

The Resistance to Visual Culture

Stephanie Polsky

Visual Culture has taken its cue from Culture Studies by placing its emphasis on the experiential, extra-textual element within the visual media encounter. In turn it has sought to radicalise the way Art History has been taught in recent years, by placing visual media within the context of a broader Visual Culture curriculum which underlines the cultural value of visual media, as opposed to underlining its historical, aesthetic or philosophical value. Through a pedagogical shift brought on Cultural Studies, Visual Culture students are encouraged to see visual media as something grounded in *their* history as *the* viewer, rather than the abstract omniscient history of it as *the* object. In doing so they become aware that it is *they* who are continuously acting upon the cultures they inhabit. Being able to analyse this relationship not only equips them with an understanding of the medium, but also an appreciation of the complexity involved in the very act of viewing and of the sophistication required to negotiate the structures of global media culture. At the same time it must also be acknowledged that the emphasis on student agency within Visual Culture's pedagogical rhetoric seldom enables them to alter the way they organise and inhabit Visual Culture. It may be that in the very broadening out of the definition of Cultural Studies to encompass Visual Culture, we have lost sight of what actually constitutes an object under 'cultural' scrutiny. This factor might be the culprit in an inability on the part of students to later impose any meaningful cultural specificity onto their reading of visual media.

One of the problems may be the way that subjectivity in Visual Culture is being narrativised. In his article, 'Ghostwriting: Working Out Visual Culture,' Nicholas Mirzoeff (2002, p. 239) asserts that, 'when visual culture tells stories, they are ghost stories.' The stories that Mirzoeff (2002) refers to do not reference ghosts in general, but rather those of a particular origin. The ghosts that Mirzoeff (2002) believes Visual Culture has in mind to narrate are the ghosts of the Holocaust. He argues that 'from its choice of theory to its subjects like Freud and Benjamin who fled the Nazis with differing results,' Visual Culture mounts its positioning in recognition of the

fact that 'the Holocaust is, for a variety of reasons, ever more central to contemporary visual culture' (Mirzoeff 2002, p. 246). The reason that the story of these ghosts has to be told and retold by contemporary visual culture is based on the 'need to make the distinction between the abyss that has come to be known by the proper name Auschwitz and its multiple representations in the present' (Mirzoeff 2002, p.246). The ghosts of Jews act a perfect cipher to illustrate this history, through the mechanism of technical reproduction, the Jew is rendered both literally and materially 'a ghost, something that resembles a human even as it is not human' (Mirzoeff 2002, p. 245). This figure is both multitudinous and abysmal. Carrying guilt and retribution as his weapons and 'like the Terminator, the ghost says, "I'll be back"' (Mirzoeff 2002, p. 245). In the meantime, the 'West' endlessly deploys the ghosts of the Holocaust to represent itself as both victim and redeemer' (Mirzoeff 2002, p. 246). All the while, it remains blind to the reality that during the Holocaust the Jews were 'not disciplined, but simply punished' and it is through these means that they became ghosts (Mirzoeff 2002, p. 241). It is this circumstance that granted 'the Jewish ghost a vantage point of hauntology, not because Jewishness is claimed as new paradigm [of subjectivity], but precisely because of its ambivalences and ambiguities. Jewish, like the ghost is an identity that is not identical to itself' (Mirzoeff 2002, p. 244).

One of the things we have learnt through Holocaust scholarship is that few individuals aspire to the privilege of being characterised according to rigid categories of marginal identification, nor readily acceded to the definition of themselves as minorities, or to the subjective status of 'ghosts.' Rather it is often the case that they are coerced to do so by hegemonic forces when such a wary status is assumed. Mirzoeff (2002) would prefer that these ghosts, despite the circumstances of their manufacture, do not retreat into the margins. Moreover it is his ambition that Visual Culture acts as an aid to assert their reality, normality and ultimately to bring about their visibility (Mirzoeff 2002). What he neglects to figure is that prior to the Holocaust the German Jews were people that could 'virtually' be seen as Germans but not 'really' that is to say 'racially, essentially' identified as Jews (Mirzoeff 2002). In its aftermath, the 'West,' and unfortunately some of Visual Culture's practitioners like Mirzoeff, constantly interpolate Jewish identity as something

that is essentially 'real' (2002). These practitioners take great pride in outing Jewish identity or intimate connection to it amongst some of Europe's finest thinkers whilst at the same time uncritically revering the positionality of these ghosts, i.e., Proust, Freud, Benjamin and Frank amongst others. They do so without thoroughly acknowledging that their ghostly position was achieved through a great deal of material violence and physical sacrifice during their individual lifetimes leading to untimely death. Those that occupy similar precarious forms of positionality must make operational several ongoing fronts of resistance, and seldom achieve results that radically and totally overturn established norms. Indeed, such visibility is a trap that many of questionable appearance have attempted to avoid in their lifetimes and their ghostly lingering is a reminder not of their escape, but rather their entrapment in the snares of societal interpolation. The example Mirzoeff (2002) elects to focus on in his article is that of the European Jews in the Modern era. He explains that their alterity arose out of the gradual

lifting of the civil and legal restrictions on the Jews, that abolished the legal boundary between gentiles and Jews in the wake of the French Revolution, in nations around Europe. In addition, there were increasingly more Jews in Europe as nations like France and Britain took in many Jews fleeing persecution in Eastern Europe and Russia's Pale of Settlement...(Mirzoeff 2002, p. 244)

In light of these developments, 'many European Jews acculturated to the hegemonic civil society around them, provoking critiques from within and without the Jewish world (Mirzoeff 2002, p. 244). Mirzoeff describes this trend toward assimilation as being indicative of Jews taking advantage of their newfound cultural freedoms. I would argue that rather their desire to acculturate into the hegemonic civil society was based on newfound cultural anxieties and the desire not to be viewed as Others. It was not so much that it had become unclear what it was to be Jewish, but rather that it was becoming profoundly over-determined in the eyes of those looking at Jews as targets for religious and cultural persecution. Indeed, there is a similar dilemma facing Muslims today as they try and ascertain what it is to be Muslim, particularly in cultures that demand their acculturation into hegemonic Western civil society.

Mirzoeff himself observes, 'for such ambivalent Jews as Proust, Benjamin and Freud, the answer

was that they were ghosts' (Mirzoeff 2002, p. 244.) Mirzoeff therein is able to classify the Arcades Project itself 'as a ghost story in opposition to a 'Jewish' experiment' (Mirzoeff 2002, p. 245). Mirzoeff does not comment on what hangs in the balance of this opposition, but it may be construed from Benjamin's own writing that it involves on one hand flirting with the prospect of studying 'Hebrew and all that is connected to it,' and on the other, 'carefully and provisionally' foraying into the territory of the Paris Arcades (Mirzoeff 2002, p. 245). Essentially what Benjamin is trying to do in weighing both prospects against each other is forestall his entry into the ghetto of identity politics as either a Jew or a European. In 1928 he wrote to Gershom Scholem, indicating that an imminent move to Jerusalem would

perhaps [be] my last chance to devote myself to the study of Hebrew and to everything we think is connected with it. First and foremost, in terms of my being ready for the undertaking, heart and soul. Once I have one way or another completed the project on which I am currently working, carefully and provisionally – the highly remarkable and extremely precarious essay 'Paris Arcades: A Dialectical Fairy Play' (Mirzoeff 2002, p. 245).

By the end of this missive it is clear in what direction Benjamin will move. He will remain in Europe to 'the highly remarkable and extremely precarious' route of far greater significance to him: the Arcades project. After that Jerusalem will never again figure into his plans, into the heart and soul of his life's design. Evidence of Benjamin's decision not to 'return' to the Jewish fold, is born out 'in the very first draft of subject headings for the Arcades Project, there was an entry for 'ghetto' that Benjamin did not develop' (Mirzoeff 2002, p. 245).

Perhaps this was so because at that stage of his thinking all traditions and cultures, as well as all belonging, had become increasingly questionable to him (Arendt 1992, p. 41). His people, provided he has one, would eventually be located using a far more radical set of coordinates (Arendt 1992). He channels an affinity with them by using what Mirzoeff describes as 'avatars like Baudelaire and Blanqui,' personas that Benjamin allows himself to don for protection as he 'imagines himself wandering through the convolutes of the Arcades (Mirzoeff 2002, p. 246).

Nonetheless when on these reconnaissance missions, 'he never encounters Jews, whose peculiar absence becomes ghostly' (Mirzoeff 2002, p. 246). For a time 'the Arcades became a Jewish-free Arcadia,' an ethnically cleansed State, that is, 'until the return of the ghost' (Mirzoeff 2002, p. 246). The Jewish-free Arcadia was for Benjamin a cipher for the loss of the world, a haunted place where the ghosts of the Arcades continued their circulation of the site of their demise.

What Benjamin experiences in this netherworld of the Arcades is a kind of alternate duration of being in the world, a 'moment when the functioning of the organs stops dead, as the intensities approach a limit where intensity equals zero, at this moment a gradient is crossed, a threshold surpassed or retreated from, a migration brought about' (Deleuze, 1998, p. xxxviii). This crossing takes place at the ground zero of a body, in the place where it assumes the appearance of bare life, as pure biological material, as sheer existence. The unbearable presence of this body comes from its marked absence; a condition brought about through its radical devaluation in the economy of Western Europe and its excessive need for alternative forms of viable shelter after the year 1933.

The transparency of the Arcades becomes the stuff of nightmares because this quality lends itself to interpretation by newer forms of architecture which provide radical exposure for some of the inhabitants deemed suspect in their social comportment. According to Mirzoeff (2002), the Arcades are closely related in structure to other forms of discreet containment dreamed up in the eighteenth century, such as Jeremy Bentham's transparent prison house, The Panopticon. The purpose of the Panopticon was not in theory radically different from that of Crystal Palace, or the Passages des Panoramas, insofar as their ultimate function was to act as 'inspection house[s] for the reformation of morals, whether of prisoners, workers or prostitutes, by means of constant surveillance that the inmates could not perceive.' (Mirzoeff 2002, p. 240). The very transparency of these structures acting 'as web of visibility... held in place by the constraining lines of disciplinary power' (Mirzoeff 2002, p. 240). Such architecture was built to

reflect 'an imperial totalising vision that sought to recast the world in its own image' (Mirzoeff 2002, p. 240). 'With the simultaneous invention of photography, the emergent disciplinary society now had both the terminology and the technology to describe this condition, the state of being a visual subject in colonial modernity' (Mirzoeff 2002, p. 240). All peoples regardless of whether they were identified as imperial or colonial subjects experienced such regulatory visual conditioning. Foucault's research reminds us that colonisation was far from a one-way process and indeed that

a whole series of techniques were brought back to the West, and the result was that the West could practice something resembling colonization, or internal colonialism on itself (Foucault 2003. p. 103).

Whilst aspects of this regulatory practice may seem to imply a benevolent control of the population through structures such as the Crystal Palace and the Passages des Panoramas, carceral designs such as the Panopticon reveal such practice had its malevolent side as well. Those who fail to conform to moral standards for whatever reason would have to have 'security mechanisms ... installed around them,' once they were identified as 'the random element inherent in the population of living beings' (Foucault 2003, p. 246). That the goal of confinement was to maintain pure visibility says a great deal about the West's desire to wield its sovereign authority in a way that was perpetual and homogenous. Placed within this context of understanding it is easy to recognise that 'Bentham's device was the creature of the global culture of his day' (Mirzoeff 2002, p. 240). Mirzoeff is quick to register this marvellous machine' as a failure insofar as through its design 'the prisoner could neither be perfectly visible nor be constantly aware of disciplinary surveillance' (2002, p. 240). Consequently and as a result of this design flaw, 'they were not disciplined, but simply punished: they became ghosts' (Mirzoeff 2002, p. 240). In this sense they could be said to have escaped at least temporarily the jurisdiction of biopolitical control.

Mirzoeff asserts that his interest in taking another look at the constitution of panopticism and its purported failures, is to recontextualise 'the apparently brand-new confusion of visuality in the present,' in light of what 'might come to be seen as the breakdown of an already existing web

of visibility that has escaped its disciplinary borders, in all senses of the term' (2002, pp. 240-241). I would like to propose another possibility for interpreting the breakdown of an existing web of visibility that is perhaps more germane to an appreciation of Benjamin's architectural foreboding. This perhaps far more troubling possibility is based on a prospect raised by Giorgio Agamben of a '*volkloser Raum*,' or space empty of people, first proposed by Hitler in 1937 during a secret meeting' (1998, p. 85.) In Hitler's proposal, this zone was meant to be located in Central-Western Europe and would transform a geographical space into a biopolitical space, in which even the confined status of the Jew could be rivaled in terms of surveillance and control of movement, within the confines of a large population. Rather than being a space empty of people we must imagine it as a place that is instead populated with individuals whose very existence, their bare lives, have been disciplined and regulated to such a profound extent that their political lives are indistinguishable from their category of being.

The exposure to such profound levels of State intervention has unfortunately become the subject of banality within the current biopolitical framework of the war on terror. Moreover, if today there is no longer any clear figure of threat in the State's ongoing security campaigns, any specific individual who must be annihilated to protect the greater good, it is because today all persons are viewed as potentially suspect. 'Terror invests in insecurity, uncertainty, and unsafety, turning citizens into hostages, to *homi sacri*' who can emerge as the target for elimination at any moment' (Diken & Bagge Laustsen 2003, p. 304). 'In the transpolitical war against terror, the state not only 'extends exception as a permanent state along a totalitarian line (offlight from terror),' it extends the geopolitical boundaries of nation-States to make a *volkloser Raum* of the entire world (Diken & Bagge Laustsen 2003, p. 304). The neocolonial 'fantasy generated by terror is, in other words, based on the promise of security, certainty, and safety' being somehow restored to the West, through constant scrutiny of the outside world captured through seemingly limitless systems of surveillance (Diken & Bagge Laustsen 2003, p. 304).

Foucault cautions us that:

it should never be forgotten that while colonization, with its techniques and its political and juridical weapons, obviously transported models to other continents, it also had a considerable boomerang effect on the mechanisms of power in the West, and on the apparatuses, institutions, and techniques of power (Foucault 2003, p. 246).

Mirzoeff asserts that the recognition of the Holocaust is, for a variety of reasons, ever more central to contemporary visual culture, because 'its aim to understand what work ... these Holocaust films, TV shows, art pieces and comics [are] trying to do' (2002, p. 246). In regards to understanding these media phenomenon visual culture 'is currently working out – working itself out, creating work, exercising itself – but with no expectation of working through to another side that no longer seems available' (Mirzoeff 2002, p. 246). Today 9/11 and the ongoing War on Terror seems to have superseded the Holocaust in our political imagination as the fascinating limit of cultural intelligibility. Mirzoeff asserts that

As the 'West' endlessly deploys the ghosts of the Holocaust to represent itself both as victim and redeemer, critics of visual culture need to follow Marcellus' old advice to Horatio and speak to them (2002, p. 246).

I agree partially with Mirzoeff's formulation, but would add that we also need to include the perpetrators in this line of questioning, in particular their hand in creating representations that linger in the present. To question as Mirzoeff does, 'How... Jewishness even is to be defined: as a religion – but what of secular Jews? As an ethnicity – but isn't that the Nazi game? As a nation – but what of anti-Zionist Jews?' is to pose a false problem. (Mirzoeff 2002, p. 244). One that goes hand in hand with dropping the expectation of working through to another side of our understanding particularly in regard to apprehending the significance of the bodies involved in a situation such as the Holocaust or the War on Terror.

In order to answer its critics Visual Culture must probe further and pose the question: why is that side no longer available to apprehension? Moreover, we must face the possibility we occupy the state of being a visual subject in colonial postmodernity. 'In short, we are witnessing a cyclic process of creating spaces of indistinction: discipline followed by control, followed by terror, and then the return of discipline as the reversed panopticon. This return of discipline is nowhere

as evident as in Western countries, which express nostalgia for safety “as if” the terrors of the outside “could be erased from memory” or disavowed from recognition (Diken & Bagge Laustsen 2003, p. 304). The occupants of these countries ‘left to themselves,’ will attach themselves ever more firmly to ‘identifications with family, clan, nation and “community” leading to potentially terrible violence, and the problem posed by this potential violence cannot be settled in a more or less “rational” arrangement of interests of choices as Mirzoeff would care to imagine. Neither the individual nor society can contain it’ (Rajchman 2000, p. 102). It is this feature of unchecked violence that produces ghostly effects within culture.

The impossible containment of such violence is precisely the aim of their war on terror, and its neocolonial aims of regime change and democracy building. ‘However, as safety and security are seen as absolute achievements, the price to pay is high: the return of discipline’ wherein visibility once again becomes a trap (Diken & Bagge Laustsen 2003, p. 304). ‘Disagreement is suppressed, antagonisms are denied, and the accidental is that sought’ as a form of resistance in Visual Culture and is ‘prevented through preemptive risk management’ of media outputs and mistakenly perceived as agents of liberation. (Diken & Bagge Laustsen 2003, p. 304). Those who wish to challenge this situation must emerge from beyond the dominion of categorical identities, from the outside or remainder of civil society. In this respect Benjamin’s avatars can take on new meaning, not as spectres of past oppression, but as a people to come for whom positionality is a contingent and splendidly impersonal act when otherwise reading any product of visual media as a means of their own cultural survival.

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