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David MacDougall: The Corporeal Image

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INTRODUCTION

MEANING AND BEING



THE ESSAYS in this book address the corporeal aspects of images and image-making. This is not to say that they are indifferent to the meanings and associations that images awaken in us—far from it—but they are concerned with the moment at which those meanings emerge from experience, before they become separated from physical encounters. At that point thought is still undifferentiated and bound up with matter and feeling in a complex relation that it often later loses in abstraction. I am concerned with this microsecond of discovery, of knowledge at the birth of knowledge.

Our consciousness of our own being is not primarily an image, it is a feeling. But our consciousness of the being, the autonomous existence, of nearly everything else in the world involves vision. We assume that the things we see have the properties of being, but our grasp of this depends upon extending our own feeling of being into our seeing. In the process, something quintessential of what we are becomes generalized in the world. Seeing not only makes us alive to the appearance of things but to being itself.

One of the functions of art, and often of science, is to help us understand the being of others in the world. However, art and science are only part of this; it depends as much on how we go about the daily practice of seeing. In this, the meaning we find in what we see is always both a necessity and an obstacle. Meaning guides our seeing. Meaning allows us to categorize objects. Meaning is what imbues the image of a person with all we know about them. It is what makes them familiar, bringing them to life each time we see them. But meaning, when we force it on things, can also blind us, causing us to see only what we expect to see or distracting us from seeing very much at all.

My reasons for writing about this come from a background of trying to use images in an academic discipline. Images reflect thought, and they may lead to thought, but they are much more than thought. We are accustomed to regarding thought as something resembling language—the mind speaking to itself or, as dictionaries put it, a process of reasoning. But our conscious experience involves much more than this kind of thought. It is

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made up of ideas, emotions, sensory responses, and the pictures of our imagination. The way we use words all too often becomes a mistaken recipe for how to make, use, and understand visual images. By treating images—in paintings, photographs, and films—as a product of language, or even a language in themselves, we ally them to a concept of thought that neglects many of the ways in which they create our knowledge. It is important to recognize this, not in order to restrict images to nonlinguistic purposes—this merely subordinates them further to words—but in order to reexamine the relation between seeing, thinking, and knowing, and the complex nature of thought itself.

The chapters in this book are essays in the strict sense of the term—attempts to find words for observations that, in the present case, have resulted from varied experiences with photographs, films, and texts. Ultimately, all concern the human subject—as material presence, as thinking being, as child and adult; in still photographs, in ethnography, and in cinema. The book moves in part I from questions of embodiment, in and around film, to filmic representation itself; in part II to the representation of childhood, and my own attempts to film children’s lives; in part III to photography in colonial and postcolonial settings; and lastly in part IV to the history and possible future of visual anthropology. If these essays have a common theme, it is that the encounter with visual images demands more of us than the mental facility that language has given us. There is a specificity and obduracy to images that defies our accustomed habits of translation and summation. In considering our use of images, it is no good simply insisting that we must do a better job of adapting them to the rules of scholarly writing. This will lead only to bad compromises. If we are to gain new knowledge from using images, it will come in other forms and by different means.



Our seeing is already deeply predetermined. Much of the knowledge we gain through vision and our other senses, and the way we direct our seeing, is highly organized. To a large extent this is not a matter of choice but of our cultural and even our neural conditioning.¹ We see conceptually, metaphorically, linguistically. But whatever our culture, we also see to some extent literally. There is always a tension between these two ways of seeing, and between our consciousness of meaning and of being. As we look at things, our perception is guided by cultural and personal interests, but perception is also the mechanism by which these interests are altered and added to. There is thus an interdependency between perception and meaning. Meaning shapes perception, but in the end perception can refigure meaning, so that at the next stage this may alter perception once again.

This applies as much to making images as to our seeing, and to seeing images made by others. Meaning is produced by our whole bodies, not just by conscious thought. We see with our bodies, and any image we make carries the imprint of our bodies; that is to say, of our being as well as the meanings we intend to convey. As a product of human vision, image-making might be regarded by some as little more than secondhand or surrogate seeing. But when we look purposefully, and when we think, we complicate the process of seeing enormously.² We invest it with desires and heightened responses. The images we make become artifacts of this. They are, in a sense, mirrors of our bodies, replicating the whole of the body's activity, with its physical movements, its shifting attention, and its conflicting impulses toward order and disorder. A complex construction such as a film or photograph has an animal origin. Corporeal images are not just the images of other bodies; they are also images of the body behind the camera and its relations with the world.

Photographic images are inherently reflexive, in that they refer back to the photographer at the moment of their creation, at the moment of an encounter. In films this is extended by a kind of triangulation, in which each successive scene further locates the author in relation to the subjects. There may be other signs of who and where the author is in the responses of the people being filmed. These signs are often difficult to interpret individually, but they gain direction and significance through the course of a film. Viewers cannot avoid interpreting these signs, however unconsciously, any more than they can in the exchanges of daily life.

Despite the parallels between seeing and image-making, looking with and without a camera can never be the same. However much it may be directed, a camera (or a photographic emulsion) produces an image that is independent of our bodies. This material image has not passed through us, even though the camera that produced it mimics many of the characteristics of human vision. There is thus an irreducible part of a photographic image that escapes from us. It is an intimation of something uncontrolled and uncontrollable. A literary view can take us only so far in understanding this. "Film is about something," Dai Vaughan once wrote, "whereas reality is not."³ Despite the imprint of our minds and bodies, films and photographs remind us that in the end life is not "about" something—life is not like that.

Framing people, objects, and events with a camera is always "about" something. It is a way of pointing out, of describing, of judging. It domesticates and organizes vision. It both enlarges and diminishes. It diminishes by leaving out those connections in life to which the photographer is blind, as when it imposes an explanation on events that we know to be more complex. Or it does this as a deliberate sacrifice to some seemingly more important argument or dramatic effect. Framing enlarges through

a similar process. It is what lifts something out of its background in order to look at it more closely, as we might pick up a leaf in the forest.

Through selection, framing also distills and concentrates experience. By isolating observations, it reveals commonalities and connections that may have gone unnoticed before. These may be the characteristic mannerisms of a person, or how a particular cultural theme emerges repeatedly in different contexts. Such intensifications and reinforcements of perception may make us, as viewers, more observant in our daily lives, but they can also dull our responses through overuse. Picture editors may wonder if there is much point in publishing yet another photograph of a maimed body or a starving child. Framing often reveals the sensibilities of the author by focusing on certain subjects or displaying a distinctive way of looking. Conversely, framing sometimes shows the author rebelling against framing, with a roughness that expresses impatience with all elegance, art, and artifice.⁴ Successive generations of photographers and filmmakers have allowed accident and chance into their work in a calculated way. Framing thus has two intertwined impulses—to frame but also to show what lies beyond or in spite of framing.

Framing in a more general sense produces different modes of looking with a camera. One may, for example, distinguish between a purely responsive camera, an interactive camera, and a constructive camera. These approaches reflect different stances toward the subject. The differences are not so much a matter of degree as of kind. One approach is not necessarily more or less objective than another, or more or less personally engaged. They represent different temperaments and aims, not different moralities. In a single film, several approaches may be employed for separate purposes. Thus, a responsive camera observes and interprets its subject without provoking or disturbing it. It responds rather than interferes. An interactive camera, on the contrary, records its own interchanges with the subject. A constructive camera interprets its subject by breaking it down and reassembling it according to some external logic.

In making films, we are constantly advancing our own ideas about a world whose existence owes nothing to us. In fiction films as well as non-fiction films, we use “found” materials from this world. We fashion them into webs of signification, but within these webs are caught glimpses of being more unexpected and powerful than anything we could create. These may be qualities we discover in human beings or in the plenitude of the inanimate world. A good film reflects the interplay of meaning and being, and its meanings take into account the autonomy of being. Meaning can easily overpower being. We see this in the effect of the picturesque on portraiture and landscapes in nineteenth-century painting and photography. In making films, wise filmmakers create structures in which being is allowed to live, not only in isolated glimpses but in moments of revelation

throughout the whole work. These form their own connections above and beyond our intentions as filmmakers. This is why knowing when to desist in our interpretations is so important, to allow these moments to connect and resonate.



In social science and the humanities, images have had an uneven career, depending upon the degree to which seeing has been accorded the status of knowledge. As photography has spread across the world, visual images have gone from being prized in the nineteenth century to being increasingly regarded as instruments rather than constituents of knowledge.

As writers, we articulate thoughts and experiences, but as photographers and filmmakers we articulate images of looking and being. What is thought is only implied, unless it is appended in writing or speech. Some would say that images, then, are not in any sense knowledge. They simply make knowledge possible, as data from observations. But in another sense they *are* what we know, or have known, prior to any comparison, judgment, or explanation. There is a perceptual as well as a conceptual kind of knowledge. This knowledge has no propositional status (of generality, of explanation) except the proposition of its own existence. It remains to a large extent inert, untapped. Only in the will to declare it do we detect the stirrings of thought.

A filmmaker's knowledge is often believed to lie in a film's conclusions, expressed through a visual rhetoric that juxtaposes shots and scenes, or at a more general level explains behavior through narratives of power, exchange, belief, and emotion. These are the "messages" that the film communicates. A kind of visual reasoning has taken place. Yet the filmmaker has seen and knows much more than can be communicated in this way. Is it possible to transmit this knowledge—which cannot be conceptualized—to others? In academic writing this question is generally dealt with by setting aside such knowledge as superfluous, or inaccessible, or outside the domain of the discipline or the problem at hand. But in films and photographs, it is far more difficult to cordon off statements about reality from the immediacy of the reality shown. The kinds of knowledge we gain from images and texts may have to be approached in quite different ways.

My image of you, or my many images of you in different situations, forms much of what I know about you. Appearance *is* knowledge, of a kind. Showing becomes a way of saying the unsayable. Visual knowledge (as well as other forms of sensory knowledge) provides one of our primary means of comprehending the experience of other people. Unlike the knowledge communicated by words, what we show in images has no

transparency or volition—it is a different knowledge, stubborn and opaque, but with a capacity for the finest detail. How we reconcile this with other forms of knowledge—of explanation, metaphor, analogy—is one of the great themes of film itself, which more explicitly than writing pits being against meaning.

Through their stubbornness, photographic images dispute their consecrated meanings (what Barthes called the *studium*) or at least have the potential to undercut them. In films the complexity of people and objects implicitly resists the theories and explanations in which the film enlists them, sometimes suggesting other explanations or no explanations at all. In this sense, then, film is always a discourse of risk and indeterminacy. This puts it at odds with most academic writing, which, despite its caution and qualifications, is a discourse that advances always toward conclusions. For all the ways in which photographic images oversimplify and aggressively impose their messages (as they often do in advertising, for example), they are intrinsically tentative, oscillating between meaning and the self-sufficiency of their subjects.

In an effort to accommodate this alien knowledge, disciplines such as history and anthropology tend to find a place for it within the knowledge systems of the people they study rather than within the discipline itself. It can then be viewed through the filter of established principles, without challenging the premises of belief (of rational thought) from which these disciplines draw their authority. Seeing, hearing, and other forms of sensory knowledge are accordingly located in individual experience or in cultural and historical collectivities. They are seen as extending the reach of the discipline without fundamentally altering it. Methods that directly address the senses, such as photography and film, tend to be treated similarly—that is, chiefly as adjuncts to formulating knowledge at a higher level of abstraction. In accepting this, historians and anthropologists preserve the value of knowledge as meaning, but they miss an opportunity to embrace the knowledge of being.



Filmmakers compose images into a form for others to see and then are frequently asked, “What were you trying to say?” They have tried to say or mean certain things, but that is perhaps the least of their intentions. Most of their effort has gone into putting the viewer into a particular relation to a subject and creating a progression of images and scenes for understanding it, much as a musician produces a progression of notes and sequences. But before filmmakers can compose images in this way, they have had to film them, and this has required looking. Thus, before films are a form of representing or communicating, they are a form of looking.

Before they express ideas, they are a form of looking. Before they describe anything, they are a form of looking. In many respects filming, unlike writing, precedes thinking. It registers the process of looking with a certain interest, a certain will.

When we look, we are doing something more deliberate than seeing and yet more unguarded than thinking. We are putting ourselves in a sensory state that is at once one of vacancy and of heightened awareness. Our imitative faculties take precedence over judgment and categorization, preparing us for a different kind of knowledge. We learn to inhabit what we see. Conversely, thinking about what we see, projecting our ideas upon it, turns us back upon ourselves. So, simply to look, and look carefully, is a way of knowing that is different from thinking. This is not necessarily a matter of greater concentration, for often the more we concentrate, the more we see only ourselves. Concentration is not at all the same thing as being attentive and free of distractions. Sartre makes the point that consciousness cannot exist devoid of content; it is given shape by things-in-themselves in the world. But if the act of looking is what occupies our consciousness, we cannot be fully attentive to what we are seeing. Paying attention is not a matter of projecting oneself onto things-in-themselves but of freeing one's consciousness to perceive them.

It is therefore important to examine closely our own patterns of observation, undiverted by the conventions and interpretations that we receive from society and that constantly crowd upon us. This is particularly important for filmmakers, who are trained in a very restricted range of methods for seeing and recording experience. It is a difficult thing to do—to understand how one looks at things. It is made more difficult because it is apparently so simple, for we tend to forget how cursory looking can be. To look carefully requires strength, calmness, and affection. The affection cannot be in the abstract; it must be an affection of the senses.

A camera can be quite blind. Surveillance cameras in warehouses or apartment buildings are quite blind. Looking at the recordings they make, one can sense that there is no one behind these cameras. Or when, in a film, a camera pans over a landscape, again one can sense that no one is really looking. Anything that might be seen is in the process of disappearing off the screen. When young filmmakers start out, you often notice that they are looking at nothing but hoping that by moving the camera over the surface of a subject something will be gathered up. The camera never comes to rest, or if it should chance to do so for a moment it immediately moves away again. This is a camera that is hunting, searching for something to see and never finding it. It is constantly dissatisfied, as though nothing were worth looking at.

It is therefore quite possible to see without looking. Can one learn to look more attentively? From birth, some people seem to do so. You some-

times recognize this in the work of new photographers and filmmakers. Others, however intelligent and perceptive they may be, live in a world so dominated by concepts that they find it difficult to look at anything attentively. When they see a film they worry about what they are supposed to think about it. Their thinking keeps interfering with the process of looking. You may have known such people. They cannot give themselves to the images of a film, and afterward all that is left in their minds is a series of judgments, or a set of questions, or a list of items they believe have been left out. They may even find the images chaotic, as if they have been asked to follow an incomprehensible language.

This is not only a problem among viewers. Many filmmakers have little respect for images or for their audiences. One sign of this is that the images they use are wholly imitative, not valued in themselves but used as a cheap coinage. Another is that the images are changed as quickly as possible, out of a constant fear that we, the audience, will lose interest in the film. In the end, it is only the changes that keep us watching, since we are never allowed to pay attention to anything. There is perhaps a deeper fear as well. One has the impression that many filmmakers are afraid of looking. What is it in ordinary things that they fear to see? Is it a fear of their own feelings, that they should dare to engage so directly with the world? Is it the delicacy, fragility, and beauty of things that they fear—or the skull beneath the skin, the horror?

It is important to understand this fear, for none of us is completely free of it. It is the fear of giving ourselves unconditionally to what we see. It seems to me that this fear is allied to our fear of abandoning the protection of conceptual thought, which screens us from a world that might otherwise consume our consciousness. For to be fully attentive is to risk giving up something of ourselves. To lose this fear, we must examine it and try to understand it. If we are afraid to look honestly, and are afraid of our own responses, or of what others may think of us, our looking will always be evasive. It is this kind of dishonest looking that does immeasurable harm to others and to society. We see it everywhere around us. We have seen it in every age—that which may not be seen or be acknowledged to be seen. To overcome this fear we need to find our own kind of freedom. It is a freedom that we can only learn by accepting that we are alone, that no one will help us, that we must make it ourselves.

Notes

1. See Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 41–42, 49–56.
2. By the same token, mental images frequently complicate (and interrupt) the train of “linguistic” thought.

3. Vaughan 1999: 21.

4. Susan Sontag notes the equivalence of artistry and chance in producing memorable photographs: “Photography is the only major art in which professional training and years of experience do not confer an insuperable advantage over the untrained and inexperienced—this for many reasons, among them the large role that chance (or luck) plays in the taking of pictures, and the bias toward the spontaneous, the rough, the imperfect” (Sontag 2003: 28). This would seem to apply, however, only to the single photograph. The principle would not hold if one compared the collected works of either professionals or amateurs.