as they design) according to ever-changing and ever-more nuanced genres of style. It is more and more possible to think it possible to dwell entirely within the domain of appearances, in which things of the world (clothing, food, furnishings, apartments, cars, appliances, holiday destinations, etc) come to presence primarily as image and style, with their materiality and the relations that constitute that materiality,

rendered obscure. The recent evolution of car design (technically and as imaged), exemplifies this well. Consider that as their various functions have increasingly become powered by electronic control systems, the possibility of the car owner ‘tinkering about’ to learn how the car works, is less viable. At the same time cars are increasingly marketed as pure image and ambience, with style and comfort foregrounded — portable ‘climate controlled’ environments and mobile signs to lust after.

Within this universalisation of a culture of appearance (staged as multicultures), proliferating differences become underpinned by the same. Here is the relentless progress of human beings towards petit embourgeoisment⁹ — drawn in by the spectacle and prefigured expectations of greater variety of food, comfort, minimisation of exertion, greater convenience and more leisure time. Within this manufactured and delivered culture artists, designers and other creative professionals are becoming more important not least because of their self-conscious relation to visual aesthetics. Those for whom questions of style, taste, fashion and the making of fine discriminations loom large are driving the turnover of trends. Their cultural labour is being channelled towards the creation of new markets and new modes of consumption, this in turn fuelling material production and its impacts (greenhouse emissions, pollutants and waste arising from the manufacturing, distribution, display and marketing of goods). But immaterial impacts are just as pervasive and perhaps more damaging. The efforts of designers and their promoters in elevating the cultural space of ‘designer design’ is extending the milieu of style and brand consciousness. Aesthetically designed products, clothing and environments are not just seen, desired and purchased. They also design those who buy them, wear them and live in them as the ‘design aware’, increasing the visibility of design while obscuring its structural presence. What is being evoked here is the colonisation of imaginations that occurs in an image-saturated environment. One instance of this is the way in which even young children are now brand aware (and not just about snack food and toys) because they are specifically targeted as purchasers or as influential on other purchasers (namely their parents, marketers referring to this as ‘pester power’). In a bizarre double move, imagery, colours and motifs are carefully engineered to appeal to children to appropriate as ‘theirs’.

More subtly and more powerfully, the culture of appearances has created a normative condition which has become a mode of being. The enormous weight of that which appears stands for the totality of that which is. We are blinded by the seduction of appearances.

⁹ Pierre Bourdieu wrote about the petite bourgeoisie concern for appearance: “the middle classes are committed to the symbolic. Their concern for appearance ... is also a source of their pretension, a permanent disposition towards the bluff or usurpation of social identity which consists in anticipating ‘being’ by ‘seeming’, appropriating the appearances so as to have the reality, the nominal so as to have the real Torn by all the contradictions between an objectively dominated condition and would-be participation in the dominant values, the petit bourgeois is haunted by the appearance he offers to others and the judgement they make of it. He constantly overshoots the mark for fear of falling short, betraying his uncertainty and anxiety about belonging in his anxiety to show or give the impression that he belongs.” *Distinction* (trans R. Nice) London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986 (orig. pub. 1979) p. 253. While problematic in its assumption of a binary authentic/inauthentic identity,

The work of designers is frequently to create the materiality of inauthenticity. But they do this in circumstances that are pre-designed. To take an example, let's ask 'what do the appearances of modern materials hide?'

Materials such as plastics, composites and metals do not hide a truth of essences. Certainly, in their increasing abstraction, refinement and complexity they conceal their material origins. This is true whether we are talking about a smooth plastic surface or an electronic image on the screen. The black box forms of the appearance of the late modern world make it ever more difficult to discern the raw materials and manufacturing processes that have gone into the objects and environments all around us. The designed, technologised, delivered artificial has become completely natural for us (what Tony Fry has called 'the naturalised artificial'¹⁰). All this stuff that makes up our environment simply declares itself as objects, surfaces, structures, useful things, beautiful things, amusing things, stylish things, without a blush of embarrassment about distant lost origins in the crust of the earth, a forest somewhere, water taken from rivers for industrial processes or the resultant damage to air, atmosphere, water and earth (to say nothing of the human and other lives that have suffered along the way in the process of making). When origins are declared (as with the aesthetic of 'natural timber') it is a self-conscious gesture and an unrecognised lament. The forced quality and the irrelevance of speculations such as 'what is the material composition of a CD?' is testimony to the massive concealment upon which our material culture is built. But this is not a conspiracy. Concealment is unwittingly built in to the nature of contemporary manufactured things. In order to function in made worlds all we are required to do is appraise appearances and interact with interfaces. In this sense, inauthenticity has become a structural condition.

What is also concealed by appearances is the inauthentic as the normative condition. This could almost be a description of what Jean Baudrillard achieved in laying bare the practice of interior design in his *System of Objects*.¹¹ Here he argued that 'the authentic antique' (for instance) in the functionalised modern world only declares the irrelevance of the values it stands for, such as craft labour. On colour, he made the point that rather than being 'liberated' from nature and traditional symbology into 'sheer expressiveness' as modernist art claimed, colour has ended up as part of the arsenal of the professional interior decorator — colours become interchangeable elements in the 'engineering of mood and atmosphere'. While Baudrillard peeled back the cultural layers of the meanings of colour, he overlooked another concealment wrought by the appeal of coloured surfaces, which is the

Bourdieu's description here is nevertheless evocative, and worth rethinking beyond its moment of writing when class was still an operative category.

¹⁰ See Tony Fry *Remakings: Ecology, Design, Philosophy* Sydney: Envirobook, 1994, especially the essay 'Conservation of the Artificial'.

¹¹ Jean Baudrillard *The System of Objects* (trans. James Benedict) London: Verso, 1996, p. 41-3.

manufactured materiality of colour. Colour is industrially produced. What is marketed as pure colour — paints and dyes — are products of mining and petrochemical industries. The production of colour-rich household and industrial paints entails massive impacts, like wastewater laden with heavy metals that contaminate waterways and do damage to aquatic ecosystems, while volatile organic compounds (VOCs) contained in solvents are released into the atmosphere during manufacture and application, contributing to the formation of smog. Paint is promoted to householders via advertisements and paint charts with endless colour varieties, along with instructions about ‘this-goes-with-this, advice on how to achieve mood effects and encouragement to ‘do a makeover’ and ‘colour-your-life’. All of this downplays the practical function of paint, that of surface protection, in favour of its sign value. The focus is upon pure colour and final effect, while the necessary preparatory work — scraping, sanding, filling, is relegated to the fine print on the paint can — mere annoying tasks to be done before the desirable effort of applying the magical transforming substance can begin.

Paint has become an essential element of decor, as part of the wider phenomenon of home-making as an aesthetic project. Vast numbers of magazines, TV shows and marketing campaigns deploy seductive imagery to induct readers and viewers into style, colour and brand consciousness. Being able to identify styles and keeping up with trends in colour schemes and furnishings, is part of acquiring cultural capital, with aesthetic choices on display in the home being a significant way of ‘making a statement’. The ways of looking and the modes of judgement required to play this cultural game (and many others such as keeping up with clothing fashions) tend to hover at the surface, having little interest in physical structure and substrate, in how something has been manufactured, how it has been fabricated to endure (or not) in a particular way in the world. Such practicalities are screened out or assumed as already resolved. For the consumer subject ‘substance’ is either actually invisible (concealed beneath surfaces) or just not noticed at all because of its aesthetic irrelevance. Only that which is given cultural and economic value (style, colour, model, price, etc) is seen. What is not valued is frequently literally not seen. So, it is not so much that appearances *per se* conceal the nature of things (such as the casing that hides the working parts of equipment), but rather, that a culturally produced concern for appearances (a valuing of appearance) creates a blindness to that which cannot be incorporated as aesthetic.¹²

Modes of seeing are not separate from modes of thinking and projective valuing. Modes of thinking and valuing direct the gaze, focus the attention on some things and not others, overlook certain things, are oblivious to others and lavish minute attention on yet others. Here is the domain of the culture of

¹² Though the two are of course linked, in that the tradition of concealing the working guts of machinery, equipment, etc is predicated upon an aesthetic premise that it is ‘not attractive’. Furthermore, as this became inscribed as a standard practice of industrial design, with the styling of casings and bodies (as in car bodies) foregrounded, consumer tastes and expectation became thus moulded.

neglectful affluence, where deskilling is presented as liberation from routine tasks (promises of more ‘quality time’), incompetence is nurtured, and made things are infinitely substitutable.

The aestheticised mode of seeing has become an ontology, i.e., a situated mode of being comfortably occupied by (many) human subjects. Furthermore, it is an ontology which contributes to unsustainability. This because it is made up of habits and behaviours formed through dwelling in made environments designed to amuse, entertain, to provoke desire; environments that operate according to a rationale of novelty, visual appeal, obsolescence, disposability, and above all, non-relationality.

The aesthetic is part and parcel of the everyday. In that sense ‘we’ are not apart from it. Yet the aesthetic disposition is predicated upon a standing-back-and-looking-at: be it a scenic view, a piece of furniture we’re contemplating buying or the image in the change-room mirror when trying on clothes. A certain distancing, a certain objectification of place, home and self is a significant part of aestheticised consumer ontology. Here is the distant echo of the gaze of the early Greeks that ‘sunders and compartmentalises’.

This is the historically formed world in which we find ourselves, made up of taken-for-granted concepts (but not necessarily even thought of as ‘concepts’) of ‘self’, ‘thing’, ‘world’ and much else.

At the beginning of this paper, the two senses of truth of the early Greeks (according to Heidegger’s reading) were evoked:

1. Truth as unconcealedness (openness of beings), in which truth is still a fundamental trait of beings themselves and then,
2. Truth as the assimilation of a representation to beings, in which truth becomes a matter of ‘correctness’ and thus a characteristic of human comportment towards beings.

Our culture has been formed (and continues to be) in the second mode. The assertion is that we need to find ways to shift to the first mode. ‘What is’ has been sought to be understood and henceforth appropriated according to the model of truth as correctness, thus so much remains actually concealed. But because of the transformative effects of human appropriation, what is available to be disclosed now can no longer be a truth about nature, the given or the essential nature of the given, but only about the nature of the made, which is itself withdrawing ever more into mystery. Nevertheless, such an uncovering is a vital task, and it requires modes of seeing and valuing which are not those of the aesthetic, but ones which places sustainability to the fore.

To say it is necessary to bring sustainability to the fore raises new issues of the problem of visibility. It requires making the unsustainable visible. But this must not collapse into the exhausted, flawed strategies of populist environmentalism that focus upon symptomatic spectacles — dead fish in

polluted rivers, felled rainforests, depleted land and so on. These precisely are images that sunder and compartmentalise, that don't acknowledge everyday normality as structurally unsustainable.

'Seeking to understand the nature of things in themselves' and 'bringing sustainability to the fore' are by necessity reciprocal projects, this because a fundamental basis of unsustainability is the withdrawal of things into designated, circumscribed functionality (whether aestheticised or not) and our diminishing ability to perceive things as otherwise. This comment clearly signals a major and substantial shift, thus only its general outlines can be indicated. Given what has been said about the aesthetic disposition as a designed ontology, the necessary project now is that of ontological design, a project of the unmaking and remaking of the material-immaterial continuum of worldly encounter, in order to dispose people to it and to things, differently.¹³ What needs to be displaced is an aesthetic seeing that overlooks, that is unable to see things as matter-in-process, changing in and as time, as matter that matters, as that which requires attention, care and judicious use. What is being evoked is a redesigned materiality of dwelling that invites different modes of seeing — such as informed circumspection rather than idle curiosity and amusement of the gaze.¹⁴

We need to be at war with how things have been designed and made to be. There is a whole world to unmake and to remake.

4,370 words including footnotes.

¹³ For an elaboration of ontological design see Fry *A New Design Philosophy* op cit or Anne-Marie Willis, 'Redirective Practice: Ontological Design' in *Design Cultures*, proceedings of the second conference of the European Academy of Design, University of Sheffield, April 1999.

¹⁴ Certainly in this pursuit Heidegger provides many other ideas worth further exploring. Take curiosity, for example, which he identifies as a deficient mode of being because it is seeing just in order to see 'not in order to understand what is seen' Curiosity 'seeks restlessness and the excitement of continual novelty and changing encounters...it is concerned with the constant possibility of distraction. Curiosity has nothing to do with observing entities and marvelling at them ... To be amazed to the point of not understanding is something in which it has no interest. Rather it concerns itself with a kind of knowing, but just in order to have known' (vast domains of popular entertainment can thus be explained). *Being and Time* op cit, p. 216.