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Beyond Representation: Affective/Affirmative Feminist Approaches to the Visual

The emergent discursive formation represented by the phrase “visual culture” at once foregrounds the political stakes involved in critical practice, and testifies to the increasingly acknowledged necessity to move beyond established disciplinary boundaries to address the urgency of the visual in the world today. While feminism may be seen as a continuing dynamic force in challenging disciplinarity in all forms, late twentieth-century feminist critiques of the visual have been largely invested in the negative influences of visual representations (of identities, bodies, cultural practices, etc.) on the lives of women and men, aimed at exposing their destructive effects in imposing oppressive scenarios of traditional gendered being and behavior. While the operations of the “male gaze” in the dominant socio-cultural domain have been legitimately—and, one might add, effectively—challenged, laying bare the historical structures of gendered looking, and calling into question prevailing practices of “reading” the visual are obviously not enough productively to use the critical potential that the interdisciplinary field of visual culture has to offer. Indeed, the critical paradigm of what is commonly called the “linguistic turn” does not adequately allow for a move beyond the levels of representation and ideology critique. In recent years, the so-called “affective turn” in critical theorizing has resulted in a much more complex, and much affirmative view of the function and effects of visual culture than a merely representational approach affords. The purpose of this panel is to take up the challenge of the focus on affect, experience, and desire in the study of the visual from an explicitly feminist perspective, and to explore its potential for a politically accountable, yet affirmative intervention in the emergent field of visual culture, and its critical and creative potential for feminist and other so called minority discourses.