

Stephen Pattison, born 14 September 1953, is professor of Religion, Ethics, and Practice at the University of Birmingham, a position he has held since May 2007. Formerly head of the School of Religious and Theological Studies at the University of Cardiff, Professor Pattison received his BA degree in theology and religious studies in 1976 from the University of Cambridge.

Below you will find the synopsis of his six Gifford lectures on seeing things, helping you explore further about how we see the world around us. The six lectures can be seen at <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/gifford/documents>. More information about the Gifford Lectures is at <http://www.giffordlectures.org>

Synopsis

The world is full of visible things created by humans, from mantelpieces to masterpieces. Usually only the masterpieces attract much analysis and critical attention, humble objects are ignored. This is unfortunate as they are little worlds made cunningly, and humans are responsible for their existence.

These lectures are designed to stimulate their audience to think more broadly and deeply about the ways in which we relate to visual artefacts of all kinds. With restrictive notions of sight as a distant sense, and of visible 'things' other than art objects being beneath serious attention, Westerners inhabit a world of 'ordinary blindness'. In these lectures, Professor Pattison proposes a more inter-sensorial, comprehensive notion of sight; or touching sight. He will explore the possibilities and realities of deeper, more person-like perceptual relations with visual artefacts. The visible works of human hands are often regarded in an undifferentiated way as 'things', whereas visual artefacts deserve more explicit and differentiated attention than this. Material objects and human relations with them fundamentally shape culture and meanings in material and symbolic ways. Chairs, for example, symbolize social status, but they also curve spines and cause varicose veins.

It is hoped that those who attend these lectures will gain a more nuanced, critical understanding of sight and seeing, and that they might want to look more carefully and closely at some of the visual artefacts around them. Perhaps this will enable viewers to enter into more responsive and responsible relationships with the material world.

A book upon which the lectures are based, *Seeing Things: Deepening relationships with visual artefacts*, is published by SCM Press from November 2007. This will expand and develop the argument contained in the lectures themselves.

Professor Stephen Pattison would be delighted to have feedback, questions and comments on the lectures at any time.

The account of theologian (and former Aberdeen Gifford lecturer) Paul Tillich's encounter with a visual artefact can be seen at <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/gifford/tillich.shtml>. This is referred to several times in the lectures.



Madonna with eight singing angels

Synopsis of Lectures

Lecture 1: Ordinary blindness

In this lecture, Professor Pattison introduces himself and his topic, outlining how a practical theologian approaches contemporary beliefs and practices associated with sight and seeing. After outlining the main argument of the lecture series, he will begin to explore some of the culturally inflected assumptions and practices that Westerners adopt towards sight, particularly considering the nature of 'normal' distant, ocular vision. This is a 'scopic regime' (set of ideas and practices) that helps to render visual artefacts distant and of little personal or moral concern. Commonsensically, we tend to misunderstand and over-value the apparently autonomous sense of sight. However, Westerners live in a regime of 'ordinary blindness' in which there is much to see, but little is related to.

Lecture 2: Touching sight

In the second lecture, Professor Pattison continues his critique of dominant Western ways of seeing and thinking about sight. He will trace the rise of distancing objective sight; against this, he will advance a more intimate notion of sight, 'haptic', or touching, vision. Haptic sight figures the possibility that people can enter into rich, person-like relations with at least some visible artefacts both within and beyond the realm of art. Professor Pattison will suggest that sight is a capacity for relationship that is part of a total perceptual encounter with the world, so that perceivers and things that are seen are bound in a mutually affecting relationship. Professor Pattison will start with the example of former Gifford lecturer and theologian, Paul Tillich, who was physically shaken by an encounter with a visual artefact.

Lecture 3 Sticky objects

Turning from the attitudes of viewers, Professor Pattison will use this lecture to selectively explore some of the factors that allow people to get personally and deeply engaged with visual artefacts, as Tillich did with Botticelli's 'Madonna with Singing Angels'. What are the elements that bind viewers to particular objects so that they become visually engaging? What is it that gives some objects a sense of real presence, so that people experience the responses and reactions that they might have with another human being; and even have a sense that the object is invested with some kind of ability to enter into a mutual gaze?

Lecture 4: Getting personal

Having raised the issue of person-like relationships with visual artefacts, this lecture enquires into whether, and how, artefacts might sensibly be regarded as person-like. Professor Pattison starts by looking at some examples of person-like relations with artefacts in contemporary life. He will then argue that artefacts are often so full of intention and emotion that it is not surprising that people can encounter them as person-like. Artefacts index their creators and acquire a kind of secondary social agency that shapes, enables and inhibits human actors materially and symbolically. Professor Pattison will touch on the nature of personhood, suggesting that this may be inappropriately extended beyond living members of humanity.

Lecture 5: Drawing near

Having established that humans do enter into person-like relations with some visual artefacts, Professor Pattison asks whether such relationships should be acknowledged, fostered, and even developed. Is it proper for humans to engage in person-like relations with artefacts? Or should they be ignored, discouraged, and extinguished on the grounds that they transgress the taboo between live humans and 'dead' things? Professor Pattison will outline some reasons for taking person-like relationships with artefacts more seriously before considering some objections and obstacles to moving in this direction. Arguing against objectification in visual perception, and in favour of a general subject to subject approach to relations with things as well as humans, Professor Pattison suggests that an orientation of 'joyful attachment' is more likely to preserve and enhance human life and culture, the environment, and the existence of artefacts themselves.

Lecture 6: Loving things

In this final lecture, Professor Pattison will suggest that humans need to develop a loving, attentive gaze towards the artefactual world. Following on from the previous lecture some ways will be suggested in which humans might begin to change their practices of seeing and relating to artefacts to engender a more loving, haptic gaze. Professor Pattison will discuss the types and nature of relationships that might appropriately be fostered. The nature of relationships with artefacts that might appear to be less than good, e.g., guns and bombs, will be touched upon. He will briefly discuss how subject to subject relationships might be consistent with Christian thought and practice. Finally, he will suggest that 'horizontal sacramentalism' might be an appropriate orientation to visual artefacts for contemporary perceivers of all kinds, religious or not.