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THE SUBJECT OF VISUAL CULTURE

DURING THE FIRST DAYS of the NATO attack on Serbia in April 1999, I was watching a CNN live report from Belgrade. The pictures showed a burning building somewhere in Belgrade while the anchor quietly relayed official communiqués. A little logo indicated that the pictures were coming from Serbian television. At this point, the surreal calm of the broadcast was suddenly disrupted. Serbian television, realizing that CNN were using their feed, switched to carrying the American images designated by the CNN logo. Thus CNN viewers were now watching Serbian television watch them watching. CNN had displayed the Serbian television logo as a warning, indicating to its American audience that the pictures were not entirely to be trusted. Well aware that its own viewers shared this skepticism, Serbian television switched feeds in order to assert to its domestic audience that because they were now watching what CNN viewers were watching, they should in fact trust the pictures. Serbian television used the global television station to vindicate its local coverage. The now angry anchor intervened and CNN stopped showing the pictures. The global corporation had lost control of the logos and hence the image. This, then, was a struggle about images as well as a struggle over terrain.

This little incident expressed the formal condition of contemporary visual culture that I call *intervisuality*, the simultaneous display and interaction of a variety of modes of *visuality*. CNN sees itself as the global surveillance channel for Western viewers. Like the jailer in the imaginary prison known as the *Panopticon* (see p. 397), the CNN camera is supposed to be invisible to participants in news events. This enables transmission from behind enemy lines or at the heart of an ongoing riot. In fact, this viewpoint is highly restricted, creating the opportunity for Serbian television to play its game with the logos. The switch in logos revealed that the images were not pure visibility but highly mediated representation. The logo itself is an expression of a chain of images, discourses and material reality, that is to say, an icon, representing both an older and a newer form of *visuality* than the

panopticon – older in the Christian icon, newer in the computer software icon. Finally, the rapid change of feed from Serbian television to CNN and back to the studio highlighted that the domain of the contemporary image is literally and metaphorically electric. NATO forces were directing the war using satellite images and photographs as highly accurate guides for missiles. However, the effectiveness of this strategy still depended on accurate interpretation of the image, as was made clear by the unintended bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade – mistaken by US intelligence for a Serbian facility. The pilots who flew the missions were trained in flight simulators but were only allowed up in clear weather conditions so that they could accurately survey the terrain below.

This was a media war in all senses. On April 21, 1999 NATO planes attacked the television station belonging to Marija Milosevic, daughter of Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic, and in so doing also knocked out two other television stations transmitting from the same building. In the fire 123 episodes of *The Simpsons* as well as new episodes of *Chicago Hope* and *Friends* were destroyed, pitting the American armed forces against their own television networks. In a further twist, knowing that the Western media would carry photos of the damage, the government placed a poster in English directly in front of the damaged Usce building that housed the television stations. It showed a computer generated image of the Eiffel Tower in Paris seeming to collapse in flames under military attack. The destruction of global tourist symbols that was imagined in the science-fiction film *Independence Day* (1996) was now deployed in what one would hesitate to call 'reality,' were it not for the all-too-real consequences of the weapons being used on both sides. Agence France-Presse duly ensured that the image was seen around the world (*New York Times* April 22, 1999: A15). The caption read 'Just Imagine! Stop The Bombs.' It artfully mixed the Nike 'Just Do It' mantra with Arjun Appadurai's observation that in globalization, the imagination is a social fact (**Appadurai**: all bold-face references are to pieces in this Reader). The Serbian government was, of course, no friend to freedom of expression and closed down the independent radio station B-92, whose reports were not wholly favorable to the regime. B-92 quickly found a new home on the Dutch website Nettime. It continued to 'broadcast' but only to those with internet access. It is not too much to say that visibility – the intersection of power with visual representation – was literally being fought over here. All available media from the pilot's line of vision to satellite-directed machine vision, photography, digitally altered images and the global mass media were arenas of contestation. Visual culture is a tactic for those who do not control such dominant means of visual production to negotiate the hypervisuality of everyday life in a digitized global culture.

On September 11, 2001, the world became aware of just how dramatic the consequences of the militarization of the global imagination could be when hijacked airliners were crashed into the World Trade Center. This moment enacted in terrible reality the destruction of a national symbol that had been imagined first in cinema and then by the renegade Serbian state. A full history of the visual dimensions of the terrorist act would locate it as the most extreme possible outcome of the strategic manipulation of the image that began with the British government's media strategy during the 1982 Falklands war. It would then look at the well-orchestrated representation of the Gulf war of 1991, which the Kosovo war seemed to confirm as the new standard. Jonathan L. Beller describes 'how in tele-visual

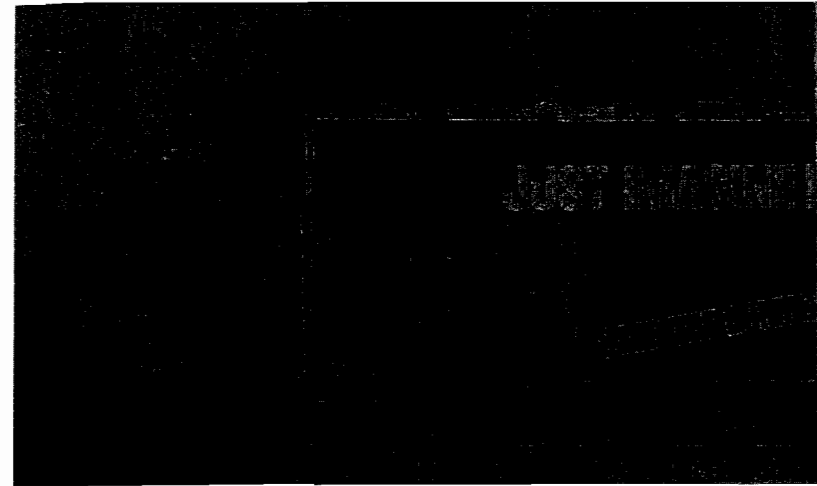


Figure 1.1 Serbian government poster, after NATO bombing, April 22, 1999 (April 2000 © Agence France Presse)

warfare the spectacular intensity of destruction as well as the illusion of its collective sanction creates certain subjective effects – a sense of agency and power which compensates for the generalized lack of these in daily life' (Beller 1998: 55–56). War is, then, the subject of these images but it is also a means of creating subjects, visual subjects. In the Gulf war strategy, the agency belonged to the 'West,' seen from the point of view of the weapons themselves. Pictures were transmitted showing their 'view' of their targets right up until the moment of impact. This stunning representation of war seemed to suggest a new surgical precision of warfare, the endpoint of Walter Benjamin's famous comparison of the surgeon and the camera operator. On September 11, the West discovered what it is like to be on the receiving end of tele-visual war. As millions watched the destruction of the World Trade Center live on television, it must be acknowledged that the sense of empowerment Beller describes was felt by some viewers, most notoriously in Palestine, where there were public celebrations. This is not to argue that the United States 'deserved' the attack or that it was in any way justified but to call attention to the way in which the Western notion of carefully controlled tele-visual war was appropriated and enlarged by those who engineered the attacks. The globalization of culture turns out to be less predictable and far more dangerous than had been supposed.

Visual events

In the first edition of this Reader, I argued that visual culture is concerned with visual events in which the user seeks information, meaning or pleasure in an interface with visual technology. This formula bears re-examination, given the rapid pace

of change. I continue to think that visual culture – rather than visual studies or other such formulations – is the right phrase for the discursive formation that this Reader seeks to represent. By retaining the term culture in the foreground, critics and practitioners alike are reminded of the political stakes inherent in what we do. For otherwise it can and has been argued that there is no particular need for visual culture as an academic subfield. Visual culture has come into a certain prominence now because many artists, critics and scholars have felt that the new urgency of the visual cannot be fully considered in the established visual disciplines. One way of connecting these different disciplinary dilemmas – whether in art history, film studies or cultural studies – is to emphasize the continually dynamic force of feminism (taken in the broad sense to incorporate gender and sexuality studies) to challenge disciplinarity of all kinds.

From these beginnings, visual culture is now an increasingly important meeting place for critics, historians and practitioners in all visual media who are impatient with the tired nostrums of their 'home' discipline or medium. This convergence is above all enabled and mandated by digital technology (Cartwright). The emergence of multi-media has created an apparent state of emergency in North American universities at the level of criticism, pedagogy and institutional practice. Responses include the creation of new centers and programs; the organizing of conferences and symposia; the installation of as-yet-unprofitable on-line courses; and the publication of a seemingly endless stream of papers. Behind all this activity lurks the fear of an emergent contradiction: digital culture promotes a form of empowered amateurism – make your own movie, cut your own CD, publish your own website – that cuts across professionalization and specialization, the twin justifications of the liberal arts university. Visual culture is not a traditional discipline, then, because before very long there may not be anything like the current array of disciplines. Rather it is one among a number of critically engaged means to work out what doing post-disciplinary practice might be like and, further, to try and ensure that it is not simply a form of pre-job training. That might mean, for example, trying to find ways to think about what digital culture does and why, rather than simply teaching software, either as practice or as what Lev Manovich calls 'software studies.'

The constituent element of visual culture's practice is the visual event. The event is the effect of a network in which subjects operate and which in turn conditions their freedom of action. What took place in the battle of logos during the NATO attack was a small example, and September 11 was the apogee of all such events. But as Michel Foucault argued in the 1970s, 'the problem is at once to distinguish among events, to differentiate the networks and levels to which they belong, and to reconstitute the lines along which they are connected and engender one another' (Foucault 2000: 116). He suggested that the study of events 'works by constructing around the singular event analyzed as process a "polygon" or, rather, "polyhedron" of intelligibility, the number of whose faces is not given in advance and never properly be taken as finite' (227). That is to say, in what Manuel Castells has called 'the network society' in which we live, events are not always fully knowable. As the popular version of chaos theory has it, the butterfly flaps its wings and that movement of air later culminates in a hurricane, but such chains of events cannot always be tracked. In a more everyday context, cause and effect continue to work much as they ever did. But today's global society is literally networked in

ways that are far clearer to the 400 million people worldwide who now have internet access – according to journalistic estimates in June 2001 – than they were to all but the most astute thinkers of the 1970s, with consequences that were not foreseeable at that time.

Let's think about how the televising of the Serbian war might be networked in the dynamically multifaceted way suggested by Foucault. At a theoretical level, we have learnt from the poststructuralist generation that, far from being an exception to normality, war is rather the clearest expression of that normality, whether in Foucault's analysis of power, Stuart Hall's post-Gramscian call for a cultural war of position, or Michel de Certeau's advocacy of guerilla-style 'tactics' as a means of engaging with everyday life. Clearly, as Paul Virilio once observed, 'there is no war without representation' (Virilio 1989: 6). But it is no longer simply the case that war is cinema, as Virilio asserted, if by cinema we refer to the classic Hollywood narrative film. The ability of CNN and other news stations to bring war to the living room, often on the same monitor used to play 'first person shooter' video games, or to watch videotape or DVD versions of films, is closely linked to the public sanction of war and its empowering, if necessarily transitory, sense of a collective and individual agency. The Serbian disruption of that viewing had to be removed from the audience's view to sustain the comforting illusion that 'we' are in charge and that no risk to any of 'us' (read American) is involved. War is also a gendered activity, rendering the subject masculine and its object feminine. When war was cinema and cinema war, it followed that the gaze in that cinema was male. The representation of war has recently been a central issue for both military strategy and film in different but related ways. Since the Vietnam war, the US military have dramatically changed their representations of their actions, following their belief that the war was lost in US public opinion rather than on the battlefield, despite the enormous effort to annihilate the Viet Cong. Converging with this military need to represent war differently, Hollywood cinema came to feel itself under threat from digital media, as the entire apparatus associated with celluloid film has become outdated. The Dogma 95 movement in Europe that refuses to use any form of special effect has been one early response to this crisis, which has yet to be played out in global cinema.

Stephen Spielberg's 1998 epic *Saving Private Ryan* addressed both the military and the cinematic need for a renewed mode of representation. The film was endlessly hyped for its realism, especially in representing the sounds of war. While the rediscovery of the epic format appeared to reinvigorate the film tradition, at the level of the plot, realism was hard to find in *Saving Private Ryan*. The dramatic opening segment showed Omaha Beach being captured in twenty minutes, an operation that actually took hours to complete and cost over a thousand American lives in the opening minutes of the landing alone. 'Realism,' then, was not an accurate depiction of the landing but the representation of the death of American soldiers with speaking roles. These deaths of the subsequently hyped 'greatest generation' stand in for the now unimaginable death of a contemporary American soldier-subject. Recent film scholarship has opened up new ways of thinking about the Second World War and its relationship to cinema. During the war, cinema audiences did not behave like the silent and immobile spectators of classic film theory. William Friedman Fagelson has excavated fascinating accounts of cinema audience behavior in wartime.

Films were subject to a 'call-and-response' audience that *Time* magazine noted: 'howled, hissed, and booed at pictures, demanded Westerns, carved their initials on seats, sometimes even fired buckshot at the screen' (Fagelson 2001: 94). A particularly demanding audience were the troops themselves, who saw films on ships and in rest areas behind the front lines, as well as at home. Soldiers critiqued the technical aspects of the representation of war and indulged in what one reporter called 'a torrent of verbal reaction that accompanies every foot of the film and affords a spectacle far exceeding any film drama in human interest and undistilled enjoyment' (Fagelson 2001: 99). Adding to this study of reception, John Bodnar (2001) argues that film represented Second World War as a 'people's war,' in the phrase of the time. The overt content of the films, although often mocked by the troops studied by Fagelson, created a context in which war goals included expanding democracy and prosperity at home. On the other hand, *Saving Private Ryan* seeks 'to preserve the memory of patriotic sacrifice more than it desires to explore the causes of the trauma and violence' (Bodnar 2001: 817), while at the same time forgetting 'a far-reaching contest over how to recall and forget the war' (815) from the late 1940s on. In this emergent view, the classic post-war cinema that generated so much of current theories of the gaze and spectatorship was also a displacement of a certain film practice that was participatory and progressive. After the events of September 11, it might have to be hazarded that it is now terrorism that is cinema. The visual drama of the events in New York played out as if cinematically directed. The largest possible target was hit with the most explosive force possible to produce the maximum effect on the viewer. At a symbolic level, the disaster was the result of the impact of the two dominant symbols of modernity's triumph over the limitations of body and space – the airplane and the skyscraper. The scenario made sense to the viewer precisely because we had all seen it before. Hollywood had turned to the terrorist as a substitute for the previously all-pervasive communist as its preferred villain from the collapse of the Soviet system in 1991 right up until the attacks. Many of the eyewitness accounts used the metaphor of cinema to try and verbalize the enormity of what had happened. Unpacking this metaphor is going to be an important task that will not be possible until the events in Afghanistan and elsewhere are completed.

This complicated, global proliferation of gazes and technologies makes it necessary to revise my earlier formulation that visual culture necessarily privileges the viewpoint of the consumer in a given visual event. This assertion was motivated by a political sense, learned from film theory, social art history and British cultural studies that this viewpoint had historically been obscured for reasons of race, class and gender. The difficulty presented by this approach was how to identify 'the' visual consumer. If one took the approach of Jonathan Crary, one could work with the ideal observer predicated by Western observational science (Crary 1991). This attention to the visual tracks changes in the understanding and interpretation of the processes of sight and seeks to map them onto visual representation. However, in a given moment of representation, all those historical factors necessarily elided by the formation of an idealized observer must come into play. Cultural studies work has been so aware of these problems that it has tended to work with a given group of observers in a method derived from anthropology known as participant observation. That is to say, the researcher does not pretend to the impossible position

of the ideal observer but involves her/himself into the group and uses that involvement as the basis for interpretation through interviews and other forms of joint participation. A very important variant of this approach has been the representation of a previously marginalized point of view by an artist or writer who claims membership in that subaltern group. Remarkably even these oppositional viewpoints have become to some extent absorbed into the global network. The Serbian billboard discussed above attempted to mobilize liberal and left-wing opinion in Europe for its own ends, even though the Milosevic regime repressed precisely these points of view in Yugoslavia. More generally, marketing in the highly competitive environment of late capital seeks out any specific group it can and makes use of formerly resistant techniques to sell products. So Volkswagen produced a series of television ads for cars in the US that were widely understood to feature gay men, creating a meta-discussion about the ad and Volkswagen that benefited the manufacturer enormously. Meanwhile all kinds of products and services are being promoted 'below the line' – that is to say, using hand-distributed flyers or postcards, or even word of mouth – techniques that were once reserved for underground nightclubs aimed at specific subcultures, or political organizations. To be consumer-oriented is now the mantra of global business. Without losing sight of the individual viewer, visual culture must go back and forth across the interface that is now much more multifaceted than the object-screen-viewer triptych.

At the same time, it is becoming clear that what Kobena Mercer has called the 'mantra' of race, gender and class as the three lenses with which to study culture is also in need of revision. This is not to say that any of the issues raised by these analyses have disappeared or are no longer of importance but that the dominant culture has found ways to negotiate them. To put it another way, the deployment of race, gender and class no longer surprises people, whether they are supportive or hostile. I shall take two examples from the semiotics of advertising – so formative for visual culture from Barthes's *Mythologies* to Berger's *Ways of Seeing* and Williamson's *Decoding Advertisements* – local to where I am writing in Australia. In these ads, racism and sexism can now be evoked directly or indirectly in ways that are not secret and therefore resistant to decoding in the classic cultural studies fashion. A 2001 ad for drinking milk features two building workers. One tells the other that he has gone soft when he fails to leer at a passing woman, visually represented by the soft man being out of focus. He drinks milk, comes into focus, and then performs an astonishing range of sexist catcalls, whistles and facial contortions to another woman. In a discussion in the *Sydney Morning Herald* of this and similar advertising, Julia Baird concluded that it was so over the top that a veneer of irony protected the ad from a feminist critique (Baird 2001). The 2001 national election campaign in Australia turned on the question of asylum seekers that the coalition government of John Howard successfully portrayed as 'illegals' threatening the Australian way of life. In a widely seen full-page newspaper advertisement, a picture of Howard taken from below, standing in front of two Australian flags, with his jaw jutting was completed with the quotation 'We decide who comes to this country and under what circumstances.' The photograph was more than faintly ridiculous, reminiscent of Charlie Chaplin in *The Great Dictator*. But the message of the underlined 'we' was clear to all: we, the white people. In an effective strategy of disavowal, Howard nonetheless repeatedly denied that the message was racist and

mobilized a degree of working-class resentment against intellectual elites for suggesting that it was. Both these examples suggest that questions of class, gender, sexuality and ethnicity are as important as ever as means of creating and contesting identity. At the same time by their careful strategy of at once invoking the forbidden and disavowing it, they anticipate and in a certain sense welcome their critique. Ambivalence and ambiguity, classic poststructuralist figures, are here invoked by a very conservative administration and an advertisement for milk. In both cases, if there was no frisson of conservative transgression of what have become mainstream norms, the message would not have been so effective. Ironically, then, the oppositional methods of cultural analysis and of visual representation that in many ways led to the emergence of visual culture are now its object of criticism.

Visual subjects

The 'media-environment' for war and its cognates in everyday life is the operating arena for a new visual subjectivity. This subjectivity is what is ultimately at stake for visual culture. By the visual subject, I mean a person who is both constituted as an agent of sight (regardless of his or her biological capacity to see) and as the effect of a series of categories of visual subjectivity. During the modern period a two-fold visual subject was predicated by the disciplinary society. That subject added to Descartes's early modern definition of self – 'I think therefore I am' (Descartes) – a new mantra of visual subjectivity: 'I am seen and I see that I am seen.' This sense of being the subject of surveillance provoked wide-ranging forms of resistance that were nonetheless, as Michel Foucault has argued, predicted by the operations of power. In 1786 the British philosopher Jeremy Bentham invented a perfect prison that he called the panopticon. The panopticon was an inspection house for the reformation of morals, whether of prisoners, workers or prostitutes by means of constant surveillance that the inmates could not perceive, a system summed up by Michel Foucault in the aphorism 'visibility is a trap.' In Foucault's view, the panopticon was a model for the disciplinary society at large but the practices of visibility were not part of his inquiry. Rather, he simply assumed with Bentham that a straight sight line equated to visibility. For visual culture, visibility is not so simple. Its object of study is precisely the entities that come into being at the points of intersection of visibility with social power.

To take two examples: the blind became an object of state concern at the beginning of the panoptic era, leading to the establishment of state institutions for the blind and Louis Braille's invention of a tactile language in 1826 from within the Paris Institute for the Blind. Panopticism created the blind as what has now become a 'natural' target of social and state concern precisely because seeing and being seen was the concern of the disciplinary nation-state. If in this instance panopticism was in a certain sense empowering, it was in many more controlling or repressive. One of the most important examples is 'race,' the visual network in which one person is designated as different from another by reason of physical or inherited characteristics. By the beginning of the twentieth century W.E.B. DuBois discerned what he famously called 'the color line,' an arbitrary division of people into racial types that took on the status of social fact (DuBois). So powerful was this means of seeing

that Ralph Ellison famously announced to a segregated United States in 1952 that the African American was an 'invisible man.' The color line had become impermeable. Panopticism, then, was a willed form of seeing in which the refusal to see certain objects or people was as constitutive of its success as the perception of self or others. This doubled sensation of seeing and being seen was reworked in a psychoanalytic context by Jacques Lacan. Lacan internalized the process of surveillance under the command of a sense of shame in his famous formula of the gaze as being a process in which 'I see myself seeing myself' (Lacan). In so doing, as his reference to Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* made clear, Lacan envisaged the subject monitoring itself for transgression. In the passage Lacan cites, Sartre describes vision as being like the voyeuristic pleasure of looking through a keyhole that is then disrupted by the feeling of being looked at by someone else, causing a sense of shame. This shame disciplines the gaze. Lacan turned this surveillance into self-surveillance, making each visual subject the locus of a panoptic drama of identity.

In advanced capitalist societies across the planet, people are now teaching themselves to be media. They attach digital camcorders to their eyes at any event of public or private importance and make endless overlapping records of their memories, which, like those of *Blade Runner's* replicants, are given out in advance. As the success of *Shrek* brought a new wave of hyperreal digital animated features to North American multiplexes in the summer of 2001, it seemed that audiences were learning to see like computers. That is to say, following Donna Haraway's famous assertion that we are all now cyborgs, we need to know how the computer sees, to learn how to recognize its gaze and then to imitate it. In *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* (2001), the heroes battle the aliens for the possession of spirits, a formula echoed by *Ghosts of Mars* (2001). In short, can humans still be media? As this is still 'Hollywood,' the answer was never in doubt and audiences stayed away in droves. A younger generation takes the digital gaze for granted. On the Cartoon Channel, the hugely popular digitally animated figures of the Power Puff Girls deal up the punishment of bad guys once reserved for male superheroes alone. The Power Puff Girls lack the ripped muscles of earlier Avengers but are drawn in the style of Japanese *anime* with vast eyes perched on insignificant bodies. These digital eyes emit blasts of unspecified energy at their enemies, much like the mutants Cyclops and Storm in the 2000 hit film *The X-Men*, based on a long-standing Marvel Comics series. The Power Puff Girls are pixilated panopticism, in which the body is a vehicle for visual surveillance unhindered by a self or an identity.

Outside the world of superheroes and aliens, things are less certain (Jones). The boundaries of the visual subject are under erasure from within and without. Today it is possible to feel constantly under surveillance and that no one is watching at all as we move from the gaze of one camera to the next. For the crisis of the visual subject has been brought into sharp relief under the symbiotic influences of globalization and digital culture. In the short life of the Information Age, this is perhaps the most interesting moment in which to attempt digital criticism. During the internet boom years, comment seemed almost beside the point as vast sums were raised for ideas that barely filled a cocktail napkin. In 1999, Amazon.com was worth more money than General Motors, according to the stock market, despite never having earned a penny. During this period Allucquère Roseanne Stone argued that there were only two responses to the question 'what has been changed

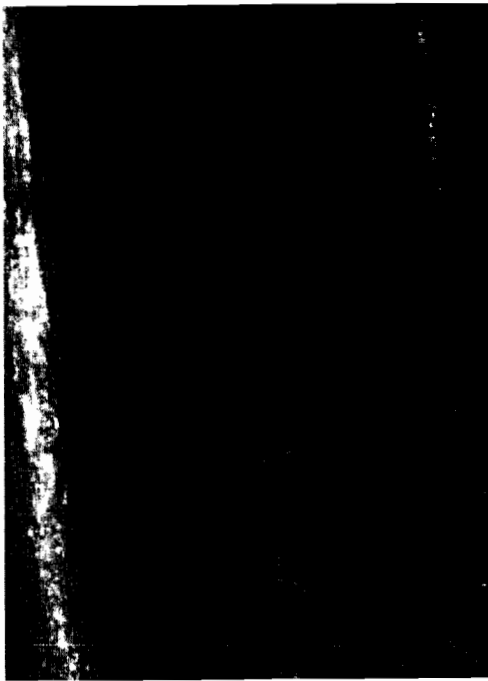


Figure 1.2 Digital ghost
(Courtesy of the International Ghost Hunters Society www.ighs.com)

by digital culture?’ – everything or nothing. On the ‘everything’ side were Nicholas Negroponte, the MIT Media Lab, *Wired* magazine, endless websites and media commentators, all claiming that life was set to change beyond recognition but offering only such dreary carrots as smart refrigerators or customized digital newspapers. This small beer was easily decried by the ‘nothing’ crowd of academics and commentators, who were also able to point to a variety of technologies that anticipated some of the features of today’s ‘new’ technology.

As the dust settles from the crash, it may now be possible to resolve some of these disputes. For example, Stone asserted that everyone is transgendered on-line, an assessment hotly disputed by those who pointed to very traditional sexual uses of the net. Yet from the failure of outraged conservatives to drive President Clinton from office, to the success of the film *Boys Don’t Cry* (Halberstam) and the relaxed attitude of many younger people to experiments with sexual and gender identity, a change does seem to have taken place. On the other hand, as several essays in this Reader indicate (Chun, Nakamura, Parks), ‘race’ continues to be strongly marked in digital culture. Rather than asking whether digital culture has changed everything or not, we can now ask more specifically why it seems to have enabled or been a part of a shift in attitudes to gender and sexuality, but has not resulted in similar change with regard to ethnicity and ‘race.’ It seems that the endless repetition of visual selves has led to a greater degree of indifference as to sexual and

gender identity, while sustaining ‘race’ in difference. The ebb and flow of visual differentiation across the boundaries of identity is disorienting (a term that in itself seems to suggest an ethnic differentiation) and dizzying, a loss of difference that can end in the loss of the self. Paradoxical as it may seem, there is even a certain nostalgia for the sensation of surveillance, the odd pleasures of being watched.

Digiteyes

So the question becomes: what are the places and means by which identification and its correlatives such as disidentification, can find a purchase in the networked global culture of the present? The question of digital identity finds a metonym in the intensely popular webcam format (Campanella). In 1991 a Cambridge University laboratory put a real-time photographic image of its coffee maker on-line so that its staff could know whether coffee was available. Much to their surprise, thousands of other web surfers came to look. In the subsequent decade, webcams – as they have come to be known – have become one of the ‘killer apps’ of the net, offering a seeming infinity of views. Webcams come in two distinct types. First, as a gaze out on a particular view or geographic location, ranging from skyline views, to wilderness sites and traffic stops. These can be seen, as Bolter and Grusin have argued, as a remediation of television (Bolter and Grusin 1999: 208). There is nonetheless a far more personal dimension to such telemediation of exterior reality than is offered by television. In Don DeLillo’s novel *The Body Artist* (2001), for example, a performance artist finds looking at a quiet stretch of road in Finland an effective balm for the pain of grieving. The choice of location to be viewed seems to be the viewer’s not the network’s for, although it is not possible to direct an exterior camera oneself, there are so many choices that no one feels constrained.

The second, more popular variety of webcam turns the gaze inwards on itself. Where Nicephore Niépce pointed his prototype camera out of his bedroom window in 1823 to create what is often celebrated as the first photograph (Bachen), webcam users make the bedroom interior the scene of the action. On popular sites like Jennicam or Anacam, the viewer sees the ostensibly private space of the photographer. The webcam depicts the interior of the closet, the most private domestic space, while *camera* is itself the Latin word for a room. Queer culture has, of course, theorized the closet as a space in which the queer subject hides his or her identity from the disciplinary gaze. Coming out is, then, both a risk and a necessary affirmation of the self. To stay in the closet is to destroy the self with deception and guilt. Webcam users do not come out of the closet but make their closet visible to anyone with internet access. For a fee, viewers are guaranteed constant access, the place of the panoptic jailer for \$19.95 a month. Here the closet is not something to come out of but rather the closet-camera serves as a device to validate the desire and hence the very existence of the Western visual subject itself. In this evacuated version of visual subjectivity, the subject simply says: ‘I want to be seen,’ using the closeted camera to reveal and conceal at once. It is not surprising that young, white women have most quickly adopted the webcam format both because of the hyper-visibility of the female body in consumer culture and because women since Lady Hawarden have queered photography by not looking out of its closet (Mavor).

For Jennifer Ringley of Jennicam, 'I am doing Jennicam not because I want other people to watch but because I don't care if people watch.' What matters, then, is the interiorized sensation of being monitored by a digital other that is enabled by the self. Ana, the host of Anacam, offers her artwork – made with Paint Shop Pro – in her gallery that declares: 'I'll be your mother, mirroring back 2 U.' This apparent parody of Barbara Kruger's already parodic postmodern theorizing of gender and desire creates a digital mirror stage. For this self-surveillance and self-display leads to a digitizing of desire. Natacha Merrit, author of the *Digital Diaries* (2000), a collection of images of staged sexual encounters in hotel rooms, claims that 'my photo needs and my sexual needs are one and the same' (Merrit 2000). Merrit uses only digital cameras in her practice, as if analog film is somehow inappropriate to this exchange of gazes. Digital desire dissolves the self – the I/eye so often evoked in theoretical discourse – at the heart of the subject and replaces it with an endlessly manipulable digital screen. A similar erasure was predicted by Foucault in the famous conclusion to his 1967 *Order of Things*, where he suggested that the human was about to be erased like a face in the sand. Sand, like the digital chip, is made of silicon. It is the unnerving task of the present to find out what comes next.

'I am not here and never have been'

These dramas were remarkably performed in June 2000, when the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Upstairs, London, staged Sarah Kane's piece *4.48 Psychosis*. *4.48* was a visualized text of extraordinary power, exploring whether it is possible for the self to see itself when mind and body are not just separated but unrelated. The piece takes its title from the notion that at 4.48 in the morning the body is at its lowest ebb, the most likely time for a person to kill themselves. In a long meditation on the possibility of self-killing that is written in different voices but not as separately named characters, Kane mixes Artaud and Plato, a mix that can only be called performed deconstruction. Three actors perform on a stage whose emptiness was broken only by a table. The *mise-en-scène*, created by director James McDonald and designer Jeremy Herbert, placed a mirror the length of the stage at a forty-five degree angle facing the audience. The mirror made it possible for the actors to perform lying down and still be seen by the audience but at the same time it converted the entire performance space into a camera, mirroring the reflex lens. Within this camera space, a video was played at frequent intervals, showing the view from a London window, as traffic and pedestrians passed by. It was in effect a webcam. The webcam was projected onto the table, forming a screen that was visible in the mirror. The speech of the actors was broken at intervals by the white noise of a pixilated screen without a picture, like a television set that has lost reception. In short, *4.48 Psychosis* played out in the contested space of the contemporary visual subject represented as a camera, a dark room in which digital, performative and photographic renditions of exteriority were explored, compared and analyzed. In one monologue a character describes:



Figure 1.3 Sarah Kane
(Courtesy of www.lainfisher.com)

abstraction to the point of . . .
dislike
dislocate
disembody
deconstruct.

(Kane 2000: 20)

The visual subject is no longer at home.

For in Kane's view, Cartesian reason was a barrier to understanding existence: 'And I am deadlocked by that smooth psychiatric voice of reason which tells me there is an objective reality in which my body and mind are one. But I am not here and never have been' (6). Kane simply asserts that in the hypervisual digital world, the single person split into two (mind/body) whose dissolution was prevented by the watchful gaze of the Christian Trinity no longer exists. Or in a Lacanian view, it is as if there was no mirror stage for Kane to identify herself as an image, only the indifferent reflection of the all-encompassing mirror of the mass media. The stage-long mirror is a visualization of both losses of identity. Now body and soul do not form a unit or even a schizophrenic network: they simply do not belong together: 'Do you think it's possible for a person to be born in the wrong body?' (*Silence*) 'Do you think it's possible for a person to be born in the wrong era?' (13). Kane explores how metaphysical reason, personal love, and pharmacological psychiatry all attempt to close the gap in which the mind is a camera admitting light all too infrequently and with uncertain results (3):

a consolidated consciousness resides in a darkened banqueting
hall near the ceiling of a mind whose floor shifts as ten
thousand cockroaches when a shaft of light enters as all
thoughts unite in an instant of accord body no longer expellent
as the cockroaches comprise a truth which no one ever utters.

The camera of the mind is deserted now, inhabited only by parasitic insects. Confronted by the indifferent surveillance of late capitalist society and an absent god, the subject disintegrates. At 4.48 'sanity visits/for one hour and twelve minutes' and as the performing voices suicide themselves, 'it is done.' The piece ends with a final aphorism:

It is myself I have never met whose face is pasted on the
underside of my mind.

There is a long pause and then an actor says: 'Please open the curtains.' The three performers silently move to the sides of the space and pull back black-painted shutters, opening the camera to the quiet West London light. There is no stage direction to indicate this anti-Platonic gesture which may read on the page as a banal *coup de théâtre* but the audience of which I was a part experienced it as shock. In 1839 Hippolyte Bayard performed a mimicry of mimesis when he photographed his *Self-portrait as a Drowned Man*, a knowing play on photography and death. On February 20, 1999 at the age of twenty-eight Sarah Kane had killed herself in a small room adjoining her hospital bedroom, her camera, her closet. The networked subject is everywhere on screen but no one is watching, least of all herself.

The transverse glance

Some critics might retort that that crisis affecting Kane is that of the white visual subject interpellated by its male gaze that has dominated Western thought since Descartes. At the same time, the non-white, queer, or otherwise subaltern subject is familiar with the indifference of disciplinary society. Global capital simply treats the West with the same indifference that it once reserved for its others. Why should the local issues of a British artist concern a globally oriented academy? Globalization cannot mean that Western scholars now have the entire globe as their domain as a form of intellectual empire. As Peter Hitchcock has argued, it is the task of African cinema 'to represent Africans to Africans' (Hitchcock 2000: 271); or by extension any of the world's variously orientalized and subaltern peoples should represent themselves to themselves. What matters is being constantly aware of the global dimensions to the work that one is doing (Appadurai). In visual culture, this means looking with a transverse glance from multiple viewpoints across and against the imperial perspective. That implies, for example, calling attention to the global aspirations of panopticism itself. The panopticon was created when Bentham copied a system his brother had used in Russia, in order to persuade the British government to replace its system of deportation to the new colony of Australia with a system of moral discipline derived from the Jesuit colonies in Paraguay (**Foucault**). That is to say, panoptic modernity was always a global system that affected different parts of the world unevenly.

This current moment of globalization is especially enacted on, through and by the female body. Global capital has changed not just relations of consumption but relations of production, as Gayatri Spivak has argued: 'The subaltern woman is now to a rather large extent the support of production,' through piece work, sweat shop labor

and reproductive labor in low-wage economies. This condition is acknowledged in the West by displacement. That is to say, as in the examples above from Jennicam to Sarah Kane, globalization within the West is culturally figured as feminine, which I take to be a contested cultural category rather than a biological given. At the same time, this gendered representation of contemporary culture, while of Western origin, has global effects. The contradiction of this moment can be expressed in many ways but here's one that I have used since 2000 that has become very acute since September 11. The Iranian video artist Shirin Neshat, working in exile in New York, is rightly becoming a global star for her explorations of the gendered divide in Islamic culture. Neshat's video work is lushly cinematic, creating ten-minute epics with casts of hundreds. Black veiled women hired on location pirouette at the edge of the sea in a disidentification with Orientalism that is nonetheless starkly beautiful. At the same time, after their takeover of power, the Taliban in Afghanistan held public destructions of artworks, television sets and videotapes, while forcibly constraining women to the home and making them literally invisible in public behind the veil. The Taliban's anti-modernity relied on the global media to disseminate their actions and discipline their own subjects, even as it disavows visual culture. For it was an open secret, reported in the Western media, that many Afghans continued to watch television and videos and these were of course the people least convinced by the Taliban. The paradox here is that the apparently head-on collision of contemporary ideologies between the feminist artist Neshat and the Taliban dictatorship of clerics both rely on nineteenth-century modes of visibility, Orientalism on the one side, panopticism on the other centered on the figure of the veiled woman, so familiar from imperial culture (**Allouah**). In this light, the events of September 11 were literally reactionary, an attempt to eliminate transculture and recreate a starkly divided world of good and evil that has until the time of writing been disturbingly successful.

For all these haunting reminders of the past, I would still argue – now more than ever – that something new is being forged out of these multiple collisions of past with present and future. I am deliberately using what one might call a strategic optimism here to suggest that this moment that has been called 'post' so often is in fact a moment before. This is to say that the present is what Helen Grace has called a 'pre-history' to an emergent configuration that may be more than the constant revolutions of global capitalism (Grace 2000). It is a prehistory under the sign of what Mieke Bal has called the 'preposterous,' a curious elision of the post and the pre that can seem absurd (Bal 1999). It is what one might call preformative – something is beginning to be formed that is intensely performative. Visual culture can be seen as a ghost, returning from another moment of prehistory, the late 1950s and early 1960s. At that time, capitalism seemed every bit as hegemonic as it does today, only for a striking wave of change to break in the late 1960s and 1970s. It was heralded by writers like Daniel J. Boorstin and Marshall McLuhan calling attention to the increasingly visualized nature of contemporary society. It was in fact McLuhan who first used the term visual culture, in the sense in which it is used here, in his classic *Understanding Media* (1964).

If visual culture is a ghost, how does it see?¹ Unlike the disciplinary subject that sees itself seeing itself, its ghost sees that it is seen and thereby becomes visible to itself and others in the constantly weaving spiral of transculture, a transforming encounter that leaves nothing the same as it was before. Rather than retreat to the

digital closet of isolated being, these multiple viewpoints can help triangulate the viewer in relation to herself, the watchers and the watched. The scholarship of modern visuality has often wanted to constrain the unpredictable effects of the networked visual event into clear, geometric parameters, whether derived from art historical formalism, panoptic surveillance or Lacan's gaze theory. It is time, perhaps past time or just before time, to look with 'double vision' (Thomas and Losche 1999), 'parallax vision' (Mayne 1993) or 'multiple viewpoints' (Mirzoeff). This is the transient, transnational, transgendered way of seeing that visual culture seeks to define, describe and deconstruct with the transverse look or glance – not a gaze, there have been enough gazes already. There are several key components of the transverse glance. In the view of Fernando Ortiz, transculture is the product of an encounter between an existing culture or subculture and a newly arrived migrant culture that violently transforms them both and in the process creates a neo-culture that is itself immediately subject to transculturation (Ortiz 1995). This transculturation is in turn subject to difference and deferral. The difference is what James Clifford has called the Squanto effect, named for the Pequot Indian who met the Pilgrim Fathers just after his return from Britain, where he had learned English (Clifford 1988). In other words, cultures were never isolated islands, developing by themselves. The deferral comes from what Emmanuel Levinas called the ethical obligation to the Other that results from the 'face-to-face' encounter at the heart of transculture (Levinas 1997). I cannot privilege my own culture in this encounter but must defer and accept my responsibility to the Other. Ortiz wrote on and about the island of Cuba. Transculture and its accompanying transyness seem closer to Edouard Glissant's formulation of the archipelago, a series of connected islands. The virtue of the archipelago is that a series of very different entities can be connected. The transverse glance is not a gaze because it resists the imperial domain of gendered sexuality, using what Judith Halberstam calls in this volume 'the trans gaze.' If this seems a little utopian, let it also be said that this transverse practice is at all times at risk of being undercut by transnational capital.

For as many of the essays in this volume suggest, visual culture will best contribute to the working out of a new visual subjectivity by seeking to be active in ways that do not create additional value for transnational capital. Visual culture needs to retain its links to cultural studies in looking to find ways to interact with visual practice and cultural policy in the wide-ranging areas of its interest. Some might do this like Irit Rogoff by working with visual artists, others like Lisa Parks by visual activism, still others by transnational pedagogy. For Coco Fusco, performance is a medium that transforms viewer and performer, while Kobena Mercer and myself have argued for the diasporic viewpoint. And so on, for each contributor to this volume, another path. The tools for this work are readily to hand (at least for those in the West) in the form of brand-new but obsolescent visual and digital technologies such as non-broadcast quality video, CD-ROMs, analog photography and all computers not running Windows XP or OS X. 2. These products without function, in some cases literally without exchange value – ever tried to sell a four-year-old computer? – can be diverted to other uses beyond those of the global market. As more links are created in this network by the engagements of individuals or groups, it may be possible to look transversely across the gaze, across the color line, across surveillance and to see otherwise.

Introductions/Provocations/Conversations

This edition of the *Visual Culture Reader* offers a diverse group of introductory materials. The field of visual culture is now sufficiently well established and dynamic to sustain a plurality of views without fracturing into warring camps. Rather than the future of visual culture being in question, there is a space to debate what that future might be among the wide-ranging group of people who take an interest in it. The two Introductions and Provocations from the first (1998) *Visual Culture Reader* by Ella Shohat and Robert Stam and by Irit Rogoff have been widely cited in discussions of the field and are now indispensable to its theorization. Aside from the debate with *October* magazine, what has been so important about these essays has been their suggestion of complementary avenues for the development of the field. Rogoff's syllogism that 'if feminist deconstructive writing has long held the place of writing as the endless displacement of meaning, then visual culture provides the visual articulation of the continuous displacement of meaning in the field of vision and the visible,' is amply borne out in this volume and elsewhere. By the same token, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam called in 1998 for a reconceptualization of visual culture moving away from the Euro-american progression of realism/modernism/postmodernism to a polycentric globalized field of study. There is a good deal of agreement on these goals now, making it possible to at least envisage achieving their goal of a 'mutual and reciprocal relativization,' offering the chance of 'coming not only to "see" other groups, but also, through a salutary estrangement, to see how [each] is itself seen.'

In his remarkable essay 'Kino-I, Kino-World: notes on the cinematic mode of production,' written for this Reader, Jonathan L. Beller asks us to reconsider some of our most fundamental presuppositions about the place of the visual in culture. Rather than seeing visual culture as an offspring of late capitalism, Beller argues for a theory of the 'cinematic mode of production' in which 'looking is posited by capital as labor.' Beller extends Marx's classic theory of value in which profit is created by the extraction of a surplus value of work performed by the laborer over and above what is required to earn his/her wages and benefits. Now work is performed visually via the seeking of human attention – think of all those banner ads wanting you to 'click here' that literally earn someone two cents when you do, or the competition for television ratings that directly generate advertising revenues. In this view, the cinema does not reflect the social, it is the social, providing that we understand 'cinema' to mean the image-making apparatus in general. However, Beller does not assert that grasping his attention theory of value provides an answer to the riddle of globalization but simply that it has 'a germinal contribution to make to counter-hegemonic struggle.' Beller controversially argues that psychoanalysis, for so long the dominant theoretical model in cinema studies, is itself merely a symptom of the cinematic mode of production: "Film" can be understood as the social relation which separates the visual component of human subjective activity from the body in its immediate environment, while "cinema" is the systemic organization of this productive separation.' In this sense, dream-work is in fact real work. By the same token, deconstruction is framed as a historical moment signifying a technological transformation in political economy (an argument in fact close to Derrida's own remarks in his 1994 treatise on globalization *Specters of Marx*).

In this essay, there is much excitement, much that needs building on and no doubt much to disagree with. But it is exhilarating to see the long stagnant pools of critical theory churned up so vigorously and with an energy that is both angry and focused.

These pieces are joined by a meditation on the status of visual culture by W.J.T. Mitchell, entitled 'Showing seeing: a critique of visual culture.' Mitchell's book *Picture Theory* (1994) is widely held to be the first major publication in the field. Here he flows widely across theoretical, institutional and pedagogical questions in a piece that is bound to provoke wide-ranging discussion. I shall simply restrict myself to being among the first to quote what I suspect will be very often quoted phrases. First, linking together all these introductory pieces in some way, is Mitchell's observation that: 'the disciplinary anxiety provoked by visual studies is a classic instance of what Jacques Derrida has called "the dangerous supplement."' Derrida is cited in all the essays in this section showing that – to parody Geoff Bennington – like deconstruction, visual culture is not what you think. At one level, it is rare to hear visual culture described as a deconstructive enterprise. At another it suggests that the work of visual culture holds a number of surprises in store. Mitchell himself suggests one when he writes in his 'Eight counter-theses on visual culture' that 'visual culture is the visual construction of the social, not just the social construction of vision.' To suggest only one possible interpretation of this remark: it turns out, then, that visual culture is not so much the descendant of the social history of art as its deconstructor.

Another discussion comes in a multi-authored piece by Raiford Guins, Joanne Morra, Marquard Smith and Omayra Cruz, who work in: film studies; a school of art publishing and music; a school of art, film and visual media; and a department of literature/cultural studies. This pluralism has produced an engaged and engaging approach that urges us to get away from the anthropological question 'what is visual culture?' and instead think about what it is that visual culture can articulate and for whom. In which 'district,' to use their term, should we work and using what archives? They rightly conclude: 'surely for the moment it is not so much what visual culture *is*, but rather what it can be enabled to *do* that matters.'

Using the VCR 2.0

This version of the Reader has been substantially redesigned and reworked following the suggestions of people who have read and used the book in its first incarnation. There are major changes in content as well as style and so it seemed appropriate to signal an upgrade in the title, meaning to suggest that the basis of the book will be familiar to readers but it offers a new and improved format. In general, this version is more open and wide-ranging than its predecessor. When *October* magazine launched its now notorious and ultimately self-destructive assault on visual culture in 1996, it seemed that there might be a repeat of the struggle over cultural studies in literature departments concerning visual culture in its various academic homes. Perhaps because visual culture is not so precisely located – at least in the United States – that did not happen. One of the most interesting developments has been

the very positive response to visual culture from artists and art schools, despite the occasional thundering from art historians that visual culture is the end of Art. Artists have of course been working with the end of modernist models of art for over thirty years now, so this is perhaps not so very surprising. More seriously, some have charged that visual culture is falling into the same trap as cultural studies by being too Western, too white and too Anglophone. Of course all of Anglophone academia is to some extent guilty of this charge. As visual culture programs or classes have been now established to my, no doubt limited, knowledge in the Czech Republic, Finland, Holland, Hungary, South Africa, Sweden, Tajikistan, Taiwan and Turkey, I am hopeful that it is at least to be found a moderate offender. As I argued above, the measure of visual culture's success in this regard will be the extent to which it learns to imagine the global in all aspects of its practice.

Given these positive changes, the model I have had in mind for this edition was that of a network in which readers and other users would bring their own ideas, readings and images to bear on the selections here. The sections are both intended to be productively interactive with each other and are better balanced among the various visual media. Responding to an often-made suggestion, I have also added a section of short clips from classic theoretical texts that might not be familiar to everyone and always bear re-examination. In terms of content, the questions of digital culture and globalization that loomed large in my introduction have of course had to be reflected in the new volume. In 1995 when the first edition was planned even Bill Gates did not think the internet was all that important. Perhaps by the next edition of this Reader it will not be. I have sought out both outstanding younger scholars and well-established figures to contribute essays to the new version, which contains much more original material than its predecessor. No single volume can adequately represent the polymorphous field that visual culture is becoming. I am also editing a new series called 'In·Sight: Routledge Visual Culture' which will offer readers and texts on specific subjects within visual culture. The first volume to be published will be *Feminism and Visual Culture*, edited by Amelia Jones (2002) and many others are planned. In addition the visual culture listserv continues to discuss these and other issues on a daily basis. This book has enabled teachers all over the world to create courses on visual culture and convince both their students and administrators that there really is a subject of this name. That alone justifies this renewed enterprise to my mind.

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The presence of [. . .] denotes a cut made by the editor in the interests of length. Each part has a new introduction and there are updated bibliographies and web references.

Note

- 1 See my essay 'Ghostwriting: working out visual culture,' the *Journal of Visual Culture*, (vol. 1 no. 2): pp. 239–54, that is in a sense the ghost of this chapter.