

Visual Concepts in Islamic Cultures



- to determine a broad spectrum of meanings of visual terminology in Arabic-Islamic intellectual history
- to highlight the significance of visual concepts in the discussion of various cultural fields
- to make conceptual-historical analysis methods applicable to a cultural-scientific perspective

To what degree do terms refer to a supra-temporal set of ideas which can be examined diachronically?
Or to what degree are terms, precisely because of their concrete manifestation and changeability,
so far thrown back to the synchronic examination of the individual texts that they defy comparison?



detailed examination of individual texts -> overarching conclusions

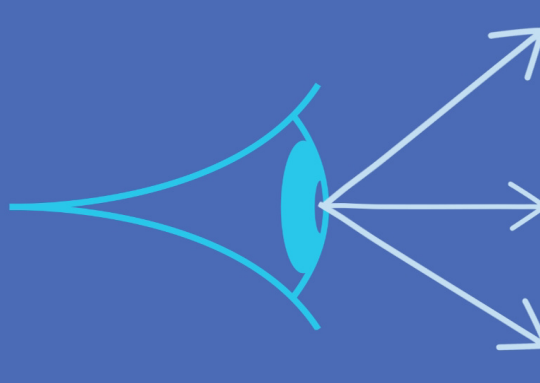
إِنَّ الْعُيُونَ الَّتِي فِي ظَرْفِهَا حَوْرٌ قَتَلْنَا ثُمَّ لَمْ يُحْيَيْنَا قَتَلْنَا

The eyes in their gazes are deep black.
They killed us and then did not raise those killed among us.
from the Dīwān of the Umayyad poet Jarīr (d. 733); transl.: BM



One group says: the one with the Eye [*al-‘ā’in*], when his spirit has taken on an evil quality, emits from his eye a poisonous power [*quwwa summiyya*] which reaches his victim, causing injury. [...] . This is a well known fact concerning a certain type of viper: when their glance [*baṣaruhā*] falls upon man he dies.

Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, Al-Ṭibb al-nabawī; transl.: Penelope Johnstone



Euclid's extramission theory

You know that forms cannot be imprinted in the eye and that, for similar reasons, they cannot be imprinted somewhere in the brain. [...] Since there can be such a thing as an incorporeal image in a mirror [...] there can also exist a substantial quiddity having an accidental image. The deficient light is like an image of the perfect light - understand this!

Suhrwardī, Hikmat al-Ishrāq; transl.: John Walbridge and Hossein Ziai

materiality of the seeing process

sight as the highest of all senses

وَلَمَّا جَاءَ مُوسَىٰ لِمِيقَاتِنَا وَكَلَّمَهُ رَبُّهُ قَالَ رَبِّ أَرِنِي أَنظُرَ إِلَيْكَ قَالَ لَن نَرْتَنبِي وَلَكِن نُنظِرُ إِلَىٰ الْجَبَلِ فَإِنِ اسْتَقَرَّ مَكَانَهُ فَسَوْفَ تَرَتْنِي

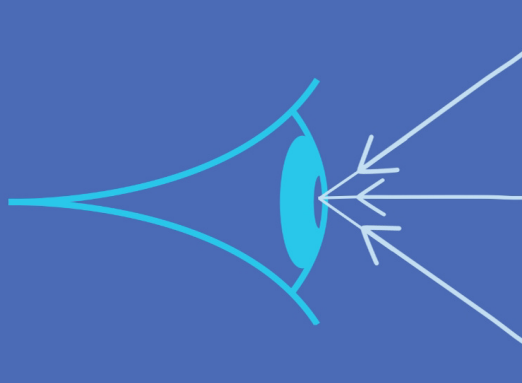
And when Moses came to Our appointed meeting and his Lord spoke unto him, he said: "My Lord, show me, that I might look upon Thee." He said, "Thou shalt not see Me; but look upon the mountain: if it remains firm in its place, then thou wilt see Me."

Qur'ān, Surah 7:143a; transl.: The Study Quran

پس چون وضوح تمام یافته بتحقیق پیوست که طبایع انسانی را از ملاحظه خط خوب وتصاویر مرغوب خط روحانی وفیض جاودانی حاصل است.

Therefore, inasmuch as it is as clear as can be that human nature derives spiritual pleasure and eternal delight from regarding beautiful writing and handsome pictures.

Shams al-Dīn Waṣfī, Shah Isma‘il II Album; transl.: Wheeler M. Thackston



Ibn al-Haytham's intromission theory

"That being so, sight's perception of visible objects occurs in two ways: through glancing [*idrāk bi'l-badiha*], and through contemplation [*idrāk bi'l-ta'ammul*]. Glancing perception is nonascertained perception, but contemplative perception is the means by which the forms of visible objects are ascertained."

Ibn al-Haytham, Kitāb al-Manāẓir; transl.: A. I. Sabra

sensitivity to modes of gazing

locus of cognition: heart or brain?

... عین شهد رأی بصر نظر

language natural philosophy everyday experience



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