Viewing: Seeing: Looking Away

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David Gibbs, Mosque in a former school building in the Presikhaaf district in Arnhem, 2002 (OK5 Arnhem).

In rebus quoque apertis noscere possis,
Si non advertas animum, proinde esse,
quasi omni Tempore semotae fuerint,
longeque remotae.

Even in the case of things which are clearly visible,
you know that if you do not turn your mind to them,
it is as though they had never been there
or were far away.

Lucretius, IV, *809* [1]

Visual art, in all its manifestations, benefits from contradictions that serve to extract clarity about the variables that define its public existence and effect. You might say that the contradiction presented in this *Open* 8, visibility versus invisibility, refers to the most significant presentations and oppositions within the current, complex battle of images. Traditionally, the theme of (in-)visibility is linked to emancipation movements, lending their existence, practices or particulars visibility, out of a struggle to be seen. Feminism, for instance, would have had less prestige had it not explicitly engaged in the struggle to influence dominant models of perception. The tradition of lending visibility to alternative modes of perception has always been a political one.

The history of visual art, certainly the tradition that has shown evidence of engaging with the public space, or public debate, was originally closely linked to the movement, more

broad-based from a societal point of view, of emancipating visibility strategies. Be it a question of pointing out abuses or proposing illegal or alternative methods of perception, or simply showing something that would otherwise remain invisible, 'visibility', as an ideal, has given direction to a practice that aimed to correct the dominant and obfuscating representations of so-called visibility.

The question under discussion is to what extent visual art, in its fusion with the culture of everyday, mediatized images, is still capable of lending visibility to this emancipating agenda of perception.

(In-)visibility in Practice

When the world is shocked by a natural disaster, as it was recently by the devastating tsunami in Southeast Asia, the signifying crisis photography that records the pain is judged, in terms of quality and selectivity, by the way it shows the lonely, invisible suffering the disaster has produced. Images that show the suffering in a subtle, suggestive manner are usually perceived as the strongest. These are images that demand to be seen and that toy with our capacity to negate the invisibility of the suffering in our imagination.

By suggesting rather than showing the actual suffering in images, its depth is made visible. This turns them into poignant images that recall the diabolical pact between suffering and invisibility. A hand to the left of the frame lying open and immobile on the beach, to the right part of a kneeling woman, in profile, weeping. Not the body washed ashore, not the bloated, partially ruptured skin, not the deformations, not the ostentatious horror – that can all remain invisible. What we do want to see is an image that gives an indication of what is not being shown. Such images evidently still have the power, in spite of all our defence mechanisms, to move us.

In talk shows in which the quality of crisis photography is discussed, the photo of the lifeless hand serves as a paragon. Simultaneously, photos that do explicitly show the devastation and horror are dismissed as amateurish and as examples of unprofessional journalism. These horrific photos are cited in the commentaries as a troubling sign of the times. An age of obsessive visibility. Everything must be shown, until there is nothing left to see in all this visibility, and everything becomes interchangeable, evaporated into omnipresence.

Jean Baudrillard, a sombre analyst of hyper-reality, sees in this visibility mania 'the equivalent of the ready-made transposition of everyday life'. Everything seems caught in closed circuits of visibility and monitored by cameras that record everything. In his view the hunger for all-revealing images is not based on any great feelings; the craving for visibility is an expression of being in the thrall of the spectacle of banality. One is fascinated by a totalitarian void, but at the same time terrified of the indifference this generates. Baudrillard sees something akin to big-time sports in this heroic toleration of the void: 'Banality as a last form of fatality has become an Olympic competition, a last version of extreme sports.'

Because the public has become part of the closed system of visibility, the idea of control has become diffused. It is no longer a question of control being visible, but of things being transparent to the external eye. This corresponds with the inalienable longing to be nothing, and to be seen as nothing. Two possibilities remain: either you don't want to be seen, or you surrender to the exhibitionist regime of visibility, and therefore to banality. In the courtroom, too, the conflict between the unconditional right to see and the right not to be seen is in many cases insoluble. This conflict can often only be resolved by an external, enforced form of visibility, as evidenced recently by the commotion occasioned by the publication of photos of the suspect in the assassination of Theo van Gogh. In that regime of imposed visibility, communication loses its originality. Language loses its capacity for symbolism and irony and becomes an empty medium. This obscenity, says Baudrillard, is

inescapable. These over-explicit images, however, exert a totalitarian power that helps to re-establish a basic principle in our relations with images: the rule of the sublime, the rule of secrecy, the rule of seduction. It is in the very visibility of their excesses that images succeed in breaking open the problem of verification.

Excesses of 'the Real'

The practice of making images has not been made any easier by the visibility industry. Yet injustices, abuses and human suffering must be seen.[2] If only as a call for solidarity, or simply as an alternative history. Crisis photographers in fact often justify their voyeuristic practice with this argument: 'The rest of the world has to see this suffering, this abuse, this injustice.' Visibility is still seen both as a weapon and as justification, in defiance of heart-rending meaninglessness. In Christian Frei's universally celebrated documentary, War Photographer, about the war photographer James Nachtwey, this ideology culminates in an amazing point of literal double-meaning when the filmmaker mounts a miniature video camera with a microphone on Nachtwey's photo camera.[3] You hear the spinning and clicking of the motor-drive camera while seeing almost the same thing he is photographing. But you also see more; you see what happens in the silences Nachtwey lets fall before pressing the button. In those moments, the film shows what he does not photograph. The intervals between his shots lend visibility to his 'editorial eye', which he uses to record the 'horrific reality'. What Roland Barthes described in the 1960s as 'l'effet du réel' ('the effect of the real') meets its opposite in the film: 'l'effet de l'irréel' ('the effect of the unreal'). War Photographer attempts to show the limits of the amount of 'reality' we can perceive and tolerate.

As Slavoj Žižek put it in his *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*: 'We should discern which part of reality is 'transfunctionalized' through fantasy, so that, although it is part of reality, it is perceived in a fictional mode.'[4] The challenge is not so much to unmask (what passes for) 'reality' as fiction, as to recognize fiction within 'real' reality.

Perception as a Model

It is thus not so much about what is generically labelled 'virtual reality' as about the 'reality of the virtual'! In an age of 'pervasive computing' – the tendency to equip the total living environment with computer systems that often have been made invisible – and perception modelled by the media, 'ordinary' perception of 'reality' also seems to be in the throes of programmed visibility and model-based viewing. The quality of the images no longer seems relevant; the power of images is extracted by the repressive strategies with which they are employed. This is often done in order to make money. In advertising, this is called 'perception management'. The images presented and endlessly repeated lend the necessary legitimacy to the product. Even innocent and artistic images are easily absorbed into the daily media circuits, without ever having been made for the purpose.

In this theatre of programmed perception, no image seems immune to the power of coding – not only the coding that is necessary to process and transmit images, but also the coding that prescribes how they should be seen and understood. In a communications universe of technological images this alienation of 'authentic' perception from the concrete reflects a media tradition in which our perception has gradually entered into an increasingly abstract relationship with reality.

Certainly as the eye becomes more and more suspect as an instrument of observation and is replaced by cameras, sensors and 'tracking devices', there is less and less room for the intuitive judgement of the naked, unmediated eye. The complex of mediatized images forces the observer to subscribe to an increasing degree to the logic of the technology that is instructing him in observation. How can the images still be critiqued? For critiquing

images by means of other images from the same economy of meaning seems a hopeless undertaking.

Since the early 1990s there has been a huge flow of books and publications on the subject of 'visuality' and 'visual culture'. No longer limited to studies about the visual arts, or specifically visual media such as film, photography, video or television, visuality is now a broad subject that can count on the attention of literature as well as philosophy and cultural criticism. You could say that this development has been one of a shift in emphasis. Whereas the emphasis in the 1980s was on the culture of images and the attendant, primarily art-historical discourse, it has since come to be placed increasingly on visual culture and the observing subject. The entry of media theory and cultural studies into the discourse has also meant the introduction of new conceptual frameworks to investigate and debate an abundance of, traditionally speaking, predominantly specialist knowledge concerning visuality and perception. Media theorists call this fundamental cultural change, this 'pictorial turn', 'the late age of print'. This end of written culture coincides with a return to the Middle Ages in the sense of a 'retour avant la lettre'. With the difference that images back then came out of the 'artisanat', were the creation of artisans, whereas they are now products presented to us by technology.

According to Vilem Flusser, the increasing difficulty of critiquing images is directly related to the decline of the critical tradition itself. In his analysis *Die Schrift. Hat schreiben Zukunft?*, he deals with the vampiric relationship that exists between the domain of the image and the domain of the written word. [5] The two domains by nature bleed each other dry in terms of meaning and effect. Text interprets the image to death, while the image reveals and mediates the inadequacies of text. But Flusser also sees a difference in consciousness in their opposition. The image, he reasons, reflects a magical consciousness that is circular and therefore has no linear temporal order, while the written word expresses a consciousness that is historical and therefore performs a critical dressage. The advent of the binary code – the elementary programming language of computers – marks a watershed in this critical tradition. Writing becomes programming, and therefore follows set 'prescriptions' and procedures. This development threatens to increasingly engulf the critical tradition of the written word in the imperative technological culture of the production of meaning.

From the classical text that attempted to explain the world as a historical presentation, we have progressed to a system of technological images that treats the world as a timeless model. Whereas the critical written word was the ideal instrument to attack the frameworks within which perception was coded into models, the complex of technological images seems to make us part of an apolitical, self-regulating system. A system that has transformed writing to the point that it can no longer encompass historical, political and ethical categories. All images circulate in this system; the image has definitively become democratic.

Let this image of crisis be a call to develop a new politics of perception from within our fusion with the media. A politics of perception based on Michel de Montaigne's insight: by not seeing something yourself, you make something visible to another.

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Footnotes

1. Michel de Montaigne, *An Apology for Raymond Sebond*, translated by M.A. Screech, Penguin Classics, London 1987.
2. Jean Francois Lyotard writes in his book *Le Différend* (The Differend) about the (philosophical) problem in proving that the Holocaust really took place. The problem to find a living witness that saw with his or her 'own eyes' the workings of the gas chambers. One was not supposed to be able to testify after a visit to the gas chamber. The Germans used the term Final Solution (*Endlösung*) for exactly that reason. He states :'This is what a wrong (tort) would be: a damage (dommmage) accompanied by the loss of the means to prove the damage. This is the case if the victim is deprived of life, or of all his or her liberties, or the freedom to make his or her ideas or opinions public, or simply of the right to testify to the damage, or even more simply if the testifying phrase is itself deprived of authority.' Jean Francois Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, translated by Georges van den Abbeele, Manchester University Press, Manchester 1988 (original text 1983).
3. *War Photographer*, a film by Christian Frei, 2001 (nominated for an Oscar for best documentary film in 2002). Available on DVD via www.warnerbros.co.uk.
4. Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, Verso, London / New York 2002.
5. Vilem Flusser, *Die Schrift, hat schreiben Zukunft?*, Fischer Verlag, Frankfurt / Main 1992.

Tags

Art Discourse, Image, Media Society, Aesthetics

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