



Ocular Becomings in Dangerous Times

Special Issue Editorial

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Over the years, there has been growing international interest in understanding the visual, the 'politics of the eye' and what we here refer to as 'ocular becomings'. This metaphor was chosen as the theme of this special issue of VJEP, and the conference out of which it was generated, as a catalyst for us to think about the contemporary ways in which humans are influenced by historically and socially constructed visual narratives, practices, strategies and realities, and the imaginations or screens that influence what and how we see. Today – as historically – selected, constructed and manipulated images are used in wars, competition, radicalisation and for abusive purposes as well as for a kind educational and supportive use. Visualisation, representation and images are therefore not simple issues. For centuries, our world has been categorised according to what we see – and many claims have been made about the nature of becoming on this basis. Some of these claims invite our earnest attention as educationalists and scholars, as consumers and as advocates for learners and the way their becomings are portrayed accordingly. These, in turn, ask us to consider new ways of casting our ocularities – through new methodologies and methods, as well as contemporary topics for inquiry that were previously unimaginable. It is to this emphasis that we devote this special issue.

As we have argued elsewhere, a consideration of ocularity is not a new phenomenon – hearking back to our Socratic predecessors who argued that what could be seen was, of itself, an inadequate vehicle for understanding (White, 2016). We have a long history of a growing awareness on how we are shaped as ocular beings, what we look for, how we use visuals and how we

think in and with visuals, how we sense and feel with visual glimpses and greater visual narratives. More recent critique of this phenomenon is found in Jay's (1993) famous book 'Downcast Eyes' where he argues for a philosophical turn in understanding visual interpretation as located ideologically, socially and axiologically – within discursive folds of human experience and understanding. We are asked to recognise the locatedness of our seeing – its movement, distance and intimacy in our everyday lives – and to pay attention its discursive folds accordingly.

The complete critique is perhaps not that aims at totality (as does *le regard surplombant*) nor that which aims at intimacy (as does identifying intuition); it is the look that knows how to demand, in their turn, distance and intimacy, knowing in advance that the truth lies not in one or the other attempt, but in the movement that passes indefatigably from one to the other. One must refuse neither the vertigo of distance nor that of proximity; one must desire that double excess where the look is always near to losing all its powers.

STARABINISKI, J. 1961, *L'Veil Vivant: Essais*, p. 26, in JAY, 1993

Taking up this challenge it becomes impossible to consider our ocularities without also considering the locations of our viewings. The vantage points, attitudes and movements through which we come to 'see' as well as the modes through which we report our 'sightings' orient the kinds of becomings that we will privilege or ignore (often at our peril). This is an important pedagogical consideration. In the renaissance of 1658, the power in a visual element, an illustration, radically changed the way pedagogues could communicate content to children. When *Orbis Sensualium Pictus*, or *The World of Things Obvious to the Senses Drawn in Pictures*, was printed and made available to many children, families and pedagogues, it was a visual breakthrough in education for the young. In modern times, Susan Sontag revealed how photography, a modern way of seeing, was different from seeing itself, a meta-reflection that leads up to the reflexive awareness we can see in these articles. Sontag points to the modern way of knowing, where we expect images in order to accept that something is real. Seeing is appearance, she claims – an always changing appearance (Sontag, 2007). Images and visual representations can be personal and political; therefore, a high awareness of visual rhetoric is necessary for every citizen.

Despite this ocular legacy and its shaping influence on becoming, very little attention has been paid to this explicit yoking in education. And less, still, in consideration of contemporary times. Yet if we are prepared to go

beyond the silos of our disciplines there are many signposts to guide our way across multi-disciplinary landscapes with fellow travellers who have walked these ocular paths – in art, media and design to name but a few. We can find good company in the methodological approaches from our colleagues in these spaces – some of whom feature in this issue. Together we share an awareness of our ocular lives in a contemporary world, and a desire to understand this phenomenon in our quest for becoming(s) in various ways. As Cray (1992) has highlighted previously, once located within the subjectivity of the observer there are two possible routes for inquiry – the first which emanates from the thickness of bodies who shape one another; and the other through increased abstraction. Cray's attention to the overlapping paths between the two, and the spaces in between, continue to call our ocularities into the service of interpretation and understanding concerning becomings as their constructions within discourse. In various ways, some of these pathways are laid out throughout the contributions that will unfold in this issue.

1 Dangerous Times for Becoming?

We do not exist outside of our time, and in the year 2019, visualities orient our lives in new and interesting ways as new technologies are a significant method of human expression. When a child is born, at least in the resourceful areas of the world, the child enters into a world where people effortlessly collect images, like photographs and videos, to gather memories and to communicate, to share them with others as a means of engaging dialogue, reporting, revealing and surveillance (indeed it is likely that they will have already been imaged in the womb). Moving images, films, virtual realities, television and visual prompts are integrated in urban living and construct lives accordingly. Indeed, we are entering an age where the first generation of children who have lived out their childhoods in and through cyber worlds are now moving into adulthood. Their lives have been characterised by a blurring of boundaries between virtual and real worlds, time and space, through engagements with both technologies and the so-called 'natural' world that is now at greater risk than ever before. They have also lived out their lives under the surveillance of the internet – bringing about additional collapse of boundaries between private and public – orienting new ways of seeing and being seen accordingly. As Rooney points out:

...the interdependent and fluid nature of the relationships between children and technologies reveals the complexity of the new spaces that children live within, challenging the ways we come to know the child and how the child comes to know themselves and the very notion of knowledge itself. Children, via a rich and integrated relationship with the technological domain, are fast leading the way to forging new notions of self, identity and relations with others, and, in doing so, contribute to the shaping of the physical-virtual spaces they inhabit.

ROONEY, 2012, p. 340

Dangerous times indeed! Perhaps more so because we know so little about them, and they are hard, if not impossible, to harness using traditional means of inquiry. The recent case of 'Momo' earlier this year is a great illustration of the means through which physical-virtual spaces are so easily implicated with form-shaping potential: https://www.liveleak.com/view?t=CyYAV_1551521745. Things got dangerous when Momo started to appear at random intervals in digital platforms like we-chat – spaces beyond adult control, no matter what restrictions they tried to put in place. At the time (and perhaps even more so in its aftermath since we are now told that Momo now appears to pre-schoolers in the midst of Peppa Pig games online) Momo purportedly represented a significant challenge to adolescent self-harm while simultaneously implicating fearful parents as the primary vehicle for its propagation as a consequence of the imbued moral and social panic that was generated through parental warnings and attempts to shut her (it) down. The image appeared to have no limits in its cyber state and the turmoil that Momo evoked as a consequence grants her the kind of agency ascribed to the Artificial Intelligence construct in Gibsons neuromancer who has the power to give (and take) motive and intention to his non-human interactions:

... Me, I'm not human either, but I respond like one. See?... it feels like I am kid, but I'm really just a bunch of ROM. Its one of them, ah, philosophical questions, I guess.... But I aint likely to write you no poem, if you follow me"

GIBSON, 1984, p. 145

How Momo was transformed into social media from an 'innocent' Japanese art form remains a mystery to this day, but the shifting meaning making and moral hype concerning her visage speaks to lingering philosophical questions concerning visual representation. Momo represents a world adults

cannot enter. Adults cannot control what their children 'see' in social media – they cannot predict and nor can they harness the appearance of Momo of such platforms without vetoing the very lines of communication through which contemporary childhoods now live (and play) by. What we can surmise from what transpired in social media is what we might describe as a contemporary version of a renaissance witchhunt – with Momo as a modern day vehicle for Satanist panic that we have seen in various epochs of society before. Producing fear based on the actions of a few and leading to certain behaviours such as imprisonment or, even as we are warned in relation to Momo, self-harm or suicide. What could be more drastically fearful!! But this is no accident – as Braidotti (1999) reminds us monsters are typically constructed on the basis of distance – ascribed to human exhibits of 'other' related to distant race or perhaps distant body in opposition to the so-called moral and embodied purity of the colonising culture. Perhaps the greatest triumph of Momo is that she generated considerable allure for many of the youth to whom she spoke *because* of her appearance in such jarring spaces. If we were to read Momo's suicidal entreaties as post-truth whereby truth is not even the point at all, but rather the illusion for ridicule – we summon a different reading altogether. Now we see Momo as disrupting a rule in game that is to be broken – one that lies at the very heart of all good play – for those who can 'see' through such ocular eyes.

Are we – as educationalists – prepared for such ocular encounters? Are they dangerous after all? If so, to whom and in what ways? Can we contemplate these as possibilities and opportunities as well as risks? Such intersections between visualities and social media – as images move through previously unimagined spaces beyond our control – call for our urgent attention if we are serious about ocular becomings. For if we are to perceive of ocular becomings as shaping events in flux or movement – as our philosophical legacies suggests we ought – we must also take into consideration the movements that exist for learners beyond our gaze or constraint. And we must find eyes and new vantage points through which to see their multiplicitous, diffractive, altered (and alter-ing) meanings. This special issue seeks to promulgate such viewings accordingly.

2 Introducing the Papers

With this special issue on 'ocular becomings in dangerous times', we present a series of selected video articles that arose from an open call made after the Association of Visual Pedagogies (AVP) conference of the same name at RMIT

in Melbourne in June 2019. 'Ocular becomings' was deployed as a metaphor intended to inspire, to open, provoke and invite a wide variety of contributions to an interdisciplinary conversation on dynamic areas of research that concerns the work of the eye. Its corollary – 'in dangerous times' – was intended to set the scene for some risky encounters therein. We deliberately did not narrow the scope of contributions because we wanted to open up possibilities that we could not yet imagine – in this we were not disappointed. A cross-disciplinary group of educationalists, literary and media scholars, educationalists, artists, designers, technicists, artists, designers, movie-makers and developers set in motion new ways of thinking about visual pedagogies and their omnipresence in contemporary society: <https://visualpedagogies.com/2019-conference-2-3/>. Some of these 'thinkings' are presented in this special issue – enabling us to explore ocular becomings for learners of all ages, across diverse contexts and within certain dimensions of time – dangerous or otherwise.

There are two key issues in the studies presented here: first, the visual is put to the forefront of our orientation; and second, these studies convey a high level of reflexiveness concerning treatment of visual approaches to learning and to their own ocularities. Implied in each these articles is the problematization of the more positivist assumptions concerning the act of seeing as providing 'natural' and 'objective' access to the world in which we live – as evidence. Instead, philosophical, theoretical and empirical approaches are summoned to ocular becomings for diverse humans/non-humans, cultures and worlds and their application/implication in and for contemporary times.

Commencing our special issue is a video-text paper by **Willi Lempert** who also opened our conference with his keynote (accessible on our conference website page above) called 'Silencing the future visualising indigenous futurisms in dangerous times'. His position at the forefront of the special issue is deliberate for a variety of reasons. Firstly because Willi deals with our theme in ways that evoke an indigenous view of both what is dangerous for a colonised peoples, and what is possible, through documentary film that opens up important ways of seeing and re-seeing as a means of both remembering and thinking into the future. Secondly, because his writings alert us to such seeings (and blind spots) in movement – across time and space – bringing to our awareness the importance of indigenous futures media as an activist de-colonising agenda for seeing and being seen.

What follows in this compilation is a series of papers and video that respond to social issues of our times of becoming using a variety of methodologies and methods to support ocularity. **Mahtab Janfada**, for

example, in her paper concerning onto-epistemological fragments of seeing based on her study of trainee medical practitioners explores Bakhtin's notion of ideological becomings as journeys of selfhood. **Yaron Meron's** paper contribution moves beyond longstanding, somewhat tedious, arguments around notions of 'authenticity' to refreshingly examine the value of creativity. Yaron describes how he sets about making the familiar strange within photographic practice and re-representation using Robert Capa's 'Falling Soldier' (Capa 1936) as a starting point, before drawing on examples from his own creative and professional practice as a route to becoming.

Taking a semiotic perspective through video and text **Richard Kearney** outlines how a Peircian semiotic framework utilising concepts such as inter- and intratextuality and Peirce's conception of habit provide a framework to understand how the language of memes is developed and transformed across a network. He raises the timely issue of the evidence that memes play a role in the well-documented political radicalisation that happens in online spaces. **Inna Semetsky** also picks up this framework – this time offering a broader scope for engagement with the semiotic as a bricolage of images that, when read beyond a single sighting – as movement – offer advanced interpretations well in advance of an isolated reading. Inna's work provides a methodological overview accordingly, with practical examples from her own work with Tarot cards to illuminate the potential of semiotic readings to advance ocular becomings in research.

Anamika Devi, Coreena Makris and Maryann James draw from cultural-historical theory to enter into children's play by utilising the video camera as a technological route to participation. The authors make the claim that through this route researchers are able to move beyond what they call a 'fly on the wall' view of play to one that is more physically and psychologically present. The positioning of the camera, they suggest, alters the potential of what can be seen – offering a source of becoming not only in terms of understanding children's play, but implicating the researcher also.

Our contributors also provide a smorgasboard of new ways of encountering 'seeing' through their various approaches, and the challenges each faced on their journeys towards becoming – for themselves and for others (human and non-human). **Catherine Gough-Brady** takes a personal starting point by illuminating her personal motivating feelings as a filmmaker in a video article entitled *A River as a Character*. What Gough-Brady presents here is neither a traditional academic essay nor a traditional documentary. Instead we are guided into a transformative research process where the author herself has transformed along with the transformation of the video article. She has created an author who is the storyteller and reveals

reflections, theory and explication – inviting the participation of the embodied spectator in an encounter with the river itself.

Articulating the epistemological underpinnings of a web banner's visual elements for a webpage **Elin Eriksen Ødegaard and Anne Myrstad** tell the story of how a research team 'became ocular' by developing a web banner when establishing a new research centre. By presenting this narrative, their aim is to share their experience and demonstrate how visual forms, elements, symbols and metaphors can be productive in research teamwork for articulating epistemological commonplaces and commonalities. The article contains text and visual elements reflecting the authors work. The video attached outlines in particular one of the metaphors that was a productive thinking tool in the process.

Through her various approaches to visual representation – including a mixture of cartooning, mind-mapping, collected stories and creative process 'moments' in arts-related fields, **Fiona King** also demonstrates how she came to understand adult becomings through PhD journeys.

Finally, we are delighted to be able to include the scientific work of **Adrian Dyer and colleagues** to end this issue. Adrian was one of the keynotes to our conference this year, and his paper (also video which you can watch on our conference webpage) will not disappoint in terms of orienting our eye/I to deep understandings concerning bees and their seeings. His work makes the important point that ocular becomings are by no means exclusive to humans alone, and that there is a great deal to be learnt by understanding the ocular encounters of our non-human companions in the world – in consideration of ourselves as much as them. Adrians engagement with this conference and associated journal issue highlight the point that visual pedagogies must remain ever-vigilant to scientific discoveries that take place beyond educational silos in which they remain otherwise deadlocked. We must remain open to all possibilities ahead if we are to contemplate our own becomings as pedagogues, researchers and artists of all kinds.

3 Conclusions

Taken together the papers and videos presented in this issue suggest that there are many opportunities for us to engage in ocular becomings for dangerous times as a source of optimism as well as a healthy degree of skepticism. Each contribution provides new insights according to how we might look into our worlds with fresh eyes through the technologies, methodologies and methods now at our disposal, and in contemplation of

those yet to come. The becomings that are granted accordingly far exceed traditional modes of pedagogical engagement, and offer fresh insights according to how we might speak into the world through such endeavours – offering advocacy, inspiration and hope through the promulgation of increasing visual perspectives as kaleidoscopes as well as microscopes on our becomings in the world. Through these eyes there are many opportunities to see dangers as opportunities, problems as perspectives and barriers as provocations beyond neuromanced limitations – as each of our contributors have demonstrated. Our ability to now produce such knowledge through visual means represents new potential for communicating research with others in ways that respond to new generations of ocular encounter. It is our earnest hope that the work of *Association for Visual Pedagogies* will continue to promulgate such insights, and support the work of those who dare to pick up the challenges ahead in an ever-increasing ocular, and – yes – dangerous, world that calls upon our urgent attention accordingly. This work is only just beginning!

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