BEYOND PHOTO OPS AND PROPAGANDA: THE ROLE OF VISUAL CULTURE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF POLICY IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of
The School of Continuing Studies
and of
The Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Liberal Studies

By

Sue E. Carlton, B.A.

Georgetown University
Washington, D.C.
November 3, 2011
ABSTRACT

The study of political behavior is typically guided by the specialized vocabularies of political science, sociology, psychology and economics. Yet, the languages of these fields are alien to the daily lives of average citizens. With theories drawn from the ancient Greek polis and the salons of the Enlightenment, contemporary discussions of politics and policy are conducted within the framework of the intellectual life. This approach is more suited for the philosopher and the world of thought rather than the citizen and the world of action.

The writings of Jürgen Habermas provide a framework in which to explore the settings in which people interact. Through his deliberations on the public sphere it is possible to gauge citizen behavior on more representative benchmarks. Habermas provides a context in which to place authoritatively the visual in opinion development.

The role of the visual is largely unrecognized in the analysis of political behavior. The contemporary emphasis on the theoretical and analytic should not overlook the obvious routines of daily by which art informs the public sphere.
# CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER I. VISUAL CULTURE AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section I. Jürgen Habermas and the Public Sphere</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section II. David Freedberg: Definitions and Themes</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section III. Communication: Visual, Oral, and Written</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER II. VISUAL CULTURE AS A CATALYST FOR PUBLIC DEBATE</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER III. PUBLIC POLICY CASE STUDIES</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section I. National Endowment for the Arts Awards to Mapplethorpe and Serrano</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section II. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section III. The Children’s Holocaust Museum</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER IV. RECOGNIZING THE POWER OF IMAGES IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

Most sociological research involves the visual domain, because in large part we theorise what we see: social contexts, spatial arrangements, people’s appearances and their actions; although the huge visual dimension of the social world and the fact that we transpose this into words are not so much remarked upon.

—Ian Haywood and Barry Sandwell

*Interpreting Visual Culture: Explorations in the Hermeneutics of the Visual*

I have found that the typical reaction to the term “visual culture” is perplexity. The people with whom I regularly interact professionally and socially, my personal sphere, know what the two words separately mean, but they do not have a sense of the placement of visual culture in the discourse of daily communication. My personal sphere is comprised of Congressional and Library of Congress staff, Federal Department employees, political appointees, political consultants, lobbyists, and members of the print and electronic media. The people in my personal sphere both use and are used by the visual. They use visuals to explain, persuade, manipulate, explore, and enlighten. They are also persuaded, manipulated, enlightened, and entertained by visuals. Though these people are bombarded with visuals, they have no working definition of “visual culture.”

While visuals can be used, as in photo ops and propaganda, to direct thoughts and understanding, they can also stimulate individuality, imagination, independence, understanding, and community.

While photo ops and propaganda have been the focus of the political eye, what of art, cinema, television, and architecture? Those fields have been seen as within the provenance of art majors and those who are not serious students of human behavior, who
do not understand power, how decisions are made, or how consensus is built. Rather, to influence human behavior relative to society, one must study political science, economics, or business. To make policy, lead, govern, or change the world, one does not study visual culture. Visuals are largely understood as entertainment not as tools to influence thought. Movies, television, theater, and exhibits are not typically considered subjects for the serious study of public opinion indicators. At best, visuals as persuaders of public opinion are staged photo ops or propaganda. Yet, public thinking, discussions, opinions, and behavior, and the resulting public policy decisions, are profoundly influenced by what the public sees, where the seeing experience takes place, and the discourse that follows. Policy experts, who spend hours in negotiations, carefully crafting written policies, may not fully appreciate that the success or failure of their efforts can rest on the visual experience of the electorate.

Visual culture plays a key role in stimulating public discourse and public opinion, and perhaps, most importantly, in creating national identity. The study of visual culture crosses academic disciplines and offers insight into history, politics, economics, sociology, and religion. The study of visuals is essential to an understanding of any distinct group and can influence, as well as indicate, national mood.

Yet, the profundity and seriousness of our experiences of art have been inexcusably marginalized on the basis of an epistemological prejudice. Facts, objects and events belong to the world while interpretations, feelings and values emanate from the inner world.1

In this thesis, I bring together the fields of Political Theory, Sociology, and Visual Culture. Just as the influence of the spoken and written word extends into public policy, so, too, do visuals. Visual images are more than “simply art” for museum walls, or images which serve single purposes. Visual culture extends into political and legislative campaigns and beyond the boundaries of photo ops and propaganda. Images speak a visual language.

I propose to identify the role that visual culture, beyond the routine photo op and propaganda, plays in informing, influencing, and motivating public opinion and public policy. I will draw a link between policy issues and visual culture by exploring the influence of visuals, as experienced in the public sphere, on public opinion. My placement of visual culture in the public sphere, as opposed to what could be described as the personal sphere of the individual, is based on the writings of the philosopher Jürgen Habermas. Through a discussion of the public sphere, as defined by Habermas, I will explore the ways in which people come together to share experiences, emotions, actions, and reactions elicited by public, shared visuals. Habermas’ thought has particular relevance to twenty-first technology and society. From his classic works to the more recent thoughts on the post 9/11 public sphere, Habermas provides a setting in which the political and the visual come together by raising issues of the media, consumer society and social gatherings. His discussion of citizenship and communication in the public sphere will be central to my thesis.

I will discuss the power of images, whether defined as high art, craft, or propaganda as predicated upon the studies of David Freedberg. An art historian,
Freedberg has examined extensively the relationship between perceiver and perceived. *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* is his analysis of triggered responses to visual imagery. His approach to art theory intersects the disciplines of art, psychology, and politics and informs the impact of the visual on the political process.

The philosopher Thomas Langan discusses the struggle of encouraging and maintaining discourse among global cultures in his *Human Being*. Langan sees cultural traditions as contributing to communication and identifies art as a key method by which these traditions are expressed.

By defining and analyzing works of scholars such as Habermas and Freedberg, I intend to develop a methodology by which to review a series of case studies. Three case studies will be analyzed: funding for the National Endowment for the Arts relative to the exhibits of Robert Mapplethorpe and Andrew Serrano; the competition, design and construction of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial; and the Children’s Holocaust Museum in Whitwell, Tennessee. These examples will extend the debate beyond art and visual communication into the broader sphere of public discourse and policy. While they were unrelated to political campaigns, as a photo op might have been directly related, these cases did inform public debate over specific policy agendas: the funding of the National Endowment of the Arts in light of controversial works of art; the public debate on war and perception of the fallen warrior triggered by the design competition of the Vietnam Memorial; and experiences of intolerance as revealed by an Appalachian community’s
exploration of the Holocaust.

Having established ways in which public discourse is stimulated by visuals, in the conclusion I will explore the relevance to public policy initiatives of recognizing the importance of visual culture as a form of communication in the public sphere. My argument is for the recognition of the significant contribution that visual culture makes to public discourse. With a form of government dependent, in political theory, on public involvement, the role of visual culture in stimulating discussion, reflection, and understanding should not be consigned to a particular area of academia. This is not a discussion of the merits of high art or of specific political uses of visuals. It is a call for the recognition of the role visual culture plays in communication in the public sphere between individuals, communities, and nations. We should look beyond the visual as art or entertainment and, instead, encourage an appreciation for the role the visual plays in furthering discussion and understanding. In a world of global communication, we will not speak one language. We will be, in a sense, illiterate, but as St. John of Damascus argued during the Byzantine Iconoclastic controversies, we will have images to guide our understanding of ourselves and each other across languages and cultures.
CHAPTER I

VISUAL CULTURE AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

The more we employ non-coercive public debate to resolve our deepest collective, moral, political, and social disputes, the better.

—Simone Chambers

Reasonable Democracy: Jürgen Habermas and the Politics of Discourse

Jürgen Habermas and the Public Sphere

In the city of Los Angeles, a city defined by cars, a space for people to gather is being created by a development known as L.A. Live. Where once downtown L.A. was empty, there are now restaurants, hotels, a museum, a theater and a sports arena to create socializing opportunities for those with incomes to support the necessary mortgage payments and condo fees. For forty-five years, a Holiday Inn stood at 1020 S. Figueroa Street. Today, the property has undergone such a complete renovation that it meets the standards of the Luxe boutique hotel brand. What had been the pool deck has been transformed into a bar overlooking one of the most vibrant public spaces in the city, across from the Nokia Theater and the Grammy Museum. Once, people drove straight through this intersection on their way somewhere else. Today, it is a destination where people gather to see, be seen, and who are heavily influenced by the visuals of their culture. A similar transformation took place in what is now Penn Quarter in Washington, D.C. Restaurants and coffee shops are located between museums, theaters, and a sports arena. People are gathering in these public spaces and communicating rather than retreating to suburban enclaves of limited interaction. Key to my point about these developments is, not that urban areas have been changed, but rather that these
developments have created places for people to gather, interact, and communicate. Visuals of activity clearly indicate how these spaces afford public discourse, how they contribute to the development and life of the public sphere. Marketing campaigns feature individuals connected to others, participating in the activities in their communities, contributing to the energy, and being energized by, the activities of the communities. In a symbiotic relationship, the communities are enlivened by visuals as well. Theaters, cinemas, and museums are part of the development, bringing people out into the public sphere, giving them experiences to share and to discuss, along with current events and personal happenings.

The Penn Quarter area has been home to the National Portrait Gallery, the National Museum of American Art, and the National Building Museum since 1968. During one phase of urban development, F Street was closed to create an urban mall. While the low rents provided gallery space for artists, the result was an abysmal failure. There was nothing about the urban plan that encouraged people to gather. Fifteen years ago, at the end of each work day, security guards were available to walk employees from nearby offices the two blocks to the Gallery Place-Chinatown Metro stop. What is now a complex of restaurants, movies theaters, a bowling alley, and sports/entertainment arena seating 18,000 was once a gravel parking lot. The first significant investment in Penn Quarter was the Shakespeare Theatre that had outgrown and out imagined its home at the Folger Theatre on Capitol Hill. Artistic director, Michael Kahn, envisioned a theater in which to produce Shakespeare and other works beyond his company’s recreation of the Globe. Opening shortly after was Jaleo, the creation of celebrity Spanish chef Jose
Andres. Abe Pollin, a Washington entrepreneur and civic leader, had long wanted a venue within the city to host his sports teams. With the opening of what is now the Verizon Center, a unique public sphere was created. The Shakespeare Theater opened a second stage in the striking, new Lansburgh Theatre. The Woolley Mammoth Theater relocated into what had been a long abandoned storefront. While many of the artists and galleries were forced out by raising rents, the change in activity actually afforded more opportunities to sell works and performance areas for a few smaller theaters. The Spy Museum and the National Museum of Crime and Punishment are recent additions, due to the post September 11, 2001, closing of the FBI public tour. The Police Memorial is across the street from the National Building Museum. It is possible on any given night to stand in the lobby of the Shakespeare Theatre to see a world class theater production while directly across F Street throngs of National Hockey League or National Basketball Association fans are having a pre-game beer at the Green Turtle. People dressed for the theater and people dressed for a professional sports event have shared the same Metro stop, the same parking garage, joined together crossing the street or to have a quick dinner before their particular event begins. The mixing of interests, backgrounds, opinions, and experiences has made Penn Quarter a vibrant area where people communicate within their particular group as well as other demographic groups as they merge in this space. Add up the many options available—the exhibits at the museums, the movie theaters, the street performers, and the many sites along the streets—so that the space in this neighborhood has become a public sphere in which visuals contribute significantly to the communication that takes place. The conversations cover a range of
topics and, as people from differing experiences come together in this place, their understanding of each other is influenced and all are influenced by what they have seen. Something is happening in this space that is very different from the experience of a suburban shopping mall and the communication between people and groups is informed differently. Understanding this dynamic is important for public policy decisions. Community leaders can make developments such as Penn Quarter not just a fortunate combination of individual establishments but key locations for increasing communication.

One of the most ironic exchanges I have observed took place in the summer of 2010, during the “Arts on Foot” festival. An annual event sponsored by the Washington, D.C. government, the area in front of the National Portrait Gallery is closed to traffic and stalls are set up for artists to offer their works for sale, for theater companies provide information and performances, musicians to play, and for local farmers and food artisans to offer tastes. Tables and chairs are set up for people to rest and enjoy the show around them. The March on Washington by the Tea Party movement happened to fall on the Saturday of the “Arts on Foot.” People who had marched to the Capitol decrying taxes could be seen enjoying the “Arts on Foot” experience—which of course had been paid for in large part by taxes. People were having great fun walking through the stalls, and talking with the local artists, the theater companies, and the residents who make “Arts on Foot” an annual event. In this public space, people strongly opposed to tax dollars being used for events such as “Arts on Foot,” experienced what can happen when people come together in a public space where communication is driven by visual culture. The people
within this space were having a great time (with no outward expressions of opposition to such events.)

As we are influenced by what we see, our communication is informed by visuals. Whether we are talking in these public spaces about a movie or television program, a play, a museum exhibition, photographs, a YouTube episode, or the latest current events, our conversations center around what we have seen. To talk in the privacy of homes and office is different from having conversations in the public sphere. The opportunity for public discourse touches multiple communities.

Projects such as L.A. Live and Penn Quarter, involving millions of dollars and government participation, have changed significant portions of each city. However, the public sphere has also been affected by much less extensive developments of just one or two places for people to gather.

For example, Valeria Ashley, executive director of Southeast Ministry in the District of Columbia’s Ward 7 opined that: “A simple coffee shop, a place to have coffee, to sit and socialize. It meant so much.”


3. Ibid.
from the pizza guy is thicker than a deep dish crust.” Ray’s did not open without controversy, for example, one heckler asked how the community could be changed if people could not afford to eat at this new restaurant. Yet beyond the economic limitations that might support criticism of Jürgen Habermas’ theories, there is Valerie’s assessment of how much a place for people in the community to gather and to talk meant, because not much talk can take place through bullet proof glass. The opportunity for civil discourse touches and creates communities. 

Positive and spontaneous interaction can happen anywhere people gather and talk, for example, stop at any McDonald’s or similar fast food chain in small towns. There you can find groups of locals sharing coffee and meaningful conversation. While the fundamental business model might have been to provide quick food, these chains frequently fill the void in some communities of clean, safe places to meet and talk. In one McDonald’s along Interstate 81, a gas fireplace has been installed along with a couch and arm chairs, encouraging people to sit and visit, not grab a bag and run.

Given that my topic is the influence of visual communication, my initial analysis of urban development and the habits of rural communities might seem diversionary. However, by identifying the relevance of public gatherings and by broadening an awareness of art and visual culture, the significant impact of visual culture on human behavior and the political process becomes apparent. The acknowledgment of the importance of social interaction for individuals and communities, and the recognition of

4. Ibid.
the place of visual communication in that interaction supports my justification for increased attention to art and visual culture.

An ideal of the Enlightenment, the principle that expressed public opinion can change a political power structure came to life in June, 1776, when the Continental Congress appointed five men to prepare the Declaration of Independence from England. Such a demand upon the governance system had never before been proposed. The concept of the right to revolt against a king ruling by divine right required original thinking, a new way of looking at power, and a new language. It is a critical element of the effectiveness of the Declaration of Independence that it was written to be spoken. It was not written to be read silently and individually in the privacy of a home or club, rather it was written to be proclaimed aloud communally in public places in what we can think of as the public sphere and as a performance. The writers of the Declaration intended to direct the consciousness of those hearing it read orally. “We must see the American revolution … as a revolution in the conceptualization of language that sought to make writing over in the image of speaking.”

… a natural spoken language that would be a corollary to natural law, a language that would permit universal recognition and understanding … what came to be called “elocutionary revolution … a language composed not of words themselves, but of the tones, gestures, and expressive countenance with which a speaker delivered those words.”

What the writers of the Declaration were proposing ran contrary to the laws of


6. Ibid., 2.
nature and of God as those laws were understood at that time. They were faced with redefining the word “rebellion” and the above description indicates that their strategy included the use of visuals. Following the intention of Jefferson, “actor” could easily be substituted for “speaker.” The symbolism and semantics of the Declaration are specific to a particular culture, that of eighteenth-century England and the influence of John Locke. However, because this document was written to be spoken aloud, it is shaped by a vocabulary that, like the plays of Shakespeare, inspired others, from different cultures, with different symbols and semantics to apply their unique interpretations and meanings. Through an essentially dramatic delivery of political theory, a document was to change the understanding of liberty, equality, and independence and, thereby, to set out a means for changing political systems.

Through the Enlightenment and the American experience, citizens now had an active role to play in their government. When society embraced the idea of equality, it accepted that citizens should have input into political decisions, but under the existing political structures, there was no opportunity to communicate with each other about what they wanted done or to share that information with the members of society in power. For a government to derive its just powers from the consent of the governed, there had to be the means by which consensus could be reached. There had to be ways for citizens to exchange information in ways unknown under an absolute monarch. Public venues were necessary.

As seen by Jürgen Habermas, it is in the Enlightenment that the concept of the public sphere takes form.
The public sphere emerges as a domain of our social life where such a thing as public opinion can be formed, where citizens deal with matters of general interest without being subject to coercion to express and publicize their views.7

As the thinking of the Enlightenment takes hold, the public sphere becomes a vital part of democratic societies.

While much has been written about Habermas’ public sphere, I intend, with this thesis, to focus on the gatherings in our society in which discourse takes place, i.e., the public places where people gather and share conversation, increasingly informed and influenced by visuals. As I will discuss, conversations taking place in public settings can be distinguished from conversations taking place in more private settings. Limiting a review of the work of Habermas to the context of every day gatherings provides the structure by which we can recognize more completely the role of visual culture in public policy decisions.

Alan McKee identifies four reasons why the concept of the public sphere is useful for thinking about societies. The first is as a means of understanding how societies are organized, as highlighted by the examples of L. A. Live and Penn Quarter. The second reason is to differentiate between liberal and totalitarian societies. Liberal societies are characterized by the availability of choices. Individuals have some control over their decisions and actions unlike totalitarian regimes in which every aspect of life is controlled. “The essence of terror is not the physical elimination of whoever is perceived

to be different but the eradication of differences in people, mainly of their individuality and capacity for autonomous action.\textsuperscript{8}

Thirdly, the public sphere defines a democratic entity beyond formal political party participation. The existence of the public sphere provides a concept by which we can think about the ways in which ordinary people, outside recognized political parties, can play a direct role in creating public policy and running the state.

Finally, the word “public” references the difference between private experiences and those occurring in the presence of others of like or different views.

For Habermas, the basic social theory question was: how is social order achievable? His answer, for modern, secular societies, is that social order rests primarily on communicative action and discourse which together provide the structure to hold a society together.\textsuperscript{9}

Thereby a follow up question becomes: what constitutes the moral basis of social order and cooperation? As William Rehg reads the work of Habermas, this question has worldwide relevance as an increasing plurality of groups claim recognition and sovereignty. The conflicts currently present around the world, within and between nations and groups, present an increasing problem of cooperation. As the world’s natural resources are depleted, as economies are restructured and become interdependent,
tensions increase.\textsuperscript{10}

Thus the conflicts that arise today, both within and between nations, pose an increasingly acute problem of cooperation. These conflicts involve not only economic, technological, and ecological issues but moral ones as well. At stake often enough are human rights, or questions of freedom, equality, fair treatment and so on. Thus an adequate resolution to such conflicts must respect the legitimate claims of different individuals and groups without destroying the complex bonds that link these individuals and groups, all their differences notwithstanding.\textsuperscript{11}

Talking face-to-face bridges divides, and, through language, individuals and groups can reconcile differences. Habermas saw that “language is the medium for a kind of reaching understanding, in the course of which participants, through relating to a world, reciprocally raise validity claims that can be accepted or contested.”\textsuperscript{12}

As referenced earlier, the societal changes brought about by the Enlightenment encouraged free association and discussion. The eighteenth-century saw the establishment of physical spaces, such as coffee houses, where citizens could gather to exchange thoughts. Habermas’ first major work, \textit{Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere}, looked to identify the progressive, rational aspects of modern society through an interdisciplinary approach, including history, sociology, literature, and philosophy.\textsuperscript{13} It is the argument of this thesis that art and visual culture should be

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{10}William Rehg, \textit{Insight and Solidarity} (Berkley: University of California Press, 1994), 1.
\item \textsuperscript{11}Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{12}Steven Seidman, ed., \textit{Jürgen Habermas on Society and Politics: A Reader} (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 153.
\item \textsuperscript{13}Finlayson, \textit{Habermas, A Short Introduction}, 8.
\end{itemize}
referenced as they inform the other disciplines.

Since the English translation of *Structural Transformation* appeared in 1989, Habermas has had an impact on the understanding of political life. Despite attacks on the bourgeois aspect of the public sphere as initially outlined by Habermas (by Michael Foucault and Edward Said among many others) understanding of the politics of human behavior remains relevant and influential. In theory, no one was excluded from the initial public sphere if they had the means to participate. In fact, Habermas responded to his critics by recognizing “a plurality of spheres,” as the example of Ray’s and McDonald’s demonstrate. The public sphere is no longer “bourgeois” in either its origins or functioning. Habermas responded to his critics by recognizing “a plurality of spheres,” as the example of Ray’s and McDonald’s demonstrate. The public sphere is no longer “bourgeois” in either its origins or functioning.14 A public sphere can exist wherever people gather.

Habermas expanded his thinking on the public sphere with the publication of his *Theory of Communicative Action* by positing that we learn who we are through our communications with others. The more we communicate effectively, and honestly, with others, “the more we grow in the understanding of ourselves and of others. This allows us to become more mature and emancipated agents, and ultimately, more rational citizens.” Habermas’ approach, unlike that of classical political philosophy which addresses the ordering of society, allows even the general public the means of “diagnosing the ills of society in terms of defects in communication.”15


For Habermas, politics is indistinguishable from everyday communication. “Political thought has to abandon the idea that politics is anything other than a communicative exchange whose key requirement is reaching rational agreement on what we mean when we talk to each other.”  

Starting in the late 1970s, Habermas began to refer to the public sphere in terms of “lifeworld” which refers to the background against which everyday life unfolds and includes daily social activities, and traditions as well as established ways of thinking and acting on communication.  

The lifeworld is a repository which contains the accumulated interpretations of past generations, how the people who went before us understood their world, themselves, and each other; their duties, commitments, and allegiances; their art and literature; the place of science, religion, law and so on. As social actors, we draw upon these understandings when trying to make sense of the things that go on around us (or even inside us).  

Thereby, his concept of lifeworld is an exploration of how we understand who we are, why we believe what we believe, and how we find answers. It is not enough for me to identify myself as a product of my own life experiences. Whatever I experienced, I did so as a product of understandings I had received from my parents, and they from their parents. Growing up in the American South during the 1960s, the “lifeworld” inheritance became very real for many, as was Habermas’ particular perspective in the aftermath of the Holocaust. There are times when a person may be called to answer, 

16. Ibid., 52.
17. Ibid., 65.
privately or publically, for the beliefs they have held, to account for what they have come
to on their own, or for how they have carried on the beliefs of their times. In Habermas’
political theory, there is a structure which encourages evaluation and interpretation.

The reasons we offer for our beliefs and principles must penetrate
more deeply into the lifeworld precisely because we are conscious of all
the things (interests, ethnocentricity, cultural bias, unexamined
assumptions, socialization, domination and so on) that can lie hidden
behind arguments. Decentering and differentiation create a different, and
a more demanding context, in which to answer such questions as “Why is
this true,” or “Why ought I do that?”

The more we employ non-coercive public debate to resolve our deepest collective
moral, political, and social disputes, the better. As outlined by Habermas, the structure
of the public sphere becomes the effective setting stimulating the sharing of ideas and
experiences in order to come to a common understanding. Specifically, how the visuals
not only enhance language but permit communication when language fails.

The foundation of Habermas’ concept of the public sphere proposes that people in
free societies come together to talk, to debate, to reach consensus, as well as to inform,
influence, and direct public policy. While only a small percentage of a population can
find the time and the location to create a public sphere, the 2008 U.S. Presidential
election attests to the fact that the non-elite can participate in their own public spheres,
i.e. churches, labor union halls, civic associations, hair dressers, public transportation, the

19. Ibid., 131.
20. Ibid., 1.
Internet, Facebook, Twitter blogs, and, in a throwback to the eighteenth-century as mentioned earlier, coffee shops and neighborhood cafes.

Rather than seeing Habermas’ thinking as outdated, I argue that we should take his concept, as it relates to the ways contemporary society participates in public gatherings, and explore the significant role visual culture plays in the communication that takes place in those gatherings. From such explorations, I can position the importance of the visuals in public discourse and in the setting of policy. It is through visuals that individuals express their autonomy and, through participation in and discussion about visuals, individuals can broaden their understanding of “the other” to the benefit of the societal whole.

In Chapter IV, I will return to Habermas’ integration of the media, consumer society, and the public sphere in the role of citizenship.

David Freedberg: Definitions and Themes

Having considered the history of a political system as based upon public gatherings for the discussion and debate of policy, as outlined in Habermas’ theory of the public sphere, I have cited examples of urban and rural settings where people come together to engage actively in conversation. The obvious question of: “What are these people talking about?” has morphed into “what influences these conversations?” Even though the conversations at Ray’s and at McDonald’s follow different threads, what they have in common is that they are informed by the visual to a degree not appropriately recognized. Turning to the theory of the power of images presented by the art historian David Freedberg, there is an awareness of high art, craft, or propaganda.
He approaches the visual arts with an aesthetic attitude, that is, a “way of paying attention, or a way of observing.”21 Such an aesthetic differentiates how we interpret images and our range of response emotions. Individual consciousness includes perception, thought, and action, and the processing and timing of those behaviors is complex and subject to interpretation by the person seeing and by those observing or evaluating the seer.22 When we see an image, is there a break in mental processing between perception, thought, and action? Or does the image trigger a response which becomes so consuming that the intellect is overridden by emotion and there is no period of time for stopping the response?

Does time intervene between perceptions and resultant decisive actions? Might sight, thought, decision, and the beginning to act, all be crammed into the same extensionless instance and yet sight lead to thought, thought to decision, decision to beginning to act?23

Further, we must be mindful how we make sense out of what we see incorporates cultural factors. “All human conduct and all institutional behavior are symbolic,” says Thomas Arnold, who goes on to say that “people are more influenced by symbolic forms than by utilitarian calculations.”24 It is not possible to process all of the stimuli to which we are exposed at any moment. The selectivity of perception and the decision to act are distinctive yet interconnected processes which are predicated upon the system of symbols


22. Ibid.


through which we were socialized as members of a particular culture allowing for both individual and group behavior.

The worlds we inhabit are based on our symbol system. The distinctions we draw between the objective world and the subjective world is a product of symbols created by the human mind which divide the world of fact from the world of opinion.25

“In ancient times … man created symbolic models attempting to portray reality as he experienced it.”26 Machiavelli held that “men in general make judgments more by appearance than by reality.”27 As the philosophers of the Enlightenment presumed, we believe that humanity has “evolved to a higher, more rational plane, yet not only will people always be influenced by their emotions; they will never be able to make judgments independent of the symbols they use.”28 Feedberg’s analysis of the power of images provides for the political and social significance of the role of the visual, in effect the need for the visual, in the public sphere. Freedberg refers to the human “will to image” and the need for “figured representation.”29 He notes the need to approach this issue from many angles including cultural anthropology and ethnography.30 Freedberg stepped out of the traditional role of an art historian to speak about the human need for

25. Ibid.
28. Ibid., 182.
30. Ibid., 23.
visual imagery in the larger spectrum of culture and society. The subtitle of his book, *Studies in the History and Theory of Response*, proposes connectives with psychology or society which are clear indications of the essential, yet misunderstood and undervalued, role visual imagery plays in the public sphere. In his review of Freedberg’s book, the *New York Times* art critic Michael Kimmelman writes how this “reminds us of the particularly direct way in which art, unlike literature, works on the imagination.”

In his review in the *Times Literary Supplement*, Rudolph Arnheim opined:

> A courageous book on the response to visual imagery … Freedberg helps us to see that one cannot do justice to the images of art unless one recognizes in them the entire range of human responses, from the lowly impulses prevailing in popular imagery to their refinement in the great visions of the ages.

Although the Library of Congress cataloged *The Power of Images* as Art History, Freedberg took the placement of the visual directly into the activities recognizable as within the public sphere.

> It is about the relations between images and people in history. It is the product of a longstanding commitment to ideas … which seem to have been neglected or to have been left inadequately articulated. I was concerned, above all, by the failure of art history to deal with the extraordinarily abundant evidence for the ways in which people of all classes and cultures have responded to images. There was occasional enumeration but no analysis … It was clear that in order to deal appropriately with the kind of material I had in mind, I would have to draw on the fields of anthropology and philosophy, and that sociological investigation would have to become continuous with the historical procedure.

---


32. Ibid.

33. Ibid. xix-xx.
Societies, which might be labeled as primitive, used images with intention. I propose that twentieth and twenty-first-century societies have closed the conscious mind off to the mystery of images so we do not see how they work individually or communally as Freedberg contends. If our contemporary culture could be redirected to recognize that reactions to images are innate in the human mind, we could increase our individual ability to acknowledge and, more appropriately, associate behavioral responses to visual stimuli. The specifics may differ throughout history, as Freedberg points out, however, there are commonalities.

There still remains a basic level of reaction that cuts across historical, social, and other contextual boundaries. It is at precisely this level—which pertains to our psychological, biological, and neurological status of the same species—that our cognition of images is allied with that of all men and women, and it is this still point we seek.34

Following Freedberg, then, the commonality of human response to visual stimuli permits us to recognize that the experience of the response might differ from public sphere to public sphere. By understanding the power of images, we can recognize and acknowledge that response can be both positive and negative. Freedberg cites examples of individual reactions to specific works critique of art. “Aristotle was one early commentator who gave a crucial role to mental images, claiming that thought is impossible without an image.”35 Scientific studies promote a clearer analysis of how these common emotions can be stimulated by imagery and trigger reactions. While

34. Ibid., 22-23.

cultures may dictate the acceptability and appropriateness of these reactions, the emotions produced, and the processes by which they are produced are not restricted to a particular age of either the responder or the historical period in which they were produced but are inherent in all humans across the many public spheres. As I will discuss in the following comparison between visual and written communication and in Chapter IV, the visual requires no translations, no dictionaries. Visual language requires only sight.

Psychologist Carl Jung examined the role and meaning of symbols in the human psyche. He had become interested in the symbolism of the medieval alchemists especially given the correlation between those symbols and the dream imagery of his patients. He focused on “symbolic content and the language of the unconscious psyche and concluded that these symbols belonged to … the collective unconscious.”36 According to Jung, “that people should succumb to these external images is entirely normal, in fact, it is what these images are for. They are meant to attract, to convince, to fascinate, and to overpower.”37 Although he studied religious imagery in particular, Jung’s work supplements Freedberg’s theory of the human need for imagery. The psychologist quoted the historian Guglielmo Ferrero who said, “man does not change so quickly; his psychology at bottom remains the same, and even if his culture varies much from one epoch to another, it does not change the functioning of his mind.”38

37. Ibid., 365.
38. Ibid., 39.
distinguished between two forms of thought: directed thinking, which he defined as thinking in words and saw as an instrument of culture, and non-directed thinking, or the free flow of thoughts. Directed thinking is a produce of education. Non-directed is the human brain in its natural state for, as William James advised, non-directed thinking is like “trains of images suggested by one another, of a sort of spontaneous reverie.”

Jung’s examination of archetypes and of the collective unconscious provides a framework as to how people respond to images and symbols. Jung concluded that “The archetype is pure, unvitiated nature, and it is nature that causes man to utter words and perform actions whose meaning is unconscious to him, so unconscious that he no longer gives it a thought.” Interconnected with images and symbols, the archetype functions where there are no conscious thoughts present, when the mind is not engaged in directed thinking. The collective unconscious—the universal as opposed to the individual—is composed of archetypes which are “more or less the same everywhere and in all individuals.” These images and symbols are eternal and transcendent, primal and experienced by everyone. Culture and education identify specific images with particular groups. To underscore the importance of images in the human psyche, Jung advises that when dogma replaces the collective unconscious, the commonality of images is replaced by creed and ritual.

40. Ibid., 101-102.
41. Ibid., 359.
In his 2000 book, *Psychology of Image*, Michael Forrester wrote, “In contemporary culture images play a significant role in influencing our understanding of ourselves, those around us and the environment we live in.” Such a statement rests on the connections between sight and understanding, between perception and thought. Contemporary studies advise of the physiological connection between sight, mind, and behavior that are further indications that reactions to imagery are a part of the human experience.

Despite scientific explanations for visual processing and behaviors, our culture does not acknowledge the significance of images from earlier cultures. Freedberg cautions that, challenged by our responses to the visual, we should attempt to distinguish between our contemporary responses and those of historical societies and primitive cultures. “Much of our sophisticated talk about art is simply an evasion. We take refuge … when we are afraid to come to terms with our responses. We have lost touch with them.” To be unaware or to deny the power of imagery is to lose a significant part of the impact of art through proscribed filters which lessen, if not completely negate, the influence of images. As Freedberg says, “we refuse, or refuse to admit, those elements of response that are more openly evinced by people who are less schooled.”

44. Ibid., 430.
45. Ibid., 18.
Diminishing then the placement of visuals in the public sphere, those acts of violence such as iconoclasm, reminds us of the power of the negative affect images can have in a public sphere. If the power of images is denied in terms of positive energies, then examples of the “evil” power of the visual incites danger and destructions. If images either have no positive power, or do not project authority, then why must they be destroyed when societal, cultural or political power shifts? The destruction of images is so instructive of activity of the cultural and political attitudes of the public sphere that Freedberg integrated the significance of iconoclasm into his broader project of a ‘history of response’ that reclaimed for the history of images a “… rightful place at the crossroads of history, anthropology and psychology.”46

As he established himself as pharaoh, Tutankhamen followed a tradition of visual affirmation of power and authority by erasing all references to his predecessor Akhenaton. The French revolutionaries destroyed many of the glories of the Middle Ages from the exterior sculptures of secular and biblical rulers to the interior altarpieces. Protestant reformers left a swath of destruction as they attempted to remove all “Catholic” visuals from the churches. With the totalitarian and authoritarian regimes of the twentieth-century, we can see the impact of imagery on the human psyche. The Nazis emphasized their erasure of the Jews by destroying synagogues, ritual objects, art collections, and domestic properties, while the Russian revolutionaries desecrated the

interiors of Russian Orthodox churches by removing the sacred icons, liturgical vessels and vestments, and ritual objects. Both Hitler and Mussolini relied heavily on visual imagery in their efforts to consolidate political power and social authority. The Soviets continued the historical practice echoed by Tutankhamen by airbrushing out fallen leaders from official photographs. The Ukrainian nationalists of the 1960s charged the Soviets with “symbolicide.” Revolutionary or insurgent groups of activities even including the “Arab spring” have signaled their liberation by toppling the public images of their oppressor. Groups symbolically free themselves from oppression by toppling the image of the oppressor. Russians knocked down statues of Stalin, the Iraqis toppled a statue of Saddam Hussein, and the Egyptians trashed the posters of Hosni Mubarak.

From a religious perspective, the act of iconoclasm can be a ritual cleansing but when viewed politically, the act of destroying the images that define transforms both public identity and emphasizes the shift in power from one group to another. Whoever controls images, holds power. Such examples affirm Freedberg’s contention that images compel emotional reactions which result in action.

The motives for such acts have been and continue to be endlessly discussed, naturally enough; but in every case, we must assume that it is the image—whether to a greater or lesser degree—that arouses such ire. This much we can claim, even if we argue that it is because the image is a symbol of something else that it is assailed, smashed, pulled down, destroyed.48

47. Keitzer, Ritual, Politics & Power, 181.
No matter the historical moment, the culture, or social situation, people react to images. Behavioral evidence attests to the human need for images to make sense of their world and to undergird the communication of the public sphere.

**Communication: Visual, Oral and Written**

In the 1960s Marshall McLuhan proposed that a civilization’s principal means of communication molds it more than the content of that communication. He classified speech, pictographs, ideographs, alphabets, print, radio, film, and television as distinctive information-conveying media, each with its own technology of transmission. These technologies insinuate themselves into the collective psyche of any society that uses them, and once embedded, stealthily exert a powerful influence on cultural perceptions. McLuhan’s conclusion “the medium is the message” became a popular slogan. He recognized that the way in which communication is shared is, in itself, an active force in creating new social patterns and perceptual realities. The perspective of individuals is influenced by the way in which they receive information because understanding is affected by the manner in which the information enters our consciousness.

Individuals, singly and as part of the public sphere, can receive information by hearing, seeing, and reading. Thereby, the importance of visual communication in the public sphere is related directly to the modalities of brain function, especially the right and left hemispheres in the processing of information whether oral, written, or visual.

The brain patterns of someone reading a book are very different from those of the same person watching television. The circuits in the left hemisphere light up when the subject is reading (while the right hemisphere remains relatively dark). When the subject looks up from the book and begins to watch television, the right hemisphere switches on and the left begins to idle. Task-oriented beta waves activate the hunter/killer side of the brain as alpha and theta waves emanate more from the gatherer/nurturer side.\textsuperscript{50}

A detailed discussion of the brain in medical or scientific terms, the modes of communication descriptive of historical periods proffers the distinctive characteristics of the human brain. The Industrial Revolution—with urban migrations non-agrarian labor and domestic transformations—is characterized by competition, science, mathematics, and finance, all activities suited to the left brain.\textsuperscript{51}

The Romantic Movement was a dramatic shift away from the left brain values of the Industrial Revolution toward the nonverbal and feeling-oriented values of the right brain.\textsuperscript{52} When Blaise Pascal opined, “… the heart has its reasons which reason knows nothing of,” he was referring to the form of discernment found in the emotional right brain which and distinguishes it from the cerebral left.\textsuperscript{53}

The left brain is interpreting the content of speech; the right brain reads the hidden messages of inflection and nuance. The right brain is attentive to comprehending speech through the speaker’s posture, facial expressions, and gestures. If the information

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 408.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 380-381.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 381-382.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 19.
being transmitted is factual, such as legal, scientific economic or academic topics, the left brain is processing information. However, when the conversation is interpersonal, as it would be in the public sphere, facial expressions and vocal inflection can give the listener “substantial insight into what is really going on, sometimes even more than whatever words are being said.”

Therefore, language and linear thinking are left brain activities; comprehension and emotions are right brain activities. “The right brain integrates feelings, recognizes images and does so in an input-all-at once process.” The people gathered in the public sphere exchange feelings, opinions, observations and emotions and to do so they will use the right hemisphere of the brain, the hemisphere of the brain which cognates the visual.

The Viennese philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein called language a ‘cage.’ After years of exploring the intricacies of syntax and grammar, he reached the conclusion that language was so limited that it was inadequate for conveying the nature of reality, observing, “… what can be seen cannot be said.”

54. Ibid., 20.
55. Ibid., 18.
56. Ibid., 398.
CHAPTER II

VISUAL CULTURE AS A CATALYST FOR PUBLIC DEBATE

The fundamental problem is simply this: How can members of the mass public develop consistent responses to policy issues, given how little they often know about politics? One of the most striking features of the study of Americans’ thinking about politics has been the submergence of politics itself. The major chord of the analysis of public opinion, endlessly repeated, is how little attention they pay to politics, how rarely they think about even major issues, and how often they have failed to work through a consistent or genuine position on them. Why, then, ask how people make any particular political choice when the whole point to appreciate is how unlikely they are to have given it any thought?


The classical view of democratic theory assumes that the major points of public discourse are well known to all members of the community and “it is simply assumed that people tend to make up their minds in more or less the same way.”

Mass belief systems concentrate on three topics. Attitude consistency, that is a person’s position on one issue given the position on another; stability of opinion, that is the consistency of an opinion on political issues over a period of time; and the level of conceptualization, that is how voters evaluate their opinions. “All three lines of research seemed to converge: the political opinions of the public tended to be minimally consistent, minimally stable, and show minimal levels of comprehension of political

abstractions."²

Classical democratic theory, which assumed that people will inform themselves, evolved from the Greek polis where communities were small and homogenous. The size and complexity of communities and issues today make it difficult, if not impossible, for the public to function in the sense of classical democratic theory.³ Therefore, the premise that informed participation is the basis for modern democracy is invalid.

The challenge of developing an informed electorate is more complex than just the expanding, diverse polis of today. Complexity of issue, quality of news coverage, and reduced attention span further affects the ability of the voting public to educate itself.

In 2008, the New York Times writer, Edward Rothstein, reviewed the opening of the Newseum, a museum dedicated to the history of news gathering, with a scathing comment about the building itself. “If the building reveals anything about the state of journalism today, it conveys the industry’s anxieties over the shrinking attention span of the average American.”⁴ Those old enough to remember the early days of television news with Edward R. Murrow succeeded by Chet Huntley, David Brinkley, and Walter Cronkite, know full well that news stories today are shorter, less in-depth, and less

² Ibid.
substantive. Human interest and celebrity-gossip stories have increased while serious news has decreased. A comparison of content between BBC News America and the leading American news programs is an indication of the relative quality of information presented to the electorate.

A 1997 survey concluded:

Most people do not have the time or the mental capacity to absorb the amounts of information now available to them, even in areas of knowledge that concern them greatly. The complexity of most newspaper texts has remained at the twelfth grade reading level, despite evidence that many citizens find this level too difficult. Television news stories are too brief to cover news items adequately. One third of the stories on the nightly news are less than one minute long and lack stopping points to permit the audience to assimilate the audiovisual information. Because of the public’s lack of interest, politics is going to remain a very small part of public communication. The public’s base of knowledge about issues is likely to be incremental rather than geometric. That means that opinion formation will continue to be based primarily on established core beliefs and intellectual shortcuts, rather than on extensive analysis of the available information.5

Issues of global economies and warming, water shortages, and terrorism do not lend themselves easily to the coffee shop discussions of Habermas. In a contracting economy, the aging American baby-boomer may be as interested in public affairs as when protesting the Vietnam War. However, the time, energy, and resources required to participate fully in the debate are now restricted by college age children, aging parents, and inadequate retirement reserves. Attention span may well be limited most directly by

the realities of their otherwise boring lives. With less and less time, intellectual depth or
curiosity, or the civic responsibility about the issues of the day commensurately the
electorate is limited in understanding issues as attention spans have shortened.

So if the electorate is not employing the traditional informative methods, how are
they forming opinions, from where are they drawing their attitudes? This compelling
question is the fundamental issue in political theory and history, civic engagement, voter
turnout, and message development.

Ordinary people do reason through their choices over a range of
issues. By reason, we do not mean self-conscious acts of cerebration,
merely that people can occasionally take advantage of shortcuts in
judgment to figure out dependably what they favor politically.⁶

There are multiple factors influencing the ways and degree to which citizens
inform themselves and participate in their government. Religious affiliation and
economic uncertainty are critical components in political activity. This cause and effect
can significantly realign political power even unto civil war and revolution. While not
traditionally categorized within the sphere or information decision-making as reasoned
discourse in the classical sense, religion and economics inspire or enrage people in
forming their opinions and attitudes, or in taking to the streets or crusades for a particular
cause.

One way people can compensate for a lack of information about
politics is to base their policy preferences on their likes and dislikes, and

the less information they have about politics, the more likely they are to do so.  

The placement of visual culture in the public sphere can significantly enhance an understanding of how opinion and attitude are formed. Advertising has insured that the visual has a critical role in modern life. We define ourselves by what we see. We are who we are because of the car we drive, the clothes we wear, the coffee we drink, the handbag we carry, how we choose to be entertained, and the electronic devices we use. We are walking advertisements for products because we are seen and we see others we want to emulate—so one role of the visual is firmly entrenched in our consumption driven economy. However, the understanding of visuals needs to expand into recognition of how the participants in the public sphere inform themselves, base opinions and attitudes, and engage in political activity. The study of political activity could be greatly enhanced by the inclusion of a serious study of visual culture. 

It is not plausible to suppose that members of the mass public walk about fully stocked with opinions on issues of the day. Certainly, it is not reasonable to suggest that, asked their opinion, all they need to do is remember where they have stored it and then retrieve it. They need to work it out – sometimes on the spot. Broadly speaking, they will follow some chain of reasoning. And their starting point, in any chain of reasoning will be some general considerations. 

7. Ibid., 8. 

8. Ibid., 71.
General considerations are formed not from theory but from behavior and observation. “The world outside has to be shaped into a picture in the mind. It needs to be imagined, rather than left as a clutter of stray facts gleaned from the daily news. Informed public opinion requires an active imagination.”9 The diffuse facts of daily existence merge together through the news media and the stories we see and create throughout visual culture. Information may be received directly from the visual as well as from news sources. “For the diffusion of news events, knowledge is measured more often than not in terms of simple awareness.”10

Awareness can come from many sources, including the arts. If art is presumed simply as a way to pass time without the stresses and demands of daily life, it is not recognized as a factor forming opinion.

When we look at how an individual processes information and formulates new opinions and images (or reshapes those already held) we have a transactional situation where images and opinions can be shaped by external sources but also created and used by the individual to help manage his or her ability to function in the social world.11

David Freedberg has written specifically about the spiritual realm not the political, but his theory is just as true of politics. “Most people cannot ascend directly to the plane of the intellect without the aid of perceived objects that may, at least

10. Ibid., 68.
11. Ibid., 85.
conceivably, act as links. 12 If people cannot intellectually comprehend the divine, it is not far-fetched to conclude an intellectual inability to recognize political theory which is based on interpretations of divine intent. If images assist in religious belief, it follows that visual culture would support individuals in societal or political community, i.e. the public sphere, and participation in the polis widely defined. What is true of religion is thereby true of political concepts.

Visual Culture is a significant force in the formation of public policy and public opinion through an intellectual process of assimilating information and subjecting it to analysis and comparison. Habermas’ descriptions of the elitism within the public sphere has been identified by his critics; however, his fundamental reading is supported by the reality of the minimal opportunities to participate in Enlightenment-style salons in which citizens could debate the issues read in the newspapers. Citizens sit today in public spaces and engage in discourse of all tempers as they are informed by visual culture. The contemporary connection between the visual and the political is not unique. If I see, I will understand and be better able to engage in a political, decision-making process.

The notion of a connection between image and discourse has been central to the understanding of visual art since antiquity. In classical Greece and Rome, many of the art works now admired for their representational realism or mimetic skill had a primarily narrative function. As early as the twelfth century, visual art was being referred to as the “literature of the lay people” that reinforced its role in

communicating the message and values of Christianity to a largely illiterate congregation. Primarily a communication medium, art was thus clearly dependent on rhetorical skills of persuasion and eloquence in addressing its audience. Within Western culture, therefore, visual art has long been regarded as a rhetorical practice, concerned with narrative and with persuading and moving its audience rather than with the simple accurate depiction of the visual world.¹³

As the population of the Middle Ages learned about religion, politics, and society through the stained-glass windows, the contemporary public processes information and engages in discourse through visual communication.

One does not need to be trained in analyzing demographic data to reach reasonably reliable, albeit general, conclusions. Just by looking at the many public spheres, for example, in a quick comparative drive through the Penn Quarter and Anacostia neighborhoods one will notice newer cars, expensive restaurants, different styles of dress, representative age groups, and styles of architecture. However, this is only one aspect of how the visual informs and influences the public sphere.

The importance of visual culture is that the “visual image has become central to contemporary cultural practice in the West with the invention of the woodcut, and later of increasingly complex techniques for the mass production of printed images, including engraving, lithography and photography. Such technologies ensured that the distribution of images became increasingly widespread from the political and religious pamphlets of the 1500s to the advertising in the 1800s. This intensified in the 20th century with the invention of cinema, television and the computer.”¹⁴


¹⁴. Ibid., 14.
Like the peoples of the Middle Ages, our reasoning is influenced by what we see. It is through visual culture—art, theater, dance, television, and movies—that information is also conveyed through the public sphere and translated into public opinion.

It is not reasonable to suppose that citizens generally have formed discrete opinions on a large array of issues, to suppose that, asked their opinion about an issue, they must often figure out what they think about it. In figuring out their position, they cannot attend to a great many factors. At any given moment only a little information, drawn from the senses and from long-term memory, can be held in the focus of attention.\(^{15}\)

The connectives between sociological and political behavior serve as a foundation for the masses forming public opinion from visual communication. Appropriately, the fields of political science, sociology, psychology, and anthropology recognize and incorporate the human reliance on the visual for information, understanding, and response. If these human behaviors are disconnected from visual communication, an appreciation for the visual and the resulting human response is undervalued—not as “simply” entertainment or propaganda. Rather, the emphasis on this powerful influence on human activity is diminished. So “the profundity and seriousness of our experiences of art have been inexcusably marginalized on the basis of an epistemological prejudice.”\(^{16}\)

Data, social media, or news broadcasts are not the sole influences on public opinion. The recognition of visual language in the public sphere is fundamental as to


how an electorate becomes informed. For example, photos of the Civil Rights movement were among the most effective tools for stimulating public debate in American history. The *Washington Post* obituary for photographer Charles Moore included the assessment by historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. that “the photographs of Bull Connor’s police dogs lunging at the marchers in Birmingham did as much as anything to transform the national mood and make legislation not just necessary but possible.”17 Jacob Javits was quoted that “Mr. Moore’s photos helped to spur passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.”18 At the time, at least half of the adults in the USA read *Life* magazine and “its photography was world-renowned.”19

As noted in the quote above from Arthur Schlesinger, these photographs made legislation not only necessary but also possible. Those are two distinctly different circumstances. It is not uncommon for a majority to see that action is necessary. The call for action is quite common. The passage of corrective legislation is quite another matter. Once reaction moves to action, negotiation begins and necessity gets lost in the search for consensus. Mr. Schlesinger, as only someone seasoned in political battles could understand, recognized that Mr. Moore’s photographs not only built a consensus but also made passage of legislation possible. The photographs made it difficult, if not


18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.
impossible, for elected leaders to hide behind words. They made it uncomfortable for the public to hide behind a façade of civility. “Moore’s photo story met the standards of intensity and personal accountability that one expects of a work of art”\(^{20}\) and it meets the standard of a catalyst for political action. John F. Kennedy was outraged when he saw the front pages of the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* on the morning of May 4, 1963.\(^{21}\)

The public sphere is informed by visuals found outside of the media as for example in theater productions such as *The Great Game: Afghanistan* and *Black Watch*. *The Great Game* is a series of 12 short plays that explore Afghan culture and history and which spark discussion on British and American foreign policy.

You emerge after seven-plus hours almost feeling, as after voting, that you’ve satisfied a civic responsibility. The Taliban’s hostility to art plays a role through a series of scenes woven into the production. *The Great Game* remains a desirable exercise for anyone who thinks about the world’s have-nots and what the have’s are doing to them. Impatient CIA agents, imperious British civil servants, beleaguered Afghan tribeswomen, altruistic Western aid workers and cunning Pakistani bureaucrats all wander across the teeming and volatile canvas.\(^{22}\)

Policy experts can pour over charts, graphs, maps and all the other tools upon which they base their decisions. Underlying all the data are human beings. Looking at,
and more importantly, comprehending what is seen, is essential to making effective policy decisions both at the highest levels and within the public sphere. While it is possible to run data through a computer program and decide upon a plan of action, the effectiveness of the outcome can depend heavily on how people are affected. History is full of lessons learned the hard way, when decisions were based on the will to power. What history can also teach is that many disastrous decisions could have been prevented by a deeper understanding of the human element. A key means of gaining such an understanding is through learning to see and to incorporate what is seen into the decision making process.

Members of the public sphere can read extensively about war, about soldiers and battles. Yet, what is the experience of war like? How do leaders decide to go to war and persuade civilians to pick up guns and kill others?

*Black Watch* is based on interviews that playwright Gregory Burke conducted with Scottish soldiers who served in Iraq. These young men chose to serve in one of the most acclaimed fighting units of Western history. This play is a powerful, complex, theatre experience and an exploration of the sociological, psychological, and historical call-to-arms heard by so many young men. Few in the public sphere have the time or resources for an academic study of such issues. The time spent in this theatrical experience provides a profound insight into many of today’s headlines.

Why do young men choose to leave home and fight wars? While answers might be found in sociological and psychological research and academic studies on the will to
protect home, to fight for beliefs, for opportunity, and for economic advancement in limited job markets, a more accessible source for the public sphere is the visual culture of the past 30 years. For example, *Rambo* movies provide a window for a large segment of the public sphere. How many Americans have watched a Rambo film? The question is purely rhetorical and the answer is irrelevant. What is relevant is that the films were not merely entertainment. Those literate in visual communication understand that messages about loss of power, and “cathartic violence” used to justify the war,23 were evident in these films, and silently accepted by a segment of the public sphere.

Today, the Pentagon is led by the veterans of the battles, military and legislative, fought in Vietnam and in Washington. Studies of the legislative and executive actions which led America into, through, and out of Vietnam are essential for students of politics and military history. Yet, since the end of the Vietnam War how many citizens—people of the public sphere—have tried to understand how that conflict affects our current defense and foreign policies? Beyond a general recognition of the impact of the body bag factor, which clearly influenced the Bush Administration to prohibit the showing of flag-draped coffins returning from Iraq, how many American citizens—citizens of the public sphere—have made the effort to inform themselves about the impact of the

Vietnam War on our collective psyches? The related question is: How many Americans have watched a Rambo film?

Instead of seeing visual practices as threats to practical reasoning or as ornamental devices that may be a necessary concession to holding the attention of a mass audience, they can provide crucial social, emotional and mnemonic materials for political identity and action.24

Audience numbers and ticket prices reveal what movies are seen by individuals within various economic levels. Rambo films played in movie theaters across the country, subsequently on television, and on personal devices via DVDs or Netflix. Some viewers have been able to identify with characters and situations; others have been able to get an insight into war that they had not previously experienced. Across race, gender, and geography a broad representation of the American electorate came together by watching these stories. Statistics provide impersonal information but an understanding of the power of the visual illuminates a profound insight into the human spirit, in the case of Rambo films, of those feelings of being abandoned by the system and left alone to fight for individual beliefs.

The experience of Black Watch is similar and yet, as it is a play, it reached a very different audience. Ticket prices in Washington were significantly more expensive than a movie ticket. The opportunity to see Black Watch was, therefore, limited to a much smaller segment of the American population. Demographically, in Washington, D.C., it

was likely that members of the audience were leaders not followers. They were policy-makers, diplomats, think-tankers, and academics. Those who attended performances of this theatrical work had a rare opportunity to learn important information which contributes significantly to the setting and conduct of national policy. For those who dismissed the Rambo films as cheap entertainment for the masses, *Black Watch*, itself a visual experience, explained why the Rambo films worked. Donald Rumsfeld, like Robert McNamara, relied on the emotions of young men to fight their wars. Neither had served in combat. Through visual communication, members of the public sphere can be exposed to the reasons behind human behavior. Rambo, like Sgt. Alvin York and Scarlett O’Hara for earlier generations, provided images for ritual and response.

Like any icon, these types of images are easily recognized by many people of varied backgrounds. They are used to orient the individual within a context of collective identify, obligation and power. They bear witness to something that exceeds words.²⁵

The ways in which understanding and public discourse is stimulated by works of art, architecture, films, and television is what should be considered in order to understand and recognize the role of the visual in the formation of public opinion and attitudes. Yet there remains a division between the literate and the visual.

It is not easy for the literate observer to inhabit a world of images. A hermeneutics of suspicion runs from Plato to contemporary moralists. … This iconoclasm is deeply rooted in Western history, religion and culture. … Such discourses all exhibit a strong logocentrism, that is, a

²⁵. Ibid., 39.
cultural bias, convinced of the superiority of writing or propositional language that devalues sensory, affective, and kinetic forms of communication precisely because they often baffle verbal resolution. … This, then, is the theoretical burden of proof: demonstrating how iconic visuals can operate as a legitimate form of public address—that is, one that constitutes viewers as citizens capable of intelligent deliberation and political agency.26

It is simplistic to divide reasoning—the process by which opinion and attitude are formed—into the literary and the visual. Understanding the placement of the visual in reasoning, i.e., becoming visually literate, requires a new vocabulary which is literate and which leads to a deeper conception of public opinion. Rather than contrast reason and the visual, an understanding of the reason within the visual language is necessary.27

If a vibrant, liberal-democratic public culture is to prevail in any nation or in a global civil society that accomplishment will depend in part on how public opinion is supported, negotiated and guided by public arts. If liberal-democratic societies are to evolve into better versions of themselves, they will need to be able to see themselves doing so.28

Thereby, Freedberg’s comment that people cannot ascend to the intellect without the aid of perceived objects can be tied directly to politics. We may not be able to put a definition of justice into words but, as Freedberg guides us, we can develop an understanding of injustice when we see a representation. As Supreme Court Justice

26. Ibid., 40.
27. Ibid., 296.
28. Ibid., 304.
Potter Stewart said, “I know pornography when I see it.”\textsuperscript{29} We see to understand and our understandings serve as guides, as short cuts, to help us form opinions and attitudes.

\textsuperscript{29} Jacobellis v. Ohio, 378 US 184 (1064).
CHAPTER III

PUBLIC POLICY CASE STUDIES

When we meet in society, if we have not learnt to see both self and other in that way, imagining in one another inner faculties of thought and emotion, democracy is bound to fail, because democracy is built on respect and concern, and these in turn are built on the ability to see other people as human beings, not simply as objects.

—Martha Nussbaum
“Skills for Life”

For Habermas, the public sphere was essential to a democratic form of government. In his later writing, he linked the notion of a public sphere more closely to the principle of universalistic argumentation. Though people are likely to be drawn into associations with others of similar backgrounds, interests, and perspectives, the public sphere provides an opportunity for the exchange of information among and between citizens.¹

In the face of popular tabloid newspapers, new forms of reality television, and an increasing lack of respect for traditional authorities, many critics are concerned that our society no longer has a rational, informed, and unified space where everyone can communicate about the issues that affect us all.² One might well ask what is happening to public debate in Western cultures? Is our public sphere disintegrating?

¹ John Erik Fossum and Philip Schlesinger, eds., The European Union and the Public Sphere (London: Routledge, 2007), 3-4.

² McKee, The Public Sphere, Introduction.
The consideration of the space visual culture provides for communicating about the issues and the role the visual plays in the political arena provides insight into response behavior. Three distinct cases explore the interconnect of reaction, response, and effect. These studies show, not only how the visual experience can stimulate individual actions within the public sphere, but also how participants in legislative debate can use visuals—beyond photo ops and propaganda—for political positioning. In each of these studies, the focus is on “the other.” As opposed to the Renaissance, these artworks are not about the powerful, the popular, or the beautiful; rather, these examples present controversial topics which resulted in public discourse. Thereby, they push viewers to imagine, to face emotions, and to challenge their understanding and acceptance, as well as respect and concern for those of a different experience.

The deeper and more extensive the opportunity and possibility of reflection, however the more rationality plays a part in the process. The more a culture allows for an open environment of questioning and criticism, the more we can describe the process of inquiry involved in answering such questions as “Why is this true?” or “Why ought I to do that?” And conversely, belief systems that work against the possibility of rational reflection—that is, cultural traditions that “pre-decide which validity claims, when, where, for what form whom, and to whom, must be accepted—are less rational.”

These case studies are but three examples of how art can challenge individual viewers, as well as society as a whole, to think about definitions of truth and justice, and how behaviors are guided by such definitions. Art presents the opportunity, and

sometimes the only opportunity, for an open environment of questioning. While some in
the public sphere may be offended, angered, or insulted by a work, an opportunity has
been created for discussion not only about the work itself but about the many issues
raised by reaction and response to the work.

National Endowment for the Arts Awards to Mapplethorpe and Serrano

The National Endowment for the Arts program, created during the Presidency of
Lyndon Johnson (1908-1973) and expanded under Richard Nixon (1913-1994), reflected,
at least initially, bipartisan support for the program. Since 1985, some 85,000 awards had
been made with only twenty awards raising questions.4 Then, in the summer of 1989, the
NEA awarded grants to photographers Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano.

While there are many ways to approach this controversy and the artworks, my
investigation is limited to a review of the debate in the U.S. House of Representatives on
the Fiscal Year 1990 Interior Appropriations Bill, which included funding for the NEA.
A review of the floor statements and the legislative procedures reveal that the issue was
not so much the awards themselves but that the works provided a political opportunity to
label, divide, and grandstand. There were more effective ways to address concerns about
the awarding of NEA grants. For example, an amendment could have supplemented the
legislation authorizing the NEA and such an amendment, ironically, could have been
offered in the authorizing committee by the very same Member offering it to the
appropriations bill on the House Floor. However, the process outlined by Congressman


52
Sidney Yates of Illinois would have taken place in the relative obscurity of a House Committee hearing room. Rather than amend authorizing legislation to address perceived abuses within the endowment awards process, key Members took full advantage of the more public and theatrical setting of the House chamber and of the annual appropriations bill to attack the “easy targets” of the Mapplethorpe and Serrano.

Congressman Richard Baker of Louisiana opened debate by questioning the language of the committee reports recommending that sub-grantors of the NEA be prohibited from awarding money unless “the grant or award has been previously approved by the appropriate councils.” He has been notified by the NEA that this policy will be implemented as confirmed by Congressman Yates, the Chairman of the House Interior Appropriations Committee. Clearly, this exchange indicates that the NEA has been put on notice as to how it awards grant money without the approval of the appropriate selection councils. Again, Congressman Yates states that the NEA will follow this policy. Part of the legislative record, this exchange should have been sufficient to address any NEA awards that did not meet the standards of the local, approving committees.

However, the floor statements make explicit that some Members, given a choice between effective legislation or political grandstanding, chose the latter. Was their intent to correct a shortcoming in the grant process or was it to whip up emotional outrage and

5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.

53
solidify their identities as defenders of public morality? The record clearly indicates that
the straightforward solution to a concern of the public sphere was confirmed in an
exchange of a few sentences. This brief exchange, while providing a solution, did not
afford an opportunity for some Members to present their assessment of the pieces of art
specifically, and of government funding of art in general. Floor debate on the bill
proceeded with several amendments being offered specifically targeting funding for the
Mapplethorpe and Serrano pieces. Congressman Dana Rohrabacher of California, for
example, offered an amendment to strike funds for the NEA saying:

Those who gave artist Anders Serrano fifteen thousand taxpayer
dollars to fund his work of art entitled “Piss Christ” did more than offend
most of the nation, they set off a national debate on the value of
government funding of the arts. Is a picture of Jesus Christ hanging from
the cross submerged in a jar of urine worthy of government funding? The
answer is no.

Then there is the work of Robert Mapplethorpe. Thirty thousand
federal dollars went to an exhibit featuring nude photographs of children,
homoerotic shots, and a sadomasochistic self portrait of the artist himself.
I believe that censorship is not the solution. The answer is getting the
Government out of the arts. Government panelists should not be given the
privilege to impose their tastes on both the artists and the taxpayers. …
These guidelines obviously do nothing to stop outrages form being funded
with taxpayer expense.7

Congressman Paul Henry of Michigan highlighted the hypocrisy of those
Members using the appropriations process to address the Mapplethorpe and Serrano
grants. He restated the opportunity during consideration of the authorization bill to offer
an amendment; however, no such amendment was offered. Further, he affirmed that the

7. Ibid., 14433.
Chairman and Ranking Member of the authorizing committee offered language directing the NEA to meet the standards of the local committees.

It is the very person who proposes the amendment to eliminate the NEA completely who objected to that language being put into the bill. The gentleman sponsoring this amendment attacks two ... grants in terms of artistic merit and uses that to impugn the entire agency and then seeks to interfere with the ways of addressing that and says, that is really not what I object to. I just object to any funding of the arts.8

Several other House Members pointed out that many now universally acclaimed artworks (from the Impressionists to the Cubists) were initially rejected and that “the Burghers of Calais, one of the great works of art in the word today, was rejected by the citizens in that city of France.”9 Congressman Thomas Foglietta of Pennsylvania went on to say:

The NEA is a respected organization that allows citizen art experts, not government employees, to make funding recommendations. The artists who approve the grants are among the most informed and highly revered in their respective fields. Are they always right? No. Do works that are sometimes repugnant, offensive, and seemingly artless sometimes slip through the cracks? Yes ... but who is better qualified to determine which artists should be supported and encouraged than the artists themselves?10

Congressman Campbell of Colorado identified himself as the only professional artist in the Congress and stated that the cultural industry in Colorado, supported by NEA

8. Ibid. 14443.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
grants, “is a potent force in Colorado’s tourism attractions.” He went on to offer not only an amusing comparison between spending on the arts and weapons but also a strong summation of the real intent of the amendment.

The arts get about $144 million per year while we spend almost that much on the Bradley tank, which sinks, and we spent three times that much on the B-1 bomber which falls out of the sky. I know that this is a great discussion item for grandstanding against the arts.

Congressman Weiss from New York succinctly expressed the tie between the political concept of freedom and art.

It seems to me that what we ought to really do is to have faith in ourselves and the ideals for which America stands. Let Members exult in the fact that we are a country that is free enough to allow artistic expressions, even if we find them offensive and objectionable. I would like to close with a quote which expresses the most important point to remember in this debate:

“In recognizing those who create and those who make creation possible, we celebrate freedom. No one realizes the importance of freedom more than the artist, for only in the atmosphere of freedom can the arts flourish.”

Few other words of former President Ronald Reagan ring so true.

Congressional critics of the Mapplethorpe and Serrano works had a number of options in addressing the issue of NEA funding. They certainly had every right and a responsibility to their constituents; however, the records of the floor debate prove that those who offered amendments aimed at the NEA were not using the most effective

11. Ibid., 14438.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., 14442.
options available to address their concerns. They opted to use the House floor to draw lines between good and bad, Christian and anti-Christian, acceptable and obscene, or self and other. Had they chosen to amend through the authorization process, they could have addressed the funding issue directly so that many Members of Congress were not in the difficult position of appearing to support the Piss Christ or to oppose their local arts enterprises. Nonetheless, the selection of the particular legislative process ensured a broader audience through television coverage on CSPAN to hear their definitions of what constitutes acceptable art. Rather than correct a situation they opposed, these Members of Congress chose to use the issue for political gain.

**The Vietnam Veterans Memorial**

While the Mapplethorpe and Serrano photographs sparked a debate that continues into the present day, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial was one of resolution and acceptance. The Congressional battles over funding for the NEA provide an effective tool for understanding the ways in which art can be used for political posturing in the legislative process. By labeling works “offensive, obscene and anti-Christian”, elected officials created a public forum in which to identify themselves as defenders of American morality and values. Throughout the open debate, politicians were able to stimulate discussion in the public sphere and create an issue that re-emerges periodically during debate on appropriations bills.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial presented a different experience of the visual in the public sphere. Quite possibly more than any other work of art, it has informed the
thinking and impressions across many different groups comprising the public spheres. The design competition and selection of the Memorial was less visible than the televised debate of the House of Representatives. The controversy which erupted over the winning design was a surprise. It is, however, a powerful example of how something so visually challenging, can win acceptance and powerfully transform how a group of citizens is seen, and understood and resolves their own experiences.

Architecture as an art form is a challenge in and of itself. For the majority in the public sphere, art hangs on walls, is presented on stage, or seen on television or the movies. Yet, throughout history, architecture has communicated powerful visual messages. “Architecture is the most public of the arts. Works of architecture frame our lives. They are one of the principal means by which the public realm is materially represented and for that reason they are of huge social importance.”14 From the pyramids, and the Parthenon, to the Gothic cathedrals, the Eiffel Tower, and the Gateway Arch in St. Louis, architecture has communicated messages to viewers. “There is an intricate dance between context, content, space and visitors that is choreographed via architecture.”15 Monuments and memorials present even more engaged debates in commemorating an event or person. Not only are monuments and memorials judged on their appearance, they become part of the larger discussion in support or opposition to


that which they are representing. The Vietnam War presented an extreme example of these dual debates.

The enigma of the Vietnam War lies not so much in the divisions that the war once wrought, but rather in the persistent battles since the war’s end over which imagery will ultimately prevail. This war of images has represented a rationale to continue the fighting of a war that appears never to end.\(^\text{16}\)

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial began with one man’s response to a film, *The Deer Hunter*.\(^\text{17}\) Jan Scruggs’ military service in Vietnam is not what drove him into the public sphere. Rather, it was his response to a movie about a war he had fought that triggered his action and led to an emotional outpouring across the country. He saw a movie—not academic research or policy positions—in a theater like thousands of people do every weekend. His response to a film changed how people looked at war and at soldiers, and how a specific group of veterans see themselves.

Senator Charles Mathias of Maryland had opposed American involvement in Vietnam but became an early supporter of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. He believed a memorial could bring Americans together and he introduced legislation providing a site between the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial. The legislation was signed into law on July 1, 1980 by President Jimmy Carter. Senator Mathias recorded his thoughts in the *Congressional Record* on July 2.


Until yesterday, the veterans of Vietnam had been dealt with very unfairly by their fellow citizens. It was their bad luck to fight in an unpopular war. No one blamed them personally, but there was no hero’s welcome for them when they returned from the fierce crucible of Vietnam. Yesterday, however, we took a long overdue step toward restoring justice to our dealings with the veterans of Vietnam. Inserted into the record is the Washington Post article. “The memorial will be a reminder of the past, what was lost and a reminder of what we learned. We do not honor war, but we honor the peace and freedom they sought.”

Included in the Congressional Record was a quote from then Administrator of Veterans Affairs Max Cleland, himself an injured Vietnam Veteran: “The public is finally separating the war from the warrior.”

The founders of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund did not have a vision of what the memorial would look like but they did have two criteria: the names of the dead had to be integrated into the design and the memorial should take the form of a place, rather than of a monument. They asked recognized authorities in the American art community to serve on the selection panel. While 1,400 entries were received, hundreds were competitive but only one “continues to haunt me,” an art expert told the veterans. It was the design by a female college student of Chinese descent from Ohio named Maya Lin. Her entry was a low, black, chevron-shaped wall cutting into the earth. The design was explained to the members of the Foundation and

19. Ibid., 18500.
21. Ibid., 16.
was unanimously recommended. The final decision on the design fell to the Fine Arts Commission. One veteran, who had submitted an entry, voiced his opposition to Lin’s design calling it “a black gash of shame and sorrow.” Instead of bringing Americans together, the memorial was dividing them again. Protesters called the design a “degrading ditch” and a public relations war began between supporters of the wall and the opposition which felt it dishonored those who had fought. A compromise was finally reached by adding a flag pole and statues of three soldiers. Scruggs informed Lin of the changes to her design. “Aesthetically, the design does not need a statute, but politically it does,” he told her.

Lin’s heritage could not be ignored in the emotions of an Asian war. “Does it make a difference, you being Oriental?” she was asked at a press conference. She in turn resented the changes made to her design and felt that the supporters of the flag and statues did not understand the intent of what was being built. Herein lies the power of her design. “They thought the Memorial was only going to be beautiful. They did not understand what it would really be.” What it would become was a place, as Senator Mathias had hoped, to heal.

22. Ibid., 19.
23. Ibid., 20.
25. Ibid., 68.
26. Ibid., 110.
It is a place for people. You can feel alone or linked as never before with the people you love. You can feel uncomfortable or exhilarated. The Memorial dictates nothing. This seeming simplicity is deceptive. The names keep you from remaining indifferent. You become part of them, and they become part of you. They search for something within you, and they stimulate you to search for something with greater meaning than yourself. Many people come to see a special name. Every day someone leaves a flag, a flower, a snapshot, a memento, a poem, or a personal note. Most visitors have no particular vet in mind. They come because they know that the Memorial has something important to offer.27

Over five million people visited the Memorial in the first two years. “Most visitors touch the wall or hug each other. They linger and talk and carry part of it away with them.”28 In 1983, one year after its dedication, U.S. News & World Report called it “the most emotional ground in the nation’s capital.”29

As Senator Mathias had said, Vietnam veterans had had the bad luck to fight an unpopular war.

Maybe Vietnam vets are forever condemned to be the most tragic of all heroes—those whose bravery was wasted. No! The Memorial shouts. It must not be. The names rise from the earth. … They speak. To their buddies. To their wives and children. To mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters. To all young Americans who must prepare for future wars.30

The Memorial changed how Vietnam veterans were seen. About 15,000 Vietnam veterans marched down Constitution Avenue to the Memorial for the dedication—the

27. Ibid., 3.
28. Ibid., 159.
29. Ibid., 160.
30. Ibid.
celebratory parade they had never had. Along the route, people stood three and four deep, applauding, reaching out to shake hands and shouting thank you. One child held up a sign “I’m Proud My Daddy’s a Vietnam Vet.” With over 100,000 veterans in town, “the entire city of Washington became a giant troopship bringing the boys home.” Finally, these veterans were recognized for their service and sacrifice during a conflict few understood and through the process of a draft.

The Wall changed how the vets saw themselves.

I could feel the chains clinking as they fell off us. I never expected that, at the age of 37, I would want to march in a parade or touch and hug other guys like myself, or be able to cry and see unknown thousands of guys like me doing the same thing.

While some vets found comfort in groups, many went to the Memorial alone.

They were afraid they would hate it, and afraid of the memories it would bring back. After seeing the wall, however, they needed each other, so they gathered in little groups. Men who had been strangers cried together. Many hugged. They had never been more strong or more fragile.

The Vietnam veterans had finally been acknowledged. They were no longer “the other” but were brought into the national family in a way never available to them before the Memorial.

31. Ibid., 149.
32. Ibid., 146.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid., 148.
The Vietnam Veterans Memorial highlighted war differently than other memorials. It has become a site of pilgrimage, remembrances, and grieving. So many items have been left at the wall that a museum has been established to preserve and display them in the context of the Memorial. In the years since the dedication, as fewer Vietnam veterans are able physically to make the trip to Washington, the Memorial continues to draw people from around the world to see their images reflected in a list of names. The Memorial began a conversation in the public sphere about war, about why some people lived and some died, about honoring sacrifice, about death and suffering, and so many emotional topics that had never before been made so public. The Memorial made it possible for people to expose emotions in a very public setting. “It was built as a very psychological memorial. It was meant to bring out in people the realization of loss and a cathartic healing process.”35

On a recent visit to the Memorial, many of the visitors I saw were much too young to have memories of the conflict, yet they were visiting Washington at a time when Americans are again serving in combat and returning home in body bags. The conversations I overheard, spoken in quiet, respectful tones, asked questions which guide public opinion and policy decisions. These conversations are vital to a democratic form of government yet do not lend themselves to social gatherings. A work of art such as the Memorial offers citizens and non-citizens alike a setting in which to reflect and to share thoughts on the human condition.

35. Ibid., 147.
The Children’s Holocaust Museum

Whitwell, Tennessee, is a small town of about 1,600 people, 30 miles west of Chattanooga. Once coal was mined in the mountains around the town; however, now the mines are closed leaving few jobs. Estimated median household income in 2009 was $27,492 up from $25,458 in 2000. The estimated per capita income in 2009 was $16,471 and 19.7% of the residents lived in poverty. The town’s population is 96.8% white. Forty-eight percent of the population is affiliated with a Southern Baptist Convention congregation. The city’s official website states that many call the area “God’s Country” and “When you are in Whitwell, YOU ARE IN AMERICA! GOD’S COUNTRY!!”36 It is a distressed city in a distressed county.

In 1998, something happened in that economically depressed town in Appalachia that changed how its people saw and were seen. Whitwell learned about intolerance and, at the same time, introduced the world to real individuals with faces and names whose families had been stereotyped as economically and educationally disadvantaged. It is fair to say that Tennessee is known for country music, barbeque, Elvis, and college football. However, when the people of Whitwell were done, they were known for the Children’s Holocaust Museum.

Whitwell, Tennessee, mostly white, and Protestant, is an unlikely place for a Holocaust memorial. But today, a World War II-era German

railcar sits in front of Whitwell Middle School housing millions of paper clips—each one honoring a victim of Nazi hatred and murder.37

The principal of Whitwell Middle School, Linda Hooper, recognized the challenges of growing up in a community where everyone is alike. “One day, our kids will leave the sheltered life in Whitwell. They will work in a big town over the mountains … and they will encounter people who are not ‘like us.’ How will they handle the intolerance or rejection?”38

One parent raised the issue of teaching diversity and David Smith, the school’s vice principal, suggested that the Holocaust would be an effective way to “show what intolerance is and what it can lead to.”39 Mrs. Hooper called a meeting of all eighth grade parents to ensure they were aware of the horror to which their children would be exposed. The project was to be voluntary and after-school. She put the proposal to a vote before the parents. One father asked if Mrs. Hooper would want her own children to attend the class. She said she would. “Then we’re all on board,” the father said.40

Selected to teach the class, Sandra Roberts told the children that the Nazis had murdered six million Jews. The students tried to quantify the number until one suggested

37. Peter W. Schroeder and Dagmar Schroeder-Hildebrand, Six Million Paper Clips (Minneapolis: Kar-Ben Publishing, 2004), Back Cover.
38. Ibid., 9.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid., 10.
they try to “collect six million of something and pile it up.”41 One student asked, “What about collecting paper clips?”42 She explained she had learned from the Internet that non-Jewish Norwegians had protested the deportation of their Jewish neighbors by wearing paper clips.

So the Holocaust class of Whitwell Middle School began to collect paper clips. At that moment, nobody could imagine that life would never be the same at the school … or in the little town in the Sequatchie Valley.43

In 1999, Dagmar and Peter Schroeder, White House correspondents for a group of German newspapers, discovered the Whitwell school’s website, www.whitwellmiddleschool.org, during a visit to the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. That same day, they met with a 92 year old woman who had fled the Nazi takeover of Austria. She knew of the paper clip project and asked the Schroeder’s to do something to help students along. The Schroeders did by writing articles for nine German newspapers with the request: “If you think this project is worthwhile, please send paper clips. And enclose a letter telling the students why you are participating.”44

In the first three weeks, the students received 2,000 letters and more than 46,000 paper clips. The letters included poems, drawings, and other artwork as well as stories

41. Ibid., 12.
42. Ibid., 13-14.
43. Ibid., 14.
44. Ibid., 22.
from former German soldiers who apologized for their actions, from survivors, and from people who said they wanted to tell the story so history would not be repeated. 45

The Schroeders were so moved by the collection of letters, they wrote a book about the German response to the project which was published in 2000. The book was read by Washington Post Editor Dita Smith who then travelled to Whitwell during Passover, 2001, to see for herself. She filed a story picked up by newspapers, and TV and radio stations across the country.46

As their studies continued, the students learned that the Nazis had also murdered some 5 million “others” besides Jews and the class agreed to increase the total to 11 million paper clips in memory of all the Nazis’ victims. The problem of where to put 11 million paper clips then arose. The answer became a German railroad car.47

The Schroeders eventually found a car at the Eisenbahnverein Ganzlin e.V Robel Museum near Berlin. The museum director, unwilling at first, was persuaded to donate the car to the children of Whitwell.48 The car traveled 300 miles across Germany bearing two signs, one in English, one in German: The Children’s Holocaust Museum, Whitwell, Tennessee.49 The children of a rural Southern town were now known in Germany. The

45. Ibid.
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid., 26.
48. Ibid., 31.
49. Ibid. 40.
car was transferred, appropriately, to a Norwegian ship to cross from Bergen to
Baltimore. “The harbormaster ordered all other work in the harbor to stop while the
memorial was loaded onto the ship. The longshoremen removed their hats and military
personnel saluted.”

Back in Whitwell, a setting had to be prepared for the railroad car. “Lord have
mercy!” a man in the audience exclaimed. “Building a Holocaust memorial is something
for big city folks.” Mrs. Hooper replied that she did not know how to build a memorial
but, if the town pulled together, they could do it. “We can build a memorial that will
show the world that we care.”

The white, Protestant residents of Whitwell built a place for the railroad car and
landscaped the grounds to honor the Jews, handicapped, homosexuals, Socialists, and
Communist who had been killed by the Nazis. Residents contributed whatever resources
and skills they had. Flowers and plants were taken from front yards and replanted at the
site where the car was to be placed. “Originally, eighteen (for chai-Hebrew for life)
butterflies (the Christian symbol of renewal) enhanced the grounds around the rail car.
Over the years, visitors have left several more butterflies.”

50. Ibid., 44.
51. Ibid., 34.
52. Ibid.
53. Ibid.
CSX transported the car from Baltimore to Chattanooga and it made the last 30 miles by truck through the Sequatchie Valley. It is there today, visited by people from around the world. In 2004, an award winning documentary told the story of Paper Clips and introduced thousands of others to the people of Whitwell and to their story. Among the most moving scenes in the film are those involving visits by Holocaust survivors and their families, many from New York, to this rural, Southern community. People, who are seen as “others” by much of the rest of the world, whether as Jews or “country,” meet face to face. The chances of groups this different ever gathering to talk are slim at best, yet through art they are brought together to share. Getting to Whitwell is not easy, but people come, not only to see the memorial but also to meet the community.

Today, a non-profit organization based in Chattanooga, One Clip At A Time, has created an interactive teaching kit “designed to motivate and empower students in Fifth Grade and above to make positive changes in their own classrooms and communities.” The organization also conducts summer seminars for educators across the country to come see the Museum, meet the originators of the Paper Clips project and spend a day at the school.

__________________________


When the project began, the intent was for one class to learn about intolerance. The Whitwell children learned about the Holocaust but they also taught the world about the people in a small, economically challenged community in Southeast Tennessee. Through the efforts of the people of Whitwell, understandings have changed and conversations taken place about public policies involving prejudice, hatred and discrimination.
CHAPTER IV

RECOGNIZING THE POWER OF IMAGES IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Culture, and by culture we refer to the manner in which speech, writing, the arts, architecture, entertainment, fashion, and other forms of representation or performance cohere to structure, perception, thought, emotion, and conduct, equips people to do the social, political, and ethical work required to live together.

—Paul Sniderman, Richard Brody, and Philip Tetlock

Art, theater, photographs, and film provide an understanding of political theories which cannot be reached through verbal communication alone. Efforts to define terrorism, equality, justice, even freedom open difficult conversations in the body politic as the photographs showing the treatment of detainees at Abu Ghraib proved. These photos, including one of a hooded figure standing on a box with electrical wires attached to his fingers, caused outrage around the world and challenged many Americans’ trust in their government to follow the foundational principles of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. The contradictions posited by the photos centered on the violation of human rights by the same government claiming its role as defender of liberty and justice. Discussions throughout the public sphere, driven by the photographs, centered on how Americans see themselves and how they see others, including a group defined as the enemy. As revealed through the photographs of the Civil Rights movement and the play The Great Game, an understanding of political concepts can be significantly influenced by a visual experience.

David Hume, a “precursor of contemporary cognitive science was one of the
most important philosophers to write in the English language.”¹ His major writings, a
*Treatise of Human Nature* and *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding*, are seminal
works of both philosophy and politics. Hume noted that humans feel more through the
“public exposure to others’ emotions than through an interior circuit of sensations, and
contemporary scholarship on the social construction of the emotions provides strong
confirmation.”²

Further, Hume advised,

> Since nothing is ever present to the mind but perceptions, and since
> all ideas are deriv’d from something antecedently present to the mind, it
> follows, that ‘tis impossible for us so much as to conceive or form an idea
> of any thing (sic) specifically different from ideas and impressions. Let us
> fix our attention out of ourselves as much as possible’ let us chase our
> imagination to the heavens … This is the universe of the imagination, nor
> have we any idea but what is there produc’d.³

Historical periods can be identified by the ways in which visuals were
intentionally used by religious and political leaders to guide the minds of the masses. In
Late Antiquity, the upper-class structure had been exclusively logocentric, that is, text-
oriented. The average man and woman—the people who grew the crops, sold in the
marketplaces, served in the military and performed all the tasks that kept the Roman

http://plato.standord.edu/entries/hume/.

². Ibid.

³. Ibid.
Empire functioning—had, however, had lost touch with the intellectual, literary symbolism that had “had encrusted public life of the empire.”⁴ This erudite way of life was replaced in the late sixth-century with a new culture based on a visual image which spoke directly to the people in the street and which was a portend of what was to come in the Middle Ages with the use of religious art to deliver biblical messages to the illiterate.⁵

In more recent time, “The shock of modernization and the horrors of two fully mechanized world wars were followed by an increasing withdrawal into a world of values from the past. Art museums were among the main channels that made this withdrawal possible”⁶ as they provided a space in which to escape into another time and to share the experience with others in similar need of emotional and psychological respite.

The transformation of princely galleries of Europe into museums was one that served the ideological needs of the middle classes and national states, providing secular civic rituals. Museums became one means by which emergent imperial states such as Britain, France and Germany could represent, justify and take pride in their global authority. Public museums not only displayed the nation’s power and wealth, in the form of objects taken from colonies, but provided a platform upon which to establish an historical canon of “national” culture. Viewing

---


⁵ Ibid.

“indigenous” artifacts imparted a strong sense of civic and national continuity, ritualizing the acquisition of national identity.  

A consequence of such presentation of art is that these works can offer a point of visual dialogue to the public sphere in which the human condition can be seen and understood, and in which self and other can be labeled or explained. Language, customs, social standings, and religions may all be different, yet an image can be understood even by those participating from different public spheres.

It is also through the visual that a more deliberate way of seeing can be developed. To sit with a visual experience and, whether consciously or unconsciously, be informed and influenced by what is seen expands and stimulates the imagination as opined by Hume.

What do you look like? What does your community look like? How do you see peace? Who wears the face of evil? How do you understand that what you see influences what you think just as what you think influences how you see? How do you understand that what you see and think influences your behavior? Do you appreciate the need to look with intention of comprehending subtle and complex messages that might not be easily communicated verbally?

The study of these questions, and the answers, fall under many academic disciplines including psychology, sociology, political science, economics, and religion.

Yet the study of the visual is typically left to Art. “The proponents of visual culture argue that what is needed is recognition of the role of the much broader range of images.”

Dress and fashion “are often some of the most widespread means of visual expression in a culture.” A general understanding of the influence of the visual on civic behavior is not considered essential material in the social sciences. Yet, human experience is, itself, an argument for recognition and inclusion in social science curricula of the role of visual culture in the communication and decision-making of the public sphere.

The ability to imagine the experience and needs of another—a capacity almost all human beings possess in some form—has to be greatly enhanced and refined if we are to have any hope of sustaining decent institutions across the many divisions that any modern society contains.

Much of public interaction includes the sharing of an experience of visuals with others and “basic principles of the Habermassian public sphere-public use of reason have a fundamental orientation toward interaction with strangers.” As we consider the power of the visual, it is relevant to distinguish between public and private engagement and interaction. There is a distinct difference between the effect of a photograph viewed

11. Hariman and Lucaites, No Caption Needed, 44.
individually and one experienced within a larger group and in a public space. How I respond in the privacy of my home is likely to be very different to my reactions if my experience is in the presence of others, aware of their responses, aware that they might note my responses, hear comments, and be influenced by others. An example is a 2010 exhibit entitled *The Sacred Made Real* at the National Gallery of Art which was devoted to Spanish religious painting of the seventeenth-century. During the seventeenth-century, in an effort to counteract Protestantism, Catholic painters and sculptors attempted to make images of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the saints as realistic as possible. This approach was “starkly austere, emotionally gripping, and even gory, intended to shock the sense and stir the soul. The result was a new style of painting, one that was vividly naturalistic and that emphasized three-dimensional illusionism.”

I attended this exhibition on the same day as the Rolling Thunder parade took place on Constitution Avenue which is in front of the National Gallery. As described on the About.com website, this parade, a call to remember the Prisoners of War and Missing in Action of the Vietnam War, started during the 1988 Memorial Day weekend. The veterans “announced their arrival with the roar of their Harley-Davidsons, a sound not unlike the 1965 bombing campaign against North Vietnam named Operation Rolling

Thunder.¹³ In 2010, some 400,000 motorcyclists participated.¹⁴ The audience in the National Gallery on that day included regular museum-goers, tourists visiting for the Memorial Day weekend, participants in the parade, and some who came in simply to enjoy the air-conditioning. I know all of these things because of the conversations taking place among viewers. I overheard their comments about what they saw; I overheard people talking about what they overheard others say. Peoples’ understanding of what they saw was affected by the communication going on around them. Outside the National Gallery, I overheard people talking about what they had seen inside. The visual experience, created by the culture of seventeenth-century Spain, had become more than art. Some of the people who had had the visual experience were not art experts, they had not studied art, they may have cared about art, about Spain, about religious works, or they may have cared only about the air conditioning on a hot Washington, DC day. To limit our recognition of a visual experience to “art” is to miss a significant influence on communication and opinion. With recognition of the dynamic created by the visual in the public sphere, we can better understand the relevance of studying visual culture.

How did the experience of The Sacred Made Real exhibit influence members of the public sphere and translate into the formation of public opinion? The comments both


¹⁴. Ibid.
inside and outside the Gallery indicated an appreciation for the opportunity to see a unique form of art. Thoughts were shared about the physicality of the works, and the acts, often of brutality, presented. There were discussions about the use of torture to control beliefs and of the limits of the human body to endure and of the mind to comprehend. Many expressed a more profound sense of the history and religion in Spain. The show presented images of a particular faith experience and provided a non-religious setting in which to explore the historical characters presented in the art. Believers reacted in the presence of non-believers giving each an opportunity to observe and form reactions. People recognized a return on their taxes which had contributed to making the show possible, and a diverse public was informed of how tax dollars can be used in support of the arts, as the “Arts on Foot” experience did in Penn Quarter. The exhibition brought together individuals who might otherwise not have encountered each other. The diversity between intentional supporters of the arts was expanded by the inclusion of people who happened upon the show and who were, at best, causally interested in art.

These types of experiences create opportunities for information processing, emotional sharing, and opinion and attitude formation. In developing opinions, people can manage only a finite number of factors. “At any given moment, only a little information, drawn from the senses and from long-term memory, can be held in the focus of attention.”\(^{15}\) Scientific research on how much information can be retained in the

average human consciousness or how information is transferred to action is not necessary to recognize that an event took place involving opinion and attitude formation. The point is not to challenge the role of the traditional social sciences in analyzing human behavior. Rather, my point is to locate the power of images in the public sphere.

“Why do we ignore the evidence for the effectiveness and provocativeness of images?”16 If the understanding of the visual is limited to the art on gallery walls, the reasons for understanding the place of the visual in the public sphere is limited to that group of people who are museum-goers. However, can we afford to ignore the influences on public opinion because we label them elitist or entertainment? When we take the perceptions of movie-goers, television-watchers, and theater patrons as a whole, we recognize the much broader perspective of how the visual is connected to the activities of the public sphere including: the formation, passage, and success of public policy initiatives. “Iconic images are central to the democratic imagination and an example of how the study of visual imagery can be a vehicle for political theory.”17 The importance of the visual to the political processes of the public sphere is underscored by archeological finds.

The artifacts that have endured from the dawn of human existence remind us that the arts have been a ubiquitous part of human life from its inception. So evident are its manifestations form our early history—cave

paintings, pictograph, petroglyph, body painting, adornments of dress, tools, weapons, housing; ceremonial movements or dance—it is tempting to speak about an aesthetic dimension that is generic to the human species.18

Thereby, my question becomes “is art necessary?” A lot of politicians think not. “Not when governments face huge deficits. In hard times, art begins to look like a frill. Its constituency is perceived as narrow. It is an obvious target for budget cutters.”19 Yet, a more informed opinion on the arts makes a strong case for their presence in the public sphere.

A comprehension of the interconnectedness of the various components that constitute an arts sector can facilitate our ability to see the scale and impact of the arts in ways not possible when we focused on separated artistic disciplines. The nonprofit arts and the unincorporated arts have been given separate and marginal consideration, while the commercial arts are viewed as entertainment. Yet they interact and are interdependent in important ways. Taken as a whole, the arts in America constitute a significant sector or industry; their domestic economic impact is substantial, as they make noteworthy contributions to the GNP, employment and the tax base.20


19. Ibid., 17.

Even as budgets tighten, the arts community has been more proactive in presenting themselves as social agents. “Arts advocates are selling their programs as a way to enhance cities’ public reputations, and improve life in neighborhoods, including those with high crime.”

Two very different approaches to visual communication being supported by local communities are African dance and drumming troupes performing either in recreational centers or a replica of a Hmong village. These activities provide opportunities to explore a heritage, and to permit those of different cultures the opportunity to come to know the people behind the label of “African” or “Asian.” In many cities, the arts address the problems of the elderly and put faces on their stories in a youth-oriented society. “When the arts expand beyond the boundaries of art galleries and museums and symphony halls, people respond to the notion that the arts are a positive social form in their communities.”

What is true of the smaller public sphere is true of larger world communities.

The global economy has tied all of us to distant lives. The world’s schools, colleges, and universities therefore have a large and urgent task: to cultivate in students the ability to see themselves as members of a heterogeneous nation (for all modern nations are heterogeneous) and a still more heterogeneous world, understanding something of the history and character of the diverse groups that inhabit it. Knowledge is no guarantee of good behaviour, but ignorance is a virtual guarantee of bad behaviour.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

In the first days of Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003, some 15,000 objects were looted from the National Museum in Baghdad. (Yet, just three years later, in 2006, 63 percent of Americans 18-24 could not locate Iraq on a map.) On May 22, 2010, the Iraqi Culture Center opened in Washington, D.C., giving Americans an opportunity to see “the cultural face of a country that is perhaps most widely known for exploding.”

In the past few years, Americans have returned over a thousand artifacts to the Iraqi embassy. “It’s been an excellent joint effort and cooperation.”

This story was reported in the Washington Post. Yet, even someone unfamiliar with that particular newspaper, or newspapers in general, could conclude that a story on page C5 was not serious news. In fact, the Washington Post C Section highlights entertainment. Had two political figures met, an orchestrated photo would likely have appeared in the A Section if not on the front page. The event would have been considered a photo op or propaganda for a particular a political statement. Instead, the understanding between peoples, the healing of physical as well as emotional wounds, and peaceful co-existence, these events described on page C5 are of supreme importance.

Rather than relegated to the files of Cultural Attaches, such events should be recognized for the statements they make and the bridges they build within and between societies. If social science curricula included required courses in the public placement of


25. Ibid.
visual culture, national and international understanding would be significantly improved. Policy makers would have a deeper understanding of the human beings affected by their decisions and, guided by that knowledge, could be more effective in their efforts. Alexandria Luria explains that, to understand human thinking, it is necessary to go behind the scientific study of the organism. “One must search for the origins of conscious activity in the external conditions of life.”26 Through art, we can reach beyond scientific and data-driven analysis, to recognize common activities and behaviors. These are the external conditions of life shared across time and cultures. Following Luria, looking at everyday activities we can understand our own opinions and attitudes, and those of others. We interpret what we see, not as scientists or academicians, but as fellow residents of the human community. The many forms of visual communication available today enable each of us to see people different from and similar to ourselves going about the business of life. Through the visual vocabulary of art, we are able to reach more informed opinions about others and to understand what we share. Should circumstances require the use of military force, strategies can be based on a more comprehensive view of the opponent so resources can be deployed more effectively. Visual culture is a too undervalued means by which members of the public sphere can

comprehend public policy. Through the arts, the public sphere can achieve a wider based awareness of issues and peoples involved in world events. We need to consider, “The world outside has to be shaped into a picture in the mind. It needs to be imagined, rather than left as a clutter of stray facts gleaned from the daily news. Informed public opinion requires an active imagination.”27 This goes beyond art appreciation and art theory to the fundamental nature of human behavior and the functioning of social organizations.

Enlightenment philosophers believed in the power of reason. It may be that they were describing what humans could be not what they were. With the emphasis on science, “today we construct our theories first and afterwards discover what effect they are having on our souls.” Previous generations and other cultures recognized the role of the visual in human behavior and we can learn much by studying how these people intentionally used visuals.

Instead of contrasting reason and visual representation, we need to ask what reason is within a visual. … Most important, reason now has to negotiate more directly with intuition, for intuitive reactions are activated, directed, and represented by the verbally mute image.28


Our contemporary understanding should not be caught in an arbitrary battle between the reasoned and the visual, but rather be a more authentic recognition of how opinions and attitudes are formed and as the basis for public opinion.

Instead of seeing visual practices as threats to practical reasoning or as ornamental devices that may be a necessary concession to holding the attention of a mass audience, we believe they can provide crucial social, emotional, and mnemonic materials for political identity and action.29

Political science, sociology, psychology, and economics can tell only so much about human behavior. The specialized vocabularies of these fields are alien to the daily lives of the average citizen.

Thomas Langan provides philosophical insight into the fundamentals of the shared human experience. “Given the staggering variety of pluralistic views of man in our present world … we need more than ever … a wisdom that can make some sense out of history, the worlds within which human beings find themselves. …”30 His study addresses the individual’s struggle to manage a variety of worlds which are increasingly demanding simultaneous attention.31 Langan maintains that to live authentically one should be interconnected.

29. Ibid., 14.
31. Ibid., 7.
… we need to invest in the many interconnected worlds we share. … with all other humans. Every one of my free decisions contributes to the direction in which humanity will invest. My responsibility to others should be restricted to sensible political compromise. Absolutist convictions have no place in the public square.32

Langan relates that the Greek philosophers noted the significance of seeing as the highest goal of man. “Both the Greek and the Hebraic traditions emphasize that you become what you see, and that seeing is a special call of the human being.”33 For Langan, imagination and understanding are essential for seeing and he acknowledges the stimulative role of art. “Watch just for one day how much … art, requiring … imagination is at work in managing the little scenes of everyday life.”34 By learning to see in this Greek-Hebraic sense, that is, by using the imagination inspired by the arts, we recognize the commonality of the human experience. “We must learn to open up ever wider world contexts to meaning as we interpret the givens of our existence.”35 The visual arts communicate these contexts and provide the structure for interpretation.

It is helpful to visualize the mind as a tower of windows. Sadly, many people remain trapped at the one window, looking out every day at the same scene in the same way. Real growth is experienced when you draw back from that one window, turn and walk around the inner tower of the soul and gaze at all the different windows that await your gaze. Through these different windows, you can see new vistas of possibilities,  

32. Ibid., 17.
33. Ibid., 18-19.
34. Ibid., 95.
35. Ibid., 9.
presence and creativity. So much depends on the frame of vision—the window through which we look.\textsuperscript{36}

The human frame of vision is influenced by many factors not the least of which is the intention we bring to the experience. What we see and how we see can be a conscious decision of focus and connection, or it can be a mindless activity. If we have been encouraged and educated to approach contact with visual experiences as an opportunity to be informed, we will gain a much more complete understanding of human behavior. Through mindful encounters with art, a more intentional way of seeing can be developed. To sit with a visual experience and, whether consciously or unconsciously, be informed and influenced by what is seen expands the imagination. As posed by Hume, active imaginations can redirect focus from the self and encourage consideration of more far-reaching concerns. Through shared experiences of art, the community within the public sphere engages in discourse on topics that are familiar or controversial, perhaps even challenging to delineate.

Above all else, collective opinion is a communications concept. The coalescence of individual opinions in the social force we call collective opinion is a product of the emergence of mutual awareness among persons who communicate with each other by using a common universe of discourse.\textsuperscript{37}


While our common vocabulary of discourse is informed by the visual, its place goes largely unrecognized in the analysis of opinion and attitude. The contemporary emphasis on the scientific and analytic on human behavior should not overlook the obvious day to day routines through which art informs the public sphere. “Fish are the last to recognize the water.”38

BIBLIOGRAPHY


