

Joel Snyder

447th Convocation Address: "In Defense of Images,"

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"In Defense of Images" by Joel Snyder

I am pleased to be joining with you today in this ancient ritual celebrating the successful conclusion of your studies at the University of Chicago. This is a demanding place, filled with exceptional people - faculty and students alike. You must never forget that first-rate teachers are drawn to schools with first-rate students. Graduates of the University - very soon you will be among them - carry with them for the rest of their lives an uncommon distinction for having studied here. You join a distinguished group today.

It is more than just a pleasure to be up here, it is something of a surprise as well. Roughly thirty-six years ago, I sat where you sit today. Mostly, what I did that June day was to worry. I had no idea what I was going to do with my life, and I can honestly say that the thought of speaking here like this, at some distant point in my future, never entered my thoughts. I was torn between my two loves, photography and philosophy, and believed there was no way I could ever bring them into a useful combination. I went on to graduate studies in philosophy and then left for a life as a free-lance photographer which provided me with a romantic interlude lasting ten years. But while I photographed, it occurred to me that much of what I had studied about picture-making in general and photography in particular did not conform to what I learned daily as a photographer. And so I began writing essays about issues in the history and theory of art and photography, and some academic journals published them, and suddenly, to my astonishment, I was on the faculty of the University of Chicago, an institution which Wednesday's New York Times reported as being the third-ranked private university in the country - this startled me a bit because I had always thought we were number one. It is a mark of the intellectual restlessness of this place, of its adventurous spirit of openness to new questions and new subjects, and finally of its generosity of spirit that I am here at all. When I joined the faculty in 1976, there was no field corresponding to what I taught. Today, departments of art history routinely hire faculty in what I can now call my area - the history and theory of photography. The subject of my study has entered into the basic curriculum of art history across this country. The University took a chance on me, as it has on others, it gave me an opportunity to combine the fields I believed could not be combined, and I shall be forever grateful for the priceless kind of freedom it has given me.

When I was an undergraduate here, I asked one of my professors who was one of the leading English critics of the time, why films were not part of the curriculum, and he responded, very patiently, by telling me it was because I would never see a film as good as a book. What followed was a long argument between teacher and student, the kind that makes this university so special. I felt passionately about moving pictures and he felt passionately about novels. We had no conclusion to our battle; he continued to think that giving visual expression to stories somehow cheapened them - "brought them down to earth" was the way he put it, as if what was then called "the life of the mind" (around here) was a life without eyes, without the joys of visual experience; and I continued to think that some films were among the greatest works of human skill, craft, and intelligence produced in this century. I continue to believe that. There was at that time a strong inclination to think of pictures, still or moving, as poor substitutes for words, as if nearly all of them could be dismissed easily from the curriculum of a great university, which was great, at least in part, because it taught "Great Books." The truth is that many people today remain ambivalent about the place of the study of pictures in a university curriculum, because they are unsure of the seriousness of pictures, still or moving. They think of pictures as being decorative, expendable, merely entertaining. Some of them think pictures threaten our capacity to think clearly.

But the study of visual art - "art" both with a capital and lowercase "a" - is critical to an understanding of any society and is essential to an understanding of this one because we spend our lives in the company of pictures and imagery of all kinds, in a world taken up with photographs, films, television, paintings, drawings, prints, and sculpture, billboard advertisements, product packaging, newspapers, and magazines - each competing for our attention and all combining to form a massive part of what we see every day. Though our visual culture is extraordinarily varied, most of us do not devote much in the way of critical thought to it. There has always been, of course, a lot of talk, dressed usually in high-minded clothing, about the harmful effects of images upon our lives. I grew up with a mild dose of picture-related anxiety, which was, in truth, a form of snobbery. My parents read the New York Times, which had very few news-related pictures, and they would not permit me to buy the New York Daily News, self-described as "New York's Picture Newspaper." My parents considered people who subscribed to Life magazine as too slow to read. Later, I learned that my father-in-law, who was the son of a Presbyterian minister and was devoted therefore to words, thought that Baptists looked at pictures and that Methodists were Baptists who could read. Slowly. We still live in a world that is often snobbish about the value of words in relation to pictures. Many people think of pictures as superficial and incapable of supporting serious examination, but pictures are, on the contrary remarkable in themselves and rich with information about the character of the culture that produces them.

This tension between words and pictures has deep roots in our culture. The effects of these stresses can be seen clearly in the history of art. Leonardo, in the Italy of the Renaissance, wrote defensively in his private journals, attempting to counter the predisposition of educated people, of poets and philosophers, to look down on painters because they used their hands, while verbal artists used only their minds. The critics of painting saw it as an impure art, one that necessarily used raw, earthly materials, while poetry and philosophy were thought to use only ideas - to be entirely cerebral and spiritual. The paintings of the greatest master of the Spanish Renaissance, Diego Velazquez, were routinely taxed at the same rate applied to kitchen utensils, and he was blocked for many years from becoming a knight of the court of Philip IV, because the honor was withheld from men who worked with their hands. In 1911, the photographer Edward Steichen imported a magnificent abstract statue by Constantin Brancusi, which as a work of art should have been allowed into the country duty free, but the U.S. Customs Office could not figure out what it was and calculated duty on it again, as if it were a kitchen utensil. By this time painting had long since won respect as a "pure" art, but ironically the battleground had shifted and Steichen's photographs could not be shown in any museum of art in the world, because they were the product of a machine and not of a painter's hand. Though the times change and the particulars vary, there is nonetheless a repetitious strangeness to these stories. Images and their makers are always struggling for legitimacy.

Just two decades ago, Susan Sontag, a graduate of our College, published an interesting book - *On Photography* - which begins tellingly with a chapter titled "In Plato's Cave." Sontag adopts Plato's stance against images of all kinds and singles out photographs as the most threatening, the most harmful of all, because they are the most seductive - they beg to be believed, she says, and we believe them, though she says we should not. John Tagg, in a more recent book, *The Burden of Representation*, argues that the history of photography is a history of the use of power - of state control through photographic surveillance and the production of picture archives of criminals, malcontents, and potential revolutionaries. At one point he actually says, "There is something unhealthy about looking at pictures."

The high purpose of these and many other books like them is hard to fault. But are these writers correct - is our health threatened by image pollution, do pictures block our understanding of the world, do they fall somehow beneath words?

Personally, I doubt it. Doubt Plato, doubt Tagg, doubt Sontag.

For pictures are not to be looked at passively; we must be active in making sense of them, and they themselves have become active too in enriching our understanding of the world. Pictures are one of the indispensable conditions of postindustrial society. All the electronic chips that power our computers, monitor our safety in elevators and automobiles, make it possible to share thoughts over the Internet and through e-mail, aid medical diagnosticians to discover our diseases and scientists to find cures for them - all of them would be impossible without pictures, for it is by means of photographic imagery that intricate and highly complex circuits can be shrunk to the size of a small postage stamp and reproduced by the tens of millions on silicon chips. Far from showing us a distorted image of the truth, pictures from Computer Assisted Tomographic procedures - CAT scans - and other image-making machines are routinely used to discover basic facts about our health. Although pictures have played an important role in science since the sixteenth century, many of the massive changes in the sciences that began in the last century have been based on the possibility of visualizing what we cannot see, through the production of images that serve as reliable guides for our actions and which increase our knowledge by giving us accurate pictures of a world that resides somehow beyond our experience. We routinely trust our lives to pictures, though we rarely take the time to reflect on this. All of us who travel by air necessarily rely on air traffic controllers who track the positions of the planes we fly by studying visualizations on radar screens, and we rely equally on the ability of pilots to understand critically important pictures of landing approaches to airport runways.

You must not make the mistake of thinking that pictures come in neatly sealed categories, that scientific pictures, for example, are somehow different in kind from pictures made for advertising or for exhibition on museum walls. Our habits of picture-making and picture-viewing move easily between categories. The old and artificial distinctions between science, art, and commerce disappeared from practice a long time ago. Let me give you a pair of examples, one recent, the other with roots in the Renaissance. The amount of information generated by supercomputers is overwhelming and the problem of finding effective means of communicating the data has been a vexing one. Some years ago, the National Center for Supercomputing Applications in Champaign-Urbana hired a group of visual artists, all non-scientists, to come up with a means for graphing massive quantities of data so that they could be expressed clearly to the scientists who needed to transform digitized readings into useful information. The resulting graphs have much in common with abstract painting and have worked well to satisfy the needs of the scientists who use them. It is no longer possible to ask if these are scientific documents or works of visual art. The line separating these disciplines has vanished, if it ever really existed.

The camera is another good example of the admixture of science, technology, and art. Many people believe that cameras were invented by scientists at roughly the same time photography was introduced in the late 1830s. In fact, the camera, as we know it, has its roots in the Renaissance. The first cameras were enormous, they were in fact entire rooms - the word "camera" means "room" in Latin - but they were very poor affairs. The first suggestion for the construction of a camera was published in Italy around 1540. The author, Giovanni Batista della Porta, suggested that cameras would be useful to people who did not know how to draw; they could just trace the image onto a piece of translucent paper. But these first cameras produced imagery quite different from the kind people were accustomed to seeing. So, over the next three centuries, the goal was to make cameras that could produce pictures that were in keeping with prevailing artistic practice. In other words, the design of cameras and their optics - as we know them today - was entirely guided by the goal of producing pictures of the kind routinely drawn by artists and illustrators. When you purchase a camera today, it generally comes with what is called a "normal" lens. Most people think that the lens is normal because it shows roughly what the human eye sees, but it does not do that at all. Normal lenses are so called because they adhere to a standard set by artists in the Renaissance, for producing what we would now call "undistorted" pictures. This means that every photograph taken by you today attaches you in some extraordinary way to the achievements of Renaissance visual artists and those who followed them.

Pictures and the history they carry are everywhere in our culture and yet our attitudes towards them remain so mixed. Some critics fear them because of their supposed superficiality and because of their alleged incapacity to reveal the truth. Susan Sontag feels threatened by them; other critics think most pictures are trivial and beyond serious consideration. Yet all of these people are addicted to pictures, trust their health and safety to them, and often turn to them for accurate information or for the pleasures that are so intimately involved with motion pictures.

What is it about imagery that has provoked some philosophers, theologians, and even dictators into demanding what Sontag calls an "ecology of images" - that is, a deliberate restriction on the number of pictures permitted to circulate in society (as if that were even a possibility) - or that has led at times to the call for a complete ban on all images? Why have people responded so fearfully or so dismissively to images?

This is a complex and a deep question. It has, I believe, something to do with enchantment, with the possibility of believing what is unbelievable or of acting on impulses that seem to defy formulation. The possibility of enchantment is at the root of the second commandment, which prohibits the making of images

and then of worshipping them as gods. It could be argued that the commandment is aimed at the very human inclination to worship the wrong thing - most especially if the thing looks good and promises something like straight "A's" and a degree from the University of Chicago. But why are images so easy to confuse with gods? You might as well ask why it is that we can be so moved or delighted or depressed by a motion picture about fictional people in a world we have never seen apart from the motion picture screen. How is it that images of people can move us to tears when most of the real people we know are incapable of doing so? Are these easy questions to answer? Does that behavior seem unenchanted to you? I have a desk drawer filled with photographs of my children with my parents who are now dead. Many of them are not terribly good pictures. Perhaps ten percent are worth keeping, but I have kept them all. I cannot throw out the other 90 percent. I cannot discard even one. Why? It would be unloving. But I do not love the pictures. My parents and children seem somehow ingrained in these images. How can I even think that when I do not know what it means? I do not know, but what a topic for a seminar.

The very fact that these questions make us uneasy seems to me to be the very best reason for probing them. We have an inclination to dismiss impulses that strike us as irrational, or mystifying, or childish. We prefer neat, clean answers running no longer than a term paper. And it is very easy to go from dismissing complex impulses to dismissing the objects that cause them. But we cannot afford to take pictures lightly. We are challenged by pictures everywhere and need to engage them, so that we can come to understand them and the cultures, and the histories, and the productive machinery from which they come - but perhaps even more importantly, so that we can come to understand each other and finally perhaps, understand ourselves.

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