General

Stepping into the Arena of Debates on Visual Culture

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Camiel van Winkel, *The Regime of Visibility*, NAi Publishers, Rotterdam 2005, ISBN 905664253; W.T.J. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2005, ISBN 0226532453

Taken together, the titles of the two books on review here could be read as if forming a sort of sentence or statement – certainly elliptical, but tremendously suggestive. The question mark in Mitchell's title would apply as well to all other parts of this statement. Indeed, what is a 'regime of visibility' supposed to look like? How do we have to conceive of the 'lives and loves of images'? Finally and probably most importantly, the idea that pictures 'want' anything or anybody, is irritating enough to demand closer inspection.

However, the fact alone that both books wear originality as well as questionability on their sleeves doesn't necessarily qualify them to be a matching couple for a review essay. What really makes them comparable is a whole array of themes and issues they share, in each case linked to a project of reconceptualizing the experience of an age 'characterized by a cancerous growth of vision, measuring everything by its ability to show or be shown and transmuting communication into a visual journey', as Michel de Certeau put it more than 30 years ago, writing about a 'sort of epic of the eye'.[1] Both books, replete with new insights and ideas, step into the arena of debates about the use and misuse of the sort of knowledge production which has been labelled 'visual culture' and 'image science'. Their agendas, though very different in detail, meet where they are questioning traditional hierarchies of high and low, fine arts and mass cultural imagery, the profound and the superficial. When transdisciplinary visual culture studies are accused of destroying the capacity of engaging skilfully (in the disciplinary traditions of modernist art history and art criticism) with the material and 'medium-specific' dimension of artworks, both writers argue that the epistemological ground on which a certain idea of the visual arts was once cultivated has been profoundly reconfigured since.

Let's begin where the two projects literally intersect. In *The Regime of Visibility* Camiel van Winkel, an art historian and critic, who currently teaches visual art and art theory at art schools in Den Bosch and Brussels and who is also known as a former editor of *Archis* and *De Witte Raaf*, makes direct reference to a 1996 essay that w.t.j. Mitchell, an art historian and English literature scholar at the University of Chicago, has included in his eighth book *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*. 'Instead of asking what images *mean*, what meaning they posses, Mitchell suggests that we ask what they *want*; and what an image wants is precisely what it *does not* possess, what it lacks. Departing from the weakness of images, the emphasis should shift from their power to their desire.[2] This affirmative and fairly comprehensive summary of Mitchell's project requires further explanation and exemplification. Van Winkel tries to provide the appropriate clarification in a discussion of two fashion magazine advertisements for sunglasses. In one of them, an ad for Pal Zileri, the male model is wearing the glasses on his forehead instead of having

them protecting his eyes; in the other, an ad for Versace, the eyes of a female model are blocked from sight by dark sunglasses whereas the male model at her back doesn't wear any. Van Winkel suggests that these still images probably want to be moving images – that these photographs act as if they were something they are ontologically not, that is, films. Why? Mainly because they are showing, in different ways, faces with and without glasses in one picture, thereby creating a sense of simultaneity of 'two successive and mutually exclusive stages: the glasses on and the glasses off'. [3]

One might wonder how plausible it is to assert a specific desire of the images themselves. The reading of the photographic assemblage of consecutive stages of the drama of raising a pair of sunglasses could be more or less convincing, whereas the thesis that the photographs are weak subjects of lack, desiring to become more complete, more film-like, does not strike one as bearing a great deal of persuasive evidence. Interestingly, Van Winkel's close observations of the Versace ad, revealing how disturbing it becomes the longer one looks at the reflections on the sunglasses, the greasy glossiness of the models' skin, the monstrous imbrications of body parts, the cubistic instalment of dead gazes, etcetera, seem to be far more instructive when read as an analysis of the visual strategies developed and deployed in the fashion industry.

Turning the entire face into a mask, Van Winkel says, is a technology of producing visual immunity. And it is in such observations that the strength of his book lies. *The Regime of Visibility* attempts a genealogical (re)construction of the contemporary situation of visuality, which Van Winkel defines as a normative, imperative cultural urge to convert the non-visual into the visual, a 'permanent pressure to compensate for missing imagery'. [4] In contrast to Mitchell's mission, whose primary interest is to steer attention away from a fixation on hermeneutics and semiotics towards the 'constitutive fiction of pictures as "animated" beings, quasi-agents, mock persons'. [5] Van Winkel's enterprise is less the ontological reconfiguration of mute objects into 'sounding' things, as Mitchell would have it (more of this further down), than the historical and discursive processes which restructured the ways of seeing and being seen in an over-visualized world.

The two case studies which constitute the core of Van Winkel's book-length essay are concerned with the interdependency of image practices that belong to allegedly different realms of visual production. In an interesting (re)construction of the near encounters of design practices and the conceptual art in the 1960s and 1970s, Van Winkel points towards the 'bureaucratic or semi-bureaucratic traits' of both fields. Wim Crouwel, the designer who almost single-handedly created the 'look' of the Netherlands in the 1960s with his trademark reductionist logotypography, is regarded as working in a similar mode to conceptual artists such as Dan Graham or Lawrence Weiner. Wishing to avoid subjectivity as well as any imposition of form, Crouwel tried to translate design into sheer, noiseless information, free from uncontrollable aesthetic surplus.

Van Winkel draws an analogy between the administrative aesthetics and managerial protocols of the period's graphic design and a professionalization of the conceptual artist, articulated in her / his delegation of the actual realization of the artwork to third persons. But in contrast to Crouwel, the conceptualists accepted or even provoked the 'noisy' aspects of communication; rejecting the visualization in favour of utter information, they created a specific material and visual dimension of their work, a redundancy called the aesthetic. The refusal of the visual always produces a visuality of its own, 'a package of information that needs to be communicated'. [6] Therefore the conceptualist 'regime of information' does not escape visibility but is instead a structural component of a visual culture that is informatized through and through.

In another attempt to convey the intricacies and resonances between different sectors and degrees of visuality, Van Winkel links together the work and person of artist Cindy

Sherman with the work and person of fashion model Kate Moss. Here, he's searching for a way to liberate the production of visual artists from the tight embraces of a critical discourse and to redefine the relationship between art photography and fashion photography as dialogic (or reciprocally parasitic) rather than hierarchically or dichotomically organized. Often hilarious and truly inspiring, at times repetitive and slightly implausible, the argument leads to a comparison of two types of submission: by turn Sherman's submission under the critical system which has endorsed her and made of her a critical artist following the deconstruction of the myths of aesthetic originality, and Moss' subjection to the production system of the fashion industry. Van Winkel privileges the latter submission over Cindy Sherman's critical reputation, as the identity of 'Kate Moss' 'fully evaporates behind the surface of representation',[7] and therefore marks an acknowledgment (and embodiment) of the realities of the regime of visibility.

A certain sadism and even misogyny lurks behind the lines of this chapter, even though the sadism may just as well be the masochism of someone living through the epic of the eye which, in Van Winkel's view, is no longer the story of the active gaze, but the tale of a passive, exhibitionist visibility. As long as Sherman and / or her critics want her to be an artist in charge of the means of representation and of images of herself, she will not reach the level of total subjection under this regime of the being-seen, while Moss has moved into the most radical position – in being 'just a cog in the machine'. Van Winkel takes Moss to be radically 'sceptical' of the myth that 'we can be the author of our own life', whereas Sherman 'just does what the system expects of her'.[8] Acceptance of the impossibility of a detached stance thus qualifies as the ultimate critical posture. Immersed in the digitized mirror halls of visibility, any aesthetic or visual judgment seems futile, since it would simply be the sign of a failure to recognize the totality of this regime. The critics 'are standing empty-handedly',[9] and Van Winkel celebrates their / our impotence as the irreversible condition of the present situation.

The Regime of Visibility recommends a subject position of relative disempowerment, of productive confusion and stimulating helplessness. Van Winkel admits that the 'burlesque operation' of his book is as 'hybrid as its subject, visual culture'.[10] Offering 'unorthodox readings' of images, making 'far-fetched comparisons', the reader should not expect 'homogeneity and consistency'[11] from this exercise in mimicry. But this is just too true. Inspiring as many parts of Van Winkel's book may be, the theoretical project of a 'critical dialectics of art and mass culture'[12] remains amorphous. Moreover, the politics are at best vague; clear-cut statements about the political economy of visual culture would probably be considered a further obstacle in 'the development of more sophisticated forms of criticism and cultural analysis.'[13] It's a disconcerting book, leaving the reader and its author with the task to make operable such sophistication.

There seems to be more at stake in w.t.j. Mitchell's *What Do Pictures Want?*, a collection of re-worked essays on visual culture, written and published since the publication of the author's influential *Picture Theory* of 1994. Mitchell, who coined the phrase 'pictorial turn', here proposes the next turn or shift-of-emphasis, from the meaning to the *desire* of pictures. It's a bold thesis, and its author goes to great lengths to substantialize it, mobilizing the history and mythology of the tropes of living and loving images from Pygmalion to the robot child in Steven Spielberg's *AI*. Visual objects or things are reconsidered as animated, desiring beings, as friends or relatives in social intercourse. Taking the lead from Émile Durkheim's concept of totemism and the recent 'material turn' in cultural and science studies, Mitchell engages in what he calls a 'construal of pictures not as sovereign subjects or disembodied spirits, but as subalterns whose bodies are marked with the stigmata of difference, and who function as "go-betweens" and scapegoats in the social field of human visuality'.[14] Defining 'picture' as a fusion of object and image, Mitchell traces the genealogy of contemporary iconophobia, from the Taliban's destruction of the Buddha statues to the 'Sensation' of seemingly offensive images in a

New York show, back to the uses of pictures as idols, fetishes and totems. In a strange and slightly uncanny ethics of friendship, the picture as totem is preferred over the picture as idol (which is or represents a god) or fetish (object of compulsive fixation). Following his argument, the totem is less a thing to be adored or worshipped than a member of the clan or tribe. Mitchell clearly sympathizes with the idea of a picture as totemic 'friend'. His renderings of this sympathy (or empathy) are compelling, sometimes funny, often disturbing. Working hard on the suspension of disbelief, *What Do Pictures Want?* repeatedly and slightly redundantly invites the reader to share the 'fiction' of the desiring picture that is in need of assistance, for someone to make it 'sound' – like a musical instrument longing to be played upon, as Mitchell muses in a metaphorical fashion. Self-consciously bordering on fantastic literature, these essays have the uncanny and perhaps productive effect of retroactively transmuting every past approach toward images, pictures and visual culture into a mythic narrative, since every verbal discourse on the visual, be it semiotic or iconological, historical or hermeneutical, is based on an 'as if', assuming the image is something else… a text, a sign, a lie, an agent of power, and so forth. Seen that way, Mitchell just pushes the envelope of a longstanding fantasy production in the relation between pictures and beholders.

In one of the most intriguing chapters on the 'visual construction of the social' and 'vernacular visuality' [15] the fate of abstract painting as a by now 'familiar, classical, standard, even official' [16] visuality is discussed in terms of totemism. Instead of serving the avant-garde cause of medium specifity, opticality or modernism, abstract paintings today are 'more like members of a brother- or sisterhood of objects than Oedipal spectacles, more like totems, toys, or transitional objects than fetishes'. [17]

Here as elsewhere, Mitchell's aesthetic-ethical project of claiming recognition for a particular collectivity and intimacy of human beings and picture persons gets close to Van Winkel's disillusioned deconstruction of the art / mass culture dichotomy. Though the one is driven by the pathos of advocating justice for the subaltern picture while the other keeps a cool and ironic stance, both books are concerned with the particular ecologies and economies, the *doxa* and paradoxes in the 'complex field of visual reciprocity' [18]; and both books are daring enough to risk some bewilderment about those concerns.

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Footnotes

1. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, English translation by Steven Rendall (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1984), 21.
2. Van Winkel, 37 ff.
3. Van Winkel, 41.
4. Van Winkel, 15.
5. Mitchell, 46.
6. Van Winkel, 186 ff.
7. Van Winkel, 86.
8. Van Winkel, 104 ff.
9. Van Winkel, 188.
10. Van Winkel, 10.
11. Van Winkel, 11.
12. Van Winkel, 10.
13. Van Winkel, 189.
14. Mitchell, 46.
15. Mitchell, 356.
16. Mitchell, 231.
17. Mitchell, 231.
18. Mitchell, 47.

Tags

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