

On Seeing & Overlooking

A Critical and Constructive Essay on MacDougall's Distinction Between "Seeing" and "Looking"

Introduction

In his essays *Meaning and Being*, MacDougall poetically differentiates between the activities of "seeing" and "looking" (MacDougall 2006, 7). "Seeing" refers to a socioculturally shaped gaze, where things are perceived through the lens of categories and concepts. By projecting our prior knowledge and values onto objects, we partially reflect ourselves in them. This carries the risk of seeing only what we expect to see in advance (MacDougall 2006, 1). In contrast, "looking" is described as an attentive, unbiased perspective toward the environment, allowing one to perceive things with a liberated mind and heightened empirical sensitivity (MacDougall 2006, 7).

For instance, consumption and viewing habits have significantly shifted in today's attention economy: we engage more in "seeing" than in "looking" (MacDougall 2006, 7–8). Audiovisual content is often characterized by a restless pursuit of ever-new images, driven by a fear of boring its audience (MacDougall 2006, 7–8). MacDougall's distinction between "seeing" and "looking" aims to inspire readers, within the context of photography, to train their eyes and reflect on their viewing habits.

While his concept intuitively makes sense, this short essay critiques the possibility of an unbiased perspective and proposes an alternative approach to sharpening one's senses for photography or filmmaking through Latour's Actor-Network Theory.

The Impossibility of an Unbiased Perspective

MacDougall's concept of "looking" assumes a socioculturally specific form of unbiased observation, where we enter a liberated and heightened sensory state, reflecting on the dimensions of our judgment to observe the environment without value judgments (MacDougall 2006, 7). However, whether through "looking" or "seeing" — when the act of seeing precedes the creation of an image or film (MacDougall 2006, 6–7) — images and films are inherently subjective. They are shaped by a specific position, perspective, framing, and moment in time and often carry an intentionality inscribed within them (Heidemann 2011, 256). Moreover, both the process of creating images and their reception by viewers function as interpretative "black boxes," where individual sociocultural preconditioning helps decode the content of the image (Heide-

mann 2011, 256–58). As Wendl suggests, visual competence and the cultural grammar of seeing are always culturally specific (Wendl 1996, 175 ff.).

For instance, in the *RCC Environmental Photography Workshop*, Dr. Alison Pouliot shared specific techniques she identified as useful for portraying objects in nature through culturally informed visual habits (cf. Keilhack 2024). Techniques such as isolating the intended subject of focus, seeking repeated patterns, or beginning with a clear artistic intention are examples of "seeing" in the sense that they consciously apply a sociocultural lens to perceive and interpret the environment.

Furthermore, Western perceptions of the world and our contemporary understanding of the environment are deeply influenced by the European intellectual heritage, particularly the Platonic tradition. Ancient Greek philosophy distinguished between (1) *Eidos*—the invisible and ideal world of forms, (2) *Eikon*—the visible representation of these forms, and (3) *Phantasma*—the deceptive appearance (Mitchell 2008, 15). The term "idea" itself originates from the Greek word *idein* (to see, to behold), emphasizing a close connection between the realms of the visible and the conceptual. Similarly, the related term *Eidolon* (visible image) illustrates that the boundary between sensory perception and abstract understanding was not absolute in ancient thought (Mitchell 2008, 15). Nevertheless, Platonic philosophy gave rise to an idealistic dualism that separated the invisible, eternal, and perfect world of ideas from the visible, transient, and imperfect material world (Latour 2000, 10 ff.; cf. Hall and Ames 1995, 72). This dualistic framework profoundly shaped the European understanding of mind and matter and continues to influence contemporary worldviews.

The act of seeing is inevitably connected to the final product of an image or film. Images are shaped both by the subjective processes of their creation and by our ontological understanding, which is itself culturally determined. Through the concepts of "seeing" and "looking," MacDougall likely aims to mark a gradual distinction, emphasizing humanity's creative capacity to become aware of its conditioning and to shift perspectives. However, his explanation is misleading, as humans cannot fully escape their inherent biases.

An Alternative Concept of World Perception

At the beginning of the iconic turn—referred to as the "Pictorial Turn" by Mitchell or the "Iconic Turn" by Boehm—images were attributed a certain power and agency to attract the gaze of viewers (Belting and Mitchell 2008, 8 ff.; Mitchell 2008, 17). Mitchell even animates and personifies images, suggesting that they desire our attention and silently reciprocate our gaze with their "face" within a "field of visual reciprocity" (Belting and Mitchell 2008, 50–67). What images "desire" is not necessarily equivalent to their message or the effect they have on their viewers: "What images ultimately

want is simply to be asked what they want—on the condition that the answer might well be: absolutely nothing" (Belting and Mitchell 2008, 66–68).

In the case of MacDougall, the notion of recognizing the image as an actant is certainly appealing, even if Mitchell's portrayal is overly dramatic and separates the "will" of an image from its message.

Using Latour's Actor-Network Theory (ANT), an alternative concept of world perception can be developed, one that is at least as inspiring for a shift in perspective as MacDougall's approach to seeing (Latour 2005; 1991). The Platonic tradition has profoundly shaped our thinking through an anthropocentric individualism, where agents are often understood as autonomous creators of ideas, independent of the environment in which they exist. ANT, on the other hand, offers a different perspective by viewing agents (humans) and actants (non-human entities such as objects, technologies, or environments) as interconnected within networks (Latour 2000). Both groups interact in creative processes—whether in photography or the interpretation of images. Here, creativity arises not from the isolated efforts of an individual but from the dynamic interplay between agents and actants (cf. Latour 2000, 219). These interactions collectively open up a new field of possibilities defined by their connections (cf. Latour 2000, 217 ff.). This dynamic is particularly evident in nature photography, where the relationship between the photographer and the environment plays a pivotal role.

Furthermore, the Western tradition is characterized by a clear separation of sensory perceptions, with sight regarded as the dominant sense. The mental construction of the world is often interpreted in (1) monocausal and (2) unidirectional or causal-linear terms, where stimuli are understood to originate exclusively from the environment and produce fixed effects on sensory perception. In reality, however, seeing is a complex process that (1) does not function independently of other sensory perceptions and (2) results from an interplay of factors such as the body, location, perspective, framing, and moment in time.

(1) Experiments on phenomena such as synesthesia, the McGurk effect, or other audiovisual illusions demonstrate that sensory impressions are interactively intertwined in the brain, complementing each other to form a multidimensional mental image (cf. Ingold 2000, 268; cf. Ansorge 2022). Thus, our ears can "see," and our eyes can "hear."

(2) The traditional view reduces complex interrelations to a one-dimensional cause-and-effect relationship. In truth, however, the interplay between agents and their environment—as well as between the various sensory organs—is reciprocal and dynamic. Perception of the environment is not merely tied to the body but emerges through it. Sounds exist only because a membrane in the ear perceives them—

without ears, there would be no sounds. Similarly, light becomes visible only through the retina, with the human eye perceiving only certain frequencies and colors, in contrast to other species (Scholtyšek and Kelber 2017). Our reactions to the things around us not only shape how we experience the world but also determine what we are able to perceive at all.

Perception is therefore always an active process in which the body, sociocultural pre-conceptions, and the environment are inextricably intertwined.

Conclusion

Thus, in these four pages, I have refuted my own bachelor's thesis on creativity (cf. Keilhack 2023). Starting with MacDougall's distinction between "Seeing" and "Looking," this essay challenges the claim that an unbiased form of seeing exists, given that both seeing and images are profoundly shaped by sociocultural contexts and can only be understood through the ontological framework of Cartesian dualism. Subsequently, I develop an alternative concept of world perception using Latour's Actor-Network Theory, aligning with MacDougall's intention behind his distinction.

While the differentiation between "Seeing" and "Looking" mistakenly grounds the need for mindful environmental perception in the critique of today's often superficial visual habits, the alternative concept emphasizes that perception occurs interactively through all senses simultaneously. Furthermore, it highlights that the creative act of interpretation emerges from the relationship between viewers and the objects within their environment.

Perhaps this essay offers photographers and filmmakers an inspiring perspective to sharpen their senses and become more attuned to new details in their surroundings.

Literature

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