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Some remarks on the visual essay as method

On the first page of WAYS OF SEEING (1972), a ‘Note to the reader’ makes plain its radical commitments, in particular the conviction that:

The book consists of seven numbered essays. They can be read in any order. Four of the essays use words and images, three of them use only images. These purely pictorial essays (on ways of seeing women and on various contradictory aspects of the tradition of the oil painting) are intended to raise as many questions as the verbal essays.

While framed by densely illustrated critical and at times polemical chapters, these purely visual sequences do not easily or obviously illustrate the ideas nor contribute to the legend that the book has become, except in and by their form of excluding captions, titles and prose. Once the words have gone, what is the visual essay, how is it to be read?

In this paper I consider the unresolved problems posed by the visual chapters in WAYS OF SEEING. I sketch a historical and intellectual context via Aby Warburg, Walter Benjamin and André Malraux for the visual sequence as a thought form and then link the problem of the visual essay to some recent examples of contemporary practice that I see as working in this tradition: Patrick Keiller *The Robinson Institute*; David Campany *a Handful of Dust* (2015*)*;Elizabeth Price *In a dream you saw a way to survive and you were full of joy* (2017)

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