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VISUAL CULTURE, EVERYDAY LIFE, DIFFERENCE, AND VISUAL LITERACY

Interview with Nicholas Mirzoeff

Introduction

Nicholas Mirzoeff is Professor in The Steinhardt School of Education, New York University. He is author of *Silent Poetry: Deafness, Silence, and Visual Culture in Modern France* (1995), *Bodyscape: Art, Modernity, and the Ideal Figure* (1995), *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (1999), *Watching Babylon: The War in Iraq* (2005) and forthcoming books on Visual Literacy and on Seinfeld. He is also the editor of the landmark *Visual Culture Reader* (1998 [2002]). This interview draws out a number of threads central to Mirzoeff's recent and forthcoming intellectual projects. Some of these threads cluster around reoccurring issues central to the study of visual culture such as historicity, pedagogy, studio practice, academic labour and the knowledge economy, the politics and ethics of the visual, visual literacy, and how visual subjectivity and identity impact upon questions of disability, racialized difference, and queer politics. Other threads tangle around the subject of the power of images in global culture and why the visual is so central to Western capitalism. In so doing, the interview stresses what it means to live in what Giorgio Agamben has called a 'state of exception', and the consequent need to engage critically with the spectacle of late capitalism.

Visual Culture Studies, Visual Culture, and visual culture: Then and Now

Marquard Smith (MS): After the first edition of the edited collection *The Visual Culture Reader* (1998) and *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (1999), your name became synonymous with Visual Culture Studies or at least with certain ways of thinking about the study of visual culture. What have been the effects of this?

Nicholas Mirzoeff (NM): The idea of creating the two books was that it would make it possible for someone who wanted to teach a class in the field to do so

and to give them the necessary evidence to prove to a dean or a curriculum committee that a field such as this existed. For that matter, I think the books make a material difference in convincing students that visual culture is an academic discipline. So, by the way, when some people have said that the *Reader* is nothing more than a packet of photocopies in bound form, I think they missed the importance of the materiality of books in general and books that advance a new claim in particular. Returning to the strategy of the books, it seems that the goal of enabling new courses has been achieved, so much so that they are now the target of a certain form of institutional critique, at least within Anglo-American universities.

So much for what was intended: the interesting things have been the unintended consequences. Perhaps the most striking thing to me about the way the *Reader* in particular has been used was that it was adopted first by studio art programmes, even as art historians informed us that visual culture was anti-art and so on. That dialogue between visual culture and contemporary art has been extremely interesting and important to me personally, given that I now teach in a studio department, and to the field in general. I'm thinking here of the Visual Cultures programme at Goldsmiths College, which has developed this interface in very exciting ways. Of course at the same time, being embraced by a fashion-conscious milieu like the art world has the inevitable consequence of becoming unfashionable, sooner or later. We've already seen some artists who were originally contributors to the *Reader* decide that visual culture is old hat, which indeed it is in a certain sense, very old. At the same time, the relationship between the Interventionist art practice of theory and visual culture's theory of practice remains very significant.

Finally, I think one of the most significant things the books did was simply to circulate globally. Anecdotally, I've heard about people using them in Tajikistan, Argentina, Turkey, India and many other places where Anglophone academic books aren't always used. My hope is this is the first step in a continuing exchange that has already begun with the publication of volumes like Jeanne Van Eeden and Amanda du Preez's (2005) collection *South African Visual Culture*.

MS: I'm sure that *The Visual Culture Reader* is the most influential and successful Visual Culture Studies book of all time. Its first edition appeared in 1998, and the second edition appeared in 2002. You and I have spoken in the past about the role of the editor, the intricate intellectual (as well as pragmatic) processes and practices involved in this role, and the ways in which these activities are often underestimated. With this in mind, I'd like to ask you about the two editions of *The Visual Culture Reader*. In the transition from the first to the second edition, you've introduced a number of differences: as well as a new design, you also decided to rewrite your introductory sections, add a couple of new introductory articles, some contributions have been dropped while others

have been added. What most interests me, though, is the overall conceptual/
structural changes to the *Reader*, and what they mean to you.

That's to say, the first edition had sections (appearing in the following order)
entitled: 'A Genealogy of Visual Culture: From Art to Culture'; 'Visual Culture
and Everyday Life'; 'Virtuality: Virtual Bodies, Virtual Spaces'; 'Race and Identity
in Colonial and Postcolonial Culture'; 'Gender and Sexuality'; and 'Pornography'.
The sections in the second edition are entitled: 'Plug-in theory'; 'Global/
Digital' – which has subsections on 'Imagining globalization' and 'The space of
the digital'; 'Spectacle and Display', with subsections on 'Spectacle, display, sur-
veillance', and 'Cinema after film, television after networks'; 'Visual Colonialism/
Visual Transculture', with subsections on 'Visual colonialism' and 'Identity and
transculture'; and 'The Gaze, the Body and Sexuality' with subsections on 'The
gaze and sexuality' and 'Technobodies/Technofeminism'.

All of which is to say, between 1998 and 2002 you made a series of signifi-
cant structural changes to the *Reader* that for me indicates a shift in your think-
ing about the field of Visual Culture Studies, the pedagogical purposes
and priorities of the *Reader* as it pertains to this area of inquiry, and even the
conceptualization of visual culture itself. Is this the case?

NM: Editing is to my mind a dialogic art. In producing the first edition of the
Reader, I had discussions with real and imaginary potential users of the book as
to what they felt was necessary in such a book and how they might use it. So
the notion of a 'genealogy of visual culture' was intended to make a case of the
necessity and existence of the field. I chose to demonstrate that idea with
examples from art history because that was my training but you could have
made the case with other areas, as Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall (1999) later
did with semiotics in their *Reader* for Sage.

By the time it became clear that the *Reader* was getting dated in 2000 –
having been devised for the most part in 1996 – a number of changes were self-
evident. On the one hand, while people still debated what visual culture could
and should be, there was enough acceptance that an issue, or a debate, or a field
(depending on your perspective) did exist that one could make space for new
material by setting the genealogical material aside. I also assumed that people
who might use the new *Reader* had the old one and could still reference or
assign that and other sections we cut.

The next obvious issue was the question of digital culture that had been ref-
erenced in the first edition mostly in relation to the question of virtual reality.
If you remember, in 1995 when we first discussed doing the *Reader*, the
Internet was still seen as a geeky sideshow, even by people like Bill Gates. So by
2002 we were wildly offbeat in not having proper coverage of the importance
of new media and their relationship to globalization.

In drawing up the second edition, I also had the benefit of a good deal of feed-
back from people who were actually using the book. So the section of theoretical

excerpts was a response to something a number of people had asked for in these surveys to give them another teaching tool. I had always envisaged people using the book as the basis of a network of readings, viewings, and other activity and that's true for many people. In other situations, people needed to be able to use the book by itself and I think it benefits from that change of perspective.

But the changes were more than taxonomic. In the first edition, I was looking back to see where visual culture had come from. In the second edition, I wanted to try and ask where it was going. So in addition to the introductory pieces, I sought out new work from people whose work impressed me, like Jonathan Beller, Lisa Nakamura, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, Tara McDonald, Olu Oguibe, Lisa Parks, and Jill Casid. Second, I made a consistent self-conscious effort to make sure that the second edition was more diverse in every sense: for example, that the authors are more diverse by age and ethnicity; that there's better geographic range; and that art has been displaced as the central reference point to one means of visual representation among others. Here I am in many ways just following the ways in which what is being made, taught, and seen as 'contemporary art' has shifted and expanded in response to new media and globalization.

MS: I have a question about *An Introduction to Visual Culture*. Do you regret beginning that book with the sentence: 'Modern life takes place onscreen' (p. 1). I know it's a bit of a cheeky question, but it's not intended to be disingenuous. Rather, it's about the contemporaneity of Visual Culture Studies. That is, do you believe that Visual Culture Studies and/or the study of visual cultures is necessarily a concern with or an attention to the contemporary – to what you'd called modern life? As someone who's written a book set in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, your *Silent Poetry: Deafness, Sign and Visual Culture in Modern France* (1995), I know you're attentive to matters of history. (It's also worth mentioning, as I noted in the previous question, that a section of the first edition of your *Reader* is entitled 'A Genealogy of Visual Culture', and throughout your writings you do endeavour to acknowledge histories and genealogies of visual culture.) I suppose it's also worth mentioning that in part my question is asked as a way of giving you a chance to respond to accusations made by both supporters and detractors alike that Visual Culture Studies is often dangerously ahistorical.

NM: This seems to me two distinct questions. As to the opening of the *Introduction*, when I wrote it, I was an obscure assistant professor. My hope was people might ask themselves what was meant by 'the modern': beginning where, involving whom, in what space or spaces? and what kind of screen was imagined: television, film, pictorial or psychoanalytic? If that sentence helped

grab people's attention to the book, which I think it did, then it would be silly to repudiate it now. And it did express a certain sense of the period, the late 1990s, in which technology seemed in and of itself to be emancipatory and confining at once, as [the film] *The Matrix* visualized so effectively. In general, I think that I decided to write the *Introduction* in bold face, as it were, meaning that I enhanced and sharpened the rhetorical stakes with the hope of provoking debate and reaction. It was never intended to be a 'textbook', even if it gets used that way, because there was no agreed field to be introduced at that time. It is rather an *Introduction* to a series of questions, debates and issues that might be taken as constituting the possibility of a field.

As to the second question, it's always seemed odd to me that visual culture has been characterized as ahistorical, whether dangerously or not. It was Svetlana Alpers's *The Art of Describing* (1983), a study of seventeenth century Dutch art, that put the term into the field of art history, for instance. And scholars like Michael Ann Holly and Keith Moxey are not only historians but historiographers. Then you might look at someone like Susan Buck-Morss whose historical interrogation of philosophy is exemplary. In my own case, you really don't have to look into the back catalogue to see this. As much as the Introduction to *An Introduction to Visual Culture* gets referenced, I sometimes feel that the rest of the book is overlooked. The first chapter deals with questions of perspective in the seventeenth century, for instance, and the transcultural approach of the second half ranges widely in historical time. I think the chapter on the Congo is perhaps most indicative in this regard because, like many other sections, it introduces new research and concepts rather than summarizing a given body of existing work. I think the allegation that visual culture is ahistorical needs to be thought through in relation to the concept of danger that you introduced. Dangerous to whom or to what? Presumably to a mode of politically-engaged intellectual practice that has served under the slogan 'always historicize' for some time now. It's true of course that my version of visual culture doesn't fit well with Jameson's vision of totalizing history. But its engagement with a form of politics is central, beginning with the question of how one might have a politics of the visual, why the visual is so central to Western capitalism, and what the political response to that could or should be.

The Everyday and Identity, Globalization, and the Media

MS: To be more charitable, I do know what you mean by the statement that modern life takes place onscreen. Really, you're simply drawing our attention to the fact that our lives, experiences, and knowledges are mediated and re-mediated by way of the televisual, the cinematic, and other kinds of vision and forms of visual media: that we're under constant surveillance; that there's an

increase in the wealth and diversity of our visual encounters; and that this, in part, has to do with the legacy of living in a post-modern culture dominated by the flowing, the circulating, the enlivening, distracting, enervating force of images.

I think this interest in the experience of being in modern life, of becoming through modern life, has to do in some way with your efforts to bring together the concerns and benefits of Art History with Cultural Studies: a converging and contextualizing of the history of images – and their modes of making and modalities of meaning – with a political and ethical impulse. And a preoccupation with everyday life. You say this explicitly in a number of different ways in the *Reader*, and in *An Introduction to Visual Culture* where you make the following statements:

> Visual culture directs our attention away from structured, formal viewing settings like the cinema and art gallery to the centrality of visual experience in everyday life. (p. 7)
>
> Just as cultural studies has sought to understand the ways in which people create meaning from the consumption of mass culture, so does visual culture prioritize the everyday experience of the visual from the snapshot to the VCR and even the blockbuster art exhibition. (p. 7)
>
> Visual culture seeks to blend the historical perspective of art history and film studies with the case-specific, intellectually engaged approach characteristic of cultural studies. (p. 12–13)
>
> The transcultural experience of the visual in everyday life is, then, the territory of visual culture. (p. 41)

My question, then, is this: what place does the everyday have in your thinking, research, and writing?

NM: There's no question that the everyday has been the boundary against which I have tried to think out the practices and possibilities of the visual. What I have meant by that has changed quite considerably over the past decade. I did my PhD at Warwick University at a time when cultural studies work was generating a community of interest there (although it tended to be called 'theory' then). Then and later, I was enormously influenced by the work of Stuart Hall and the Birmingham group, who seemed to have a means of interfacing the academic with the political that was full of potential. I remember seeing Stuart do a political meeting on a wet night in North London to a handful of people in some union hall and being quite brilliant and inspiring. So I have always wanted visual culture to call itself that, rather than say visual studies, in order to emphasize the engagement with the politics of the everyday.

In the 1990s that seemed to me and many others to be about moving away from formal spaces of viewing created in the era of mechanical reproduction, like cinemas and art galleries, to the personal interface with the visual, ranging from face-to-face encounters, the drift of Western city life with its signage and display, the spread of ambient media (like TVs in airports and post offices) and the sheer proliferation of channels, whether on television or the Internet, that placed a premium on 'capturing eyeballs'. If, as de Certeau had

argued in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, walking, cooking and shopping could be seen as tactics of negotiating with disciplinary power, it seemed that such everyday looking might be added to that list as a means of engaging the spectacle of late capital. Add to that the proliferation of digital media, in which consumers were enabled to become producers and which tended to create challenges to centralized authority because 'information wants to be free', and one had the sense that the possibilities of visual culture were quite striking at that time.

Now of course many of these tactical sites are also locations of surveillance and of the generation of statistical and other records. Walking is, in many American suburbs and cities, a potentially suspect activity in and of itself. At the same time, the digital has become the agent and locus of capital's free mobility, rather than of 'freedom' in an emancipatory sense, and the web is less free in the sense of being without charge. Once again but from a different optic, I feel the force of the Situationist protest against 'the colonization of everyday life'. The agent of that colonization is a networked intersection of the resurgent militarized state and transnational capital that has been named *Empire* by Hardt and Negri (2001). The everyday is, then, no longer necessarily a place of resistance in the sense made common by cultural studies, so much as the locus of an elusive trace of that resistance to be reconstituted by political action, or more precisely, by the reconnection of the general intellect with praxis. That action takes place in the context of what Giorgio Agamben (2005) has called the 'state of exception', that is to say, a moment in which the government claims that it needs to suspend the laws in order to preserve the rule of law. Everyday life in the state of exception is, as Tom Mitchell has pointed out, nothing less than the experience of fascism (which is not quite to say Nazism, and does not necessarily imply extermination camps). This neo-fascism, as Paulo Virno calls it, does not aestheticize politics in the famous phrase of Walter Benjamin, so much as cast a pall of invisibility over that which is done in the name of the state of exception. What we have had to learn is that simply making things visible, as in the exemplary case of the 'Abu Ghraib' photographs (taken to mean all those depictions of lawless violence undertaken in the current global civil war), has not had the consequences one might have expected. It seems that as long as people accept the rhetorical framing of such spectacles as necessitated by the current emergency, their contents remain, in a certain sense, invisible: not that there was not revulsion but no significant political consequences followed from the Abu Ghraib scandal. Bush, Howard, and Blair were all re-elected and no person of seniority has been disciplined, let alone jailed. At the same time, the anti-war protests of February 15 represented, as the Retort group has argued, a moment in which the multitude – that is to say, the mass of humanity, as opposed to the 'people' predicated by the neo-liberal State, as in the endless reiteration of the war as being for 'the people of Iraq' – became visible to itself, even as it soon experienced defeat.

MS: You return to these issues of everyday life in the opening pages of your recent book *Watching Babylon* (2005): The war in Iraq and global visual culture where, in the context of discussions of globalization and visual culture, you also speak of 'vernacular watching' (p. 13, pp. 30–1). *Watching Babylon* is, overall, about how such everyday experiences of 'watching' are caught up in and take place by way of what you characterize as the 'digital and global culture of hegemonic capitalism' (p. 13). This is about the power of images in global culture, the saturation of our field of vision, and what you call the visual event. You go on to speak of watching as 'all the things we do when we watch television: looking, not looking, listening, not listening, eating, making a phone call, working, doing laundry, child care, reading and so on'. You speak of 'vernacular watching' which 'tak[es] everyday life as its domain'. Watching, you say, 'needs to be thought of as an activity that is necessarily intersected and implicates both other forms of watching and other activities altogether' (p. 13). Could you tell us some more about this lovely turn of phrase 'vernacular watching'?

NM: Thanks, I'm very glad that you like the term. It owes a debt to the emergent field of vernacular photography – photographs taken by non-specialists – in general and Geoffrey Batchen's championing of the idea in his book *Each Wild Idea* (2001) in particular. W.J.T. Mitchell (2002) also used a similar term in his 'Showing Seeing' essay and, like everyone in the field, I'm always in debt to his work and his generosity. I was also thinking of Anna McCarthy's book *Ambient Television* (2001) which talks about TV 'out of place', whether in bars, airports, post offices or other such places. The phrase resulted from an experience in a gym in Long Island where I found myself watching the bombing of Baghdad as a man dressed in military-style work out clothes celebrated each and every bomb and I could not find words to deflate his ardour. Watching was clearly not resistance here. It is a means, then, of trying to encapsulate the oddities of vernacular experience in the state of exception. I also wanted to try and suggest by this what I have always intended, namely that watching is not the performance of a disembodied eye – what Duchamp called the retinal – but a performative constellation of certain modes of habit, domesticity, leisure, and work. If, as Jonathan Beller (1994) has put it, 'to look is to labour', watching is an uneasy meditation on the place of the intellect in the everyday and in the production of value, rather than a passive consumption of media. In this regard, I also wanted to evoke the importance for visual culture of the experiences of watching and being watched that are not mediated by technology (while granting that all phenomenal experience is shaped and understood by means of the age of the world picture). At the same time, many people do spend more and more time watching screens on static and portable media as their work and as their play. While they perform this work or play, they are often subject to certain modes of being watched themselves, whether by a webcam monitoring

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child-care, a computer noting the number of keystrokes performed in a given time, or an observer in the classroom checking for faculty 'bias'. The visual event is, then, a place of complex intersection that we resolve to ourselves as 'watching', knowing that watching is also being watched, that vision is not an isolated perceptual event but a compound one and that there is nothing banal about the quotidian.

MS: In *Silent Poetry* (1995), *Bodyscape: Art, Modernity and the Ideal Figure* (1995), and the edited collection *Diaspora and Visual Culture: Representing Africans and Jews* (1999), as well as elsewhere, you've written extensively about identity, identity politics, identity formation, and what, in *Watching Babylon*, you call 'visual subjectivity'. I'd like to ask you a couple of questions about the matter of identity – which is so often a question of representation – and its place in Visual Culture Studies.

In both *Silent Poetry* and *Bodyscape*, you pay close attention to blindness and deafness. In fact I think it's fair to say that of all the scholars working between Art History and Cultural Studies, in Visual Culture Studies, you're the one with the most unmistakable commitment to Disability Studies, and the questions that Disability Studies raise for vision and visuality. That's to say, in your writings, blindness and deafness, for instance, don't simply crop up as ways to engage with the non-visual but, rather, demonstrate how differently-abled bodies, identities, and subjectivities are constituted by, with, and against more hegemonic regimes of vision and visuality. (Actually, it strikes me that you also do something similar with matters of race, nation, diaspora, and so on: you use them as a dialectical counterpoint, a lens through which to both see these matters themselves and also see differently the hegemonic projects and prejudices to which they are tied, imbricated, embedded, caught up in one another's concerns – in this case racism, nationalism, xenophobia.) Can you tell us more about this way of looking, seeing, knowing?

NM: To me disability studies has opened up crucial new modes of thinking about specific identities within a collective framework. To argue, as Lenny Davis puts it, that we have all been 'disabled' (as infants) and that some form of disability attends all those who live into 'senior citizen' status is to reframe identities as contingent and flexible, while also being collective. By the same token, thinking about necessary disability is to put pressure on the very abstract notions of sensory perception that dominate the academic discussion on such matters. Georgina Kleege (2001), for example, has written about how the sighted expect the blind to have no visual perception whatsoever, rather than the complexly variegated forms of visual perception that pass under the rubric blindness. I think here of Borges's essay on yellow, the only colour that his eyesight would latterly let him perceive, in which he displays not a bitterness of

loss but a remarkable meditation on his monochrome world. By the same token, I am what the deaf call 'hard-of-hearing', a person with very restricted hearing that nonetheless lives as a hearing person. So I tend to become impatient with arguments that all visual materials are also audio materials because sound is such a problem for me. So whereas the regime of normality insists that sight either is or is not available ('referee, are you blind?' meaning that only a person without sight could not see), it also claims that hearing must always be available ('he can hear if he wants to' is the vernacular version of this). So I would say that the 'normal' is constituted by its own formation of what 'disability' must mean and the insistence that the 'normal' is synaesthetic. It's striking that, in the US, the same authorities that are prepared to grant the administration ever wider powers to exceed and evade the norm under the rubric of the state of exception are at the same time restricting what the state can be expected to do for people with disabilities and expanding the reach of the normal so as to exclude people from disability benefits. One can't help but be reminded of the Catch-22 whereby anyone with any apparent African descent is African-American because there is no perceived advantage to that status, whereas anyone wanting to be called Native American has to go through a rather rigorous process of certification because of the perceived benefits that accrue. Such interfaces of the collective and the particular within sensory and legal regimes of normality seem to me to epitomize what visual culture might do.

By extension, I have always felt that by the very engagement with 'culture', with all its attendant baggage from the eighteenth century on, requires visual culture to make questions of difference a first-order priority (I recall here being put down by a grand British academic a few years ago when I mentioned identity politics: 'We don't say "identity", we speak of "difference"', itself of course a claim of superior 'European' identity to the backward 'American'). However, these issues are often now dismissed as 'so 1990s', as if they had been resolved at that time. One of the reasons that the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the Asian tsunami were so shocking to many was that here one could not ignore the interface of racialized difference, class, neocolonial state policy, and human suffering. However, the effects of this shock in the US have been very short term and quickly passed over. But there is an emergent critical response that seeks to connect questions of 'race', sexuality, nationality, and Empire, such as Roderick Ferguson's queer of colour politics and the recent special issue of *Social Text*, edited by David L. Eng, José Muñoz, and Judith Halberstam (2005) on queer politics and theory. The latter has caused quite a stir for its critique of white middle-class gay male practice in academia. It is becoming obvious that the state of exception has caused a revival of racialized sentiment and politics in the Anglophone Iraq war coalition of the US, Britain, and Australia, even as the effects of the globalized neoliberal economy are producing similar

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results in Europe. With the recent provocation of the Danish cartoons of Mohammed causing a worldwide uproar, it's clear that visual culture needs to engage with the politics of global difference as a matter of urgency. It's been salutary, for instance, to see how the remarkable effort of Okwui Enwezor's *Documenta XI* has had so little effect on the corporate globalized art world with its non-stop art fairs, biennales, and new museums. Once again, in a somewhat different context, the sheer quantity and scope of the market is able to absorb and neutralize any challenge so that it can take an active effort to remember it, even as we are surrounded by constant memorialization.

MS: My second question on identity is a short one. Early on in *Watching Babylon* you say that you watched the war in Iraq with a Western viewpoint, as a European based in the United States and watching by way of US television, but that you want to 'disidentify' with this viewpoint. Why? Can you?

NM: Here I wanted to use José Muñoz's (1999) idea of disidentification to suggest a mid-point between a meaningless denial of my complicity with the Western viewpoint – because clearly I have no other – and a refusal to identify with it. The book strategises precisely on this point: how might one make the naturalized 'American' viewpoint seem strange or open to question? As an American immigrant, I arrived in Los Angeles in 1990 only to find it was always already intensely familiar as the scenery and imaginary of film and television, just as a certain New York is known worldwide. Now it is of course the case that as Mike Davis and others have shown, there's another Los Angeles that is not that of the mediascape. In *Watching Babylon*, I wanted to frame the American viewpoint in an environment where it is experienced as local and to which it is addressed, that is to say, the American suburb. Unlike many European cities, American suburbs are increasingly independent of the cities of which they are in theory the outlying areas. So in this case, the town of Babylon on Long Island, New York, from where I watched the war on Iraq (or at least the active invasion up until the capture of Saddam Hussein) was a place from which one could ask what it means to watch war. This is a place of outsize cars buying products from superstores to stock their gigantic McMansions and in which to watch outsize TV, all the while haunted by the suspicion that the constant exhortation to 'move on, there's nothing to see' is concealing something terrible. It's not by coincidence that the town of Babylon includes Amityville, site of the events that generated *The Amityville Horror*, first made in 1978 and remade in 2004. So, without repeating the argument of the book at length, it was exactly my intent to explore and negotiate the presumed normality of the West, rather than claim an affiliation with – for example – a viewer in Baghdad whose experience is to all intents and purposes unknown to me, blogs, al-Jazeera, and all other mediation notwithstanding.

The University, Visual Rights, Visual Literacy

MS: On the issue of Visual Culture Studies as a challenge for the university, disciplinarity, and thinking in general, in *An Introduction to Visual Culture* you write:

> To some, visual culture may seem to claim too broad a scope to be of practical use. It is true that visual culture will not sit comfortably in already existing university structures. It is part of an emerging body of postdisciplinary academic endeavours from cultural studies, gay and lesbian studies, to African-American studies, and so on, whose focus crosses the borders of traditional academic disciplines at will. In this sense, visual culture is a tactic, not an academic discipline. It is a fluid interpretive structure, centred on understanding the response to visual media of both individuals and groups. Its definition comes from the questions it asks and issues it seeks to raise. Like the other approaches mentioned above, it hopes to reach beyond the traditional confines of the university to interact with peoples' everyday lives. (pp. 4–5)

A few years down the line, with Visual Culture Studies more established, and with you in a new institution, and specifically in a practice-based visual arts context, what do you think about this whole issue now?

NM: The question of the academic institution and academic labour has certainly changed but not in the way that I had hoped. I had a rather utopian belief that the information revolution would transform university practice by making the simple provision of information available to all and thereby both compelling and enabling universities to become the site of critical practice. I envisaged a transformed humanities sector in which the nineteenth-century division of labour into highly specialized subfields would be required to change in line with contemporary labour practice into a fluid and open field of work. It is of course somewhat the case that the Internet has made information of a certain sort more widely available, but there's no quality control, as a quick glance at the Wikipedia entry for visual culture will testify.

So what actually happened was a dispersal of academic labour into the marginalized border zones of intellectual production, once known as the knowledge economy. The new university is a place of part-time labour on a per-course basis. This question about working in a practice-based environment is hard to answer, because the universities are now so driven by revenue and labour questions. As much as I continue to think that visual culture is the theory of practice and the practice of theory, the room for such equivalence has been driven out by the continuing issue of the academic workplace. At New York University, where I now teach as you mention, according to the Adjuncts' Union, some 75 per cent of all courses are taught either by such staff or graduate students. The quality of their work is usually excellent so the reduction in salary and benefits is invisible to students. But the disparity between undergraduate fees of around $35,000 a year and adjunct stipends that average $3500 a course

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is egregious. The graduate students at NYU organized and won union recognition, despite intense opposition from the administration, in 2001. However, the Bush administration overturned the ruling of the National Labor Review Board by which graduate students were recognized as workers and consequently universities are no longer required to recognize unions. In August 2005, NYU arbitrarily ended its contract with the student union, Local 2110 of the United Auto Workers (a union that represents many clerical and administrative staff, including graduate students at the University of California and the staff at the Museum of Modern Art). A bitter and divisive strike has ensued with the university penalizing students on strike in January 2006 of two semesters' (a full academic year) stipend, even though they had by then been on strike for only nine weeks. The university claims that even though the students teach stand-alone classes and are indispensable to the functioning of the institution, they are not workers but students and therefore all grievances must be resolved by the officers of the university not by 'outsiders'. Without getting lost in the arcana of the dispute, the university presents itself as in a permanent state of exception, caused by apparent financial shortfall, to justify its literally autocratic decisions. The NYU case is typical of the move by US universities to institutions characterized by a highly centralized adminstration, a reduced and demoralized full-time faculty and staff being asked to perform ever greater duties, and an ever-expanding part-time workforce. Reversing viewpoints, Virno (2004) has raised the intriguing prospect that such conditions could become voluntary, a defection from the search for tenure and promotion and professional advancement that might lead to a politics of post-Fordism.

MS: I'd like to bring our 'conversation' to a close in this final section by asking you to speak a little about your long term attention to matters of emancipation, justice, equality, democracy, utopian thinking, even. In our exchanges over the last few months, you've mentioned in passing a series of interests that emerge out of such commitments. They include 'the expanded field of cultural work', the 'Experimental University', and 'visual rights' or the 'rights to visual literacy'. While not new to your thinking and writing *per se*, these interests seem to be coming to the fore with more insistence. I think speaking about these things would be a nice way to end: to showcase your current and upcoming research projects, and to conclude with a note or two of optimism and hopefulness.

NM: I do think it's important to try and be optimistic in the spirit of the 'pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will'. On the one hand, sheer pessimism leaves you with the Dick Cheney world-view in which evil is active and all means are justified to combat it. On the other, a Frankfurt-school view in which the sheer domination of the culture industry is such that all resistance is futile is a recipe for revolutionary rhetoric in the seminar -room and a social conservatism in practice as one waits for the revolution that never comes. So in

Watching Babylon, I ended each chapter on an utopian or weak messianic note as a counter to the difficult and depressing material.

More recently, I have been working on a project that I call 'Visual Rights' that draws together all my different interests into an extended statement. It's motivated by the awareness that we have no visual rights and yet we live in a renewed society of the spectacle in which the visible and the invisible are of great political moment. (Just as a footnote, the so-called 'Multi-cultural art in America' book that Routledge advertise on Amazon was never more than an idea that they have somehow decided to announce as forthcoming: it never will so don't pre-order!). This book makes a claim for visual rights, even though they do not yet exist. What does exist, and has made the case for visual rights, is a right to look, as Derrida once termed it. The right to look is exercised in the contemporary, which is understood here to mean the living together with others that has been Anglophone experience since the term was coined in the seventeenth century. Consequently, 'the right to look' is 'the invention of that other' (Derrida). The look is a sideways one between those of minority status (the enslaved, Jews, women, children, and all those excluded from majoritarian legal subjectivity) and is always in tension with the law of the gaze. The place of the right to look is therefore the 'South', in tension with the 'North' represented by the gaze. The book offers a historical and theoretical genealogy of minority and the right to look, theorized in terms of deconstruction, psychoanalytic culture criticism and the fragmentary method of Walter Benjamin and postcolonial theory. Minority was a strategy of forming transnational collectivity that existed in counterpoint with the universal claims of Enlightenment and revolution until the division of Western society into the 'normal' and distinct minorities made such transverse links impossible by the early twentieth century. I concentrate here on the related Atlantic world figures of the enslaved African and the transcultural Jewish ragpicker known as the *Smouse* from the seventeenth century to Oscar Wilde's London. However, far from being an object of antiquarian curiosity, minority has again become a feature of the globalization of our time. The numerical majority finds itself in the position of Minority, unable to influence the key practices of security, finance, and ecology that determine their conditions of existence. This new Minority requires a new claim to rights, especially visual rights, because so much of globalization is conducted as a form of invisibility, in which the citizen has no right to look but is asked to 'move on, there's nothing to see'. Minority is, then, a means of imagining the multitude in a way that insists that the collective is constituted by difference and deferral.

How these ideas might move into play in the general attempt to challenge the state of exception and reassert the possibilities of Minority is perhaps too presumptive a question for me to answer. My hope is simply that in making certain performative claims about the rights in relation to the global spectacle that some friction might be introduced into the seemingly relentless process by

which scandal and crisis recedes into oblivion as the endless cascade of media-tized information inundates any given object. The performance of rights would be first a claim to that which one does not have as if one does, which Rancière (2004) has called 'dissensus', that is to say, a breaking of the conservative con-sensus. Second, it would mobilize the process of surrogation that is the sibling of memory and performance as Joseph Roach has taught us, in that any right is a surrogation of difference that does not erase the difference so much as put it into play. By asserting the hold of right in the flows of transnational neo-liberal intellectual capital, one would also emphasize the placing of law as right over law as force, remembering Derrida's meditation on *droit* in 'Force of Law' (1990). Here, following Benjamin, Derrida places the law's capacity to enforce and hence conserve itself in tension with the right [*droit*] to strike, a violence that founds and creates. Visuality was Thomas Carlyle's 1840 word for what Chartism was not: that is to say, he opposed Chartism's vision of non-representative democracy (that is, a democracy that does not delegate its governing function to others) with his idea of the Hero, a single all-powerful figure. In 1906, Georges Sorel and Rosa Luxemburg would come to understand the general strike as a means to create 'groups of images' assembled into a picture of what socialism might achieve, like Benjamin's famous dialectical image that resulted from his interface of his reading of Sorel with the Arcades project that he began two years later. In claiming the right to strike, or to what Virno calls general civil disobedience, one thus tries to visualize, or create a dialectical image of, the 'general intellect' other than it is, without erasing difference into a Hegelian subject.

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