This is the published version of a chapter published in *Engaging with Educational Space: Visualizing Spaces of Teaching and Learning*.

Citation for the original published chapter:

Boström, U. (2014)
Seeing is Knowing, or The Creation of a "New Real".
In: Catherine Burke, Ian Grosvenor & Björn Norlin (ed.), *Engaging with Educational Space: Visualizing Spaces of Teaching and Learning* Umeå: Institutionen för idé- och samhällsstudier

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published chapter.

Permanent link to this version:
http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:isbn:se:umu:diva-96359
In addressing the value of the visual in educational research, the present project has been greatly influenced by articles in the anthology *Visual History*, featuring papers from the EERA conference in Edinburgh in 2000, and the art of Darcy Lang. The specific question the present essay intends to examine is the subjectivity of the visual as a source of common knowledge. The aim of the documents examined is to find out what kind of knowledge is perceivable in its visual form.

Teachers and pupils were asked to photograph what they commonly saw in everyday school situations. Their photos were then examined in accordance with the notion of the visual as central to how we perceive the world, a notion that has evolved with the discovery of technical devices like the camera obscura, the microscope and the camera. The philosophical issues of the real, the perception of the real and whether or not we can trust our senses to perceive the real remain unresolved.

The subjective understanding of the real is conspicuous when dealing with the subjectivity of the visual. While the photographer constructs what we see as real by choosing what to show through framing, lightning, sharpness, and technical aids, the results are nevertheless powerful arguments in the language of the visual. Two epistemological questions emerge: How is knowledge acquired? To what extent is it possible for a given subject or entity to be known? My original intent was to discover whether or not it was possible to capture the look of understanding. I believed that I had a clear idea of what my

pupils look like in the classroom, how they look at me distractedly or stare out the window, or move around, tired, trying to stay awake. But I also had a vague sense that, once in a while, caught a glimpse of clarity in their eyes. I wanted to see if it was possible to capture that look visually. I wanted to capture the moment that knowledge is acquired while at the same time determining whether that kind of visual knowledge, as described above, was even possible. Thus in this project, the signs of learning or the signified becomes the signifier.

A third perspective is the historical perspective. In *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, Jonathan Crary writes: “the problem of the observer is the field on which vision in history can be said to materialise, to become itself visible”.

He concludes that vision is (of course) inseparable from the observing subject, who is both a historical product and the creator of historical products. There is also the problem of how to categorise the visual knowledge attained from this examination as well as the discourses that shape the respective pupils’ views of their school environment. For there is always a discourse of knowledge behind each perception and understanding, vision and interpretation, or as William Blake puts it: “Every Eye sees differently as the Eye — such the object”. Since there is no true natural there is no real reality. Rousseau also describes the social impact of human understanding as “the senses 'have been taught'”.

**Representation**

As argued above, the notion of reality is something more conventional and artificial. In *Picture Theory*, W.J.T. Mitchell states: ”What is at issue in realism is how things appear, not how they are. So realism is more a style of representation.” Mitchell argues further that style is “functionally related to

---

70 William Blake quoted in Crary (1992), 70.
Photographs are often treated as facts, objective sources of information. But pictures do not offer a "transparent window" into the past. Pictures need to be read as texts and they are created within certain cultural discourses. Recent research deals with the way in which space is affects the pupils and teachers in respective environments.

A single photograph contains many layers of understanding. One can choose to understand them as signs, in accordance with Saussure. Concepts of interest include what he terms the signifier, the material, and the signified. As historians, we can view them as "transparent reflections of the past". But photographs have the ability to stop time, which raises a problematic issue; "the photograph takes its subject out of history: every photograph "has no before or after: it represents only the moment of its own making". Susan Sontag broaches the same issue in On Photography: "After the event has ended, the picture will still exist, conferring to the event a kind of immortality (and importance) it would never otherwise have enjoyed".

These pictorial theories lead my study to clash with reality. How true is an image? Is a photograph a reliable historical source at all? Is there something missing? What kind of truth did the pupils’ documents reveal?

**Method**

My original plan was to involve two pupils who are relatively close to take photos of each other over the course of a school day, documenting their everyday, trying to catch the little things. By giving the pupils control, I hoped to attain a more objective and honest documentary material compared to what one might achieve by having an outside photographer take pictures of what he or she thought was going on in school at that particular time and place. Having the pupils perform the task would also avoid leaving holes in the documentation, since

---

74 Ibid.
75 Mietzner, Myers and Peim (2005), 13.
76 Grosvenor (1999), 86.
77 Quote of G. Clarke in Grosvenor (1999), 87.
they live the life being documented and therefore lend the project continuity. We discussed their assignment and the problem of taking the most natural looking pictures. They started out by taking turns trying to catch each other listening to the teacher, taking notes and working. After a while, a third girl was invited to take part in the project. She became the photographer, documenting the other two. It was made clear that she should be thorough; each and every class was to be documented. I also filmed two of my lessons, in order to have a neutral template with which to compare my view of the classroom with their pictures. Influenced by the work of Darcy Lang, an artist from New Zealand who filmed pupils watching themselves on film, I wanted to see how his method would work in my specific context. “I showed my film to three pupils and then filmed their spontaneous reactions, which would have been far more difficult and time-consuming to capture in words.

Figure 1. Photo by students (2012).
This is what they saw as the most representative of their pictures. This image captured what it looks like going to school in 2012 in Stockholm.

Figure 2. Photo by students (2012).
This is more the feeling they captured, what it feels like going to school. It is a look of indifference.

79 The Ikon Gallery, an exhibition guide about Darcy Lange: *Work Studies in Schools*, filmed across a total of seven different schools in two cities, firstly in Birmingham during 1976 and later in Oxford in 1977. “By showing the classroom footage to his subjects, and then recording interviews with them on their reactions to seeing themselves on video, the artist formalised a process of looking, thinking and responding that was intended to empower those he filmed. He believed this would produce a study that was as objective as possible, because it embodied different points of view”. Ibid.
In the final stage, I discussed the pictures with the pupils. I documented their reflections on learning and what they had captured, what they saw.

Results

Did they value their classroom environments differently? Were they of the opinion that some classrooms were more advantageous to learning than others? Should their answers and documentation be evaluated in light of what the environment does to their learning?

Comparing my film with their photos, they thought the former revealed more. There were three things that really caught their attention and surprised them — that they sat quite still, that they looked somewhat indifferent, and that they looked tired. Their surprise surprised me. The “look of understanding” seemed nowhere to be found. Documentation in hand, I wondered if this look could only to be found in my imagination, a teacher’s wishful thinking.

What I saw was this (Figure 3): see page 74 and 75.

Freezing motion and time might well show you things that you did not hitherto realise were there. In a sense, it is more real than the real. The effect was reminiscent of Muybridge’s 1872 attempt to settle the debate over whether or not a galloping horse, at any given moment, left the ground completely, or if it always kept one hoof on the ground. Taken out of context, these images lose their history but attain some kind of immortality as photographs.

Figure 4 was taken in the Darcy Lang tradition, to investigate the historical view of perception, the reaction of seeing oneself in the footage, as seen in the pictures above. The historical perspective consists only of the facts that these images were taken in 2012 and the pupils’ reactions were, at first, overwhelming. The pupils become both a historical product and the creator of historical products.
Did visual documentation clarify what is more real? What do we see? Are we dependent on the context, as mentioned in the introduction?

“The reading of a photograph is always historical”

To make them aware of the somewhat challenging perspective of photography, and how their pictures are now part of history as visual documents of their school at a specific time, as well as what we read into them, I showed them some old school photographs. The old photographs also problematised the context issue. Since my project focuses on the visual as a way of rethinking knowledge and reality, it also affects the pictorial concept of photographs stopping time or at least becoming part of a historical narrative. In discussion, the pupils’ conclusion was that although the historical context was readily apparent, they seemed able to see beyond that and saw the similarities they shared with the historical pupils.

80 Roland Barthes quoted in Grosvenor (1999), 93.
Figure 3. A.
Photo: Ulrika Boström (2012).

Figure 3. B.
Photo: Ulrika Boström (2012).
Figure 3. C.
Photo: Ulrika Boström (2012).

Figure 3. D.
Photo: Ulrika Boström (2012).
This picture provoked heated debate. It was completely spontaneous and showed how clearly we view based on our own experience when we have lost the “whole” picture, so to speak, that is, its context. We do not know the purpose of this picture. Perhaps it was meant to document the work of this specific teacher, since the pupils appear from behind. Two of the girls argued over whether the boy indicated by the circle was cheating or just leaning forward to better see what was written on the blackboard. Obviously both girls read the photograph from their own perspective, with their own eyes. They easily identified themselves with these historical boys and forgot about the context, revealing one way of responding to photographs with an open ending.

Discussion

The objectivity of stopping time evolved and the fact that photographs become autonomous entities withdrawn from history, more exactly the original history of which is was a part, became perceived more clearly. In my case, the problem of perception

became evident. Screening the film for my pupils, they realised things about themselves that were not altogether unproblematic. It made me think of how brutal the moving image remains by showing every perspective of classroom behaviour. Despite all the contemporary technology with which these youngsters are so familiar, they still worry about how their own image is perceived.

In their own documents, where the signifier became the signified, representation was turned around. Rather than the fact that the gaze has the power, or that seeing is knowing, the clash concerned the fact that an image is not easy to place within the framework of reality when it is all a matter of personal interpretation. The observational mode of the film camera brought a more brutal reality into “real educational space”. In “Making Spaces…,” Jane McGregor writes that space is seen as relational both in producing and as a product of interconnecting social practices: "Space is literally made through our interactions”.\(^{82}\) So is the virtual space or the mental gap in our perception. When it comes to film as a documentary medium, mind the gap: the gap between what one perceives as real and the actual real.

Conclusion

Three levels of representation were examined in this essay – pupils watching themselves on film, being documented by film, and turned into moments frozen in time. Though the technology is hardly new to them, being documented made visible things they had no idea where there. When comparing my documentation with that of the pupils, a discussion arose about the look of indifference, not the look of understanding. Their most representative picture of what going to school is like features an active pupil, which leads to a clash over the perception of reality. As the most typical image of what going to school feels like shows a disinterested, indifferent pupil, none of us managed to find a single instance of the true look of understanding. Perhaps this means that the reality of the gaze cannot be ascertained at all. Judging from the pupil’s astonishment, perhaps the images instead helped create something one might call a “new real.”

\(^{82}\) McGregor (2003), 354.