



Teaching Visual Culture in an Interdisciplinary Classroom

Feminist (Re)Interpretations of the Field

A book series by ATHENA

Edited by Elżbieta H. Oleksy and Dorota Golańska

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**Teaching Visual Culture in an Interdisciplinary Classroom.
Feminist (Re)Interpretations of the Field**

Teaching with Gender. European Women's Studies in
International and Interdisciplinary Classrooms

A book series by ATHENA

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INTRODUCTION

Teaching visual culture today requires special skills. We live in the times when not only entertainment but also knowledge are visually constructed. What we see has become as crucial as what we read or hear. School and university curricula have been restructured to include courses on the visual, so that visual grammar can be studied alongside texts and figures. Yet there is still much uncertainty as to how to “read” visual images and—particularly—how to respond to ideology, which is often embedded in visual texts, or how to approach the visual on the aesthetic level, despite its ideological/oppressive character. This teaching manual provides students with the tools they need in order to view critically what the visual has on offer. This kind of approach reconceptualizes the visual and makes visuality a process whereby the search for meanings involves not only resistance to dominant ideologies but also creativity on the part of the student.

Visual culture should be seen as an interdisciplinary or even post-disciplinary field of study¹ which focuses on a broadly defined problem of visuality. Stemming from art history, the field was inspired by British cultural studies which drew from multiple disciplines and methods of analysis to expose deep hierarchical and intersecting structures of society. Social conditions and effects constitute crucial elements of cultural practices, and they are likewise important for the articulation of meanings in visual culture. Therefore, critical approaches used within the field should focus on—as William J.T. Mitchell suggests—“the visual construction of the social, not just the social construction of vision”.² The study of visual culture is crucial for understanding its role as a key factor in processes of globalization, technologization and multiculturalization, which are all part of our historicity. Today, the field is defined by its interdisciplinary study of images across diverse media, new media, architecture, design and art across a range of social arenas, namely, news, art, science, advertising and popular culture. At the centre of contemporary visual culture stands the image, but—as Mitchell reminds us—“we still do not know exactly what pictures are, what their relation to language is, how they operate on observers and on the world, how their history is to be understood, and what

¹ Nicholas Mirzoeff, “The Subject of Visual Culture”, in *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).

² William J.T. Mitchell, “Showing Seeing: a Critique of Visual Culture”, *Journal of Visual Culture* 1(2) (2002), 170.

is to be done with or about them”.³ Consequently, the study of visual culture is not limited to the study of images, but also examines their effects, the material practices they entail, and the creative potential they offer. Therefore, it is of critical importance to work out new approaches to study both epistemologies and ontologies of the visual. For these reasons, further exploration of the topic is necessary, especially from diversified feminist/minority perspectives, to improve our visual literacy of the increasingly sophisticated visual world in which we are all immersed.

Both vision and visual culture belong to the most celebrated yet simultaneously hotly debated technologies of self and sources of knowledge. The different practices of seeing, looking and being looked at, organize and restrain the processes of subjectification. Clearly, looking contributes to the ways in which the hierarchy of gender is maintained within the phallogentric order, a system which is built on the principle of one sex and its negative (man and no-man). Feminist (and other so-called minority) theories and practices have for decades focused on the power of vision in constructing the social and the privileging of the (male) gaze in meaning and knowledge production. The revolution across much of the social sciences and humanities, translated into what is commonly known as the “linguistic turn”, has obviously led to the increased interest in social relations as signifying practices. It is often argued that in the field of visual culture there is no way back to the pre-semiotic or pre-discursive analysis. Consequently, there is no pre-linguistic, or rather pre-representational, realm separated from the signifying system wherein meanings are produced. Of course, one form of feminist work on the image is the critique of representation and the deconstruction of its existing regimes with reference to gender and sexual difference, always in complex asymmetrical relationship to class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, etc.

It is, however, important to keep in mind that not only did feminist theory lay bare the historical structures of looking but it also challenged the dominant ways of reading visual culture. Although the emphasis on the meaning-making practices is important, it is obviously not enough, if we want to truly understand the critical potential that the field offers. The paradigm of the “linguistic turn” and privileging of the linguistic model in the study of the visual do not facilitate a move beyond representation and ideology. Their

³ William J.T. Mitchell, “The Pictorial Turn”, in *Picture Theory. Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, by William J.T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 13.

adequacy notwithstanding, the purely ideological or representational readings of the visual often leave us unsatisfied. Hence, there is a need for new figurations to creatively think about the visual in order to get liberated from the ontological dichotomy of essence and representation. Such a novel rendition of the visual from a feminist/minority point of view promises a demise of the rationalistic dualistic legacy (and the humanist bias inscribed in it), which has for centuries worked to the disadvantage of women.

This collection of essays, which responds to the need to re-evaluate the concept of visibility, is designed as a companion for students and researchers interested in the feminist critical input into the field of visual culture. The main objective of this volume is to present an overview of different ways in which visual culture can be approached from diversified feminist perspectives. The primary focus is on teaching and pedagogical aspects, therefore the chapters included in the volume aim to thoroughly present issues salient from the feminist point of view. The volume provides theoretical and methodological support and examples of possible analyses for researchers and students interested in the field of feminist visual culture or, more generally, women's studies, gender studies, visual studies, art studies and science studies. It presents feminist theories and methodologies, which were influential for the field of visual culture and encourages readers to critically think about the visual. The purpose of this volume is to comment on the existing modes of feminist reading of visual culture and, more importantly, to explore and develop effective theoretical and analytical tools which would facilitate a thorough and innovative analysis of the visual. The focus is on critical renditions of the expanding field of visual culture in order to find creative and novel theoretical and methodological concepts to process the critical potential of this research area.

Teaching Visual Culture in an Interdisciplinary Classroom weaves together various critical paradigms, theories and methodologies within the common field of feminist visual culture. By doing so it demonstrates the importance of the analysis of the visual for the feminist studies as well as the need to increase visual literacy in general. The selection of topics explored is certainly not exhaustive. The idea behind the volume was to cover at least the most recent feminist developments and critically assess the most important issues in order to reveal different applications of feminist theories and methodologies in interdisciplinary or post-disciplinary research within the domain of visual studies. Each chapter of this volume offers a good introduction to perspectives

and issues important to the field and presents sample analyses of visual material. Whereas the former constitute an overview of the feminist input into the field and offer new critical developments, the latter are used as examples of how the visual can be studied, signalling possible directions of further investigations. Furthermore, each chapter contains a set of questions for review and discussion, which may be helpful in the teaching and learning process but also serve as a summary to the issues addressed. The book also highlights a number of key terms. Since *Teaching Visual Culture in an Interdisciplinary Classroom* discusses theoretical and methodological issues that often have their own vocabularies, in order to help readers identify key terms, they are emphasized in bold in each chapter. For the aforementioned reasons, the book can be effectively used as an educational tool in the curriculum of undergraduate and/or graduate studies of visual culture or—more broadly—cultural studies, but also as a companion to academic work in the field. It can also be offered in Life Long Learning curricula, including the use of E-learning.

In **Chapter 1** Elżbieta H. Oleksy reviews early to recent debates on the critical empowering theory and practice of the viewing mechanism known as the gaze. Starting with Laura Mulvey's arguments about the complex relationship between spectator and film text which unveils a viewing apparatus whereby the male gaze, equipped with political, economic, social and sexual power, consigns women to silence, marginality and absence, the chapter proceeds with an overview of feminist critique challenging the essentialist binarism of Mulvey's claims (e.g., Steve Neale, Jackie Stacey). Following other commentators critiquing Mulvey's theory, who suggest that gender is not the only factor determining subject positions in spectatorship and point to the importance of other categories of identity (such as race, ethnicity, class, nationality, sexuality, age, etc.), the chapter describes the "oppositional gaze", a viewing strategy first proposed by bell hooks. Using a critical approach in the interpretation of the visual representations, the author examines the effects produced by them and situates them in the social conditions. She also proposes viewing strategies that resist and creatively dismantle patriarchal and racist ideology.

Chapter 2 by Joanna Rydzewska introduces students to the methodology of contextual analysis with a special emphasis on ideological analysis. In order to teach visual culture, the chapter shows how to read ideological messages in popular culture texts using as an example the 1974 film *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*. As the author stresses, the critics of the movie

debated “whether the text offers a positive female character (progressive text) or whether its seemingly progressive air only veils patriarchal ideology (reactionary text)”. It is these notions of progressive and regressive that the chapter seeks to explore, thereby demonstrating to students how these categories cannot be treated as stable “because such valuing notions are in great measure dependent on the dynamic moment of reading in a particular historical, social and political situation”. *Alice Doesn't Live Anymore* serves as a good example because the film was released at the height of feminism and, as Rydzewska argues, the formulation of the question of film reception in terms of progressive/reactionary text mirrors the feminist discourses of the time. It argues that *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* negotiates the difficult task of on the one hand representing the female experience of the 1970s' gender revolution and on the other dealing with the threat this very revolution poses to the well-established social order. With this in mind, “the question of immutable categories of the reactionary or progressive becomes no longer viable because the film is important precisely for apprehending the mutable nature of Hollywood forms dependent on historical context.”

In **Chapter 3** on “Intersectionality and Visual Culture...” Aleksandra M. Różalska presents the complex set of methods of intersectional analysis and demonstrates how they can be used to approach visual texts. Following the argumentations of prominent feminist and postcolonial thinkers, she reveals the potential of this methodology, aiming at pluralizing and decentring the category of gender and situating it in the multidimensional relation vis-à-vis race, ethnicity, nation, class, age, etc. By discussing intersectionality as an approach to study both representations and audiences, Różalska points to the importance of the concept of intersecting categories for the examination of how they are used to construct social hierarchies and, consequently, how they lead to exclusion or marginalization. The chapter offers a thorough overview of feminist approaches to intersectionality and different understandings of this methodology; it also proposes different applications thereof to research and teaching within the interdisciplinary domain of visual culture. Różalska gives examples of intersectional analysis and develops research questions in order to encourage more complex investigations in the field, which would allow us to move beyond well-established dichotomous divisions such as man/woman, black/white and occidental/oriental.

Chapter 4 focuses on feminist approaches to photography. Starting with an overview of feminist critical developments, Redi Koobak explores the theoretical modes of looking at online self-portraits in an attempt to prove that photography cannot be seen exclusively as a means of visual representation. Quite contrarily, she encourages us to approach photography as a “way of seeing” the world in the historicized social context. Drawing on Celia Lury’s observations, the author understands contemporary photography as a technological and perceptual prosthesis and extension, which triggers a thorough transformation of contemporary “self-understandings”. Grounded in the “epistemology of doing”, her case study consists of her own experimental participation in the “365 days” project and critical analysis thereof and aims at proposing some practical guidelines for looking at, around and behind pictures.

In **Chapter 5**, Cecilia Åsberg focuses on the issue of vision as it has been a central concern of feminist studies of science, medicine and technology. She describes how in cultural or social feminist analysis, the male gaze and the ways in which technoscience accommodates, and in effect organizes the watching of women, has been an important part of the feminist interrogation of the gender and power relations that produce the subjects and the objects of science. This attention is due to the intimate merger of the processes of seeing and the processes of knowing, since visual representations play an important role in most scientific disciplines. Pointing to numerous examples of the application of scientific imagery in popular culture and social life in general, Åsberg emphasizes the fact that in science images have been used for the purposes of legitimization and offering proof, and the difference between the two are hard to tell as images are imbued with persuasive qualities. Her analysis consists of two cases, firstly pictures of genes, genetics and DNA, and secondly, imagery of the aging brain affected by Alzheimer’s disease. She interrogates them as sites of intense scientific, commercial and popular attention, appeal and concern. Importantly, both the brain and human genes have been pinpointed as the sites of specific human identity and the chapter problematizes and links certain ways of seeing and knowing with certain ontologies. Critically examining Donna Haraway’s concept of “modest witnessing” and exploring feminist approaches to technoscience, the chapter surveys how feminist visual criticism may trace new modes of investigating the overlapping realms of science and popular culture.

Charlotte Kroløkke in **Chapter 6** investigates the intersensory experience of the 3D/4D fetal ultrasound session and situates it in the context of the new imaging practices. The visual experience of seeing the unborn child, as she demonstrates, is quickly transformed into a bio-tourist experience where the sonographer takes on the role of a tourist guide and prospective parents are encouraged to take part in a guided tour inside the body of a pregnant woman. While analyzing the course of the fetal ultrasound session, Kroløkke considers the transformation of the roles of the viewers from spect-*ators* to spect-*actors* and discusses the intersensory aspects of the whole event, which is no longer exclusively a visual one. In the process of carefully framing and narrating the ultrasound image, and with the substantial help of currently available visual and haptic technologies, healthcare professionals consider all of the human senses in order to create a deeply engaging and tangible experience of meeting the unborn child. Kroløkke also analyses the stereotypical gender discourses which accompany this playful performance and situates them in the context of contemporary consumer culture.

The visual representation of human in vitro fertilization (IVF) is a focus of **Chapter 7** by Edyta Just. While stressing the promising and transformative potential of medical imaging technologies and assisted reproduction, especially as far as discourses on gendered bodies and reproduction are concerned, the chapter proceeds from the overview of feminist critique of the IVF to more recent theoretical developments which take the potentially revolutionary character of IVF into account. Taking on a feminist point of view, Just analyses IVF visual representations currently available on the Internet and tries to assess whether they do justice to the critical potential that IVF technology offers. In doing so, she comments on the medical imaging techniques and IVF itself and encourages further feminist investigations within the field of visual studies in the context of medicine, reproduction and gender roles.

In **Chapter 8** renée c. hoogland examines the significance of a theoretical framework and suggests critical vocabulary to analyze the operations of affect in both the reception and consumption of new forms of visual culture in a digital age. hoogland addresses the problem of affect—post-deconstruction and explores its significance for the study and teaching of visual culture. As she underscores, a shift from traditional media (such as TV or film) towards thoroughly interactive and transformative ones has its important consequences for subjectivity. The latter, she argues, requires reconsideration outside the

grids of conscious reason and individual emotion alike. The chapter claims that the turn to affect may be “key to effective post-ideological critiques of especially mass mediated visual cultural production” and points toward the indispensability of a critical vocabulary with which to think affect in education, and in the sociopolitical realm at large.

Chapter 9—“Seeing Differently: Towards Affirmative Reading of Visual Culture” by Marek M. Wojtaszek and Dorota Golańska—starts with the revision of the three dominant strands of critical analysis of the visual. It briefly describes the philosophical groundings of mimetic, intentional and constructionist paradigms of conceptualizing representation in order to both sketch the most significant differences between them and to expose their investment in the dominant dichotomous logic. Taking on a feminist point of view and assessing the most common feminist approaches to reading the visual, the chapter explores uses and abuses of ideological renderings of visual culture and discusses their theoretical assumptions and methodological shortcomings. It challenges prevailing ways of reading visual culture by dint of ideology, discourse or semiotics advocated by theorists working within the methodological paradigm of the so-called “linguistic turn”. By claiming that visual language is irreducible to the conveyance, discovery or construction of meaning as these remain pertinent to representation, the authors encourage a radical shift towards creational (i.e. affirmative) understanding of the visual. They formulate an appeal for non-representational models to emerge which take visibility as productive of sense through novel figurations (e.g. simulacrum, becoming, the virtual) and point to their implications for feminist thinking.

Many of the contributions to this volume have been written by members of ATHENA working group 1D Visual Culture, whose aim was to assess existing curricula on feminist visual culture by identifying differences, strengths and weaknesses of current teaching practices within the field. The most salient aim was to critically address the key theoretical and pedagogical issues which would help in developing new emancipatory ways of teaching visual culture to students interested in feminist studies. The book is one of the results of the work of people involved in the project. We are aware not all of the possible sources and approaches have been addressed in this volume and we believe many more fascinating topics and practices exist in the field. We hope, however, that the material gathered in *Teaching Visual Culture in an Interdisciplinary Classroom* will be helpful for teachers, students, practitioners

and all people inside and outside academia, who are keen on exploring this post-disciplinary field. As editors, we would like to thank the contributors to this collection: Joanna Rydzewska, Aleksandra M. Różalska, Redi Koobak, Cecilia Åsberg, Charlotte Kroløkke, Edyta Just, renée c. hoogland and Marek M. Wojtaszek. We appreciate very much their outstanding and thought-provoking work. Special thanks go to ATHENA network for their financial and organizational support, the co-ordination office at the University of Utrecht and, finally, to the series editors Berteke Waaldijk, Andrea Petö and Annika Olsson as well as to Noemi Kakucs, their assistant. Certainly, the publication of the book would not have been possible without their hard work and support.

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CHAPTER 1

Critical Visual Empowerment through the Gaze

Elżbieta H. Oleksy

I discovered the power of the gaze in early childhood. My parents were both academics at the time when Polish psychology and psychiatry were belatedly exposed to the teachings of Dr. Freud. A historian (my father) and a psychiatrist (my mother) had their heads full of the meanders of child-rearing processes. In a word, my parents had their diversified and unique ways of dealing with my disobedience. On such occasions, my father sent me to bed. I truly disliked that, but the punishment I dreaded most was coming from my mother. She looked at me with some intensity—nothing else—but that persistent gaze went through me and shamed me to such an extent that I wanted to disappear instantly. I still remember how I envied other children their less experimental punishments.

Introduction

In this chapter I present you with the tools you need in the interpretation of visual culture. I review early to recent debates on the critical, empowering theory and practice of the viewing mechanism known as the gaze. I use a critical approach in the interpretation of visual images, examining the effects produced by them and situating them in the social conditions. I also propose viewing strategies that resist and creatively dismantle patriarchal and racist ideology, and empower the spectator. As regards the teaching process this chapter is based on the main tenets of emancipatory pedagogy.

Laura Mulvey, an icon of spectatorship theory, in an essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”,¹ delves into a complex relationship between spectator and film text. She studies a number of classical Hollywood films in order to unveil a viewing apparatus whereby the **male gaze**, equipped with political, economic, social and sexual power, consigns women to silence, marginality and absence. The essentialist binarism of Mulvey’s argument was challenged by a number of critics who pointed out that, in the signifying practices of the text, masculinity is not always aligned with activity. Nor is femininity permanently equated with passivity. Steve Neale, for instance,

¹ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, *Screen* 16/3 (1975).

questions Mulvey's assertion that men are never sexually objectified within the space of the film.² On the contrary, he observes a **voyeuristic gaze** directed at male characters by other men in the western and the epic film. Jackie Stacey makes a similar contention regarding women and explores erotic exchanges of looks between female characters in contemporary, as well as classical, Hollywood films.³ Other commentators critiquing Mulvey's theory suggest that gender is not the only factor in determining subject positions in spectatorship. Race, ethnicity, class, nationality, sexuality etc. are also key factors. bell hooks, for instance, politicizes looking relations by actively proposing a viewing strategy—"oppositional gaze"—one that would negotiate hegemonic norms and values both in spectatorship and filmmaking. She calls for the oppositional look of the film director that would disrupt conventional representations of black people in culture.⁴

This chapter is structured into three main parts. In the first, I examine at some length Mulvey's **spectatorship** theory, both in the sense of its gains in terms of the viewing mechanism, as well as its lacks. With art samples created five centuries apart, I subsequently discuss two **intimate stories** which depict the gaze of the artist. In the third part, I use bell hooks' theory of **oppositional gaze** vis-à-vis films produced in different locations, Poland and the United States.

Spectatorship

The decade of the 1970s was ripe in publications that celebrated the advent of feminist visual theory. To argue my point, I will refer to two sources: Molly Haskell's *From Reverence to Rape. The Treatment of Women in the Movies*⁵ and Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema".⁶ Haskell's is a historical analysis of images of women in American film, and Mulvey champions psychoanalytic feminist film theory, mostly in reference to classical Hollywood cinema. In Haskell's view, female characters in American cinema are one-dimensional and have no relation to women's actual roles in the society. The reverse is true of male characters: they are fully dimensional and successfully convey the complexity of men's social roles.

² Steve Neale, "Masculinity as Spectacle", *Screen* 24/6 (1983).

³ Jackie Stacey, *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 1994).

⁴ bell hooks, *Black Looks. Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992).

⁵ Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape. The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1973).

⁶ Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure*.

The socio-historical trend in feminist film criticism soon retired to the background. Since the late 1970s, critical attention has focused not so much on the social context and the postulates of egalitarian treatment of women and men in film, as the reception of the cinematic text. One of the most influential critical studies of the new research trend was Laura Mulvey's essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema".⁷ Mulvey's approach was inspired by the psychoanalysis championed by Sigmund Freud and his disciple, Jacques Lacan.

Psychoanalysis, in Freud's view, was rooted in the conviction that the theories postulated by the Enlightenment, to the effect that human reason is the source of progress, were inadequate. The thinkers of the Enlightenment maintained that the individual, or the subject, was able to control knowledge and create ideas through education. Maturity was seen as a fully stabilized identity which guaranteed a safe place in the world. In the second half of the twentieth century these "certainties", considered by feminists to be the determinants of (white) male culture, were subjected to criticism.

Freud's theory suggested that the individual was not capable of fully controlling her/his experiences, although s/he was, to an extent, shaped by them. Poststructuralists took this point even further by claiming that the individual, to whom the Enlightenment ascribed the causative and controlling role towards life experiences, resembled actors on a stage; although they could interpret the text of the play, they had to keep changing their identities in keeping with the script.

Feminist cultural criticism (including film criticism) draws on the findings of Freud—and, later, Lacan—in order to explain the differences in the reception of a cultural text with regard to the recipient's gender. According to Freud, the unconscious and its symbolism, as well as infant sexuality, constitute stimulants in the shaping of sexual identity. Freud analyzed the process in which children of both sexes identified with their mother. Focusing chiefly on boys' psyche, he argued that a boy's identity is shaped at the moment when his erotic feelings towards his mother are transferred (during the Oedipal phase) on to other women. In order to overcome the fear of castration, which is embodied by the mother on account of her lack of a penis, the boy turns to his father and reserves his erotic desires for other women. During this process a strong *superego* (the moral censor) develops, rejecting the *id* (the unbridled desire).

⁷ Ibid.

In Freud's view, in a female child the process is much more complex, since the girl transfers her feelings from the mother on to a man. Aware, as is the boy, of the mother's lack, the girl unconsciously learns to despise her and turns to the father in the hope that his bodily completeness will compensate for her own "lack". This process, according to Freud, although hardly free from traps which increase the danger of neuroses, leads to the formation of the female identity.

Contemporary feminists reject Freud's theory as supporting patriarchal ideology. There is also much evidence of it in his own writing, indicating that Freud simply did not understand women. In his famous essay "Femininity", he wrote:

Throughout history people have knocked their heads against the riddle of the nature of femininity . . . Nor will you have escaped worrying over this problem—those of you who are men; to those of you who are women this will not apply—you are yourselves the problem.⁸

In the essay, Freud slashes women as prone to narcissism, masochism and passivity, as well as a weak *superego*, which leads to a tendency towards jealousy and other low instincts. Freud was aware of the impact of social factors on the shaping of sexual identity ("we must beware in this of underestimating the influence of social customs, which similarly force women into passive situations"⁹); but when he elevated sexual identity and desire to the rank of universal sexual processes, he was in fact contradicting himself.

Lacan revised Freud's theory. He replaced the biological penis with the notion of the phallus as a symbol of patriarchal power. In Lacan's system, Freud's "pre-Oedipal" phase becomes the "imaginary stage", during which the child, seeing its reflection in the mirror (hence the alternative name, "mirror stage"), creates a coherent image of its body. This period is transient, ephemeral; it is followed by the "symbolic stage", that is, an initiation into language and culture. Mastering the language disrupts the coherence of the preceding phase. The child becomes aware of the difference between the sexes (her/his own and the other) and, consequently, acquires a place in the symbolic order, that is, in the "Law of the Father", with the phallus (the symbolic penis) as the principal

⁸ Sigmund Freud, "Lecture XXXIII. Femininity", in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. J. Strachey, vol. 22 (London: Hogarth Press, 1964), 113.

⁹ *Ibid.*

causative power. According to Lacan, interactions with the symbolic force us to negotiate our attitude towards the order, assuming mutable and random identities.¹⁰

Laura Mulvey accommodates the theories of Freud and Lacan to an analysis of classical American cinema. Her point of departure is the issue of the so-called *pleasure*, that is, the psycho-dynamic relations between the viewer and the text. According to Mulvey, classical American cinema prefers the male perspective of viewing both on the narrative plane (male plots, strong male characters) and the visual plane. Woman in classical film is the object of the “male gaze”; she constitutes a coded convention—signifier—and, as such, she represents an ideological meaning only for men.

In classical American cinema, argues Mulvey, female characters are presented exclusively in relation to male figures. The “woman *qua* woman” equals visual void, absence, lack. How, therefore, does one explain the viewer’s fascination with the film, regardless of gender? In order to answer this question, Mulvey first employs the Freudian notion of *der Schautrieb* (the wish to look), and afterwards analyzes the film from the perspective of the Lacanian “mirror stage”. Mulvey demonstrates how the diversification of gender in film releases these two forms of visual pleasure. First, in traditional cinema, male characters are foregrounded both in terms of the “gaze” and the *diegesis*. Narration, camerawork and editing render the viewing pleasure as a male experience. The confluence of the three factors—the gaze of the (male) character, the camera and the spectator—controls the female character, which becomes a mere object of the “gaze”; in other words, she is characterized by, to use Mulvey’s expression, “to-be-looked-at-ness”.

The viewer’s pleasure, according to Mulvey, is composed of two phases. One is the “pleasure of the gaze”—*voyeurism*, and the other—“narcissistic pleasure”, which is justified by the author by referring to the Lacanian “mirror stage”. Just as the child reacts to the perfection (completeness) of her/his mirror image, so the viewer of classical cinema has no other choice than identify with the perfect (complete) image of the male figure. Mulvey explains the source of the tendency to repress women in classical American cinema in the following way. From the perspective of psychoanalysis, the signifier “female” indicates a problem, because its negative meaning (non-male) obsessively brings to mind

¹⁰ Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience”, in *Écrits: A Selection*, ed. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1977), 1-7.

the essence of this signifier: the lack of a penis, that is, the fear of castration. In Mulvey's view, cinema is capable of defusing this fear in two ways. One is a combination of voyeurism and sadism. Because the woman is "culpable" for her lack of a penis, her deficiency may be either pardoned or punished. The culmination of most classical films is either a happy ending, that is, the heroine's marriage (e.g. numerous Hitchcock's productions, such as *Marnie*, *Rear Window*, *The Birds*), or her death (e.g. *Psycho*, *Vertigo*, *Rebecca*). Another way in which the fear of castration may be neutralized is, according to Mulvey, turning the female figure into a fetish. Fetishism is a mental structure which reveals the notion of lack, simultaneously replacing this lack with a fetish. Thus, fetishization in Hollywood films assumes the form of an exaggerated white beauty and leads to the cult of white femininity (e.g. Marilyn Monroe in most of her roles).

Mulvey's theory, although undoubtedly ground-breaking in terms of the scope of its impact on generations of film theoreticians, has one fundamental limitation: it refers to the male viewer's reception. In *Visual and Other Pleasures*, Mulvey revised her earlier theory, clarifying that the pleasure of a spectator rests not so much in her/his gender as in the manner of reception, which is inherently male, taking as its point of departure male subjectivity.¹¹ I will conclude with Mulvey's words that I will now quote at length:

. . . it is always possible that the female spectator may find herself so out of key with the pleasure on offer, with its "masculinisation," that the spell of fascination is broken. On the other hand, she may not. She may find herself secretly, unconsciously almost, enjoying the freedom of action and control over the diegetic world that identification with a hero provides.¹²

Intimate Stories

Over recent decades, the visual has been incorporated in many research areas. The visual turn can be found in the most unlikely disciplines. For instance, the digital multimedia culture of today has inspired the newest citizenship studies, such as Nick Stevenson's *Cultural Citizenship. Cosmopolitan Questions*¹³ and Ken Plummer's *Intimate Citizenship. Private Decisions and Public Dialogues*.¹⁴

¹¹ Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

¹² *Ibid.*, 29.

¹³ Nick Stevenson, *Cultural Citizenship: Cosmopolitan Questions* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2003).

¹⁴ Ken Plummer, *Intimate Citizenship: Private Decision and Public Dialogues* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003).

The term “**intimate citizenship**”, first elaborated by Ken Plummer in 2003, describes a range of emerging concerns over the right to choose what people do with their lives, their bodies, identities, feelings, relationships, representations and so forth. Not only can this type of citizenship research lend itself to intersectional analysis (more to follow), but the very term intimate citizenship implies an intersection between the private and the public realms of individual life. Plummer convincingly argues that in our turbulent actuality permeated by all kinds of “intimate troubles”, such as new kinds of bonding either publicly recognized or publicly held in disdain; debates around gender/s and sexualities; and medical debates over new reproductive technologies, we need new discourses to ponder over the practices of these new intimacies. Intimate citizenship theory describes how our private decisions and practices have become intertwined with public institutions and state policies, such as public discourse on sexuality, legal codes, medical system, family policy and the media.

Crucial in Plummer’s discussion of intimate citizenship is the notion of storytelling inherent in literature, everyday conversation and the media. Nick Stevenson’s study of cultural citizenship has already touched upon the controversial nature of the new media: “Are the new media technologies”, Stevenson asks, “responsible for undermining a sense of community by robbing people of participatory public spaces, or are they sites where more diversified relations of solidarity can be made?”¹⁵ He gives consideration to both sides of this question, but importantly notes that the new media, especially the Internet, open up possibilities of an exchange of voices that were formerly excluded from public spaces. The reciprocity and interactivity of the various underground networks, the MUDs (Multi User Dungeons) and so forth, develop communicative skills, bind people together, and often imbue life with art. Here, Plummer’s discussion on the role of storytelling in intimate citizenship is especially worthy of note. In the absence of meta-narratives, argues Plummer, people use their own stories and those of others to “construct” themselves. He makes an important reference to Richard Rorty, whose critique of the pretentiousness of traditional epistemology led him to conclude that no belief is more essential than any other. The implication of this inference is that—since philosophy cannot determine anything—it can only be understood as an “edifying”, or enlightening, conversation. Argues Rorty: “The novel, the movie, and the TV

¹⁵ Nick Stevenson, *op.cit.*, 108.

program have, gradually but steadily, replaced the sermon and the treatise as the principal vehicles of moral change and progress”.¹⁶ Plummer concludes with the words that constitute one of the main facets of feminist ways of knowing: “We need to hear new stories and anticipate how they might change our lives”.¹⁷

I have argued that there has existed, since the sixteenth century, a tradition in women’s art (and “art” is meant here very broadly as fine arts, critical art, novel, personal narrative, film and so forth) that has precisely aimed to bridge the gap between the private and the public.¹⁸ In other words, I see a strong tradition of intimate citizenship in women’s creativity *per se*. I will combine the “old” and the “new” stories of intimate citizenship in order to demonstrate the **artist’s gaze** even as she documents the passage of her own private life into the public sphere. I will begin with the story of an Italian artist, Artemisia Gentileschi and, subsequently, pass on to an example of contemporary Polish critical art.

Susannah and the Elders

Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1653), daughter of a painter, Orazio Gentileschi and Prudentia Montone was born in Rome. Having inherited her talent in art from her father, she first practiced with him and, subsequently, studied perspective with Orazio’s friend, Agostino Tassi. Tassi raped Artemisia twice: in May 1611 and—after nine months—in March 1612. During the trial that her father instigated, Artemisia was tortured. Tassi was briefly imprisoned, and Artemisia married and moved from Rome to Florence.

As many artists of the time, Artemisia found inspiration in the Biblical stories, especially the motif of *Susannah and the Elders*.¹⁹ In the painting, Susannah is bathing in her garden. Having dispatched her maids to bring bath oils, she is disturbed by two licentious elders who try to persuade her to surrender to their sexual wishes. If she does not, they will accuse her of licentiousness, the penalty for which is death. Susannah declines, and the elders carry out their threat. She is sentenced to death. Daniel defends Susannah and exposes the elders’ lechery. They are subsequently executed as false witnesses.

¹⁶ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), xvi.

¹⁷ Plummer, *op.cit.*, 100.

¹⁸ Elzbieta H. Oleksy, “Citizenship Revisited”, in *Intimate Citizenships: Gender, Sexualities, Politics*, ed. Elzbieta Oleksy (New York and London: Routledge, 2009), 5.

¹⁹ Ludovico Carracci, *Susannah and the Elders*. Oil on canvas, 66 ⁷/₈ x 46 ⁷/₈, 1616 (London: The National Gallery).

This and other paintings of the Renaissance depicting the female nude within the masculine economy of rape, shifted connotations of woman's nakedness from the symbolic association with Truth to its modern iconographic "signification of (masculine) desire and its privileged visibility".²⁰ Contrary to such connotations, argues Mary Garrard,

Artemisia's *Susannah* presents us with an image rare in art, of a three dimensional female character who is heroic in the classical sense, for in her struggle against forces ultimately beyond her control, she exhibits a spectrum of human emotions that moves us, as with Oedipus or Achilles, to pity and awe.²¹

Garrard thus concludes that the painting gives us "a reflection, not of the rape itself, but rather of how one young woman felt about her own sexual vulnerability in the year 1610".²²

Susannah and the Elders has been interpreted as an account of Artemisia's internal therapeutic process to come to grips with her trauma. Griselda Pollock takes issue with such readings of the painting, arguing that "the equation of the artist's biographical life with art through the mechanism of expression"²³ regards the works of female artists of the past as exceptions, whereby they function as simple records of personal life. Pollock argues that such interpretations create major problems for feminist art historians who try to reassess intimate stories of women artists. They "have been committed to restoring to visibility women as artists whose significance for us lies in the difference to the existing stories of art: to the canon".²⁴ She proposes to approach Artemisia's art as "the process by which what happens to [the artist] is transformed from event into experience, memory and thus meaning", that is, as "relief of representation".²⁵

²⁰ Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 105.

²¹ Mary D. Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi—The Image of The Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989), 200.

²² *Ibid.*, 208.

²³ Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, 106.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 102.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 108.

Olympia

Meanings, as Annette Kuhn and others have argued, do not reside solely in images; they are “circulated between representation, spectator and social formation”.²⁶ The production of meanings can be analyzed when taking into consideration social and historical contexts, such as in the case of John Berger’s historical renderings of the difference between **nudity** (as being displayed in art) and **nakedness** (as being oneself).²⁷ I also concur with Kuhn that the analysis of images of women in terms of the relationship between representation and sexuality is valid but not always sufficient because, as she notes, “in practice, images are always seen in context; they always have a specific use value in the particular time and place of their consumption”.²⁸ Let me give an example.

In a triptych entitled *Olympia*,²⁹ Katarzyna Kozyra adduces a painting culled from the realm of high art, a famous version of the lifted pose in Edouard Manet’s *Olympia*, which problematized, in the mid-nineteenth century, the formalism of the female nude. It unsettled, as Carol Armstrong argues, “the pretext for the nude, the reading and enjoyment of her body and the status of the male viewer”.³⁰ Kozyra’s work is composed of three large-scale photographs and a twelve-minute video. The first photograph portrays the artist herself as Olympia; the second depicts her on a mobile hospital bed; the third shows an old woman—thus the signifier in the first two photographs is inseparable from the signified. The video records the artist being fed on a drip while undergoing treatment for cancer.

Kozyra’s work can be seen, among other examples of critical art, as a resisting text. As I have argued, its polemicizing aesthetics attempts to counter the scenarios of helplessness that are involved in the act of women looking at women put on display in art.³¹ Women’s **critical art** disempowers the scopophilic gaze by sinking into the muck and mire of physiology, documenting women’s suffering and humiliation and showing women’s bodies age and endure childbirth, abortion and disease. E. Ann Kaplan defined such texts as the ones that employ a “deliberately rational/

²⁶ Annette Kuhn, *The Power of the Image: Essays on the Representation and Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 1992), 31.

²⁷ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London and New York: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1982).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁹ Katarzyna Kozyra, *Olympia*. Photographic triptych, 1996.

³⁰ Carol M. Armstrong, “Edgar Degas and the Representation of the Female Body”, in *The Female Body in Western Culture. Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Susanne Rubin Suleiman (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 230.

³¹ Elżbieta H. Oleksy, “Women’s Pictures and the Politics of Resistance in Poland”, in *Nordic Journal of Women’s Studies* 12, no. 3 (2004): 167.

cognitive stance—a stance often associated with the explicitly political text—rather than any specific aesthetic strategies”.³² It has been argued that such pungent, angry art attracts critics (notably for different reasons) but evokes little visual pleasure. Griselda Pollock rejected such art, for instance in “What’s Wrong with ‘Images of Women’”, and especially the kind of body imagery with an affirmative subtext inherent in the “celebratory imagery of the female genitals”,³³ for reasons that I now quote at length:

The appropriation of woman as body in all forms of representation has spawned within the Women’s Movement a consistent attempt to decolonize the female body, . . . and often serves rather to consolidate the potency of the signification rather than actually to rupture it. . . . I would argue the absolute insufficiency of the notion current in the Women’s Movement, which suggests that women artists can create an alternative imagery outside existing ideological forms.³⁴

Clearly, Pollock rebuffs the idea that women can create oppositional art which would counter the prevailing modes of visualizing women’s bodies. However, in an essay published ten years later she argued that the feminism of a work of art is a matter of “effect”.³⁵ That effect she defines as the way in which a work of art operates within the specific social, political and economic space and in relation to dominant ideologies of femininity. A work of art is feminist, Pollock contends, when it “acts upon, makes demands of, and produces positions for its viewers”,³⁶ that is when it subverts the usual ways of viewing art which are complacent with the signification processes of the dominant, oppressive culture. This subject will be continued in the next section.

³² Ann E. Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation. The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama* (London: Routledge, 1992), 125.

³³ Griselda Pollock, “What’s Wrong With ‘Images of Women?’”, in *The Sexual Subject. A Screen Reader in Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 1992 [1977]), 140.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 140-142.

³⁵ Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker, *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women’s Movement 1970-1985* (London: Pandora Books, 1992 [1987]), 364.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

The Oppositional Gaze

Borrowing from Michel Foucault the concept that in all relations of power “there is necessarily the possibility of resistance”, bell hooks asserts that “the ability to manipulate one’s gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it, opens up the possibility of agency”.³⁷ In other words, by looking critically against the grain, we make our looks change the reality. hooks’ concept of the interrogating look thus goes beyond Mulvey’s theory of the gaze³⁸ for hooks politicizes looking relations; “one looks a certain way in order to resist”,³⁹ she says. hooks conveys her theory on two planes. First, the black female spectator should resist complete identification with the film’s discourse by critically viewing against traditional visual representations of not only race but also gender. Second, she places the agency of critical intervention in the hands of African-American women filmmakers who would disrupt conventional racist and sexist representations of black womanhood.

With these views in mind, I will focus on two films which employ the oppositional gaze: a film adaptation⁴⁰ of the novel by Zora Neale Hurston *Their Eyes Were Watching God*⁴¹ and a Polish film *Man of Marble*.⁴²

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie—a Mulatta also known as Alphabet for the different names white folks have been giving her—discovers her identity while looking at a photograph. Gazing at the picture of all white children but one, taken on the farm where she has been living with her grandma, Janie cannot find her own image and asks: “[W]here is me? Ah don’t see me”. The white folks laugh and someone points to the dark face on the photograph and says: “Dat’s you, Alphabet, don’t you know yo’ ownself?” And Janie exclaims: “Aw, aw! Ah’m colored!”⁴³

Hurston seems to have thus conceived, in the mid-1930s, the concept, which has been the backbone of contemporary identity theories and can be found in recent publications on race, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, gender, age, class and so forth, the work that sees these social differentials not as isolated or cumulative but as intertwining, intersecting, and inter-

³⁷ bell hooks, *Black Looks*, 116.

³⁸ Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure*.

³⁹ bell hooks, *Black Looks*, 16.

⁴⁰ *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Directed by Darnell Martin, 2005.

⁴¹ Zora N. Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978). All quotations are from this edition.

⁴² *Człowiek z marmuru*. Directed by Andrzej Wajda, 1977.

⁴³ Hurston, op.cit., 21.

locking—in Janice Radway’s phrase, as “intricate interdependencies”.⁴⁴ Much of this work deals with the social and cultural construction of the subject as it is discussed in feminist and pro-feminist work on gender, queer studies and antiracist studies of race and ethnicity. By detaching the issue of difference from various essentialisms, be they biological, national or cultural, it marks a critical theoretical departure from previous definitions of identity and explores, in the words of Radway, “the complex, intersecting ways in which people are embedded within multiple, conflicted discourses, practices, and institutions”.⁴⁵

Women of colour, in particular, challenged those varieties of feminism, which perceive the roots of women’s predicament exclusively in their disproportionate access to the means of production, characteristic of wealthy Western civilizations. Disclosing material foundations of women’s social submission, as well as the relationship between the mode of production and women’s status—goals advocated by Marxist feminism—fails to embrace the experience of women of colour, who, similarly to women in numerous Eastern European countries, traditionally had access to the means of production.⁴⁶ In the remainder of the chapter, I will follow this argument in the intersectional analysis of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Man of Marble*.

Their Eyes Were Watching God has been, on several occasions, called “A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Black Woman”,⁴⁷ a description suggested by the fact that the film not only traces the process of Janie Crawford’s artistic empowerment, but also is a narrative of the movement from a private to public space. The film presents Janie’s relationships with three men. It begins when Janie returns to her home in Eatonville, Florida, where she tells her story to an old friend, Phoeby Watson. She then informs Phoeby that “Tea Cake [Janie’s third husband] is gone”. Phoeby responds with: “It’s hard for me to understand what you mean, de way you tell it. And then again Ah’m hard of understandin’ at times”.⁴⁸ Thus Phoeby fulfils a two-fold function in the novel: not only does she “feed” Janie’s story with her interest and thus makes the telling of the story

⁴⁴ Janice Radway, “What’s in a Name? Presidential Address to the American Studies Association 20 November 1998”, *American Quarterly* 51 (1999): 9.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Elżbieta H. Oleksy et al., eds., *Gender in Film and the Media: East-West Dialogues* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2000).

⁴⁷ Lucinda H. MacKethan, *Daughters of Time. Creating Woman’s Voice in Southern Story* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1990), 86.

⁴⁸ Hurston, *op.cit.*, 19.

possible, but also she is elevated from the status of a listener to that of a storyteller. When both women gain understanding, Phoeby by listening to Janie's story, and Janie by finding her sense of self through self-revelation, Phoeby will pass the newly gained knowledge on to the community; she will tell them what Janie asks her to tell them.

A similar process of "awakening" is depicted in Andrzej Wajda's *Man of Marble* which centres on the tragic story of one oppressed individual—bricklayer Mateusz Birkut. The narrative, set in the 1970s with flashbacks to the 1950s, is, briefly, this: Agnieszka (Krystyna Janda), a graduate student in film school, sets out on a project that is both ambitious and politically risky: she wants to produce a film about an exemplary worker and a union activist of the Stalinist period, the bricklayer Birkut. She discovers her theme when, while watching some old newsreels, she spots a huge marble statue of a worker—that of Birkut, as she later discovers. Her interviews with the people who knew the man, who is dead by that time, reveal that Birkut was a national hero whose accomplishment was to lay a thousand bricks in record time. Agnieszka's film shows how Birkut fell from his high position as a figure revered by the party functionaries and became a victim of the communist system.

Wajda's film is just another example of the revisionist project—the critique of Stalinism. The uniqueness of this film, compared to others made roughly at the same time, lies in the fact that Wajda assigns the role of a romantic rebel against the system not to a member of the intelligentsia but to a plebeian—a manual worker. Most outstandingly, however, *Man of Marble* offers the first attempt in Polish post-war productions to openly address the issue of the social construction of gender. The questing heroine, who is the moving force of the narrative, possesses the attributes traditionally associated with men in Polish culture: she is assertive, independent, dynamic and courageous; she derives her power from her ability to think and live independently; and she is the competent manager of a film crew consisting of four men. Responding to the criticisms of *Man of Marble*'s film crew that Krystyna Janda's (Agnieszka) performance in the film was a "caricature", Wajda said this: "I did not agree with this [criticism] for a minute; I wanted for this film to be contemporary, not only in the shots and narration but, above all else, in Agnieszka's way of behaving".⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Jerzy Płazewski et al., eds., *Wajda. Filmy* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1996), 71.

And Janda confessed that Wajda had communicated to her that she “must act in such a way as to make the viewers love her or hate her. One or the other, doesn’t matter, they mustn’t stay indifferent”.⁵⁰ In one of the early sequences in the film, Agnieszka bends her arm at the elbow and kisses her hand—a common masculine gesture of defiance. By this wonderful sleight of hand (quite literally), Janda transgresses the assigned role in the script (she apparently introduced it herself to the script) and reconstructs the narrative. She said that when she had made that gesture she “knew then who [she] was; [she] had to fight singlehandedly against everybody”.⁵¹

What Sharon Willis suggests in reference to transgressive elements of Ridley Scott’s film *Thelma and Louise* very much holds for *Man of Marble*—namely, that it “remobilizes for women viewers the pleasures of phantasmatic identification with embodied agents of travel, speed, force and aggression, pleasures that [women] have historically enjoyed in **cross-gender framework**”, that is, pleasures that, as Laura Mulvey argued in the context of classical Hollywood cinema, women can enjoy only through identification with men.⁵² Willis adds that “the spectacle of women acting like men works to disrupt the apparent naturalness of certain postures when performed by male body”.⁵³ In other words, *Man of Marble* offers a rich context in which signifiers of freedom and power apply to women.

I have argued that Agnieszka (Krystyna Janda) is far from being a supporting character. She takes over the narrative and brings *diegesis* to a spectacular resolution. Even if Polish viewers in the 1970s did not appreciate her transgressive femininity, younger generations’ views are very promising. To them she is not an exemplary action heroine; she is one of them.

Concluding Remarks

In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger investigates a certain continuity in the visual representation of women in art history and advertising. He contends that women have been trained to look at themselves from a masculine perspective because art and advertising position women for the pleasure of a male spectator. Women have thus internalized the tradition of their representation in culture.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 72.

⁵¹ Ibid., 40-2.

⁵² Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure*.

⁵³ Willis quoted in Yvonne Tasker, *Working Girls. Gender and Sexuality in Popular Cinema* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 142.

Berger's conclusions are similar to Mulvey's, but in Berger's case they are based on a historical model rather than psychoanalysis.⁵⁴

In this chapter I have argued that such approaches to women's agency could be dismantled by giving other options and choices to viewers and spectators. We have seen how much pleasure can be derived from looking against the grain, equipping ourselves with an oppositional gaze and liberating ourselves from constraints of culture with their closed models of a viewing mechanism.

Questions for Review and Discussion

- What are the principles of the viewing mechanism based on Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis?
- What is the relationship between representation and agency in art?
- How do certain gaze theories relate to the concept of intimate citizenship?
- What is the meaning of "transgression" in reference to women in the movies?
- What are the viewing strategies that resist and creatively dismantle patriarchal and racist ideology, and empower the spectator?

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CHAPTER 2

Re-visioning Feminism: Progressive Text, Genre and Female Experience in *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (1974)

Joanna Rydzewska

At the time of its release, *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (1974) directed by Martin Scorsese galvanized the critics, who debated whether the film offers a positive female character or whether its seemingly progressive air only veils patriarchal ideology. For example, Roger Ebert hails Alice as “one of the most perceptive, funny, occasionally painful portraits of an American woman [he’s] seen” or “a film that gives us Alice Hyatt: female, thirty-five, undefeated”.¹ Russel E. Davis is a bit more cautious and while he praises the producers “for daring to center a substantial budget upon a woman, who is not a ladylike star either in role or personality”, he expresses his disappointment that the beginning of the film feeds audience expectations that “an outspoken girl . . . will devote her life to duplicating her idol’s success [Alice Faye’s]” only to frustrate them by showing Alice “in a state of unquiet desperation . . . saddled [with] a slob of a husband”.² In the same vein, most of the feminist reviewers were unanimous in labelling the film reactionary and criticizing the film for its conventional depiction of the heroine. They particularly denounce the film for the fact that it is the death of Alice’s husband which forces her to go on to the road and not her own will, and for its ending with the marriage, both of which, in the eyes of the critics, compromise the film as a piece of patriarchal ideology, as they claim, “its main protagonist neither provides a realistic model for women, nor does she make any strong decision for herself”³ or “Alice is strictly non-character—floating, undefined, inconsistent—veering this way and that way”.⁴ Indeed, at the time of the peak of second-wave feminism in the 1970s, Alice’s indecisiveness and conventional reliance on male authority may have seemed

¹ Roger Ebert, *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*. Available at <http://www.rogerebert.com>, (1974) (accessed 15 July 2007).

² Russel E. Davis, “Under the Comic Frosting”, *Jump Cut*, 7 (1975): 3-4. Available at <http://www.ejumpcut.org> (accessed 15 July 2005).

³ Teena Webb and Betsy Martens, “A Hollywood Liberation”, *Jump Cut*, 7 (1975): 4-5. Available at <http://www.ejumpcut.org> (accessed 15 July 2007).

⁴ Karyn Kay and Gerald Peary, “Waitressing for Warner’s”, *Jump Cut*, 7 (1975): 5-7. Available at <http://www.ejumpcut.org> (accessed 15 July 2007).

not only backwards but also utterly incongruous with the prevailing discourses of women's liberation.

However, with hindsight the text may seem not as reactionary as it was initially pronounced and as such poses questions concerning feminist methodology. In order to teach visual culture, the chapter closely analyzes the reasons why the film was labelled **reactionary** by some and **progressive**⁵ by others, taking into account the film's **narrative structure**, **generic conventions** and **the historical context**, alongside the issues relevant to the filmic representation of women. The chapter introduces students to the methodology of **contextual analysis** with a special emphasis on **ideological analysis** but also goes beyond it to show how the immutable categories of progressive and regressive may be inadequate because they do not take into account the dynamic moment of reading in a particular historical, social and political situation. Using Linda Williams' assertion of the importance of the "specificities of the historical moment of film production and the situation of its original audience" and Frederic Jameson's idea of the narrative as the "symbolic act", the chapter shows how to perform a more complex reading of the cultural artefacts' relationship to spectators and how historical audiences may have read the film. It also suggests how one may reveal patriarchal assumptions underlying the filmic representation of women, while also showing how the film text often negotiates the difficult task of both embodying the female experience of the 1970s gender revolution and managing the threat this very revolution poses to the established (patriarchal) order. As such the film offers a unique and valuable insight into the historical moment of 1970s second-wave feminism and the struggles against patriarchal order it waged.

⁵ According to Barbara Klinger, the progressive film refuses the usual "ambition of the classic form toward concealment and transparency". In other words, the progressive text reveals the workings of ideology behind the cultural production. For a useful discussion of reactionary and progressive text see Barbara Klinger "'Cinema/Ideology/Criticism' Revisited: The Progressive Genre", in *Film Genre Reader II*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 74-90.

In terms of the historical context, the film was released at the time of the appearance of the first feminist writings on the representation of women in Hollywood cinema, including articles by such authors as Rosen, Haskell, Mellen and Johnston, as well as the seminal essay by Laura Mulvey "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema".⁶ Amid an atmosphere of the radical questioning of the patriarchal status quo both in social life and cinematic representation, the critics' disappointment with Alice's submissiveness inscribed itself in the prevalent discourses, but as such may be treated as symptomatic of second-wave feminism rhetoric and may disregard other important aspects of the film, which, after all, is credited as starting a spate of interesting films, including *An Unmarried Woman* (Mazursky 1977), *Three Women* (Altman 1977), *The Turning Point* (Ross 1977), *Coma* (Crichton 1977), *Girlfriends* (Weil 1978) and, ultimately, *Alien* (Scott 1979). The question of the inscription of feminist rhetoric in criticism points then to the need for an awareness on the part of students of different kind of methodologies used to analyse visual text and the different evaluations they produce, as Charlotte Brunsdon notes with reference to 1970s films: "There has . . . been a considerable disagreement among feminists about both the political significance of the films, and also about the methodologies it is appropriate to use in assessing this significance".⁷ Thus while *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* may often be perceived as complicit with patriarchy, the meanings in *Alice* are more complicated than simply corroborating it. In view of the repeated claims that the portrayal of Alice's struggles in the public sphere are remarkably "realistic", they could be read as not only or not necessarily placating patriarchy but as exposing its abuses and typifying the difficulties women have in inhabiting the public sphere, a situation that must have been quite a common experience for very many women watching the film. In this respect, it is important for students of visual culture to be sensitive to the film's intricate relationship with the historical moment of 1970s feminism and the spectators' experience of the film text. As Linda Williams asserts, "we need feminist readings that can be more sensitive to specificities of the historical

⁶ See: Marjorie Rosen, *Popcorn Venus: Women, Movies and the American Dream* (New York: Coward McCann & Geoghegan, 1973); Molly Haskell *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973) and Joan Mellen, *Women and their Sexuality in the New Film* (New York: Dell, 1974), and the semiological approach of Claire Johnston, "Women's Cinema as Counter Cinema", in *Notes on Women's Cinema*, ed. Claire Johnson (London: Society for Education in Film and Television, 1973) and psychoanalytic Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", *Screen* 16 (3) (1975), 6–18.

⁷ Charlotte Brunsdon, "Introduction", in *Films for Women*, ed. Charlotte Brunsdon (London: BFI, 1986), 119.

moment of film production and the situation of its original audience”.⁸ In other words, film analysis should contextualize audiences’ understanding of the film’s text within the historical situation, especially how the historical female spectator could possibly read—and what uses she could make of—the contradictions of history in the text in relation to her own lived experience. Therefore, while critics may debate *Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore* as a progressive or a reactionary text, each a contested notion, a more worthwhile approach may be to examine the ways the film incorporates and “manages” female (and male) experiences of the 1970s and what needs the film might have served. In this context, the film critic Pauline Kael’s incisive remarks on the film could give a hint both to the way the film could have been received by 1970s audiences and to the way the film tried to go about the representation of a woman, which at that time did not yet develop conventional means of representation outside of patriarchal paradigm as testified by the current criticism on the “absence” of women on-screen in the preceding decades (cf. Johnston, Mulvey, Haskell, Rosen). Hence, while critics may criticize Alice for her inconsistency or submissiveness, Kael perceives Alice’s exertions and lack of stable identity as a testament to the contradictions of history that women faced in the 1970s, as she writes:

Sometimes a person’s anger and overstatement tell a bigger story that the person knows how to tell. The anger may derive from deprivation of the means to express oneself calmly, “rationally”; people can be too angry to care about balance, while resenting everything that has unbalanced them. *Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore* is a bigger movie for what’s churning around it.⁹

Thus the aim of this chapter is to demonstrate to visual culture students how films often **mediate**¹⁰ and “**manage**” the contradictions of historical experiences and how these films can serve as a site of insight into the patriarchal struggles women wage and the battles they have won. *Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore* offers a particularly interesting picture of the **1970s gender revolution** and the redefinitions in gender relations it entailed: the movement of women from the private sphere of reproduction to the public sphere of production, the difficul-

⁸ Linda Williams, “Feminist Film Theory: *Mildred Pierce* and the Second World War”, in *Female Spectators: Looking at Film and Television*, ed. Deidre Pribram (London: Verso, 1988), 20.

⁹ Pauline Kael, “The Current Cinema: Woman on the Road”, *New Yorker*, (13 January 1975), 77.

¹⁰ Mediation is a term used in film studies, which foregrounds the constructed nature of filmic reality.

ty women have in combining work and motherhood, the changing definitions of the sex roles and the crisis of male authority. The chapter shows that the film embodies those experiences on the level of content but tries to manage (and even deny) them on the level of form. Even though, in the middle part, the film does represent the changes in gender roles commenced by 1970s second-wave feminism as signified by the road movie generic conventions, it tries at the same time to manage them through the use of a number of formal devices, which deny them: the melodrama genre conventions, Alice's husband's death (rather than divorce), the traditional "happy end" with marriage conveyed through the alienating effect of the screwball comedy genre. In this way, the film served, for the spectators, a twofold function: on the one hand, it made sense of and managed the new gender role relations brought about by immense historical, economic and social changes; and on the other hand, it tried to develop new cinematic language that would suit the new female experience.

If one looks closely at the narrative of *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, one immediately becomes aware of the lack of generic coherence on its surface. The beginning especially, but also the film's ending, stand out as completely out of place, in relation to the middle part of the film.¹¹ As one of the critics bemoans, "[the beginning is] . . . an unnecessary little *Wizard of Oz* parody, which has little connection with the rest of the movie and tells us little except that Scorsese had plenty of money to spend"¹² and another critic complains that the ending is a "cop-out" and not realistic at all.¹³ Additionally, the parts thus isolated correspond to different genre: the beginning has a melodramatic bend, the middle part is a road movie, and the ending leans towards screwball comedy. These formal properties of the narrative do more than simply apply different generic conventions to the content: they also, through their generic connotations, create their own **ideological meanings**. Frederic Jameson in his book *The Political Unconscious. Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*¹⁴ argues that forms themselves send ideological messages. Jameson makes his point clear when he analyzes medieval romance and asserts that the notion of "epic" as a form or genre not only signals heroic values or the heroic world but also "social development for

¹¹ While teaching in class, it would be good to show the students a clip of the film's stylized beginning.

¹² Webb and Martens, op. cit.

¹³ Davis, op.cit.

¹⁴ Frederic Jameson. *The Political Unconscious. Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981).

which those values served as a hegemonic ideology”.¹⁵ In other words, cultural artefacts mirror society’s ideological moment and its internal ideological antagonisms, not only in their content but most importantly in their form. In this respect one may ask: what is the significance of the use of the two genres, **the melodrama** and **the screwball comedy**, which are historically linked to female protagonists and audiences and the use of **the road movie genre** in the middle of the film, which has been traditionally linked to male protagonists (though not necessarily to male audiences)?

According to Bordwell and Thompson “A film does not just start, it *begins*. The opening provides a basis for what is to come and initiates us into narrative”;¹⁶ on the other hand “A film does not simply stop; it *ends* . . . by bringing the development to a high point, or *climax*”; therefore, they continue, “it is often useful to compare beginnings and endings”.¹⁷ The beginning of a film then, just like its ending, though for different reasons, is the privileged moment in the narrative nourishing spectators’ expectations, setting the tone and creating the framework for the signifying practices in the film. *Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore* begins with the credits scripted on satin followed by the flashback of Alice as a young girl on a farm which bears striking similarities to the Kansas farm of the film *The Wizard of Oz* (Fleming 1939). Scorsese’s reference to *The Wizard of Oz* is deliberate and partakes significantly in the process of the production of meaning. The opening sequence not only refers the audience to the well-known film but, more importantly, to its symptomatic reading that “the home and the family may seem to be the last refuge of human values”.¹⁸ However, the very beginning with the background song from *Hello Frisco, Hello*, the script lettering of the credits on satin, and the shot of the traditional couple, in which the woman serves the man a dish, refer us not to the isolated instance of a film alone but to the whole strain of 1940s melodramas and women’s films with their ideology of domesticity and female subordination rooted

¹⁵ William C. Dowling, *Jameson, Althusser, Marx: An Introduction to The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 141.

¹⁶ David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art. An Introduction. Seventh Edition* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004), 80.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 57.

in the notion of “**true womanhood**”.¹⁹ From the start, then, the film establishes the patriarchal discourse of the gendered division into **the public** and **private spheres**, with the “woman’s right place” at home.

Just after this stylized prologue, the tracking out shot relocates us to Socorro, New Mexico. Twenty-seven years have elapsed and we can see Alice, a suburban housewife, leaning over the sewing machine. The device that disrupts the equilibrium and sets the narrative in motion at this moment is the death of Alice’s husband. At this juncture the film *really* begins, forcing Alice to make an independent decision concerning her future. This moment is also the time when the film adopts the generic conventions of the road movie and relocates Alice from “the feminine space of the family and reproduction . . . to the masculine space of production”,²⁰ setting her up as a “working girl”. The importance of the middle part’s switch to the traditionally male road movie genre, which rarely before featured women in the main roles, cannot be overstated and should be understood as **a signifying generic practice**, which not only enables the representation of but, first and foremost, signifies the new 1970s female experience which older forms of generic conventions cannot convey. The situation of women in the 1970s became so different from what it had been before that it necessitated the appropriation of a genre which had never before spoken about female experience and had been for a long time regarded as traditionally male. The change from melodrama to the road movie genre to portray women’s experiences speaks of the changed historical situation to which the Hollywood mode of representation had to adjust.

Steven Cohan and Ina R. Hark note that the heydays of the road movie genre not only occurred during periods of “upheaval and dislocation”, a description which definitely fits the 1970s, but also that “a road movie provides a ready space for exploration of the tensions and crises of the historical moment in which it is produced”.²¹

¹⁹ Kathleen Gerson explains that the notion of “true womanhood” originated in the nineteenth century and held that “women are uniquely endowed with the emotional qualities necessary to oversee the private sphere and thus to safeguard society’s moral fabric from the corrupting influence of industrialism”. The notion was also inextricably linked to the ideology of motherhood as “every woman’s ultimate fulfillment and . . . highest priority”. Gerson notices that the period between 1900 and 1945 “saw the consolidation of the ideology of domesticity”. See Gerson, Kathleen, *Hard Choices. How Women Decide about Work, Career, and Motherhood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985). This time was also the heyday of melodrama and woman’s pictures, the carriers of this very ideology. *Alice* was released in 1974. Alice is now 35, about the age of the female spectators whom the film targeted. It means that both Alice’s childhood and adolescence (and possibly the audience’s too) falls in the 1940s and 1950s and that those women knew very well what the film was referring to.

²⁰ Mary A. Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman’s Film of the 1940s* (London: Macmillan, 1987), 138.

²¹ Steven Cohan and Ina R. Hark, eds., *The Road Movie Book* (London: Routledge, 1997), 2.

If, in a larger context, the road movie is characterized by its spiritual quest of the largely marginalized and outlawed protagonists for freedom, then from a specifically gendered point of view it is a masculine quest for freedom from rules and limitations of the bourgeois society marked as feminine. In this context Shari Roberts notes:

While male protagonists use the road to flee femininity, women cannot similarly flee the masculine because of the gendered assumption of the genre. . . . The trend [“feminine” road films] serves to open up the issue of a new type of woman’s film, a subgenre which targets a female audience. The most substantive generic alternation is not that actresses are substituted for male stars, but that the protagonists take to the road not to escape socially coded notions of the feminine, but rather to flee patriarchy and its effects on their lives. The trend, therefore, works to bring concerns associated with women and feminism into the public discourse.²²

Timothy Corrigan further observes that the road movie as a specifically “post-war phenomenon” “responds to the breakdown of the family unit” in this period and “so witnesses the resulting destabilization of male subjectivity and masculine empowerment”.²³ On this account, the death of Donald cannot be analysed on its face value (as most of the critics did in the 1970s) as an index of Alice’s weakness and reliance on male authority. Rather it should be perceived as a symbol of the crisis of paternal authority in the 1970s and the narrative’s management of the very real upset that second-wave feminism and female advancement caused at that time. Thus even though the film never acknowledges in the narrative the existence of Women’s Liberation, it is inexorably **the absent cause** behind it.²⁴

Again Frederic Jameson’s understanding of the narrative’s symbolic function is illuminating in this context. For Jameson,²⁵ the narrative’s denial of certain aspects of history and the fact that it does not address them openly

²² Shari Roberts, “Western Meets Eastwood. Genre and Gender on the Road”, in Cohan and Hark, op. cit., 62.

²³ Corrigan cited in Cohan and Hark, op.cit., 2.

²⁴ Frederic Jameson follows Althusser in his understanding of History as the absent cause, “. . . history is *not* a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise, but that, as an absent cause, it is inaccessible to us except in textual form, and that our approach to it and to the Real itself necessarily passes through its prior textualization, its narrativization in the political unconscious”. In other words, history is inaccessible to us except in textual form. Such a statement is a much more radical claim than “we make up stories about the world to understand it” because it claims that there is no other way to know history but as stories. See Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious. Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 35.

²⁵ Jameson, op.cit.

is not only *not* unusual but also the defining characteristic of the relationship between history and the text. For Jameson, the model for interpretation is the reading of myth and aesthetic structure offered by Claude Lévi-Strauss in his fundamental essay “The Structural Study of Myth”. According to Lévi-Strauss, the basic function of any individual narrative, or the individual formal structure, is the imaginary resolution of a real contradiction, its management. In this way the “text” constitutes “a **symbolic act** whereby real social contradictions, insurmountable in their own terms, find a purely formal resolution in the aesthetic realm”.²⁶ Thus Jameson argues,

ideology is not something which informs or invests symbolic production; rather the aesthetic act is itself ideological, and the production of aesthetic or narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal “solutions” to unresolvable social contradictions.²⁷

In the context of the 1970s, the unresolvable social contradiction was feminist questioning of paternal authority, which patriarchy had to deny. If the narrative had depicted Alice’s divorce, it would have been both an acknowledgement of the Women’s Movement and a questioning of the family values on which the patriarchal system depends. To the contrary, the death of Alice’s husband is an accidental and uncontrollable event, which does not have such discrediting (in patriarchal terms) reverberations. Scorsese himself gives a revealing insight into the event when he says, “I understand a person being taken away from the trap, not of her own accord, but by God’s will. The finger of God comes down, the truck crashes. Because if she left the husband it would be a different story, and then I really wouldn’t be interested in it”.²⁸ To put it crudely, had Alice left her husband, the story would have feminist overtones, the viewpoint that neither Scorsese nor Hollywood wanted to embrace. Robin Wood points out in his article “Images and Women” that feminism had to undergo a fundamental repression of politics for Hollywood so that the Women’s Movement is never mentioned in Hollywood films as a motivating factor. Therefore in film, “there are only individual women who feel personally constrained”.²⁹

²⁶ Ibid., 76.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Anthony Macklin, “It’s a Personal Thing for Me”, *Film Heritage* 10(3) (1975), 15.

²⁹ Robin Wood, “Images and Women”, in *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Patricia Erens (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), 337.

Thus, we could treat the narrative device of a husband's death as reactionary. However, even though it is so, students should also be aware that we also need to assess it not only through what feminism wants to achieve (because it will always be negative as we still live in a patriarchal society and have feminist goals to achieve) but rather what had come before it and what the situation of the contemporary viewer was at that particular moment in time. Also it is important to understand what the "husband death" device actually allows the film to show.

In this view then, the husband's accidental death could be understood as the narrative's "symbolic act" to manage the "gender revolution" at hand. When Jameson explains the meaning of the phrase "symbolic act", he uses Kenneth Burke's assertion that the symbolic act is, on the one hand, a true act but, on the other, "'merely' symbolic, its resolutions imaginary ones that leave the real untouched".³⁰ Dowling in his writings on Jameson's theory succinctly explicates it through a story of an old woman who leaves a dish of milk on her doorstep to fend off evil forces. He concludes that while the old woman's act projects or summons to life the realm of the supernatural (as without it the woman's act would be meaningless), this act at the same time denies it (as long as the magic is successful the evil forces will not get expressed).³¹ We need to understand the death of Donald in the same way: his death summons to life Alice's independence, and allows for the emergence of female subjectivity and the 1970s female experience, and yet at the same time *manages* it on the narrative level. The technique of "explaining away" Alice's "unruly" desire for a singing career (i.e. self-fulfilment, a job outside the home) has the function of alleviating the threat that this very desire poses for the patriarchal status quo and which the film in this way is symbolically managing. It is thus the acknowledgement that films (and other cultural artifacts) are the expression of how a given society gives meaning to and structures its experience of the most important aspects of social reality—in the case of the 1970s, it was second-wave feminism. As Anton Kaes argues:

³⁰ Jameson, op.cit., 81.

³¹ Dowling, op.cit., 124.

Narrative fictions in film (or any other medium) do not exist in a vacuum but are part of a social and economic dynamic; they do not simply mirror society, they comment on it. In their own way, fictions intervene in on-going debates and often give shape to dominant discourses; they negotiate collective fears, hopes, and hidden anxieties; and they supply in their make-believe worlds precisely what cannot be had or said in reality.³²

Narratively speaking, then, the function of the husband's death is literally to allow Alice to "flee patriarchy" and thereby for her story to emerge, while at the same time to manage the crisis of paternal authority.

The film which explicitly situates its heroine's independence within the discourses of the Women's Movement and female independence that could serve as good comparison is *Looking for Mr Goodbar* (Brooks 1977).³³ In this film, Theresa, the main heroine, after a number of quarrels with her dominant, patriarchal father, decides to leave her family home and start living on her own, as she comments to her father, "I can't be myself and stay here". After leaving home, she gets a job as a teacher of deaf children by day and starts to cruise in bars for men whom she brings to her apartment to have sex with at night. After one such encounter, she violently gets killed by a man whom she picks up in a bar. E. Ann Kaplan asserts in her book *Women and Film. Both Sides of the Camera* that "Theresa's greater possibilities for leading her 'own' life and for sexual satisfaction . . . make her a more serious threat to patriarchal discourse and bring down even more hostility and rage on her head".³⁴ Because within the narrative, Theresa, unlike Alice, openly questions the place allocated to her by patriarchy, the narrative has to resort to a much more violent *repression* of her desire to re-establish the patriarchal status quo. Hence while the death of Donald allows Alice to relocate into the public sphere of production, Theresa's own decision precipitates her death at the end of the narrative. The narrative's open location of Theresa's independence within discourses of 1970s feminism then marks the film as a much more evident projection of male fears concerning female independence at that time. The unleashing of the aggression of the symbolically castrated character

³² Anton Kaes, "German Cultural History and the Study of Film. Ten Theses and a Postscript", *New German Critique*, Spring-Summer (1995), 50.

³³ The students could watch the film for comparison as the film offers an utterly patriarchal vision of 1970s second-wave feminism. Also the students could read a chapter on the film "Forms of Phallic Domination in the Contemporary Hollywood Film: Brook's *Looking for Mr Goodbar* (1977)", in *Women and Film. Both Sides of the Camera*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (New York: Routledge, 1990), 73-83.

³⁴ E. Ann Kaplan, *Women and Film. Both Sides of the Camera* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 76.

(George is doubly disempowered the film suggests—as a homosexual and as an uneducated working-class character) on to the professional woman additionally points to the anxiety about the apparent male disempowerment caused by the female advancement in the workplace in the 1970s. It can also point to the displacement of the anxiety and violence of white middle-class men against women on to the disenfranchised groups of men. The comparison between *Alice* and *Mr Goodbar* suggests that the anxiety about female advancement is not only a function of gender but also one of class.

Once the film facilitates and manages Alice's independence through Donald's death, it also enables the emergence of **female subjectivity** on two levels: firstly the middle part of the film actually incorporates the most topical and salient events in the history of American women in the 1970s—second wave feminism, the sexual revolution, the issue of single parenthood, the increasing participation of women in the workforce, and, most of all, growing female independence. Secondly, it disturbs the Mulvey paradigm of passive/female and active/male as it is Alice who actually drives the narrative forward and whose desire is of paramount importance. Alice's independence not only creates the **female subject position** but also actively manages the contradictions of the historical situation for female and, indeed male, spectators. In her 1985 book, *Hard Choices. How Women Decide about Work, Career, and Motherhood*, Kathleen Gerson claims that the defining characteristics of the 1970s for women were the choices they had to make about work and motherhood, the two domains previously kept rigidly separate by ascribing work to the public sphere and motherhood to the private one.³⁵ She argues that the choice those women faced started to follow a new paradigm of what she calls a “subtle revolution”—that is, a change in women's behaviour concerning work and family life—best summarized by two discourse formations labelled “the new working woman” and “the new choice of motherhood”.³⁶ Even though, *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* does not openly inscribe Alice's decision to work in its discourse, it does, nevertheless, contain the unequivocal subtext of female work and independence, and even perhaps the desire for professional fulfilment mediated through Alice's desire to sing, which runs through the middle part of the film. Alice's wish to sing, while grounded in the realm of fantasy rather than reality, is also posited as a very *real* and powerful desire, which drives the

³⁵ Gerson, *op.cit.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.

narrative forward (after all, Alice wants to go to Monterey to resume her work as a singer). And her desire *is* actually satisfied, albeit by a more meagre means, in a roadside diner, thus explicitly establishing Alice as a “working girl”. The film also acknowledges the female discourse through the intertwined discourse of the inseparable quality of women’s work and family decisions. Throughout the middle part of the film Alice is represented, mostly in sympathetic terms, juggling work and motherhood. The film alternates scenes showing Alice at work and scenes of Tommy, alone, in the motel room, which stresses the problematic relationship between female work and motherhood and is an expression of patriarchal assumptions about women’s proper place at home.³⁷ Those scenes, as it were, “naturalize” the problem, that is, present the difficulty in combining motherhood and work (and often the necessity to choose one over the other) as inherent to female work in the way it is not to male work. As Catherine Hakim argues, “this choice does not, yet, arise for men in anything like the same way, although it may do in the future”.³⁸ If the discourse of the linking of working mothers with childhood delinquency is quite stereotypical (and often detrimental to women’s self-perception in relation to work), it does not get too much prominence in the film, serving as a token stereotype.

The re-inscription of Alice into the public sphere makes prominent yet another discourse surrounding female work: “an insistent equation between working women, women’s work and some form of sexual(ised) performance”.³⁹ Alice’s work in show business foregrounds not only the importance of the body but, for women especially, of the sexualized body. When Alice prepares to look for a job, she buys a new dress and goes to the hairdresser to conform to the culturally prescribed standards of female beauty. Moreover, the public space itself into which Alice has moved seems to define her as sexualized and sexually available, a stereotype she tries to defy: When one of the employers asks her to turn around to show her bottom, she defiantly reacts by saying “I don’t sing with my ass”.⁴⁰ Similarly, both in the first restaurant where

³⁷ The students could see a clip of Tommy in the hotel, later getting drunk with Audrey and try to understand how the film makes a link between female work and juvenile delinquency.

³⁸ Catherine Hakim, *Work-Lifestyle Choices in the 21 Century. Preference Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 1.

³⁹ Tasker, *op.cit.*, 3.

⁴⁰ The students could see a clip of this scene as the scene is quite enjoyable, which can later be analyzed in terms of how important it is that we enjoy the scene, does it work to suppress our awareness of the objectification of the female body or do we notice it and how we react to it.

she sings and in Mel and Ruby's diner where she waits on the tables, she is perceived as a sexual object. For example, when Ben approaches her, he assumes that she is available for a sexual relationship. The clients in the diner also openly treat all the waitresses as sexual objects. Flo understands the sexual objectification of women as an inherent feature of patriarchy and wisely uses it to earn more tips by unbuttoning her blouse. So while women both within the diegetic space and in the audience may understand the abuses of patriarchy, the only possibility they have is to play by the rules, which have not been set up by them.

While the middle part of the film follows the conventions of the road movie genre and establishes, as mentioned in the previous paragraphs, the liberal discourse of 1970s feminism, Alice's independence and female subjectivity, the ending again changes its generic references to the screwball comedy genre. Actually, the ending of *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* with Alice and David's reunion stands out in the formal structure of the film on a par with the stylized beginning.⁴¹ The scene of the couple's eventual reunion in Ruby's diner is stagy and unrealistic with all the clients watching and clapping their hands to accompany the couple's kiss. According to David Biskind, Ellen Burstyn wanted Alice to "leave the Kristofferson character and go on to Monterey, where she had a singing gig"; an action more in keeping with what preceded the scene and "the feminist tide of the early 1970s".⁴² However, John Calley, Warner's head of production, objected and said "she has to end up with a man".⁴³ Scorsese was somewhat ambivalent about the scene: on the one hand he wanted an unhappy ending because it was more artsy to have one and on the other he wanted the film to be a commercial success, a task much more easily achievable with the happy ending.⁴⁴ He also, however, felt that the old formulaic ending of marriage neither accounted for the changed historical situation nor suited the transformed mode of representation in the New Hollywood.

Scorsese resolved the issue of how to end the film in an upbeat but not too conventional way by theatricalizing it. Burstyn recalls that "Marty wanted the people in the café to applaud when Kris made his offer, because he always

⁴¹ Again students could see the clip of this scene.

⁴² Peter Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How the Sex-Drugs-and-Rock'n'Roll Generation Saved Hollywood* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), 253.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid. It is quite interesting for the students to notice that in Hollywood terms a "happy ending" is understood in terms of marriage, especially for women.

felt the ending was theatrical, not real, and the applause would underline that. He felt we should admit it”.⁴⁵ Scorsese himself comments that the film “ends happily in the tradition of the old films” with “a flourish and applause and that kind of crazy Brechtian nonsense that I try to do . . . and then we’re back to reality”.⁴⁶ The comment points out beyond all doubt that the scene should not be judged according to the standards of realism—of whether real people behave like that—but against both its generic reference to the **screwball comedy** and the **Brechtian distancing technique**,⁴⁷ and the way they impinge on the meaning of the scene. Steve Neale in his book *Genre and Hollywood* notes that

[screwball comedy] has been seen as a cycle which, in and through its aesthetic characteristics—an energetic mix of slapstick, wisecracks, intricately plotted farce and the comedy of manners combined with vividly eccentric characterization and a disavowable undercurrent of sexual innuendo—served to revivify the institution of marriage and traditional gender relations at a time when both were being bolstered by government policy following periods of intense turbulence, challenge and change during the Jazz Age and the early years of the Great Depression.⁴⁸

It is no coincidence, therefore, that Scorsese chose to use the screwball comedy genre to comment on the 1970s social dissolution of the institution of the marriage. On the surface the reference to the genre of screwball comedy in *Alice* serves the same purpose as in the past: the revivifying of the institution of marriage and traditional gender relations and at the same time the *acknowledgement* of the unprecedented challenge to them. Just like in the 1930s, the institution of marriage was under siege in the 1970s⁴⁹ and Hollywood cinema, as a usual proponent of normative ideology, felt once again compel-

⁴⁵ Ibid., 254.

⁴⁶ Macklin, op.cit., 26.

⁴⁷ “A representation that alienates is one which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar”. The purpose of Brecht’s alienation effect is to make the familiar unfamiliar in order to exact change. According to Brecht the organization of social life is taken for granted out of the habit and predilection to trust the things one is used to: “For it seems impossible to alter what has long not been altered. We are always coming on things that are too obvious for us to bother to understand them”. Thus “to transform himself from general passive acceptance to corresponding state of suspicious inquiry he [man] would need to develop that detached eye with which the great Galileo observed a swinging chandelier”. See Bertold Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre. The Development of an Aesthetic* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1973), 192. Laura Mulvey also talks about “passionate detachment” towards Hollywood cinema. See: Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure*.

⁴⁸ Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (London: Routledge, 2005), 70.

⁴⁹ There was a large increase of 116 percent in divorces between 1965 and 1975. The divorce rate (number of divorces per 1,000 married women) peaked in 1979 at 23. Since then, the divorce rate has dipped to about 21 per 1,000. Available at <http://www.ed.gov/pubs/YouthIndicators/Demographics.html> (accessed 10 December 2007).

led to endorse it. However, the use of the generic conventions of the genre which in the 1970s had for a long time been dead defied its ideological message. While the ending with the marriage wants to recuperate Alice's independence by bringing her to a woman's traditional place, the use of the generic conventions of screwball comedy and the distancing technique undermine the ideological meaning of the message of the "happily ever after" and make the viewers aware of a purely traditionally cinematic meaning of Alice and David's reunion in relation to women's lived experiences in the 1970s. The fact that the traditional ending with marriage is only a "formal solution" on the narrative level to "unresolvable social contradictions" is thus substantiated by its formal properties. Hence, even though the last shots' allusions—to screwball comedy, a big sign of a restaurant reading Monterey (Alice's home place), the mountain whose texture refers us to the satin of the credits, and Alice's decision to set up a family—could be understood through the same patriarchal reference to the ideology of domesticity as the melodramatic exposition, their ideological meaning is discredited through their artificiality and formulaic nature. Consequently, even though *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* ends with marriage, the viewers know that it is a conventional and clichéd happy ending and that its purpose is only to give a symbolic resolution to historical contradictions caused by second-wave feminism and women's very real advancement.

In this context, the coexistence of different genres in *Alice*, as expounded earlier by Jameson when he talks about the way the form mirrors the ideology of a particular social development, signifies the 1970s shift from industrial to post-industrial society and the ways it affects women directly and men implicitly. One of the main characteristics of the **post-industrial society** is the decline of industrial production and the rise of the service economy. Catherine Hakim notes that in the post-industrial world the white-collar occupations not only on the whole create more jobs for women but also produce "an expanding group of gender-neutral skilled occupations", which, she concludes, "offer women almost as many opportunities for promotion, for higher grade and well-paid work as are offered to men".⁵⁰ In contrast, for men the post-industrial society means the decline of jobs based on pure physical skill and a consequent questioning of hegemonic masculinity. Thus *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* registers not only those changes with more women than ever starting to enter the job market in the 1970s, but also the ensuing feeling of the crisis of

⁵⁰ Hakim, op.cit., 69.

masculinity, additionally strengthened by the political events of the Vietnam War and Watergate. In this context, the conventional screwball comedy marriage at the end of *Alice* offers a symbolic solution to Alice's independence and manages, what Yvonne Tasker calls, "the threat of male redundancy"⁵¹ implicitly embodied in the central part of the film and precipitated by Donald's death.

In conclusion, *Alice's* use of the road movie conventions not only generally raises questions concerning patriarchal relations but, more specifically, underscores the fact of female advancement in the 1970s, most notably in the workplace, and ensuing male "anxieties about a perceived feminization of the public sphere".⁵² While the middle part of the film, which follows the road movie conventions, enables the depiction of women's independence, the outer part's references to the melodrama and the screwball comedy try to contain its radical potential to the patriarchal ideology. To look at it from another perspective, the circumscription and repression of female independence in the middle part through patriarchal references at the beginning and ending of the film to an older genre, which traditionally spoke of women's plight under patriarchy, help manage this very independence by offering a purely narrative solution—Alice, the independent woman, is independent only by accident and eventually ends up in the arms of David. By anchoring images of female liberation in the codes in which Hollywood cinema has always spoken to women, the film activates identification by referring to the familiar. The evocation of a traditionally female genre and mode of representation of female experience in *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* activates female audience's visual competence and media literacy so as to point out the transition in the mode of representation of women in Hollywood cinema. It is only apt to note in this context that the road movie conventions have since been used to represent female agency as well as female plight under patriarchy, in such films as *Thelma and Louise* (Scott 1991), *Leaving Normal* (Zwick 1992), *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* (van Sant 1993) or *Boys on the Side* (Ross 1995).

⁵¹ Tasker, op.cit., 5.

⁵² Sue Thornham, "A Good Body'. The Case of/for Feminist Media Studies", *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 6(1) (2003), 89.

To say that *Alice* has patriarchal elements is not, however, to say that *Alice* is a thoroughly patriarchal film. The text's ideological function needs to be understood in the context of Jameson's statement that "ideology is not something which informs or invests symbolic production; rather the aesthetic act is itself ideological".⁵³ The coexistence of different genres in the film to portray female experiences—the melodrama and screwball comedy and the road movie—not only "mirrors" the transitional moment in experiences of women but, more importantly, it registers the transition in a hegemonic ideology concerning women. With this in mind, the question of immutable categories of reactionary or progressive becomes no longer viable because the film is important precisely for apprehending the mutable nature of Hollywood forms dependent on historical context—a tension which metaphorically captured the *Zeitgeist* of the 1970s and thus offered the re-enactment of the very real tensions which ordinary women faced in patriarchy in the 1970s.

Key Films

Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore (Scorsese 1974), *Looking for Mr Goodbar* (Brooks 1977)

Recommended Films

Mildred Pierce (Curtiz 1945), *Klute* (Pakula 1971), *An Unmarried Woman* (Mazursky 1977), *Three Women* (Altman 1977), *Coma* (Crichton 1977), *Girlfriends* (Weil 1978), *Alien* (Scott 1979), *Thelma and Louise* (Scott 1991)

Questions for Review and Discussion

- In what way is *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* different from films that preceded it?
- To what extent is the use of different genres—the melodrama, screwball comedy and the road movie—meaningful and what ideological messages do the different genres send?
- What aspects of the 1970s gender revolution does the film address?

⁵³ Jameson, op.cit., 76.

- How would the meaning of the film change if it depicted Alice divorce Donald rather than his accidental death?
- Which scenes in the film could be read as underpinned by patriarchal ideology and which could be read as exposing its abuses?
- How does the ending of the film impact on the understanding of Alice's independence? Can you compare it to, for example, *Looking for Mr Goodbar*, *Coma* or *Thelma and Louise*?
- What is progressive and reactionary text? Are those notions adequate for feminist analysis? Argue.
- To what extent is Frederic Jameson's notion of the "symbolic act" which "finds imaginary or formal 'solutions' to unresolvable social contradictions" an answer to the contested notions of reactionary and progressive text? How useful is it in the feminist analysis of visual culture?

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CHAPTER 3

Intersectionality and Visual Culture: Approaches, Complexities and Teaching Implications

Aleksandra M. Różalska

Intersectionality is a complex methodology that enables us to approach people's experiences and identities on multiple levels determined by different axes of cultural and social stratification. The approach aims at “**decentring and pluralizing** the (white, western, heterosexual, middle-class) categories of gender and woman by examining how other intersecting categories such as race, ethnicity, nation, class, generation, sexuality, and disability shape or constitute gender and women”.¹ Intersectionality not only acknowledges numerous interrelationships between different social divisions but also examines how they either enhance or counteract each other.

Leslie McCall underlines the importance of intersectionality for feminists: “In fact, feminists are perhaps alone in the academy in the extent to which they have embraced intersectionality—the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations—as itself a central category of analysis. One could even say that intersectionality is the most important theoretical contribution that women's studies, in conjunction with related fields, has made so far”.² I would also add that not only do theoretical feminist developments benefit from the findings of intersectionality, but also intersectionality has a great creative potential for teaching, especially within modules on visual culture and media studies.

Intersectional methods make it possible to identify **multiple interdependencies** between numerous categories that could otherwise remain impossible to examine; therefore it has been used by many researchers and activists representing different disciplines and backgrounds. This feminist approach is inspired by theories of racism, sexism, classism, post-structuralism, and cultural studies, and aims at creating a certain kind of political solidarity among women while recognizing their diversity.³

¹ Dorothe Staunco, “Where Have All the Subjects Gone? Bringing Together the Concepts of Intersectionality and Subjectification”, *NORA* 2 (2003), vol. 11: 2.

² Leslie McCall, “The Complexity of Intersectionality”, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 3 (2005), vol. 30: 1771.

³ Dorota Golańska and Aleksandra M. Różalska, “Introduction”, in *New Subjectivities: Negotiating Citizenship in the Context of Migration and Diversity*, ed. Dorota Golańska and Aleksandra M. Różalska (Łódź: Łódź University Press, 2008), 10.

The intersectional approach can be useful as an analytical tool in examining how certain people (women, ethnic minorities, gays or lesbians, etc.) are positioned as different or marginalized, also in visual culture. The concept of **intersecting categories** is thus helpful in understanding the **heterogeneity** and **diversity** of certain groups on the one hand, but on the other hand it also enables us to examine how mutually interdependent categories construct social hierarchies and lead to exclusion/marginalization from mainstream society. Intersectionality also allows us to go beyond the **dichotomous division** between black/white, male/female, heterosexual/homosexual, thereby promoting the inclusion of **multiple differences**, not only between certain groups but also within them. In this context Gabrielle Griffin and Rosi Braidotti claim that addressing whiteness in the context of race and ethnic relations has been insufficient

since the black-and-white dynamics, whilst offering a symbolic opportunity to analyse power relations determined by biological markers, leaves untouched the whole issue of diversity among groups seemingly of one colour, the intra-group differences that account for many of the most serious racial and ethnicized conflicts in Europe. . . . Whiteness is not only about the relation between “black” and “white” but about the definition of ‘white’ as such. . . . Diversity is not merely or exclusively about colour.⁴

One of the most important assumptions intersectionality results from is that groups of people (nations, women, ethnic minorities, gays, lesbians, etc.) are not homogenous communities deprived of any internal differences or contradicting behaviours and experiences. Consequently, analyses should take into account their complexities and diversity. Therefore, in the feminist context, it calls for a reconceptualization of the category of women in reference to race, class, sexual orientation and so forth, and to examine how these aspects shape the processes of exclusion and inclusion, influence power relations and reinforce discriminatory practices. Therefore, it allows us to acknowledge many identities, sometimes self-excluding, that constitute experiences of a certain group. This, in turn, facilitates the identification of many **inter- and intra-group differences**, and it also allows us to transgress these differences in order to seek similarities and common experiences within and between these groups. Such a multi-dimensional approach offers possibilities to go beyond

⁴ Gabrielle Griffin and Rosi Braidotti, “Whiteness and European Situatedness”, in *Thinking Differently. A Reader in European Women’s Studies*, ed. Gabrielle Griffin and Rosi Braidotti (London: Zed Books, 2002), 227.

the limitations of perceiving differences in a dichotomous way (white/black, young/old, heterosexual/homosexual, working-class/middle-class, etc.) and it challenges the idea that identities can be analyzed only from gender or race perspectives. Thus, intersectionality has pointed out various weaknesses and limitations of feminist discourses by emphasizing their failure to address, for example, women of colour, lesbians and the working class or to grasp and comprehend the complexities of differences. Simultaneously, traditional categories of division should also be deconstructed as they simplify and generalize various experiences. According to McCall, “the deconstruction of **master categories** is understood as part and parcel of the deconstruction of inequality itself. That is, since symbolic violence and material inequalities are rooted in relationships that are defined by race, class, sexuality and gender, the project of deconstructing the normative assumptions of these categories contributes to the possibility of positive social change”.⁵

The above mentioned dichotomous division and power relations based on domination and marginalization are also reflected in the media; hence it is crucial to apply intersectional approaches to research on visual texts and to analyze the representations of **subjectivities** as reflected in visual culture. Simultaneously, the intersectional approach enables us to find differences between certain groups of people or their representations in visual culture, and it is also a powerful tool to identify similarities between those who seemingly have nothing in common.

Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw’s Mapping the Margins

The term “intersectionality” was coined by **Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw**⁶ in her article on women who were victims of domestic violence, wherein she justified the need to approach the problem with reference to the race and ethnicity of battered women because—as her research proved—their experiences significantly vary. She also indicated that the institutions responsible for dealing with violence against women (the police, non-governmental organizations, social workers) are not prepared for the multiple levels of violence that are determined by race or ethnicity differences. Crenshaw draws attention to the

⁵ Leslie McCall, op.cit., 1777.

⁶ Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color”, in *Critical Race Theory. The Key Writings That Formed the Movement*, ed. Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Garry Peller and Kendall Thomas (New York: New Press, 1996).

fact that in many theoretical considerations various forms of **discrimination** are approached separately; that is why they fail to address those experiences that are influenced by various **intersecting categories**: “Although racism and sexism readily intersect in the lives of real people, they seldom do in feminist and antiracist practices. Thus, when the practices expound identity as ‘woman’ or ‘person of color’ as an either/or proposition, they relegate the identity of women of color to a location that resists telling”.⁷ Crenshaw underlines—similarly to other black feminist researchers such as bell hooks or Patricia Hill Collins—that women of colour experience racism differently than do men of colour and that they also suffer from sexism in a different way from white women, which in consequence leads to an inability to examine their positions and their marginalization. She uses intersectionality “to describe the location of women of color both within the overlapping systems of subordination and at the margins of feminism and antiracism”⁸ for this methodology has a great potential to fill in the gap, because it focuses on intersections of different forms of discrimination: **racism, sexism, classism, ageism, homophobia** and so forth. Undoubtedly, Crenshaw’s research was inspired and influenced by the manifesto of the **Combahee River Collective**—a group of black lesbian feminists—entitled “A Black Feminist Statement”, which includes several assumptions that in my opinion provide important fundamentals for the concept of intersectionality:

The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking.⁹

Crenshaw also emphasizes the fundamental setbacks of feminism to address race and class differences:

Among the most troubling political consequences of the failure of antiracist and feminist discourses to address the intersections of racism and patriarchy is the fact that, to the extent they forward the interests of people of color and women, respectively, one analysis often implicitly denies the validity of the

⁷ Ibid., 357.

⁸ Ibid., 367.

⁹ Combahee River Collective, “A Black Feminist Statement”, in *Words of Fire. An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: The New Press, 1995), 232.

other. The failure of feminism to interrogate race means that the resistance strategies of feminism will often replicate and reinforce the subordination of people of color, and the failure of antiracism to interrogate patriarchy means that antiracism will frequently reproduce the subordination of women.¹⁰

Different Approaches to Social Categories

Crenshaw also emphasizes that intersectionality ought not to be understood as **anti-essentialism**, which criticizes perceiving the **categories** as natural factors dividing people but rather treats them as socially constructed. For anti-essentialists, such expressions as “women”, “blacks” or “women of colour” should not be used as they include certain assumptions about categories being “natural” and “essential”.¹¹ Other critics go even further in criticizing categories (especially race) by claiming that they are created and reinforced by scientists. In his book *The Racialization of America*, Yehudi O. Webster writes that racial problems are “made up” and remedies that are designed to overcome them generate further misconceptions because race is simply an arbitrary tool of categorizing people and creating non-existent differences between them. Thinking along racial lines translates to using biological attributes as analytic perspective; using “black” and “white” categorization leads to unnatural classifications because, according to Webster, “races do not exist naturally, but rather they are only the result of a specific system of classification”.¹² Similarly, it is underlined in the context of American society that “in a certain sense it imprisoned some groups and social categories. The main division to black/white, protestant/catholic, Anglo-Saxon/ethnic, old/new immigration, poor/rich confined the whole racial and ethnic groups in networks of social structure”.¹³

Critics who apply intersectional analysis, however, do not entirely agree with this argumentation because the fact that categories are socially constructed does not ultimately mean that they should be abandoned or their importance should be undermined. Denying the relevance of categories can lead to so-called **colour-blindness** (in reference to race) or, in a wider perspective, to **difference-blindness**. According to **Ruth Frankenberg**, who uses a similar

¹⁰ Crenshaw, op.cit., 360.

¹¹ Ibid., 374-375.

¹² Yehudi O. Webster, *Racialization of America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 9.

¹³ Tadeusz Paleczny, *Współczesne społeczeństwo amerykańskie w perspektywie socjologicznej. Zarys podstawowych zagadnień* (Kraków: Jagiellonian University Press, 2002), 161.

term—**colour-evasiveness**—such a standpoint leads also to **power-evasiveness**, which results from the conviction that “we are all the same under the skin; that, culturally, we are converging; that, materially, we have the same chances in U.S. society; and that—the sting in the tail—any failure to achieve is therefore the fault of people of color themselves”.¹⁴ Thus, categories should not be denied but rather redefined to signify not factors assigning people to powerful/powerless, privileged/disadvantaged groups but affirmation of differences between people—**race (difference) cognizance**, to use Frankenberg’s terminology.

In similar manner Crenshaw maintains that “categories have meaning and consequences. . . . In many if not most cases, [the problem] is not the existence of the categories, but rather the particular values attached to them, and the way those values foster and create social hierarchies”.¹⁵ In fact, feminist research as well as studies on various ethnic minorities confirm that these categories are crucial in shaping the **processes of exclusion and inclusion**, social hierarchies, and in determining membership in privileged or marginalized groups. Furthermore, “there is no such thing as an un-raced, un-classed, un-gendered, and un-sexualized subject. We are always already travelling on all roads simultaneously; only our vehicles may differ. Discrimination, thus, proceeds from a certain complex of hierarchical categorical positionings of a subject”.¹⁶ This is also confirmed by research on visual texts, especially film and television, which indicates that stereotypes and generalizations based on race, class and gender play a key role in designing images, creating narratives and reporting on, for example, ethnic minorities. Although for such reasons a complete rejection of categories is impossible, nevertheless they should be approached critically at all times. The categorization of people should be constantly questioned and analyzed from the perspective of **situated knowledge**,¹⁷ with their multidimensionality and complexity taken

¹⁴ Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters. The Social Construction of Whiteness* (London: Routledge, 1993), 14.

¹⁵ Crenshaw, *op.cit.*, 375.

¹⁶ Elahe Haschemi Yekani et al., “Where, When, and How? Contextualizing Intersectionality”, in Golańska and Różalska, *op.cit.*, 24.

¹⁷ The term *situated knowledge* was coined by Donna Haraway to describe a new epistemological standpoint which requires acknowledging the individual social contexts of both the researcher and the subject of research and the relations between them as shaped and conditioned social positionings. Thus, by referring to theories of new materialism, she calls for deconstructing the traditional positivist model which in her opinion allows—in the name of objectivity—for unacceptable simplifications. All knowledge is therefore partial and located, proximate and reflexive. See: Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism as a Site of Discourse on the Privilege of Partial Perspective”, *Feminist Studies* 14/3 (1988): 575-599.

into account. The Intersectionality Research Team also agrees that intersectionality “serves as a permanent reminder to critically reflect upon the scholar’s position within various power structures and cultures of knowledge”.¹⁸ McCall embraces the difficulties of applying intersectional approaches in the following way: “The methodological consequence is to render suspect both the **process of categorization** itself and any research that is based on such categorization, because it inevitably leads to demarcation, and demarcation to exclusion, and exclusion to inequality”.¹⁹ Furthermore, examining the experiences of a certain group from the perspective of only one category is not only reductionist but even impossible as “it is often hard to draw the line between two religious groups in a local community of New York, Chicago, or Los Angeles because these ethnic, racial, cultural, social, and religious boundaries are transgressed in all possible directions leading to emerging such phenomena as multiple religious or ethnic identity or creating its syncretic or hybrid forms”.²⁰

Leslie McCall’s Intersectional Complexities

McCall distinguishes three main approaches to intersectional methodology, which enable multiple analyses of diversity of social experiences; however, each of them understands complexities of categories in a different way, which allows for a wide spectrum of applications:

- **Anticategorical complexity** assumes that the social interdependencies between structures of domination and various groups of people are too complicated, dynamic and multidimensional to be reducible to a few categories which, by nature, lead to generalizations and simplifications of these social processes. What is more, certain categories are given more attention than others, which results in greater inequalities and a deepening of existing differences.

¹⁸ Haschemi Yekani et al., *op.cit.*, 22.

¹⁹ McCall, *op.cit.*, 1777.

²⁰ Paleczny, *op.cit.*, 35 (my translation).

- **Intracategorical complexity** methodology is situated between anticategorical and intercategorical approaches, as it concentrates on a certain group, so its focus is on differences within rather than between groups. It does not centre around inter-group points of intersection but rather problematizes and challenges the assumptions about the homogeneity and sameness of these groups.²¹ In short, McCall defines it as a “single-case intensive rather than comparative” approach.²²
- **Intercategorical complexity** requires the provisional application of existing analytical categories in order to document relationships based on inequalities within various conflicting aspects of social life. Categories are used here strategically, as there are no other sufficient tools available; however, they are used critically.

Patricia Hill Collins’ Matrix of Domination

The model of intersectionality proposed by **Patricia Hill Collins** aims at “reclaiming feminist intellectual traditions”²³ and reconceptualizing the politics of black feminist thought as a critical social theory by working “on the epistemological implications of thinking more fundamentally in intersectional terms about feminist theory and scientific research, that is, scientific knowledge and scientific practice”.²⁴ Collins’ research goes beyond intersectionality understood as interconnected ideas and experiences resulting from different social positioning as she is especially interested in how oppression affects black women. Therefore, she distinguishes between intersectionality and—what she calls—“**the matrix of domination**”, with the former being closely interrelated with the latter: “Intersectionality refers to particular forms of **intersecting oppressions**, for example, intersections of race and gender, or of sexuality and nation. Intersectional paradigms remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing

²¹ McCall, 1771.

²² Ibid., 1786.

²³ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought. Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000), 15.

²⁴ Elahe Haschemi Yekani et al., op.cit., 25.

injustice. In contrast, the matrix of domination refers to how these intersecting oppressions are structurally organized. Regardless of the particular intersections involved, structural, disciplinary, hegemonic and interpersonal **domains of power** reappear across quite different forms of oppression”.²⁵ Collins proposes “replacing additive models of oppression with interlocking ones” which, in her opinion, would present new possibilities of thinking about domination and exclusion: “The significance of seeing race, class, and gender as interlocking systems of oppression is that such an approach fosters a paradigmatic shift of thinking inclusively about other oppressions, such as age, sexual orientation, religion, and ethnicity”.²⁶

The matrix of domination, which permeates all spheres of life and social institutions, also affects popular culture and the media. Therefore, in the context of visual culture, Collins underlines that intersectionality is crucial in investigating “**controlling images**” of black women in, among others areas, popular culture and the media: “From mammies, jezebels, and breeder women of slavery to the smiling Aunt Jemimas on pancake mix boxes, ubiquitous Black prostitutes, and ever-present welfare mothers of contemporary popular culture, negative stereotypes applied to African-American women have been fundamental to Black women’s oppression. . . . These controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life”.²⁷

The concept of the matrix of oppressions is a means to deconstruct **dichotomous divisions** that have traditionally determined the representations of “Others” as well as the **mythical norms** that **enlightened racism** (which Collins calls new racism²⁸) rests upon. The term “enlightened racism” was used by media researcher Christopher P. Campbell²⁹ to describe a new type of discrimination practices that characterize American society nowadays and permeate media texts. The concept is based on two myths—the **myth of assimilation** (strictly connected to the American Dream), which assumes unconditioned integration to the dominant culture and equal possibilities to achieve success to everyone regardless of race, gender, class or any historical conditionings; as well

²⁵ Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 18.

²⁶ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/45a/252.html> (accessed 12 January 2009).

²⁷ Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 5 and 69.

²⁸ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005).

²⁹ Christopher P. Campbell, *Race, Myth and the News* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1995).

as on the **myth of marginalization**, which refers to those who fail to assimilate. Deconstructing both these myths in visual culture enables us to recognize the multiple axes of oppression.

Various studies proved that “Others” have lesser impact on and access to power and social institutions, including the media. On the other hand, certain stereotypes concerning those who diverge from—as **Audre Lorde** puts it—“the mythical norm”, are deeply ingrained in social consciousness and, for this reason, are maintained and reinforced by visual texts. According to Lorde:

Somewhere, on the edge of consciousness, there is what I call a *mythical norm*, which each one of us within our hearts knows “that is not me”. In America, this norm is usually defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure. It is with this mythical norm that the trappings of power reside within this society. Those of us who stand outside that power often identify one way in which we are different, and we assume that to be the primary cause of all oppression, forgetting other distortions around difference, some of which we ourselves may be practicing.³⁰

These norms result in creating the sense of otherness, uncertainty and abnormality felt by certain groups, which consequently results in the **unequal division of power** in society. This is also reflected in the media, which—by devoting limited time and space to certain groups—makes them powerless, marginalized or even absent.

The above mentioned feminist critics—Lorde, Crenshaw and Collins—emphasize the importance of adding the **class** dimension to any examination of the **interlocking system of oppression**. Acknowledging the importance of class is also necessary in analyses of television texts and representations of otherness, for example in TV programs. Television by definition is targeted at middle-class viewers, and this fact is reflected in the narratives. According to Christopher P. Campbell, middle and upper-class images dominate on television whereas the working class—as a less privileged group—is generally neglected and/or marginalized.³¹ Since there are fewer middle-class representatives of, for example, ethnic minorities, vast numbers of viewers are ignored. Many critics underline that class is one of the key elements influencing social positions, however, it should be understood as a resultant of many factors: income, wealth

³⁰ Audre Lorde, “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference”, in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde* (Berkeley: The Crossing Press, 1984), 116.

³¹ Christopher P. Campbell, op.cit., 91.

as well as profession combined with social prestige, and the power associated therewith³²—these determinants decide about privilege and disadvantage, exclusion and inclusion, domination and oppression. That is why intersectional research on racism and sexism is often accompanied by an examination of the class dimension. In Crenshaw's words: "At the simplest level, race, gender, and class are implicated together because the fact of being a woman of color correlates strongly with poverty".³³

Intersectionality and Audience Studies

Intersectionality can also be successfully applied to study **audiences** and different viewing and reception practices. The process of "pluralizing and decentring" audiences, to use the words of the above quoted critic, Dorothe Staunøes, facilitates an investigation of their diversities: on the one hand, it acknowledges various differences between certain groups of people (white women, working-class women, women of colour, etc.); on the other hand it makes it easier to consider multiple experiences within the group (for example within African Americans). **John Fiske** claims that:

Pluralizing the term into "audiences" at least recognizes that there are differences between the viewers of any program that must be taken into account. It recognizes that we are not a homogenous society, but that our social system is crisscrossed by axes of class, gender, race, age, nationality, region, politics, religion, and so on, all of which produce more or less strongly marked differences, and that these social differences relate among each other in a complexity of ways that always involves the dimension of power. Social power is unequally distributed in society, so any set of social relations necessarily involves power and resistance, domination and subordination. The term "audiences" recognizes the heterogeneity of society and allows for that heterogeneity to be understood in terms of power relations.³⁴

In this context, it is crucial to understand that "**diversity of readings** is not the same as diversity of programs, and a diversity of readings and the subsequent diversity of subcultural identities is crucial if the popular is to be seen as a set of forces for social change".³⁵ Therefore, intersectionality serves as a

³² Tadeusz Paleczny, op.cit., 103 (my translation).

³³ Crenshaw, op.cit., 358.

³⁴ John Fiske, *Television Culture* (London: Routledge, 1987), 17.

³⁵ Ibid., 326.

means of examining different readings of the same text as well as how those interpretations depend on specific social and ideological conditions and practices related to various categories. According to Fiske, television—but in a wider sense I would also say other visual media—“is decentered, diverse, located in the multiplicity of its modes and moments of reception. Television is the plurality of its reading practices, the democracy of its pleasures, and it can only be understood in its fragments. It promotes and provokes a **network of resistances** to its own power whose attempt to homogenize and hegemonize breaks down on the instability and multiplicity of its meanings and pleasures”.³⁶

There are various methods of examining audiences and their responses to different visual texts; however, I would like to focus on and give some examples of **open interviews**, which in my opinion provide interesting and in-depth results impossible to achieve when other methods are used. **Ruth Frankenberg**'s book *The Social Construction of Whiteness. White Women, Race Matters* provides an interesting application of open interviews to discuss race relations and the meaning of whiteness. Frankenberg talked to a group of white women of different social background and status, education as well as sexual orientation about their perception of race and their own “colour” in everyday life and ordinary contacts with other people. Her research shows that the whites oftentimes treat race issues as well as racism as something “external” that does not concern them directly rather than as a phenomenon which influences and shapes their everyday experiences, identities and self-image. Race is associated exclusively with different skin colour, and not, for example, as a source of unequal power relations or the cause of discrimination, marginalization and disadvantage. In similar vein, the struggle against racism is understood as something voluntary—“an act of compassion for an ‘other,’ an optional, extra project, but not one intimately and organically linked to our own lives. Racism can, in short, be conceived as something external to us rather than as a system that shapes our daily experiences and sense of self”.³⁷ Frankenberg proposes to question race privilege and the dominance of whiteness as well as “their seeming normativity, their structured invisibility”. I find her approach extremely useful also in analyses of visual culture as the concept of **white race normativity** and therefore dominance need further investigation in

³⁶ Ibid., 324.

³⁷ Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters. The Social Construction of Whiteness* (London: Routledge, 1993), 6.

film and television studies. Media, among other institutions, have reinforced racism, sexism and other processes of exclusion, and they have sustained the **category of whiteness** as invisible, yet superior. She underlines that “whiteness refers to a set of locations that are historically, socially, politically and culturally produced and, moreover, are intrinsically linked to unfolding relations of domination. Naming ‘whiteness’ displaces it from the unmarked, unnamed status that is itself an effect of dominance”.³⁸ Another critic, who analyzed the difficulties in noticing whiteness and in examining its cultural representations is **Richard Dyer**.³⁹ Both Frankenberg’s and Dyer’s approaches are in my opinion extremely useful and therefore recommended in classes on visual culture as they are very creative (students can design their interview questions) and innovative (in each case the results will be different depending on the questions asked and students’ personal engagement).

Sample Analysis for Students of Gender and Visual Culture Courses: Representations of Ethnic Minorities in American Television News

The sample analysis is to show that students can use intersectionality methodologies in a number of ways depending on what media texts they choose, whether they are interested in audiences’ reception, what kind of representations they would like to examine as well as which social categories they focus on.

The research on the **representations of ethnic minorities** in American television news in this case is undertaken on two levels: content analysis of television texts in both qualitative and quantitative perspective is applied. Material for the analysis consists of the evening news recorded from primetime American network television. For comparative reasons, the material includes programs from two channels: NBC (*NBC News at 11*) and FOX (*FOX News at 10*), which were recorded within four weeks from different periods of the year (October, November, December, January). Network commercial television channels are chosen due to their popularity and the easy availability of their programs to wide audiences. Similar research can be undertaken on a selection of public or cable TV channels. The material length and the choice of TV stations need to be carefully justified—in this case NBC and FOX are

³⁸ Ibid., 6.

³⁹ Richard Dyer, “White”, in *Visual Culture: the Reader*, ed. Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall (London: Sage, 1999), 457-467.

commonly regarded as representing different political and social views (FOX is considered more conservative, with a preference for the Republican Party, whereas NBC is perceived as more liberal).

The research rests on an analysis of the representations of ethnic minorities (African, Latin and Native Americans) with reference to first of all gender, but also to other categories such as class and age. It aims at examining how intersections of race/ethnicity and gender influence the images as well as at identifying the main thematic areas within which representations of these groups are the most visible.

Consequently, there are six main groups that are closely investigated: African women and men, Latinos and Latinas as well as Native American women and men. There are a few research issues that students may find particularly relevant in reference to these representations:

- the context of the news (positive or negative);
- the age of the people covered in the news (child, teenager, adult or elderly);
- what **thematic areas** the news concerns (for example politics, crime, education, science, family, show business, sport, etc.); it is, of course, possible to conduct further studies within each area: certain roles can be distinguished within the theme of crime (perpetrator, victim, witness, law-enforcement institutions), politics (leader, politician, protests, etc.), science and education (expert, teacher, student), and so on;
- television staff: how many journalists, reporters, newscasters belong to the analyzed ethnic groups.

Each of these research themes provides in-depth knowledge about particular aspects of ethnic minorities' participation in the news and in television institutions in a more general context. Firstly, it is determined if the news deliver positive or negative information about these groups. Secondly, in accordance with intersectionality, I look at the images from the perspective of race/ethnicity, gender, class and age, which gives a more complex and complete image of intra-group diversity. Thirdly, the focus on certain thematic areas enables one to take a closer look at **minorities' experiences** in narrower contexts and to assess which topics prevail when it comes to representing a given group. Of course these themes are tightly interrelated, for example news

on crime contains a lot of details concerning family, poverty and unemployment, and they provide an interesting insight into not only race but also class relations in American society. Finally, the fourth question aims at assessing whether **institutional racism** exists, examining minorities' access to television professions and newscasts and their impact on the news content or material selection.

The recommended method for examining these research questions, a method that can incorporate intersectional analysis, is **case study**, which can be described as a close reading of a particular news story or its coverage. McCall underlines that this facilitates analyses of intracategorical complexity:

Case studies are in-depth studies of a single group or culture or site and have long been associated with the more qualitative side of the divide between qualitative and quantitative methods in the social sciences. Case studies and qualitative research more generally have always been distinguished by their ability to delve into the complexities of social life—to reveal diversity, variation, and heterogeneity where quantitative researchers see singularity, sameness, and homogeneity.⁴⁰

The method of case study minimizes the risk of generalization and simplifications which are difficult to avoid when ethnic minorities are analyzed. What is more, focusing on African or Latin Americans always involves some sort of comparison and/or confrontation with the white majority understood as a privileged and dominant group but also in very homogenous terms. As a consequence, examining the diversity and multiple experiences of minority groups may simultaneously lead to ignoring internal differences within the white majority by treating it exclusively as a reference group. Therefore, a combination of intra- and intercategory approach would be useful here although such a comparative and multidimensional study is a large project. Therefore, one of the teaching recommendations would be to discuss in class the possible danger that such research can be too general and reductionist. Students should be aware of these difficulties because, as McCall claims:

The categorical space can become very complicated with the addition of any one analytical category to the analysis because it requires an investigation of the multiple groups that constitute the category. For example, the incorporation of gender as an analytical category into such an analysis assumes that two

⁴⁰ McCall, *op.cit.*, 1782.

groups will be compared systematically—men and women. If the category of class is incorporated, then gender must be cross-classified with class, which is composed (for simplicity) of three categories (working, middle, and upper), thus creating six groups. If race-ethnicity is incorporated into the analysis, and it consists of only two groups, then the number of groups expands to twelve.⁴¹

Thus, if an intercategorical approach is applied, the intersecting categories should be reduced (for example to ethnicity, gender and class) in order to reveal the experiences of, say, Latin-American working-class women. Then the results could be compared with a similar study of African-American women. McCall also uses example connected to Hispanics in the United States:

If researchers want to examine more detailed ethnic groups within racial groups—say, Cubans, Mexicans, and Puerto Ricans within the broader category of Latino/as—it becomes necessary to limit other dimensions of the analysis, such as the gender or class dimensions, for the sake of comprehension. In this respect, intercategorical researchers face some of the same trade-offs between scale and coherence or difference and sameness that intracategorical researchers face in determining the appropriate level of detail for their studies.⁴²

Another suggestion for teaching is to juxtapose the results of evening news analysis and of other television texts, such as for example TV series that are also broadcast during primetime. Such an approach—in accordance with the idea of **intertextuality**—certainly enriches and complements the overall conclusions about the dominant representations of ethnic minorities on primetime television. Intertextuality assumes that media should be examined with reference to mutual interrelationships and influences between different programs, texts, conventions and genres. Therefore, approaching television texts from the comparative perspective of, for instance, fictional and non-fictional representations adds another dimension to the analysis and enriches the conclusions.

Implications for Teaching

Combining intersectionality and studies on visual culture provides unique opportunities to constantly question and challenge differences as reflected in

⁴¹ Ibid., 1786.

⁴² Ibid., 1786-1787.

media texts as well as to deconstruct various cultural myths and stereotypes thereby reinforced. By acknowledging multiple identities and subjectivities on the one hand, and the significance of the matrix of domination in creating and reading media texts on the other hand, it is possible to identify multiple axes of oppressions which marginalize, ridicule or ignore certain groups.

Examples of Research Assignments for Students in Classes on Visual Culture and Gender

- An analysis of how people of different gender, race and ethnicity are represented in advertising (press, television, etc.) using the comparative perspective or a method of “changing roles” (playing with categories by exchanging white with black, black with Asian, man with woman, young woman with an old one, etc.).
- Intersectionality as a method to examine representations, and at the same time as a means of critiquing them, for example the intracategorical analysis of the images of Latin Americans in crime television series (*Miami Vice* and *Dexter*, in a comparative perspective).
- Intercategorical analysis of the relationships between ethnic groups in films such as *Do the Right Thing* or *Crash*.
- The concept of the matrix of domination used to examine how certain categories contribute to being privileged/marginalized, included/excluded from the media (films, television series, news, etc.).
- An analysis of readings/interpretations of the same text (film, TV series, talk show, news service, etc.) of different spectators using the method of open interviews. For example, how viewers of different age, gender and education read a selected television series. Intersectionality as a method to approach audiences and to identify the possible receptions of the same text by people of different race, class and gender as well as of different cultural and social experiences (similarly to Jacqueline Bobo’s research on interpretations of *The Color Purple* or to Ruth Frankenberg’s method of interviewing black and white women of different backgrounds about their perceptions of race and racism).

Suggested Films

Babel (Inarritu 2006), *Body of Lies* (Scott 2008), *The Color Purple* (Spielberg 1985), *Constant Gardner* (Meirelles 2005), *Crash* (Higginis 2004), *Do the Right Thing* (Lee 1989), *Far From Heaven* (Haynes 2002), *Jungle Fever* (Lee 1991), *Monster's Ball* (Forster 2001), *Training Day* (Fuqua 2001), *Set It Off* (Gray 1996), *Waiting for Exhale* (Whitaker 1995)

Suggested Television Series

Ally McBeal (1997-2002), *Cold Case* (since 2003), *CSI Miami* (since 2002), *Desperate Housewives* (since 2004), *Dexter* (2006-2007), *ER* (since 1994), *Grey's Anatomy* (since 2005), *Men in Trees* (since 2006), *Prison Break* (since 2005), *Sex in the City* (1998-2004), *Sleeper Cell* (2005-2006), *X Files* (1993-2002), *24* (since 2001)

Questions for Review and Discussion

- Explain the concept of “the matrix of domination” and the importance of the intersectional approach in identifying multiple axes of oppression.
- How do different critics deconstruct or question master categories? Is it possible to deny the existence of certain categories, such as race, class, gender, age and sexual orientation?
- Summarize the three methodologies of intersectionality developed by Leslie McCall and give examples of how each method can be applied to study visual culture.
- What does intertextuality mean and what possibilities does it offer for studying media texts?
- How is the idea of colour-blindness (or difference-blindness) connected to the myth of assimilation? Give examples of media texts that you find “difference-blind”.
- How is the phenomenon of “enlightened racism” manifested in the media?
- What does Audre Lorde understand by “the mythical norms” and how can intersectionality be used to question them?

- Explain the concept of “controlling images” used by Patricia Hill Collins and the potential of intersectional methods to deconstruct them.
- Give one example of analyzing representations in visual culture using a selected intersectional approach.
- Give one example of examining audience responses to media texts using a selected intersectional approach.

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CHAPTER 4

Zooming in on Photography Online: Three Hundred and Sixty Five Flickering Selves

Redi Koobak

Photography has the unappealing reputation of being the most realistic, therefore facile, of the mimetic arts.

Susan Sontag¹

In this chapter I aim to unravel some feminist threads of discussions on photography, more specifically exploring ways of looking at and methods of analysing self-portrait photography online. I intend to underline that photography is more than a means of visual representation, it is in fact a “way of seeing” the world—and the self—in historically, culturally and socially specific ways. Furthermore, I will argue, with the help of Celia Lury, that photography has “transformed contemporary self-understandings”² and acts as both a technological and perceptual prosthesis or extension to the new type of contemporary “experimental individual”. I take self-portraits as my focus in the hope of exemplifying how this move from the socially and naturally constructed individual has and is shifting toward a technologically enabled one, to the extent that the entwinement of technology with the production of identity can no longer be meaningfully separated from the human subject. Reflecting on my participation in the “365 days” project on *www.flickr.com*, I will analyse two examples—one of which I tentatively call a snapshot and the other a more theatrical, performative photograph. The choice of these particular photographs is somewhat arbitrary and the analysis bound to remain sketchy and generalising due to the limited scope of the chapter.

¹ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin Books, 1979), 51.

² Celia Lury, *Prosthetic Culture: Photography, Memory and Identity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 3.

Through zooming in on the details and contexts of these two specific photographs, I want to offer some practical guidelines for looking at, around and behind pictures and suggest possible directions an analysis of photographs can take within a research process based on the “epistemology of doing”.³

Photography as a Feminist Issue

Insofar as visibility and visual culture is a feminist issue, photography is a matter of concern for feminism. It should, however, be regarded not only as a source of anxiety and frustration, but also as a source of inspiration and, possibly, a site of resistance. The visual aspect of culture, which includes all kinds of imagery, signs and pictorial symbols, is often deemed as “the most powerful component of the complex and sophisticated systems of communication”.⁴ The ways in which we affect and are affected by visual images in our everyday lives are central to our experience of our surroundings and importantly of ourselves—we use images to represent, make meaning of and communicate in the world around us. In the age of new booming technologies that make image production, distribution and consumption an increasingly widespread phenomenon, the task of reflecting on the ways in which our culture is an increasingly **visual culture** and the challenge of making sense of what negotiating so many images in our daily lives entails becomes all the more urgent.⁵ Since discussions of the visual necessarily evoke questions of and anxieties about power, the study of visual cultures, including photography, has been and continues to be an unarguably feminist issue.

In fact, feminism has “long acknowledged that **visuality** (the conditions of how we see and make meaning of what we see) is one of the key modes by which gender is culturally inscribed in Western culture”.⁶

³ Natalia Rybas and Radhika Gajjala, “Developing Cyberethnographic Research Methods for Understanding Digitally Mediated Identities”, *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 8(3), Art. 35, (2007), <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/282/619>.

⁴ Fiona Carson and Claire Pajaczkowska, “Issues in Feminist Visual Culture”, in *Feminist Visual Culture*, ed. Fiona Carson and Claire Pajaczkowska (New York: Routledge 2001), 1.

⁵ See, for example, William J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*; Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking*; Nicholas Mirzoeff, op.cit.; Amelia Jones, *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).

⁶ Amelia Jones, *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, 1.

As has often been pointed out by feminist scholars who have considered the **politics of representation** within the fields of feminist film theory, photography and art history as well as cultural and media studies,⁷ visual images not only present power relations in a narrative form but these relations are embedded “within their very formal structure and in their conditions of distribution”.⁸ Thus, an alliance between visual culture studies, including studies of photography, and feminism makes sense since they share a common interest in positioning culture and art in a more general sense, without the pretentious capital A, within social and political contexts with the help of interdisciplinary methodologies. Moreover, feminism—which, it has to be acknowledged, is not an easily or singularly defined discourse and can mean and include many things, however, defining and policing its borders would be unproductive here—may be said to have played “a central role in the development of critical models of reading visual imagery in visually oriented arms of media, new media and cultural studies”,⁹ although its role is not always recognized as such.

In a general sense of the word, **representation** refers to a process of using language and images to construct the world around us and make meaning from it.¹⁰ Throughout various debates in history, representations have been seen as reflecting the world as it is, so to speak mirroring it back to us as a form of **mimesis** or imitation, or they have been considered from a **social constructionist** point of view, which argues that the world is not simply reflected back to us through the systems of representation that we deploy, but we in fact make meaning of the material world through these systems in specific cultural contexts. When contemplating the visual, we can look at many different **systems of representation**. We can focus on, for example, a film, a painting, a photograph, an advertisement, or a television programme. Clearly, the rules and conventions of different means and forms of representation vary, as do the cultural meanings we attribute to them, and sometimes it is not easy to distinguish between the idea of reflection or mimesis, and representation as construction of the material world, especially when it comes to photography (more on this in Chapter 9).

⁷ See, for example, Laura Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure*, Rosemary Betterton, *Looking On: Images of Femininity in the Visual Arts and Media* (London: Pandora/RKP, 1987); Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall, eds., *Visual Culture: The Reader*, Amelia Jones, *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*.

⁸ Amelia Jones, *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, 3.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁰ Sturken and Cartwright, *op.cit.*, 15.

Interestingly, as Sturken and Cartwright¹¹ point out, a lot of images that belong to the spheres of fine art, public art, advertising, popular culture, alternative media, the news media and science are produced through photographic or electronic technologies, a fact that sometimes gets understated or overlooked. These images are **photographs** and should be viewed as such because there are certain important features and paradoxical moments that differentiate photographs from other kinds of images. More often than not, a camera image is still regarded as “an unmediated copy of the world, a trace of reality skimmed off the very surface of life”.¹² Although the creation of a photograph through a camera lens always entails a certain degree of subjective choice through selection, framing and personalization, “[a]ll camera-generated images, be they photographic, cinematic, or electronic images (video or computer-generated), bear the cultural legacy of still photography which historically has been regarded as a more objective practice than, say, painting or drawing”.¹³ The perception of camera-generated images as simultaneously subjective and objective forms is then one of the central tensions of photography.

The **myth of photographic truth** still haunts the common understandings and uses of photographs and renders them seemingly neutral in their structures of meaning. Susan Sontag aptly notes: “Photographs furnish evidence. Something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we’re shown a photograph of it”.¹⁴ For example, in everyday settings photographs are often associated with the truth-value. It is commonly used as proof of certain events such as family gatherings or birthday parties having taken place or as evidence that someone was alive at a certain time and place in history. In the same vein, photography carries the burden of **positivist science** which has used the photographic camera as a tool for establishing **empirical** truths, for registering reality, as the machines were and often still are taken to be more reliable than humans for representing the world accurately. But clearly photographs are not simply mimetic of the world they show and can tell different “truths” depending on the social and historical context. They are produced and reproduced, displayed and redisplayed, reduced, cropped, retouched, doctored, sold and bought, to specific and diverse effects in count-

¹¹ Ibid., 16.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Sontag, *op.cit.*, 5.

less different contexts. Therefore, the conditions under which something is defined as a photograph and what that means may not be so straightforward.

The confusion about what photographs actually are remains and neither are the ways to study photographs necessarily exhausted, particularly considering the changing commercial and technological factors involved: new modes of production of photography, new types of audiences and new spaces of consumption. On the one hand, photographs—especially amateur snapshots—are everywhere, yet on the other hand, they remain somewhat invisible, almost non-objects in their everyday ubiquity. We are all involved in taking photographs, looking at them, carrying them around, keeping them in frames on the walls and shelves or carefully preserved in albums, sharing them with family and friends and, in fact, with the help of the Internet and mobile phones, with the whole world at a simple mouse click. What makes photographs elusive, then, despite their pervasive presence and “naturalised” commonality as everyday objects, is the fact that they are inextricably interwoven into the very practices of our daily lives, practices that are so routine that we are not always even aware of them.

Jessica Evans finds that feminism has had a somewhat uneasy relationship towards photography, as feminist work on the politics of representation and visual image “has tended to privilege *textual* investigations based on the rhetoric of the image, drawing out the *effects* of representation in terms of ideology and power”.¹⁵ What this means is that images produced with the help of a camera lens tend often to be viewed as “visual constructions, as texts, like any other”, as if photography were only “the effect or product of a set of determinations that are logically prior”,¹⁶ disregarding the relevance of the ways in which photographs are produced, distributed and used, what their movement and circulation involves and means. Thus, whatever the particular object under scrutiny in the earlier feminist analyses of images—a film, a painting, a photograph, an advertisement or television program—“the politics of representation turns out to be the same politics”.¹⁷ Although somewhat outdated in her approach considering the changes in the directions of research on visual culture in recent years, Evans is importantly highlighting the possible limitations of

¹⁵ Jessica Evans, “Photography”, in *Feminist Visual Culture*, ed. Fiona Carson and Claire Pajaczkowska (New York: Routledge, 2001), 105.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

sticking to the **representational approach to photography**, that is, analyzing photography as just texts and scripts. She calls for considering the extent to which we can think about:

the specificities of a medium, its conditions of production, distribution, consumption and practical use, without subsuming them under a more universalising assumption that since its products are “representations,” this is only what we must analyse. When we are thinking about photography, we should keep in mind the way it is often discursively put to use in order to make appearances equate with reality; to reduce the field of what can be known to what is observable; to entice us with “evidence” for which viewers are interpolated as “witnesses.” We should be wary of claims to “see clearly” and without distortion, for these are always entangled with power relations and with *a priori* frameworks that regulate the relationship of seeing to knowing.¹⁸

Moreover, it is important to note that photographic history has often been investigated from a **historiographic perspective**, grounded in the tropes of traditional art history. Clearly, photography as art, or fine art photography, constitutes only a tiny bit of the vast array of photographs that are taken and used, thus more diverse approaches are needed to study photographs. All photographs could (though, of course, not necessarily should) be studied—from everyday snapshots to family albums to advertisements and so on, and not only the “artistic” images that are technically sophisticated and aesthetically pleasing.

In the light of current changes in the ways in which the photography of “the ordinary people” has become more visible and accessible, it is crucial to look at photographs not only in terms of artistic aesthetics or of scientific description—as many critics have done and still continue to do—but as cultural documents that shed light on historically, culturally and socially specific **ways of seeing** the world as well as the self inhabiting the world. John Berger’s understanding of the phrase “ways of seeing” which comes close to the concerns of more recent writers is important to note here. His argument in his book *Ways of Seeing* from 1972 makes it clear that images of social difference work not simply by what they show but also by the kind of seeing that they invite. He emphasizes that “we never look just at one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves”,¹⁹ importantly

¹⁸ Ibid., 107.

¹⁹ Berger, op.cit., 9.

establishing the connection between the image and its spectator. Taking an image seriously requires reflecting on how it positions you, the viewer, in relation to it. Furthermore, we should equally importantly pay attention to the **practices of photography**, not just focusing on the images and what they represent, but on the embodied social practices and performances involved, the ways of looking for, framing and taking photographs, posing for cameras as well as editing, displaying and circulating photographs.

Having sketched out some possible stakes feminism may have in considering visibility in general and photography in particular, I now explore the ways in which the digitization of photography is seen as a new extension of the image's role in producing self-knowledge and personhood and what implications this might have for analysing and understanding photography online. More specifically, I consider self-portrait photography and explore the contexts of a *flickr* group called "365 days".

Performing Flickering Selves in Prosthetic Culture

In order to briefly establish the context for my discussion of self-portrait photography, I will draw on Celia Lury's work and provide some possible starting points for trying to conceptualise contemporary digital imaging culture, notably the popular or personal photography and how the digital turn to the self has brought about shifts in the way bodies are imagined and perceived, selves are performed and negotiated, people are monitored, by themselves and others. Lury suggests in her book *Prosthetic Culture: Photography, Memory and Identity* that the way in which we achieve our self-identities is changing.²⁰ She elaborates on the emergence of a new type of "**experimental individual**" whom she sees as an extension of the classic, freely determining and self-responsible "possessive individual" of modern liberal democracies. According to Lury, vision and self-knowledge are "inextricably and productively intertwined in modern Euro-American societies" and photography "offers one way into an exploration of the historically specific and dynamic relations between seeing and knowing".²¹ Furthermore, she asserts that photography has transformed our current self-understandings and acts as both a technological and perceptual extension to the new type of "experimental individual" insofar

²⁰ Lury, *op.cit.*, 1.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

as photographs are not merely representing but enabling ways of seeing, which in contemporary culture has come to mean **seeing photographically**.

Lury also locates these changes in the nature of identity in what she describes as a current shift from a “synthetic” to a “**prosthetic culture**”. She suggests that in this culture “the subject as individual passes beyond the mirror stage of self-knowledge, of reflection of self, into that of self-extension”,²² referring to what Barthes calls “the advent of myself as other”.²³ The prosthesis which may then be either mechanical or perceptual—we can easily think here of our contemporary attachment to digital cameras and sharing of our lives on social network sites which is becoming increasingly popular—is what enables that **self-extension**. To make her point even more pronounced, she says “[i]n adopting/adapting a prosthesis, the person creates (or is created by) a self-identity that is no longer defined by the edict ‘I think, therefore I am’; rather, he or she is constituted in the relation ‘I can, therefore I am’”.²⁴ The transformation of a socially and naturally constructed individual into a technologically enabled one then translates into a situation where the newly “experimental individual” has the potential and capability to perform in a hi-tech theatre of possible “selves to be”. On exploring the “prosthetic”, Lury relies on Baudrillard’s thesis in *Simulacra and Simulation*, in particular his argument that technology has entered so deeply into our bodies, that we can no longer understand prostheses simply as artificial extensions to our organic bodies, but need to think of the body as being technologically “modeled ‘from inside’”.²⁵

However, as Lister importantly points out in his review of Lury’s book, in her elaboration of the new emerging “experimental individual” it is not always clear how this differs from the de-centred and plural, but somehow socially determined, individual of **postmodern theory**, the so-called lifestyle shopper and consumer of pastiche in the highly commodified and stylized culture, “[a] ‘self’ whose identifications with larger social groups or genres of class, gender and ethnicity are unstable or, at least, fluid, and whose material displays of cultural status have little direct relation to their other social and economic realities”.²⁶ Furthermore, the role of photography in changing the way in which self-identity has come to be negotiated and accepted remains

²² Ibid., 3.

²³ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 12.

²⁴ Lury, op.cit., 3.

²⁵ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 101, quoted in Lury, op.cit., 17.

²⁶ Martin Lister, “The Experimental Self?”, *New Media Society* 1(3) (1999): 373.

somewhat unclear in her discussion. Nevertheless, there is a lot of potential in this argument and it is worth exploring further how the photograph and seeing photographically might encourage the “experimental individual” to view all possible ways of “self” as available, undetermined, free floating.

Personally, I see potential for elaborating on this argument in particular in **self-portrait photography**. What I find fascinating about self-portraits is the complex relationship between the subject and the object that they embody: you are the creator of the image (the subject who has agency) at the same time as you are the model in the image (the object of the subject’s/the camera’s gaze). Self-portraiture has the capacity to foreground the “I” as other to itself and, thus, serves as an important means of looking closer at and making sense of the relationship between the subject and its representation. As self-portrait photography offers a way of keeping control of one’s own representation it can therefore be a potentially empowering means for the subject to see and imagine himself or herself. All the more interestingly, while photography carries with it an apparent realism, self-imaging is also decidedly performative. A self-portrait may be hastily snapped with a mobile phone camera, carefully composed and almost a theatrical performance for a digital camera lens, forgetfully stored away in a personal computer or proudly shown off in photoblogs and communities on the Internet, but it is often created in a highly exaggerated and performative mode. Therefore, self-portraits open up space for questions of how subjectivities and identities are negotiated and established as well as how the human body is and can be represented. Self-portrait photography can, thus, be viewed as a “**technology of embodiment**”,²⁷ a way of mobilizing technologies of representation to constitute oneself in relation to others, that is performing the self through photographic means. Self-portrait photography serves then as an example of the way in which “technology not only *mediates* but *produces* subjectivities in the contemporary world”.²⁸ Indeed, in line with Lury’s argument, self-portrait photographs, especially as appearing in social network sites online, seem to exemplify how technology has become so entwined with the production of identity that it can no longer be meaningfully separated from the subject.

²⁷ Amelia Jones, “The ‘Eternal Return’: Self-Portrait Photography as a Technology of Embodiment”, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 27(4) (2002), 950.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

Interestingly, many feminists and progressive/left photographers²⁹ in the early 1980s encountered a situation in which “the act of photographing someone had become so analysed as a relation of power that representation of persons became embargoed”;³⁰ they allegedly turned to self-representation as the only politically acceptable way out. Although, as Evans points out, other possible reasons can be found for why a lot of the photographic work in the late 1980s focused on the self and identity, there is a certain appeal to self-portraits as less threatening, more empowering and fair means of representing the human subject.

In recent years, an increasing number of people seem to be making various personal data, including (self-)portraits and other images of what constitutes their life and experiences, more and more readily available on the Internet. Be it personal blogs, social network sites such as *myspace* or *facebook*, or photo-sharing webpages such as *flickr*. Such an explosion of private information made public testifies to the fact that living in a contemporary society has largely come to mean living in a “transparent” and mediated society where we stretch our identity outside the boundaries of our flesh and blood—our bodies—and create a public persona for ourselves, accessible to others 24/7. Often we find ourselves googling the new people we meet or want to meet and expect them to have “a life online”. Existence in today’s world means that your image, opinion or comment is likely to be out there somewhere on the Internet for everybody to scrutinize, praise or criticize.

One example of a social network site where constant identity production and negotiation takes place is *flickr*, an increasingly popular photo sharing website that calls itself “a revolution in photo storage, sharing and organization, making photo management an easy, natural and collaborative process”.³¹ As soon as you delve into it, you realize that it means so much more than just storing and sharing photos with your friends and family. With over two billion images and numerous innovative web services, *flickr* is about sharing experiences. It is an online platform that encourages people to build communities with “online community tools that allow photos to be tagged and browsed by folksonomic means”.³² The descriptive words that people use to tag each photo can be searched by others, enabling them to find and comment on

²⁹ For example, Jo Spence and her colleagues from the Hackney Flashers feminist photography collective.

³⁰ Evans, *op.cit.*, 110.

³¹ <http://blog.flickr.com/en>

³² <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flickr>

the photos of other users. In addition to the freedom of managing one's photos through collaborative content categorizations, the sense of community is further fuelled by joining groups that offer "a way for people to come together around a common interest, be it a love of small dogs, a passion for food, a recent wedding, or an interest in exploring photographic techniques".³³ Among one of the most popular groups (with currently over 13,000 members) on *flickr* is the "**365 days**" project,³⁴ which involves taking a self-portrait each day for the period of one year, tagging it with "365 days" and submitting the portraits in the group's pool. Are all these men and women just self-obsessed exhibitionists who have nothing better to do and who attempt, with a little help from digital technologies, to create a sense of self-importance?

The personal is nowadays decidedly out in the public and the "365 days" project is yet another manifestation of this. But does the amount of public airtime given to the personal still carry the promise of the political? Or does it crumble under the weight of mundane everyday trivia that keeps pouring in from all the possible and impossible directions? Why do we seem compelled to turn the camera eye on ourselves rather than sticking to representing the world around us as we used to? Why the digital turn to the self? While it is impossible to fully answer these questions within the scope of this chapter, I will attempt in the section that follows to show through two examples of self-portrait photographs how digital self-representation through self-portrait photography can offer ways for exploring the corporeal, spatial and temporal cartographies of identity formation. I suggest as one possibility for analysing the relationship between racially, sexually and gender-identified subjects and representation a methodology based on "**epistemologies of doing**" that allows the researcher to engage directly in the production of culture and subjectivity at the intersection of online/offline environments, interacting with others doing the same in order to gain a nuanced understanding of how identities are formed and performed in these contexts.³⁵

³³ <http://www.flickr.com/tour/share/>

³⁴ <http://www.flickr.com/groups/365days/>

³⁵ Natalia Rybas and Radhika Gajjala, "Developing Cyberethnographic Research Methods for Understanding Digitally Mediated Identities", *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 8(3), Art. 35, (2007), <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/282/619>.

The 365 Days Method or Some Practical Advice for Analysing Photography Online

Now, once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of “posing”, I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image.

Roland Barthes³⁶

To consider the questions of digital identity formation and production in the contemporary “prosthetic culture” in a way that would not be limited to observing representations as texts, but taking an active interest in the practices and performances involved in self-portrait photography, I started off by participating in the “365 days” project on *flickr*. I committed myself to the daily visual self-representation or self-production in cyberspace and reflection on the links between the online and offline practices involved in the process through interaction with other members in the group. I envisioned that becoming a part of the setting, being both the object and subject of my study would offer me different and more valuable insights into self-representation online than just “passive” browsing through images. The putting of the “I” or the self in the midst of my “field” was hopefully going to give the necessary “depth” for contextualising my research questions and develop them a step further.

This methodology, what I call tentatively “the 365 days method”, is inspired by what Rybas and Gajjala call a methodology based on “epistemologies of doing”³⁷ and basically aims to analyse and understand the production of subjectivities in online/offline environments through an ethnographic engagement with the technological environments. This methodology suggests that “subjects/objects produce selves—through typing, writing, image manipulation, creation of avatars, digital video and audio—and engage in practices of everyday life at these interfaces” and importantly “underscores the significance and particularity of the context and pays specific attention to the social status of knower”.³⁸ It is seen as providing ways for gaining a nuanced understanding of how identities are produced and shaped in online environments where specific social, economic and cultural practices intersect and multiple meanings and identities are intermingled in networks of power.

³⁶ Barthes, *op.cit.*, 12.

³⁷ Rybas and Gajjala, *op.cit.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, paragraph 9.

What do three hundred and sixty five days of photographic self-exploration do to your understanding of yourself and of the production of selves online? How do they help you to understand the process of posing, setting the timer on the camera for countless times again and again, taking and retaking sometimes hundreds of images, censoring yourself, editing, posting, checking back on the page sometimes obsessively to see if your picture has got any comments? Grasping the whole year in a few pages is not my intention here, not to mention the impossibility of such a task anyway, but zooming in on two particular images will suffice to give some practical advice on how to look at, around and behind photographs.

Day 354. Welcome Back.

(photo available at <http://flickr.com/photos/neveredi/3178118072/in/set-72157603759666801/>)

She is staring right into the camera, with her eyes slightly sparkling. She looks bored, supporting her head with her right hand on the cheek, almost resting the hand on her shoulder, a bit tense. Or rather, she looks serious and perhaps tired. It seems as if she did not really want to be photographed at the particular moment the photo was taken, yet she does not look away or protest either. There is a strong light coming from behind her, probably from a little lamp attached to the wall, therefore her face is not particularly well lit, although it is in rather sharp focus. She is wearing a dark sweater, her light-coloured hair is bound back, she is framed as sitting slightly more to the right hand side of the photograph—all of this contributes to a general gloomy, unimpressive mood of the scene. Yet there is also some sort of cosiness to the image. She does not look uncomfortable. The photograph does not really give too many clues as to how, when, and by whom it was produced or who the girl in the image is, what she does and what the occasion for the picture could have been. It looks like a casual snapshot with a touch of times-gone-by or worn-out look. The image is almost black and white, with remnants of warmer sepia tones and a definite look of a Polaroid, as the square format and little white “scratches” on the surface of the image suggest. Disregarding for a moment that this effect can easily be achieved through digital manipulation, we could almost say that it is a Polaroid, popular before the boom of the digital cameras and sophisticated photo editing programmes.

The photograph described above belongs to the set of self-portraits I have taken within the 365 days project I participated in on the online photosharing website *flickr* as part of my research on photographic self-representation. It is entitled “Day 354: Welcome Back”; it has four tags—“self-portrait”, “365 days”, “Wednesday”, “January”—and it is added to the 365 days group “pool” as well as my personal 365 days “set”. It was taken by myself with a handheld Nikon D40 DSLR camera, uploaded to my MacBook laptop, then edited with a so-called Poladroid programme and uploaded on the *flickr* website on the day I arrived back to Sweden, where I am doing my PhD in gender studies, from a holiday at home in Estonia. The photograph has no privacy restrictions; it is public and accessible to anyone who knows how or happens to find it online. It is a rather banal, unflattering snapshot of me in my flat in Stockholm, sitting on the sofa in an everyday sort of casual way—as casual as one can be after only a few hours of sleep followed by a long and tiring trip due to multiple stops and changes of means of transportation. With just thirteen views and two comments (one of which is my own response) as indications of any interaction with this photo, it is more or less lost among the pool of self-portraits of the thousands of members of the “365 days” group.

An analysis of a photograph can begin, as I have shown above, from a fairly simple description of the human subject in the photograph, trying to take up the position of the subject (which in case of a self-portrait is, of course, more easily accessible) and using the third person singular (here, “she” rather than “I”). This is followed by a description of the context of production of the photograph. It is rather straightforward in the sense that I shortly describe where, when, how, by whom and why the photograph was taken and see then which further questions can be asked on the basis of this. This could include the following: what does the description of the photograph and additional information I have provided about the context of its production, distribution and consumption as well as a brief account of my location in time and space tell us? How can we make sense of this photograph? How would its meanings shift if this photograph were to be found in a printed miniature format stuck in an album somewhere in the far end of a big closet or exhibited in an elaborate frame covering the whole wall in a contemporary art gallery? What could be the value of analysing such an image from a feminist point of view? What can it tell us about the politics of representation, about gender, race, class, sexuality in relation to agency and visibility?

This moment entitled as a welcome back evokes several possible ways of interpretation. The photograph reiterates the subject, that is myself, restates me beyond the moment of the picture's taking. This is true of any portrait as the reiteration of the subject "can never establish the 'truth' of the subject but merely suggests at aspects of the subject that can be encountered by future viewers".³⁹ The contexts of future interpretations will obviously differ from the many original signifieds attached to the image. Yet, as I pointed out earlier in the chapter, photography carries with itself the myth of the "photographic truth", the promise of delivering, revealing or documenting the subject. For instance, in this snapshot self-portrait, an indexical image of the "real" me in a "real" moment in time and space is presented through the technological means of mechanical reproduction, that is the camera, and supported by other "evidence" around it that tempts the viewer to turn this photograph into a document of the truth, into something what Roland Barthes called the "that-has-been" before the lens.⁴⁰ We can pinpoint my location in Stockholm as it is stated in my profile (though I could choose not to disclose it), we see the date when the picture was taken and uploaded and we can find traces of me trying to establish that it really is me who took this picture of myself (the tags "self-portrait" that I have written on the side of the image and the link to the 365 days self-portrait group that I have added the picture into). The viewer is as if drawn into believing this is how I looked like, through my own eyes, on this certain day in January of 2009 in Stockholm, Sweden. Looking a bit around the context of the photograph, this self-portrait seems to be recognized and made sense of rather through its title: "Welcome Back". As is apparent from the comment I received for this photo, which in Estonian reads as "you're not too happy to be back, are you?" (and people who followed my stream were up to date about my travels since I posted self-portraits daily and usually added little commentaries as well), it is the words around the photograph, the titles, that make it possible for viewers to decide what the photograph is about, not so much the content of the visual image itself. Without this surrounding text, the subject, as if it fails to possess its "own image", must forever re-enact and re-present. The image looks dark and the subject in the image unhappy, therefore the "welcome back" in the title frames the photograph as a manifestation of the subject's frustration over returning.

³⁹ Jones, *The 'Eternal Return'*, 950.

⁴⁰ Barthes, *op.cit.*, 77.

Interestingly, I would argue that this was not the case, although I would certainly want to refrain from claiming that the intention of the photographer, which is at this point easily accessible since it is myself, should be taken as a key to the “real” meaning of the photograph. As I have underlined earlier, photographs are more than a mere visual representation and even together with titles and texts that they might be surrounded by resist single, coherent and stable interpretations. The darkness and slightly worn out look of the image derive from my lack of desire to “be represented”, made visible that day after a long and exhausting journey, yet I had committed myself to keeping the continuity of the project and had to take some kind of a photo of myself. Frankly, I hardly recognise myself in it and was trying to, so to speak, cover up the poor quality and unflattering snapshot-like framing of it by turning it into a Polaroid with an image manipulation programme called Poladroid. Having just recently listened to Joanna Zylińska’s lecture about digital futures, about anxieties in the art world concerning amateur photographers and how these link to the explosion of interest in found images, often of poor quality and amateurish, salvaged from fleamarkets and family attics,⁴¹ I thought the good old Polaroid look lends the photograph some nostalgic quality that certain art photographers seem to be longing and striving for. I imagined that this would make the photograph acceptable, something that could be put on the web for everyone to scrutinize. Thereby I was attempting to aestheticise the image by evoking certain passions around the fetishization of old technology and analogue images.

Day 54. Dear Diary.

(photo available at <http://flickr.com/photos/neveredi/2309553547/in/set-72157603759666801/>)

She is sitting on a chair in what appears to be a corner of the room by the window, considering the direction of light reflecting from her arm and her face. She is wearing a red short-sleeved dress, white thick tights and red shoes. She is holding a notebook in her lap with one leg crossed over the other and she seems to be focused on writing something. Her face is not entirely visible but you can tell she is wearing

⁴¹ Joanna Zylińska, “Digital Futures, or Who’s Afraid of the Amateur Photographer?” Paper presented at a symposium Photographic Mediations organised by Coventry School of Art and Design together with Goldsmiths’ Creative Media Forum. Podcast available at http://covmedia.co.uk/content/audio/08_J_Zylińska.mp3.

glasses with dark red frames and the position of her lips speaks of her concentration on her activity. Behind her there seems to be a paper collage taped on the wall with one particular image in a prominent position with respect to the framing of the photograph—it looks like an advertisement ripped out of a magazine. The ad features a girl in a red dress with a notebook in her hands, writing. She is sitting on a chair in a rather similar pose to the girl in the photograph, so less tense, and it looks like the girl in the photograph is attempting to imitate her. The scene in the ad differs from that of the photograph with respect to the props—namely the shoes, as it seems to be a shoe advertisement—which are arranged on a table and around the girl. Furthermore, the ad-girl looks more suggestive and girlish, a kind of mix between a Lolita look-alike and Little Red Riding Hood, with her bare knees and the white ruffles of what is perhaps an undergarment showing from under the red dress, although her arms are covered with long sleeves, maintaining her look as a proper (school)girl. She looks more distanced from her writing activity than the photo-girl. The left hand side of the photograph is rather toned down and dark which creates a stark contrast with the light that falls on the photo-girl's arms and face and illuminates the white cleanliness of her tights. The perspective of the photograph draws attention mostly to the position of the legs which take up the bigger portion of the whole image. Despite the graininess of the photograph, which suggests that it is not of too high quality, the whole composition and look of the image has a classical, Rembrandt-painting feel to it with its contrasts, the way the fabric of the dress falls, the red tones, the light and the shadows.

This self-portrait differs in several aspects, at least at first glance, from the “Welcome Back” snapshot I looked at above. It is one of the most popular images among my 365 self-portraits and rather surprisingly so, from my point of view, despite the easily, almost unknowingly recognizable visual conventions it contains. I was not happy with my regular point and shoot camera that I had at the time and was feeling limited in terms of how I could (or rather couldn't) realise the images I had in mind. However, I find the result rather compelling in terms of illustrating the performative and almost theatrical character of most self-portraits. The very performativity of this image that plays with citation and doubling, if you will, toying with the idea of a picture in the picture, allows one to complicate and deconstruct the belief of the self-portrait image as incontrovertibly delivering the “true” self to the viewer. The fact that I am trying to imitate the pose and the look of the girl in the advertisement, to

“perform” her, hints at the way in which posing functions in portrait photography and also in our cultural imaginary, especially considering the ways in which female subjects tend to get represented. In this photograph we see a subject that in fact literally constructs herself in the image of a representation (another photograph that serves as a reference point, a citation), exposing the illusion of mimetic representation that dominates the conception of photography in the moments of discrepancies between the two pictures. The inclusion of the direct source of inspiration for the image that the subject cites and draws on further foregrounds this argument. In recognition of what Barthes notes about posing in photography in the quotation at the beginning of this section, I feel I am transforming myself into an image in advance, before the camera takes the photograph. I am, in the process of a highly self-conscious imitative reproduction of the self-image, taking a detour through the other. I am other to myself and the practice of taking a performative photograph and rendering the performativity visible highlights this clearly. Another important aspect to underline from my point of view is the mechanisms through which this photograph attempts to subvert the culture of representing women as narcissistic and vain. Although it is challenging to escape claims of narcissism and vanity in a project that involves a daily photographic self-scrutiny and self-production, this particular self-portrait underlines importantly the way in which self-portrait photography also works to decentralise oneself, to see oneself from a distance, as other.

Seeing oneself from a distance creates not only ways to see your own identity as unstable and ever-changing, but also carves out spaces to see the identities of others as never fixed and uniform. Seeing the difference and otherness in ourselves in a daily documentation and representation of the self, we begin to see the differences in others and thus, build up room for change of stereotypes and the way we perceive others. The technologically enabled contemporary “experimental individual” that has learned to see herself and the world around her photographically thus turns out to be more than just a lifestyle shopper indulging in her own image that she creates in a high-tech theatre of possible “selves to be” but as someone who may in fact help us learn to see and read images in an ethical and politicized way. Due to its status as a representation, a self-portrait photograph opens up the photographic subject, the self, as well as the viewing subject—which in this chapter has also been the self, my almost schizophrenic self in the process of looking at photographs of myself

taken by myself—to otherness both within and without the self. The engagement with self-portrait photographs can therefore be radicalizing when these photographs are understood as performative and the process of reading pictures seen as privileging the productive instability of meaning, resisting closure.

Questions for Review and Discussion

- What kind of stakes does feminism have in theorising photography?
- How can self-portraits be historically understood in feminist terms?
- What difference does it make to a representation when the photographer is also the subject of the image?
- How could the 365 days project on *flickr* be understood as an extension of one's personhood?

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CHAPTER 5

Looking at Science, Looking at You! The Feminist Re-visions of Nature (Brain and Genes)

Cecilia Åsberg

Vision has often been a central concern of feminist studies of science, medicine and technology. In cultural or social feminist analysis, the male gaze and the ways in which technoscience¹ accommodates, and in effect organizes the watching of women, has been an important part of the feminist interrogation of the gender and power relations that produce the subjects and the objects of science.² This attention is due to the intimate, and power-saturated, merge of processes of seeing and processes of knowing. Inherent in the notion of vision, there is always a politics to ways of seeing, ordering and observing, of organising the knowledge of the world. Historically, this can be exemplified by the eighteenth-century Swedish “father” of biological classification, Linnaeus. Taking a leap away from Christian assumptions, Linnaeus placed human beings in a taxonomic order of nature together with other animals.³

In his large-scale vision, he located humans together with primates in the order of *Homo sapiens*, as Donna Haraway⁴ so eloquently describes it in her ground-breaking book *Primate Visions*. And as the “father” of a specific discourse on nature, one that was not understood biologically but rather representationally, and still within a highly Christian framework, he referred to himself as the second Adam, as the “eye” of God. As the second Adam, Linnaeus could give true representations and true names to nature’s creatures and in so doing also restore the purity of name-giving lost by the first, biblical Adam’s sin. Haraway writes on how nature in this way became a theatre, a spectacular stage for the social order of the new and emerging sciences. New cartograp-

¹ Technoscience is a term for our late modern entangled relationships—or rather, the implosion—of science, technology and medicine, everyday life consumption and embodied subjecthood into each other. This is something that has been happening, or rather, been practiced, for a couple of hundred years—and on an almost global scale as a result of geopolitical, colonial and capitalist processes. See Donna Haraway, *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium. FemaleMan@_Meets_OncoMouse™ Feminism and Technoscience* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997).

² Jordanova, Ludmilla. *Sexual Vision: Images of Gender in Science and Medicine Between the Eighteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989); Donna Haraway, *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (New York: Routledge, 1989); Schiebinger, Londa. *Nature’s Body: Gender in the Making of Modern Science* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).

³ Schiebinger, op.cit.

⁴ Haraway, *Primate Visions*, 9.

hies of “virgin land” inhabited by uncivilised “savages” and beasts, botanical and zoological excursions, in some ways mirroring the internal anatomical explorations of European medicine, followed suit to the expansive, European regimes of patriarchal colonialism, slavery and cultural imperialism.⁵ Biology, in the centuries to follow, was constructed as a discourse on nature about production and reproduction, racial and sexual difference for the efficiency of organisms. Linnaeus is a historical example of a scientific identity, the modern authoritative, and almost God-like, scientist Self with almost all-seeing capacity to inscribe nature with an order that affirms, assures and legitimizes his mastery. This is the idea of the universalist mode of seeing, and knowing it all, as from above or from no particular location at all. It is a mode Haraway in her famous epistemological text “Situated Knowledges” calls a God-trick.⁶ Linnaeus, as the almost mythical figure of heroic science he is today (celebrated as “Mr Flower Power” in Sweden in 2008 in a vain hope to attract more young students to science), came to existence inside a larger visual culture, a societal, scopic regime of ordering ways of seeing and knowing.⁷ It was a visual culture with the power to sort things out, give names and appoint identities. Such “scopic regimes” change over time, with political and economic circumstances, and are always circumvented by intersecting patterns of gender and sex, race/ethnicity, age, ability or disability, nationality and religion.⁸ This is why vision and practices of looking in science has been a feminist concern in regard to the gendered identities and historical practices of science.

⁵ Anne McClintock *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995); Schiebinger, op.cit.

⁶ Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women. The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association Books, 1991).

⁷ Important to keep in mind is that science is not just a set of cultural practices, but also a practical culture. The scientific subject position based on a mode of superior vision is not necessarily that which characterizes all real life scientist’s daily work today as they systematically struggle with, for instance, their particular images under the microscope. Conversely, in the laboratory practices I have started to study, amongst two young science teams consisting of predominately women Alzheimer’s researchers, *the local and the concrete* was of the uttermost importance (since it, as in the case of the protein and enzyme cascades in and between cells, was complicated enough). Further, manipulating the microscopic images of brain cells, from either mice, humans or the fruit fly (*Drosophila*), in digital imaging programs so to make clogged and entangled proteins (that disrupt the cell and are linked to a range of diseases) appear even more brightly green on the screen, something accomplished by adding a molecules that enhances fluorescence in the tissue, makes it obvious to most practitioners that what is studied is not and never was “pure nature”, but material-semiotic biocultures. Indeed, these women and young men are already self-consciously practicing situated knowledge—meanwhile they feel it part of the game of, ever more global and competitive, science to use a more grand-scale rhetoric when communicating their results to a popular audience, or even to peers in journals. And does that, the importance of image, not sound uncannily familiar to us as well? From conversations amongst “the fly women of the lab”: Ethnographic field notes from February 2009.

⁸ A “scopic regime”, a term coined by Martin Jay in “Scopic Regimes of Modernity”, in *Vision and Visuality*, ed. Hall Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988) describes more or less a hegemonic mode of seeing and knowing our selves in the world that also regulates vision and visibility, that is, who gets to see and who gets to be seen, and in what way.

Scientific images and whole social imaginations of a particular field of vision, namely nature, where science holds the societal authority, work as rhetorical tools in the making of public meaning, and such images transcend the faux distinction between science and society, between lab cultures and popular cultures. And these images are highly mutable. They carry changing relations, and are perhaps even more obviously transformative in today's media-saturated world. That is why they are interesting to study and discuss, and in this chapter I will take a closer look at two ways of scientifically picturing the ever evasive nature of human identity. I will zoom in on the celebratory modes of depicting the human genome, and a commercial rendition of the human brain. Both DNA and genes, and the neurons of the brain have each been singled out and imagined as the essential bits to the human puzzle. And while I look at what might seem like mere pictures, these are imagery from the scientific domain. First, from the two most distinguished science journals, *Nature* and *Science*, when the first results of the multi-national Human Genome Project were released in February 2001, and second, I look at one pharmaceutical advertisement for a drug aimed to mitigate the symptoms of Alzheimer's disease (a disorder of the brain) found in an internationally renowned medical science journal. I argue that these pictures are indicative; they are iconic examples of a particularly scopic regime that imbue pulled out parts of our bodies with an enormous power to define the biological essence of humanness. Typically, they aim to convey something about our biology, about our bodies and our selves. And it is the way in which this is done that I find especially troublesome, but in order to do this I need to situate my concern within a larger historical context of scientific ways of looking, as well as in the historiographical context of previous feminist views on the body.

A History of Humanism and the Proliferation of Scientific Visuality

Historically, one example of how the ways things have been seen and looked at have changed is the emergence of the philosophy of humanism during the European Renaissance. Man, and not God, was put at the centre of the universe. In art and science, the invention of perspective supported this understanding of human exceptionalism and uniqueness. Perspective, as a visual technique, intended to show things the way they really were. This was done by creating an illusion of depth on a two-dimensional surface so that representations on this surface could get smaller the further away they were intended to appear.

Visual historian Martin Jay⁹ describes the emergence of the Cartesian central perspective as a scopic regime. And further, as a modern gesture of great importance as it generated a universal imaginary around the possibility for joint vision—that regardless of the observer, the view would remain the same.¹⁰ In effect, this was the claim that there is a neutral and universal mode of looking, one which can be controlled according to strict mathematical rules. This scopic regime of perspectivalism, as a “human exceptionalism”, claims in a way that the human eye may dominate the world, and that the human gaze can be scientifically structured. Such (phantasmic and hyperbolic) vision is not arbitrary but calculated and exacting, and truly objective as the observing eye is asked to disregard the body and other senses than sight. Perspectivalism is generated by objectification and disembodiment. However, this scopic regime of perspectivalism and human exceptionalism is not the only one and perhaps not even the most protruding way of seeing nature and culture, self and other, body and technology today. It is, however, one that has had a recent revival, which perhaps is evidenced in the many neo-humanist projects science has delivered publicly in recent years, from the medical imaging project of visually scrutinizing the interiority of the human body in The Visible Human Project to The Human Genome Project. Such grand-scale neo-humanist projects, of almost global reach, have made biological claims of great dignity. There are of course a lot of other scientific images that circulate in our media cultures today.

In fact, visual representations of various kinds play an important role in most scientific disciplines today. In cultural studies, art history or media studies we may use graphs and schematics when picturing a theory.¹¹ Whole disciplines, besides those of the natural sciences working with various imaging technologies, are exclusively relying on visuals (for instance meteorology, geology and geography). The display of posters and photographs are an indispensable part of medical textbooks, just as they surface in popular science media so to train laymen in scientific ways of looking and show off new spectacular sights from the interior of the body, the womb or the cell. Images are used for the encoding or analysis of raw data as well as in the communica-

⁹ Jay, op.cit.

¹⁰ Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes. British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

¹¹ Nina Lykke, “Feminist Cultural Studies of Technoscience: Portrait of an Implosion”, in *Bits of Life: Feminist Studies Meets Cultural Studies Meets Science Studies*, ed. Nina Lykke and Anneke Smelik (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008).

tion of scientific concepts and information to peers, students and the general public in museum exhibitions, but do also reappear in art or in entertainment. Expanding enormously with the late modern efforts of achieving public understanding of scientific advancements, “popular science” can no longer be understood as the watered down remains of science proper.¹² The latter, “science proper”, is often imagined as practiced in seclusion, devoid of anything social or as a “culture of no culture”, as pioneering anthropologist of science, Sharon Traweek¹³ termed this pseudo-neutral self-perception among white, men physicists in the USA. Today, dinosaurs are popular and famous from movies while no human has ever actually laid her eyes on a living T-Rex. The iconography of the ascent of man from the apes is so well established it is often parodied. There are hilarious (Larsson) cartoons of microorganisms as seen from under the microscope slide. And the Bohr atom, in itself looking like a kind of solar system, has become an important icon of the modern world, of progress and rationality. It is a cultural icon that now only is eclipsed by the DNA double helix, a model of a large and dynamic molecule on the chromosomes (and mitochondria) of the cell, that has become excessively familiar to us. It is much like how we accept that rather obscure scientific methods, without knowing their names, such as gel electrophoresis patterns, provide genetic “finger prints” and certain identification, thanks to television series like *CSI*. So, on the one hand, there is a flow of science images into other cultural domains. On the other, cloning, *in vitro* fertilisation, the Internet, mobile phones, cyborgs and robots, to mention only a few phenomena, existed in 1950s literature and the popular imagination long before they became technoscientific realities and more or less mundane parts of our lives. Both popular culture and visuals in science have traditionally been understood as dimming the sharp truths of science and compromising its neutrality. Such a distinction is impossible to uphold today, both in the politicized, and highly social and rather public, media realm of science and in the local laboratory practice where images constantly are used as raw data for analysis.

Clearly, scientific imagery and scientific regimes of knowing are not contained to, for instance, the realms of the laboratory. There are many, not

¹² Cecilia Åsberg, “Genetiska föreställningar. Mellan genus och gener i popular/vetenskapens visuella kulturer” [The Genetic Imaginary: Between Gender and Genes in the Visual Cultures of Popular/Science] (PhD Dissertation. Linköping Studies in Arts and Sciences, 2005); Stuart Allen, *Media, Risk and Science. Issues in Cultural and Media Studies* (Buckingham, Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2002).

¹³ Sharon Traweek, *Beamtimes and Lifetimes The World of High Energy Physicists* (Harvard: Harvard University Press 1988, 166.

just scientific images, but whole ways of seeing, that famously have traversed the borders between the cultures of science and popular cultures. Inspired by cultural scholar Constance Penley's approach in *NASA/Trek. Popular Science and Sex in America*,¹⁴ I use the term "popular/science" to cover this wide and expansive mediascape, to underline the co-constitutive dimensions of the scientific and the popular.¹⁵ Popular/science signifies not merely an attempt to circumvent the traditional diffusion model of science communication, but—moreover—the *intra-activity* of popular visual culture and mediatized science in public.¹⁶ Simply put, I use it to rework the common idea of popularization as simple vulgarization, as the impure residues of pure science proper spread in popular science media.¹⁷ The notion of popular/science is used for the purpose of zooming in on how popular science media taps into scientific discourse just as scientific representations draw on popular imagery and contemporary media. Thus, science is not done in a social, political or historical vacuum—as the cases of Linnaeus and of the emergence of humanist perspectivalism indicate. Instead, science inhabits a larger cultural context and identity producing setting ("the cultural imaginary"), a context of technologies, economies and geopolitics ("technoscience"). And hybrids of cultural conventions, popular notions and science imagery circulate in the many overlaps of these realms. Solar system models are still today part of most classrooms, as phrenological heads once too were common teaching accessories. Still in existence, systematic practices of anthropological portraiture, once used to prove ideal types and the existence of different human races, make us remember eugenics, physiognomy and the once widely accepted ideas of racial hygiene as well as the non-innocent role of visuals in making scientific claims about human nature

¹⁴ Constance Penley, *NASA/Trek. Popular Science and Sex in America* (New York and London: Verso, 1997).

¹⁵ Åsberg, *Genetiska föreställningar*.

¹⁶ Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter", *Sings: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 3(2003), vol. 28: 801-831.

¹⁷ As suggested by this French term, popular science is then regarded as the debasing of scientific knowledge. This is moreover based on an assumption about priority where the scientific version is the pure original others only can trail. The imaginary boundary between science and society (as if science was not part of society and the natural world it studies) is in such a way maintained. This is even done in popular culture when scientists or scholars are portrayed as incomprehensible boffins, which is, I would say, just another unfortunate way of reinforcing their separateness and elitist power. Adding to the problem with thinking about popularization as vulgarization is that all scientific activities rely today on social support, like governmental or other funding opportunities. This is an incitement to maintain public relations, ensure support and adhere to social issues and demands (see Allen, op.cit.). In fact, there are images, visuals and whole imagerial landscapes that are constitutive of both the cosmologies of science and our everyday life popular culture. Think only of the notion of "outer space" and the genre of science fiction, or of how clones, robots and the internet, long before becoming scientific fact have been staple features of the amazing wonderland of horror film and science fiction literature in the 1950s.

and human differences. In the past, the outer features of the surface—the facial features, physical frame and the colouring of the skin—were to tell about inner moral qualities, to tell the difference of the criminal from the gentleman.¹⁸ However, facial features, as I will soon show, still play an important part in signalling inner genetic qualities, but in a different way as it is circumvented by new modes of thinking ethnicity and race, sex and gender. Images have been used, and are still used, for epistemological purposes of legitimization, justification and proofing, and the difference between them is hard to tell as most images of some scientific relation are imbued with persuasive qualities (with a “rhetoric”), for instance with regard to scientific discoveries.

Recently, for the last two decades or so, it has been especially notions and imagery of genes and of the human brain that have had the rhetorical intention of telling us something essential about our bodies and our selves. In commercial vernacular this has been played out as “Genes ‘R Us”, which is the oft-used name for the flurrying direct-to-consumer online market for small bio-tech companies. For a small fee, these offer to test your DNA and sequence your genes, thereby helping you find an appropriate partner, life style, plan your recreational health care and determine your ancestry or genetic predisposition for diseases or criminal activities. These new companies experiment with ways of selling individualized genetic information to consumers. But there are also public efforts, often then making claims not on the individual level but on the level of the human race. As such, these pictures, biological figures or cultural images have the social authority and power of science. And they are obviously imagery in which feminists are stakeholders since especially women, as well as “other Others” sorted as marginal to the phantasy of “Universal Man” by the material signs of skin colour and pigmentation, reproductive capacities, physical constitution and ability, age or sexual orientation, have been defined and confined through a gendered, sexualized and racialized rhetoric of biology and nature. This power of the biological image, especially in combination with word and our ability (and respect) for scientific literacy, has also been interrogated by feminist theorists, scientists and artists, for instance by US American artist Barbara Kruger (who, herself, has appropriated this and stated “I work with pictures and words because they have the ability to determine who we are and who we aren’t”).¹⁹

¹⁸ Barbara M. Stafford, *Body Criticism: Imaging the Unseen in Enlightenment Art and Medicine* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991); McClintock, op.cit.; Sturken and Cartwright, op.cit.

¹⁹ Barbara Kruger quoted at the official website of The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York: <http://www.tfaoi.com/aa/1aa/1aa667.htm> (accessed 2 March 2009)

Let us turn to a picture, not from science, medical commerce or popular science, but from the artistic realm that also makes a commentary on the topic of human embodiment; Barbara Kruger's visual exploration of feminist theory from the mid 1980s and US women's political demands for reproductive choice in the piece *Untitled (Your Body Is A Battleground)*, an artistic and obviously political photo montage. This picture may work as the entry point into a less obviously political terrain, namely the scientific practices of looking at the body, or rather into the ways in which feminist analysis has been useful for looking back at science as it has been looking at you.

Your Body Is A Battleground

The message stands out, white on red, from atop the black and white frontally photographed face of a woman looking straight back, unflinching, at the viewer. She is indeed looking back, returning the gaze of the observer. From books on contemporary art we may conclude that this picture in particular is representative of much of Kruger's work in how it addresses feminist issues of power and identity as they intimately relate to practices of looking at bodies in contemporary society. Kruger's art has been seen in the backdrop of the 1997 tour by the musical act *Rage Against the Machine*, and this specific image was initially used and made by the artist for a political manifestation for women's reproductive rights in the United States.

By recycling recognizable imagery of stereotypical 1950's ideal femininity, and by juxtaposing it with an arresting phrase, such as "Your body is a battleground", text and image work together to create a striking message about the contested discursive terrain that is female embodiment. In fact, the picture, as a totality of word and imagery in dialogue with its surrounding culture, declares a challenge to naturalized femininity, for instance to ideals of female beauty and proper womanhood as defined by her body rather than her mind. However, the retro-look of the woman pictured makes us acutely aware of the historically changing ideals of gender, of how they have already had their historical expiration date, and that definitions of femininity as a natural function of reproductive heterosexuality as well as a disembodied male gaze are under siege. Further in that vein, the pictured woman's own steady gaze, as she is looking right back at the onlooker, is a challenge in itself to the contested terrain that is women's bodies and the discontented theories of them (us!).

When it comes to defining women's subjectivity, our sense of selfhood, degree of agency, authority, influence and role in society—a spectacularly narrow range of theories of our bodies have been used to legitimate social power relations. And such limiting narratives of women's bodies have almost always backtracked heterosexual reproduction as the root cause and its own *sine qua non*.²⁰ The female body has been the rhetorically imagined root source for both women's existence and for why women, supposedly and collectively, are more physically limited to their reproductive bodies than men, weaker in both body and mind, more malleable, penetrable, leaky and susceptible to ailments and pathologies of various kinds.²¹ Scientific "facts" of the female body have been made a huge obstacle, incarcerating any feminist hope for societal change. However, evolutionary "facts"—of, say, the supposedly given naturalness of male heterosexual philandering and territorial expansion, of female sexual modesty and coyness, of women's natural role in the private sphere as mothers, facts on women, children and non-white people's closer proximity to underdeveloped natural stages, to pure nature rather than to civilized culture—these have also been investigated and critiqued from both outside and from within the natural sciences. In the historical retrospect, provided by feminist historians or anthropologists of science, medicine and technology, they appear more as social views than as natural facts of life. No doubt, these are, however, still contested terrains.

Indeed, it is possible to delineate four typical concerns or problems feminists have had with the biological body.²² The first is the trouble with **determinism**; that anatomy is supposed to be social destiny.²³ After having worked his way carefully through the psychological development of the boy for decades, and by 1930 approaching the female psyche, Freud famously declared, rather abruptly, that for women "anatomy is destiny" (and gave up). Biological facts about the woman body have been used for causal explanation, and at the same time also as justification, of societal power differences. In the

²⁰ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

²¹ Jordanova, op.cit.; Stafford, op.cit.; Margrit Shildrick, *Leaky Bodies and Boundaries. Feminism, Postmodernism and (Bio)ethics* (London: Routledge, 1997).

²² Ruth Bleier, *Science and Gender: A Critique of Biology and Its Theories on Women* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1984); Annemarie Mol, "'Sekse' en 'wetenschap': een vergelijking met twee onbekenden", in *Wetenschapstheorie: de empirische wending*, ed. Louis Boon and Gerrd deVries (Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff, 1989); Lynda Birke, *Feminism and the Biological Body* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000); Cecilia Åsberg, "The Arena of the Body: The Cyborg and Feminist Views on Biology", in *Gender in Media, Art and Culture*, ed. Rosemarie Buikema and Iris van der Tuin (London and New York: Routledge, 2009).

²³ See Nelly Oudshoorn. *Beyond the Natural Body: An Archeology of Sex Hormones* (London: Routledge, 1994).

1980s, the feminist tactic to counter biological determinism was to make the strategic distinction between *sex* and *gender* and to point to the social construction of biology and historical wrongs regarding biological facts (especially race has been successfully problematized as a distinct biological category). Indeed, the body as code for one's naturally given social place has been contested.

A second concern of feminists has been the problem of **scientism**. The authority of science in society has been problematized, as it reigns over all other forms of non-academic knowledge production. Feminists of various parlour have also interrogated the innate masculine gendering of, for instance, medical expertise, and in historical studies scrutinized how the practices and ancient knowledge of midwives were actively subdued by the emerging profession of male doctors and gynaecologists. Historical processes of professionalization of, say, obstetricians or botanists, seem to have taken place not so much in the absence of women as in defiance of women.²⁴ The struggle has been concerning reproductive authority for women to decide vis-à-vis medical experts over their bodies. Third, feminists have been concerned with the **objectification** of the body, the perspectivalist idea that bodies are to be known from the outside—as if we, regardless of scientific status, were not actually all of us living and learning inside bodies. This is the problem of nature and bodies being treated as passive resources, awaiting exploitation and disassociated from the Self and any form of agency. Feminists have also been concerned with discourses on the human body as an objectified, unitary organism in general.²⁵ For instance, as in the idea of the immune system as a defence system against invading foreign others. The notion of a unified human organism imagines the body as bounded territory, ideally impermeable, like the borders of a nation-state protected by inviolable frontiers. Alternative feminist understandings trouble this monolithic view of the body, and see it instead as fluid and fragmented, deterritorialized and leaky²⁶ or as a biological relation of what in fact turns out to be many co-existing species.²⁷ The perspectivalist view of the objectified human body needs revision, as we have never been fully or purely human in the first place. We have rather been constantly co-evolving with other organisms, as evidenced by the viral residues in our (not quite) human genome.

²⁴ David F. Noble, *A World Without Women: The Christian Clerical Culture of Western Science* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992).

²⁵ Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

²⁶ Shildrick, op.cit.

²⁷ Haraway, *When Species Meet*.

With regard to how we share almost seventy percent of our genes with a loaf of bread (or any other organic entity), perhaps genomic percentages are not such great indicators of humanness after all? And as always co-existing with others, like the micro-organisms in our organs and intestines (helping us digest food), which are far exceeding the number of human cells in the body, we have to radically (and cold-bloodedly) rethink the assemblage of nature and culture, self and others, that is human embodiment. Incurably informed by material-semiotic feminisms (and by fields such as animal studies) as well as by the technoscience we inhabit, such alternative understandings may be thought of as **posthumanist**.²⁸ The problem of objectification (and with human/ist exceptionalism) relates to the fourth feminist body-concern, namely the trouble with **disembodiment**. This is the problematic splitting of mind and body, the priority and distinction given to the mind and to rational thought—as if the mind was not anchored, and thinking as well as looking did not always take place inside a body (within a setting of cultural affect). The problem is that disembodiment provides the scientific gaze with the power to see while not being seen, to represent while escaping representation so the conquering gaze may signify an unmarked position of (universal) Man.

The counter strategies of feminists to these problems have been to study science as culture and scientists as embodied, gendered practitioners embedded in societal norms. But also, more recently, to in fact study science as a discourse open to intervention, and not to prejudge it as bad or good but rather to paint impressions of the subjectivity producing effects of scientific ways of looking. Science is now often studied as an entangled network of agents, and humans as co-dependent on other non-human actors (or performative elements), like other organisms and animals, machines and technologies, nature and the environment. This is what we can call the posthumanist challenge to gender studies of science,²⁹ since it does not 1) take the purity of categories such as human for granted; 2) it problematizes the Renaissance-aged humanist vision of the coherent, rational and ethical human Self; and 3) since it is highly interdisciplinary it challenges and expands the disciplinary boundaries and scope of the humanities.

²⁸ Haraway, *When Species Meet*; Cecilia Åsberg and Jennifer Lum, "Mapping the Cultural Imaginary of Alzheimer's Disease: Towards New Understandings Within the Interdisciplinary Approach of Feminist Visual Culture of Technoscience", *European Journal of Women's Studies*, forthcoming in 2009.

²⁹ Åsberg and Lum, *op.cit.*

After the early pioneering book, *The Science Question in Feminism* by Sandra Harding,³⁰ the gender studies ambition was made explicit of engaging with the reality-producing potential of science. This book announced a turn *from* the problems of gender representation among scientists and women's issues and a rallying call *to* the science questions within feminist theory. Rather than asking how women can be more equally treated within and by previously bad or biased science, feminists started to engage in the project of changing science from within, as empowered patients, activist nurses, critical scientists or cultural scholars befriending lab cultures. After such thorough and far-reaching critiques of the scientific ways of looking at the body, as those four delineated above (but there are more), vision and visuality were in quite some trouble within feminist science studies. However, Donna Haraway famously suggested a new mode of seeing and knowing, an embodied form of objectivity she referred to as "situated knowledges".³¹ She wanted to reclaim vision, images and imaginings. This, in order for feminists to turn to the concrete and particular, limited and embodied and not to the scopic regime of an all-seeing God-trick, since only a "partial perspective promises objective vision", that is, any perspective that acknowledges, and stays accountable for, its own both cultural and natural locatedness and situation.³² Seeing is an activity, and it promotes social change—especially so in the powerful guise of technoscience, hence the need to reclaim it.

In a sense, such developments—together with activist work like the medical women's collective health book *Our Bodies, OurSelves*³³—trace the origins of the research field today often named **feminist technoscience studies**.³⁴ And today, as biology is dramatically increasing and producing knowledge of the body's plasticity, its molecular and multiple, cascading and co-dependent status, and as the sciences are increasingly aware of the "glocal" politics of situated knowledge, it is clear that biology and its imaging sciences are transformative practices—and, as such, potentially powerful allies to feminist, anti-racist and non-sexist claims. Such allies should not merely be

³⁰ Sandra Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986).

³¹ Haraway, *Simians*, 188.

³² *Ibid.*, 190.

³³ One root especially worth mentioning is the feminist medical self-help movement and the famous book *Our Bodies, Ourselves* initially published by the Boston Women's Health Book Collective (1971) and later distributed and rewritten by different women's communities on a global scale (cf. Kathy Davis, "Feminist Body/Politics as World Traveller: Translating Our Bodies, Our Selves", *European Journal of Women's Studies* 9/2 (2002): 223-247).

³⁴ Haraway, *Modest_Witness@Second*.

critiqued but creatively changed from within the academic “belly of the beast”. Today there is thus a body of feminist theories on how to scientifically know about our embodied selves in the world, and that body of work, handed-down to women’s or gender studies students, is in itself a contested field. Many feminist theories of embodiment and of science flourish and cross paths: Your discursive body of feminist theories, analytical tools and thought-models is also, *per se*, a self-reflexive battleground!

The art piece *Untitled (Your Body Is A Battleground)*, evocative as it is, may thus illustrate some of “the feminist troubles with biology”, or the ways in which women’s bodies constitute a spectacular battleground for contesting biological discourses of scientists, feminist activists and of activist feminist scientists. The stakes are high for all, but as trained biologist and feminist theorist Donna Haraway has put it: “biology is a source of intense intellectual, emotional, and physical pleasure. Nothing like that should be given up lightly—or approached only in a scolding or celebratory mode”.³⁵ In fact, following Haraway, biology is “a political discourse, which we should engage at every level”.³⁶ While it has had the tendency to mean the actual physical body itself, biology is perhaps better conceptualized as a set of social and mutually struggling discourses of both cultural meaning and fleshy matter with some unruly agency of its own. And these struggles over the politics of vision are, as I hope to show further, to a large degree, played out in the visual field.

Genomic Visions

The magnitude of the scientific endeavour of the **Human Genome Project** was in science media likened to the NASA project of putting the first man on the moon.³⁷ A media spectacle of grandiose proportions, the mapping of the human genome was not just described as a crucial event in human history but

³⁵ Donna Haraway, *The Haraway Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 203.

³⁶ Haraway, *Simians*, 134.

³⁷ The United States founded part of this international research project to sequence and map out the human genome; it was directed by the National Human Genome Research Institute and led by Francis Collins, PhD, MD. The comparisons between the Apollo project and the HGP were made explicit on the American website but also commented upon in the science journals, *Nature* and *Science*, where the research results were published. “For the general public, however, the human genome sequence is of enormous symbolic significance, and its publication . . . is likely to be greeted with the same awestruck feeling that accompanied the landing of the first humans on the moon and the detonation of the first atomic bomb”. (Pääbo Svante, “The Human Genome and Our View of Ourselves”, *Science* 29/5507 (2001), 1219). The link between space science and genomics was also explored in popular culture, in for instance the Hollywood films *Mission to Mars* (Brian de Palma, 2000) and in *GATTACA* (Andrew Niccol, 1997).

also as a reversed exploration of space, a journey of discovery, not into outer space, but into the inner, genomic universe of all human kind.³⁸ Characterized by an abundance of visual imagery circulating in North European and Western media, I am to now zoom in on the covers of the two influential science journals that published the first scientific results of the tedious work of sequencing and mapping all the genes of the human genome.



Figure 1: The famous journal covers from 2001. The human genome project used an aesthetic celebrating human uniqueness while in fact very few uniquely human genes were found in comparison to other organisms. Reprinted with kind permission of *Nature* and *Science*.

After the cold war enormous resources previously used for military ends were freed, in foremost the USA, Britain and France, which together, with collective efforts of other Western scientists and politicians, aimed to amend the slightly shattered image of science after the A-bomb and, decennia earlier, racist practices of eugenics. The Human Genome Project was in that sense a gigantic effort to amend the very public image of the biological sciences themselves. The scientific journals thus put a lot of artistic effort into these covers. For instance, the *Nature* cover was produced with several advanced digital photographic technologies and used a large number of photographic pictures of famous or non-famous human faces scrambled together through the imaging program Mosaic, so to form a colourful and visually appealing DNA helix.

³⁸ In the light of the political climate in the decennia after the Cold War, and the economic, logistical and computational resources then released in Western countries, it is no surprise that this project became celebrated on a grand scale in the United States and was heralded by President Bill Clinton and British Prime Minister Tony Blair over a satellite link. It was science not for military ends, but discursively constructed as benefiting all of humanity. See José van Dijck, *Imagination. Popular Images of Genetics* (London: McMillan Press, 1998).

The artist contracted for the picture with the diffuse nuances associated to painting, on the cover of *Science*, was in fact also conveying something about visible differences of facial looks and the inner genetic nature of all of human-kind.

Sameness under the umbrella of the human genome is the political message on these covers. It becomes then also clear that politics is not something only gender studies scholars are immersed in, but that, more widely, all “science is politics by other means”—as stated by anthropologist of science Bruno Latour.³⁹ Both illustrations are supposed to visualize the otherwise *invisible* genetics, our inner genetic nature, the “discovered” molecular code to all of what is human. The colours of skin and clothing have to stand in for the evasive visual nature of genes. However, I see in fact also an idealized rendition of humanity where our ongoing worldly geopolitics, and lingering racial regimes, are transformed into a smooth aesthetics of not racial but ethnic difference. Ethnicity and gender is here the colourful and shape-giving cultural difference between humans. A computer program called Mosaic was used for the cover of *Nature*, forming a gigantic DNA molecule out of the photographs of hundreds of faces. Even the soft linear forms of the larger facial portraits on the *Science* cover seem to mimic the helical twisting of an up-right standing DNA molecule.

Exterior cultural markers of identity and difference are made to associate with an all-encompassing inner *panhuman* genetic identity. We are our human genes, the genes are us, our genes make us human (and culturally different). The scientific journals seem to in fact hold up the images for us to behold ourselves. In this gesture of mirroring, of holding up an idealized image of a collective, uniquely human, or even panhuman self, processes of identification and disidentification immediately take place. The pictures seem to tell a story of cultural differences as a function of human genes, in a form of biological determinism often named genetic determinism. Further, we see an aesthetization of lived difference that trace historical processes of colonialism and slavery. It is a refined image of human uniqueness and human unity in spite of what is conceptualized as superficial, “only” skin-deep, diversity.⁴⁰ As such, both the covers leave out the present social power relations between the depicted humans. Perhaps recalling the successful commercials of the clothing

³⁹ Bruno Latour, *Science In Action* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).

⁴⁰ Lisa Bloom, ed. *With Other Eyes: Looking at Race and Gender in Visual Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

company Benetton, biological “race” is instead turned into a matter of cultural difference and of colour, and—in turn—colour is turned into a voluntary state of mind.⁴¹ Colour becomes a choice of visual consumption. Allegorically, so has also racism today turned from being legitimated by nature to being legitimated by culture. It is almost pictures that could bear the heading “United Colours of Genomics”, so as to also remind us of not only the commercial, but the universalizing dimension of the Human Genome Project. In that vein, I would on the one hand even dare say that the neo-humanism conveyed by these images is grossly unsuccessful in creating a greater sense of inclusivity (in the invented category of “we, the genetically defined humans”), generating diversity awareness and further, a better public understanding of science in society.

On the other hand, the Human Genome Project *per se* also brought some posthuman insights to the fore. In a posthumanist feminist sense, affirmative towards the body, nature and non-human agency, the great human project in itself deconstructed our humanist understanding of the human as a unique and individual species, the Linnaean crown of creation. In fact it challenged the human exceptionalism that the project, publicly and widely, celebrated in the visual field. The human genome could not have been mapped were it not for the fly (*Drosophila*) genome, the mouse genome and other animal models, and were it not for the bovine DNA that became an essential part of the job to cover the blanks when sequencing the human genome. In this, non-humanist notions of selfhood appear, notions that pick up on dependency instead of solipsist autonomy and individuality, notions that do not shun reactions but in fact always incorporate and are co-constituted by the Other. Many of these parts of others, like fungi, bacteria or protists, within us are necessary for our survival. Most of them just ride along without doing any harm, as Donna Haraway⁴² has put it. It is in that sense we can come to realize that we have never really, anyone of us, been human in the first place. Paraphrasing Bruno Latour’s famous dictum, we have never been modern,⁴³ I think it is fair to state with Donna Haraway, that “we have never been human”—not in the prevailing traditional and purist sense. Thus, as biology itself deconstructs human exceptionalism, new differences appear on the horizon, differences that

⁴¹ Sarah Franklin, Celia Lury and Jackie Stacey, *Global Nature, Global Culture* (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2000); Evelyn M. Hammonds, “New Technologies of Race”, in *The Gendered Cyborg. A Reader*, ed. Gill Kirkup, Linda Janes, Kath Woodward and Fiona Hovenden (London and New York: Routledge and The Open University, 2000).

⁴² Haraway, *When Species Meet*.

⁴³ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

defy humanist understandings of ourselves as coherent, purely human, selves in charge of our bodies rather than co-constituted by them and other bodies. Such a feminist vision becomes thus not just about women, neither just about men and women, but about mapping out all kinds of human and non-human relations—also in the visual field.

AD-ventures

As the neurological literature explains, Alzheimer's disease, or AD, is a progressive degeneration of nerve cells (neurons) in the brain. Neurofibrillary tangles and amyloid plaques are characteristics of this disease of the brain. These are all molecular changes of a non-human and non-voluntary nature that take their toll on the narrowly defined, and experienced, exceptionalist sense of human Self, as it supposedly is always rational and in control of one's body. When looking in medical science journals, a range of commercial advertisements for drugs appear. Some are to mitigate the symptoms of AD and they are telling of how we culturally define human subjectivity as it in fact inevitably is affected by age or disease. In one of the ads an elderly man looks sternly and straight into the camera and declares defiantly, in a cultural commentary to this disorder of the brain: "I haven't yet retired from the human race, and I don't intend to for a long time". The brain is culturally imagined as the locus of humanness.⁴⁴ Alzheimer's apparently threatens not merely our perceptions of human value and human dignity, but also human identity as a cerebral essence.

The chief biochemical feature of this disorder, we may learn from medical textbooks, is a marked reduction in the synthesizing enzyme choline acetyltransferase, therefore pharmaceutical therapy, in the shape of drugs prescribed and administered, involves correcting such acetylcholine deficits.⁴⁵ Available on the market are so called cholinesterase inhibitors. Drugs of this class have showed some results but many of them are being poorly evaluated in clinical and other medical studies. This is why public health-care systems in many European countries are ever more reluctant to sponsor these drugs for prescription. Multinational pharmaceutical companies like Pfizer, Shire, Johnson&Johnson and Novartis AG often work together to promote and

⁴⁴ Åsberg and Lum 2009, op.cit.

⁴⁵ Howard L. Field and Reid Brackin, "Neurological Disorders of Increased Prevalence in Women: Migraine, Multiple Sclerosis and Alzheimer's Disease", in *Women's Mental Health: A Comprehensive Textbook*, ed. Susan G. Kornstein and Anita H. Clayton (New York and London: The Guilford Press, 2002).

market these drugs, like Exelon™ and Reminyl™, on a global scale and, for instance, Aricept™ (the leading brand sold in 44 countries) is marketed by Pfizer Inc. and the Japanese company Eisai. The results of clinical trials range from notable improvement to no change. The drugs may thus treat some of the symptoms of the disease in its early stages, but they do not stop or target the underlying and fatal process of this disease, and not all people respond to these drugs. Alzheimer's disease is in fact considered one of the most serious health concerns in Europe and the United States and one of the top five leading causes of death in the wealthy countries of the Northern hemisphere.⁴⁶ Women are affected by the disease as caregivers of the elderly.⁴⁷ But this is also a neurological disorder of increased occurrence in women; that is, more women than men suffer from it.

The biochemical origins of Alzheimer's disease is highly complicated, multifactorial and not quite fully known. Age is most significant, but medical literature lists also possible causes in genetic predisposition, blunt trauma to the head, exposure to heavy metals and toxins along with suggestions that estrogen deficiency and menopause are related to AD. In clinical terms, progressive and irreversible dementia is the symptom that is central when diagnosing patients with AD. From the onset of clinical symptoms, which are recognized in carefully executed memory tests and brain imaging scans (but never fully secured until after a post-mortem examination), most patients gradually get worse until they die (from indirect causes such as pneumonia). Patients experience a progressive deterioration of memory and difficulties with planning, abstraction and judgement. Last to go are long-term memory, motor skills and social skills. Altered behaviour patterns, impaired activities of daily life (ADL), sleeping disorders and general expressions of purposelessness are listed in the medical literature along with emotional manifestations such as depression, agitation and anxiety, but also delusions and even hallucinations. Afternoon and evening confusion, subsumed under the term "sundowning", is common, but the patients are very sensitive in general and easily disturbed by even the slightest environmental and physical changes.⁴⁸ From this rather clinical

⁴⁶ Epidemiologists have suggested that this form of dementia exists in up to ten percent of individuals over the age of 65 while the prevalence of Alzheimer's disease increases dramatically with advanced age so that as many as 47 percent of people aged 85 and above may suffer from it. The number of patients with AD is expected to grow dramatically in the future, against the background of what has been envisioned as a dramatically greying population (Field and Brackin, op.cit; Alzheimer's Association 2008).

⁴⁷ Catherine Ward-Griffin, Abram Oudshoorn, Kristie Clark and Nancy Bol, "Mother-Adult Daughter Relationships Within Dementia Care. A Critical Analysis", *Journal of Family Nursing* 13/1 (2007):13-32.

⁴⁸ Field and Brackin, op.cit.

background of a disease of the brain, let us look at how it appears in an advertisement.

The educational significance of advertising (rather than the study of successes or failures in promotion specific goods or services) lies in the politics of representation. Advertisements are highly worthwhile to study as they may lead to clues on what the idealized images of embodied subjectivity that are being mass diffused so to have as profound an impact as possible. Consumerism is in fact intended to arise from the visually experienced glitch between the culturally valorized images of the advertisement, and one's mundane, everyday life reality; and the heavy investments in pharmaceutical advertising is telling of the apparent success in this regard. In my last examination of a picture appearing in "popular/science", that is an advertisement for a pharmaceutical drug aimed at mitigating the symptoms of "AD", I locate the objects of analysis, as popular cultural expressions of scientific knowledge, at the intersections between culturally shared fantasy imagery and various strains of biomedical and social AD discourse. Such discourse does not so much passively reflect, but actively articulates and (re)constitutes both gendered and aged identities and subjectivities, as well as the social politics occurring along such differentials.

More specifically, in addition to the problems of determinism, objectification, scientism and disembodiment, we may here identify and trace lines of *biological* and *humanist fetishism*. Such fetishist strains of reductionist logic demarcate, organize and differentiate the (female) brain as an autonomous site of disease pathology removed from and impermeable to cultural and historical forces. Furthermore, the ad allows me to map the discursive devices through which biomedical science is produced as an authoritarian agent in the illumination and rationalization of the phenomenon of the female brain, as a cultural locus of biological difference, rationality, gender, heterosexuality, social relations, normalcy and pathology. In the following, I especially interrogate how boundaries emerge between the feminine/masculine, the rational/irrational and the human/nonhuman. Even so, in many ways they seem blurred, giving rise to ambivalences and even apprehension. Perhaps we may situate such unease within a larger cultural context of underlying fear surrounding women's bodies, aging and dying, as well as within cultural uncertainty regarding the effects of new biotechnologies.

The female brain is in the centre of attention within a 2003 advertisement for Reminyl. The image consists of a side profile of an elegant looking, aging Caucasian woman. She appears to be thoughtfully gazing off into the distance, with the hint of a smile on her face. The top half of her head, however, has been covered by a broad, landscape-style shot photograph of a heterosexual couple gazing out over the ocean at sunset. Even so, her cranium is outlined by a semi-circular line of clinical and diagnostic-sounding terminology associated with AD, including the words “general function”, “cognition”, “ADLs” (Activities of Daily Living) and “behaviour”. Initially, the advertisement’s circumscription of the top half of the woman’s head with the above described terminology demarcates, individualizes and thus *fetishizes* the woman’s brain as the autonomous origin of both disease and human identity. As a biological fetish, the aging female brain is imbued with self-sufficiency and autonomy as the disarticulated and self-referential source of AD-related pathology.⁴⁹ Not only is the brain framed as the origin of the pathologies of old age, but it is assigned the powers to generate its own semiotic system, whose signifiers supposedly correspond one-to-one with its various complexities and behaviours.

The image of the brain is akin to the previously discussed popular/science conceptions of DNA, another popular/science culture fetish, in the sense that it appears as the source of its own natural, original, monolithic and unchanging meanings. As such, the brain is understood within the advertisement through “metaphors of communications and integrated systems which collapse the images of the brain as a territory, and the brain as a machine”.⁵⁰ Consequently, its apparent strengths and weaknesses, which are perceived as being located within its boundaries as a self-contained organ, are in the ad translated into rational “maps” of its functions. Thus, while the image constructs the brain as the origin of its own transparent sign systems referring to the cognitive and affective disorders ascribed to AD, the brain emerges as an unmediated, disarticulated entity whose behaviours themselves autonomously produce the mappings and meanings assigned to them. In other words, the advertisement fetishizes the brain through the imaginary act of *seeing into the head*, as if such unmediated seeing was possible. By the picture we are asked to look at the interior of the female head, on to the source, the brain-itself. And as such the ad becomes a visual gesture that echoes the various visual techno-

⁴⁹ Haraway, *Modest_Witness@Second*, 142-145.

⁵⁰ Anne Beaulieu, “The Brain at the End of the Rainbow”, in *Wild Science: Reading Feminism, Medicine, and the Media*, ed. Janine Marchessault and Kim Sawchuk (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 41.

logies employed within the medical profession, such as CT scans or magnetic resonance imaging. The image prompts a controlling way of seeing, one we recognize as perspectivalist. It is a **medical gaze** aiming to abolish sickness and promote normalcy and health. Within such a dehumanizing visual regime, we the viewers of the ad are like the medical professionals, enabled with the capacity to separate the body from the person. The medical professionals of today, as the intended readers of this advertisement in the journal, are in this image allowed to enter visually, without technical effort or physical pain, into a generalized aging woman's brain. The chemically induced realities of her enhanced being are laid out to the spectator, as romantic memories of a heterosexual couple on the beach during "sundown" unfold as a snapshot. Thus, the fetishistic image of the supposedly drug-enhanced white woman's brain, encircled with explanatory notions such as "general function", "cognition" and "behaviour", effectuates and sustains, generally speaking, a medicalization of aging womanhood.⁵¹

This picture is a culturally encoded constellation of selected scenes that seems to signify that which transpires in the drug-enhanced brain of the woman is her inner true desires and thoughts which here are supposedly biochemically exposed.⁵² This picture links to other closely related visual genres. As a computer generated image, requiring advanced imaging programs and artistic skill, it resembles for instance widely-recognizable images found in popular science journals. In effect, an understanding and decoding of this "popular/medical" picture is produced through allusions to pre-existing reference systems of interpretation, within both medical and popular culture. It relates especially to such popular/scientific ways of imaging the mind as localized in the brain. The scientific research community, the corporate pharmaceutical world and the broader public are complicit in the production of the female brain as it is here imag(in)ed. In this sense, the picture both reflects and inflects the cultural imaginary around Alzheimer's as it is produced in the mediatised interstices of the popular and the scientific.

⁵¹ Jennifer Lum, "It's Not Her, It's the Disease': Towards a Cartography of Scientific and Popular Cultures of Alzheimer's Disease". MA Thesis defended at Utrecht University, the Netherlands, 2006.

⁵² Bettina Leysen, "Medicalization of Menopause: From 'Feminine Forever' to 'Healthy Forever'", in *Between Monsters, Goddesses, and Cyborgs: Feminist Confrontations With Science, Medicine, and Cyberspace. Feminist Confrontations with Science, Medicine and Cyberspace*, ed. Nina Lykke and Rosi Braidotti (London and New Jersey: Zed Books, 1996).

A striking montage is visible between the textual descriptions and mapping of the various functions of the female brain ostensibly affected by AD and the landscape shot of the couple taking in a view of the ocean. This seems to displace the impressions of her mind with the biochemical workings of her brain. Arguably, the juxtaposition articulates the female brain as the embodiment of an expansive, natural terrain that can be explored and rationalized by the contemporary powers of biotechnology and pharmacology. Moreover, the superimposition of the image of the beach, ocean and sunset over the top half of the woman's head produces what Kim Sawchuk may describe as a "biotouristic" fantasy, in this case, of the female brain as a corporeal frontier of scientific exploration. Biotourism is alive with the advancement and popular diffusion of medical imaging technologies, an example being the digitalized Visible Human Project available online. The body becomes a bodyscape which is "spatialized" and given definable geographic contours. "Rendering the interior of the body as a space for travel is contingent upon the representation of the body as a frontier with glorious vistas that can be visited—perhaps not by a real body, but at least by the human eye".⁵³ Importantly, this cultural fantasy renders a new kind of subject position available: the biotourist. This spectator, as Sawchuk implies, is liberated to roam about indefinitely, enjoying the sparkling "wonders" of the wet-ware of female brain in touristy fashion, without really getting close enough to feel that his/her integrity is threatened by whatever foreign and unforeseen unpleasanties and even dangers lurk within the landscape with the deep sea that threatens to engulf. In the Reminyl ad such a biotouristic window on to the fetishized female brain is opened. Mind is turned into anatomy and anatomy into landscape.

Looking at Ourselves through the Eyes of Science: Concluding Remarks

The simultaneously corporeal, media-technological and visual domain of advertisements for this particular anti-AD drug ad generated dynamic images of gender and embodiment, as well as it lent itself to ongoing feminist interventions engaging with the images and ideas circulating around aging, medicine and the body.⁵⁴ In this chapter, I explored historical regimes of vision and visibility connected to scientific ways of looking and knowing. I looked

⁵³ Kim Sawchuk, "Biotourism, Fantastic Voyage, and the Sublime Inner Space", in *Wild Science: Reading Feminism, Medicine and the Media*, ed. Janine Marchessault and Kim Sawchuk (New York and London: Routledge, 2000).

⁵⁴ Van Dijk 2006, *Imagination*.

at art, scientific journals and advertisements, targeting medical practitioners treating patients with for instance Alzheimer's disease, in order to interrogate how "technoscience" comments upon itself. Working within a methodological framework I think we should identify as "feminist visual studies of technoscience", I hope to have not merely delineated feminist concerns with the body as gazed upon by science, such as determinism, objectification, scientism and disembodiment, and that I further added another highly visual problem, that of fetishism, and more importantly propelled insights into the relations and tensions of seeing and knowing.

Clearly, publicly available science images, scientific icons (like the DNA molecule) and commercial or celebratory imagery that link to other, often different, visual genres such as romantic movies or scientific brain scan technologies, are part of our contemporary cultural fantasy landscape. These images impact upon our processes of identity formation, our practices of looking at our selves through the eyes of science, insofar as they furnish an array of cultural signposts and schematics through which we understand, imagine and even experience ourselves as gendered, racialized, sexualized, disabled subjects. Furthermore, the biological fetishism of the brain or fetishism of the genes here interrogated, seem to rely on a specific regime of human exceptionalism at the expense of the co-constituting technologies or other organisms that make us what we are. Rather than logic or argument, the appeal of the scientific rhetoric is in fact derived from the effervescent usage of images, whether in scientific or in popular or commercial settings. Prospering with images, and whole imaginary landscapes, science as well as popular culture sustain and contribute to the discursively shaped imaginary of technoscience. Feminists engage with these images due to the fact that they both give shape to identity producing fantasies, and sustain a particular organization of knowledge of the world. There is even a reality producing potential of the technoscience imaginary and this anticipatory effect is not produced in science or in fiction, but in the visual culture at large. In this chapter I have shown how feminist visual criticism can inspire us, in our further investigations of the overlapping realms of science and popular culture, to combine epistemological insights with situated knowledges and a vision of social change.

Questions for Review and Discussion

- What is the relationship between seeing and knowing? And how has feminism responded to historical ways of looking and producing science?
- Since the 1970s, the accepted interpretations of the body have been subjected to feminist critique. What views on the body did feminists critique?
- How are gender, ethnicity and sexuality visualized in contemporary science as it appears in popular media? Give examples from science-fiction films, popular science and commercial advertisements.
- What do contemporary scientific approaches to the biology of genes and the brain tell us of our contemporary understandings of human identity?
- What is to be gained from approaching biology in various interdisciplinary ways that combine visual analysis with cultural studies, feminist theory and history with postcolonial approaches to science?

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CHAPTER 6

Look and *Feel* Those Chubby Cheeks: An Intersensory Approach to Seeing the Ultrasound Image

Charlotte Kroløkke

Watch your unborn daughter play and smile. Talk to her and trace how she moves to your voice. Caress a print of your unborn son's little foot. Or, with the help of your Falcon computer mouse, touch his cheeks or feel his kick, while he is still in the uterus. While the first few experiences are now common services offered to pregnant women, family members and friends, touching your unborn son's cheeks or letting other family members see and feel his kick may soon be as well.

Fetal ultrasound imaging, as it unfolds in Western cultures, promises to engage all of our senses. The goal of this chapter is to discuss how these new ways of seeing and sensing affects our understanding of the ultrasound image as well as its implications to the teaching of feminist visual culture and to professionals navigating new visualization techniques. Taking my point of departure from the **performance turn**, I wish to extend previous feminist scholarship to suggest that participants in the ultrasound session are not only spectators of the session but more appropriately cast as co-performers. During the ultrasound session, pregnant women and their family members direct their gaze away from the pregnant woman, the sonographer and the ultrasound machine to the flat-screen TV or the image as it is projected on to the wall. Fetal activities and movements are intensely watched, narrated and commented upon. Pregnant women and the sonographer jointly work to get the fetus into a more flattering photographic position. Prospective parents actively co-construct and navigate the ultrasound session. In this manner, the dreamscapes of future parenting and family life readily unfold.

While the theoretical set-up includes existing feminist scholarship on two-dimensional ultrasound imaging, I begin by positioning the pregnant body and fetal ultrasound imaging, jointly, in the midst of the experience economy. A brief introduction to the ethnographic fieldwork highlights the consumer approach that elective ultrasound imaging now takes. I then present feminist perspectives on ultrasound imaging and continue with a discussion of

the ultrasound as a not-to-be missed part of the pregnancy experience and as a bio-tourist experience. A discussion of developments within touch technology and examples from the fieldwork will be included throughout the chapter.

Meet Your Baby: Love at First Sight

Experiences are no longer just the hallmark of the entertainment industry but are spreading to businesses and industries far removed from the Disney World theme park. Authors of *Welcome to the Experience Economy*, Joseph Pine and James Gilmore,¹ succinctly point to experiences as key to successful businesses in late capitalist society and as the fourth economic offering (following commodities, goods and services). While they speculate on a fifth economic offering, the transformation economy, their work rests with the notion that consumers today want experiences. Experiences are carefully crafted so that customers (now frequently referred to as guests) can engage in different forms of interactions that promise to make use of all of their senses and perhaps even facilitate new types of sensations.²

Key to staging an experience is a set of rhetorical strategies.³ Firstly, an experience needs a concise and compelling theme which helps to organize and remember it. In the fetal ultrasound session, bonding with the baby is a compelling and common theme. Secondly, positive cues must be stressed and negative cues eliminated. Sonographers swiftly move from the 2D to the 3D image when a particularly cute image emerges. They also promptly move back to the 2D image, when the 3D image fails to live up to the criteria of “cuteness”, and the fetus looks like a “non-human baby”. Thirdly, memorabilia and engaging all five senses intensifies the experience.⁴ In the case of the ultrasound session, prospective parents leave with photos of the baby-to-be and a DVD. While the session highly prioritizes the visual sense, other senses such as hearing and touching are important as well. Biomedical services have, thus, successfully entered the marketplace of experiences.

Fetal imaging must also be understood in light of a larger transnational pregnancy and infant commodity industry. The fact that most prospective

¹ Joseph B. Pine and James H. Gilmore, “Welcome to the Experience Economy”, *Harvard Business Review* July-August 1998.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 102-103.

parents see the ultrasound as a not-to-be-missed experience is not exclusively a sign that the biomedical industry is making mothers more transparent or perhaps even invisible, but also a sign that pregnant women (including family members) are careful shoppers of reproductive technologies. Fetal ultrasound imaging has, as noted by Janelle Taylor,⁵ become a hybrid activity. It blends medical aspects, familial bonding and entertainment. This is especially true in the case of three-dimensional fetal imaging—an elective service, frequently purchased by the prospective grandparents. Although the main purpose of the elective ultrasound is to “meet”, “see” and record the fetus, its appeal lies also with its transformative potential. It promises to transform the pregnant woman and her family members into mothers, fathers, grandparents, aunts and siblings and in the process re-positions the fetus as a daughter/son, younger (annoying) sibling, cousin, playmate and grandchild.

Developments within new visualization technologies co-exist with an increased visibility of pregnant bodies in the Western imaginary. The photo of a very pregnant and nude Demi Moore on the August 1991 cover of *Vanity Fair* kicked off, as noted by Matthews and Wexler,⁶ spirited discussions of the pregnant (nude) body. In their analysis of Demi Moore’s photo, they see her pregnant belly as signifying a “bulging shopping bag from some boutique”⁷ and as a “fashion accessory”.⁸ Not only are images of pregnant celebrities common (one need only to think of Halle Berry, Angelina Jolie and Nicole Kidman), but magazines, pregnancy and mothering websites position the pregnant body as being able to hold both the gaze of the viewer and the baby.⁹ Images of the pregnant body as well as the fetus intertwine and take their form in the midst of consumer culture.

The **fetal ultrasound image** is no longer just a medical image but rather the first picture of our new baby, swiftly incorporated into family albums, Facebook, YouTube, baby’s own website and baby shower announcements.¹⁰ As such it is a transient image that takes on different meanings.

⁵ Janelle S. Taylor, “Image of Contradiction: Obstetrical Ultrasound in American Culture”, in *Reproducing Reproduction. Kinship, Power and Technological Innovation*, ed. Sarah Franklin and Helena Ragoné (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004)

⁶ Sandra Matthews and Laura Wexler, *Pregnant Pictures* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 203.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 204.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Lisa M. Mitchell, *Baby’s First Picture. Ultrasound and the Politics of Fetal Subjects* (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2001).

I will now briefly detail the ethnographic fieldwork that was carried out at two different elective ultrasound clinics in Denmark and in the United States.

Prenatal Photos at the Scandinavian and New Mexican Clinics

Colourful designer chairs, posters with prenatal photos and Danish designer lamps greet you as you enter the ultrasound clinic “Scanningsjordemoderen” in the centre of Copenhagen. Two midwives started the clinic and they jointly administer three clinics in different locations in Denmark. The Copenhagen clinic is decidedly modern with a “feminine” and cosmopolitan touch: Candles, music, Moroccan teacups, silver trays, small side tables and water await each client. The chosen furniture along with white walls and airy white curtains signals a recognizable Danish contemporary home setting. Posters with photos of “Christine” during week 25 and week 32 of pregnancy are contrasted and matched with photos of “Christine” shortly after her birth. A three-dimensional photo of identical twins intimately displays the physical closeness of the two fetuses in the womb. The resemblance between the prenatal and post-birth photos is uncanny and sets the stage for a very special and joyful experience awaiting each client.

In contrast, a distinct New Mexican setting greets you when you enter “Blessing Way Prenatal” in Albuquerque, New Mexico, USA. Colourful wooden chairs, southwestern carpets, wooden beams, a kiva fireplace, battery-operated candles and relaxing music create a setting that feels more like a home or a spa than an elective ultrasound service. Blessing Way Prenatal is run and owned by a certified sonographer and it is superbly positioned within New Mexican culture. Not only is the décor and physical lay-out representative of modern New Mexico, but the posture of the owner of the clinic as well as her choice to also, at times, communicate in Spanish with her clients, matches the multicultural context that she is in. Unique to New Mexico is the use of Ultrasound Streaming Technology known as Sonostream. Clients can invite family members or friends to follow the ultrasound session in real time through the online medium Sonostream.

While the sonographer, in this clinic, is certified and has the expertise to conduct a diagnostic exam, clients come to the clinic for the 3D photos and the accompanying DVD. Consequently, she quickly looks at the fetus in 2D, shows and comments on the structure of the heart, the workings of

the kidneys, the placement of the fetus and the placenta as well as presenting prospective parents with a quick sound bite of the heartbeat. She then turns to get good photos of the fetus and, just as in the Danish context, facial portraits are in demand.

During my ethnographic fieldwork from October 2007 to the end of December 2008, I interviewed and talked to the midwives and sonographers (henceforth jointly presented as the sonographers) who administer the ultrasound sessions. I observed a total of seventy ultrasound sessions and briefly talked to clients before and after the session. In both the Danish as well as the New Mexico setting, each client was presented with my research and given the opportunity to decline to participate. None of them did. Each session took an average of forty-five minutes to one hour and during this time I took notes, detailing nonverbal expressions as well as verbal communication.¹¹ Most of the exams were undertaken during weeks 28-31 of pregnancy, as this is the recommended time for “better photos”. Many of the clients had already undergone other 2D medical ultrasound exams, usually undertaken in the Danish or US prenatal healthcare setting. To prevent parents from choosing the 3D ultrasound over the regular check-up, proof of regular prenatal visits is required in New Mexico. In both settings, the three-dimensional ultrasound session was viewed as a “bonus” session—one for enjoyment and interaction with the baby.

Fetal Touching

Novint Technology, a computer software developer, located in Albuquerque New Mexico, specializes in **haptics technology**. In an interview with CEO of Novint, Tom Anderson,¹² as well as in the promotional material of 3D touch technology, touch is positioned as an important gateway to experiencing the world. Existing computer games are, because of the absence of touch, cast as similar to movies before the introduction of sound.¹³ Novint Technology’s latest development is the Falcon—an interchangeable handle that moves right and left, forwards and backwards. When the 3D cursor touches a virtual object, the computer recognizes it and creates a force that the user feels.

¹¹ At Blessing Way Prenatal Ultrasounds I was given permission to also tape-record the session.

¹² I interviewed Tom Anderson in December 2008 in his office in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

¹³ <http://home.novint.com/novint/whatis3dtouch.php> Retrieved December 2008.

The Falcon is a versatile grip and presents the user with different forms of feedback. It can be used by the surgeon who is practicing making an incision into the patient's skin or by the student of dentistry who is practicing drilling into a tooth. The Falcon provides each professional with a chance to understand, what Anderson calls, "a patient's data set" before surgery.¹⁴ In the world of computer games, for which the Falcon is now primarily sold, players enjoy grabbing a basketball, feeling its momentum, feeling the swing of the golf club, moving through space or other forms of kinesthetic or forced feedback. As noted by Anderson, it makes you feel like you are really in the game. Instead of just controlling and pushing buttons, you are the character in the game.¹⁵

Touch technology can easily be applied to other settings as well. CEO of Novint applied touch to the 3D ultrasound image of his own son. With the help of e-touch Sono, prospective parents can touch the fetus. Move the cursor across the fetus' face and you feel the contours of its lips and nose. Anderson notes: "I touched my son's cheek before he was born. It was an incredible moment to touch him for the first time. I remember the experience clearly and will never forget it".¹⁶ Novint attempted to briefly immortalize the moment and created 3D sculptures of the fetal face that expectant parents could buy and bring home. Thus, the fetal image became matter or as noted by Scott Lash and Celia Lury, it entered the media-thing/thing-media circuit: "Image has become matter and matter has become image: media-things and thing-media".¹⁷

While New Mexico sonographics and a few gynecologists located at the University of New Mexico have shown an interest in the product, it was initially too expensive. Anderson notes, however, that with the latest development of the Falcon, expectant parents may soon use their golf gaming software and the Falcon to touch the 3D image of their unborn child.

Elective ultrasound clinics as well as developments within touch technology speak to the ways in which fetal imaging promises to become an **intersensory experience**. Prior to discussing the intersensory approach to fetal imaging, we turn to feminist scholars whose provocative insights into two-dimensional fetal imaging are crucial.

¹⁴ Interview with Tom Anderson, December 2008.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ <http://www.4d-ultrasounds.com/ultrasounds/etouch.htm> Retrieved December 2008.

¹⁷ Scott Lash and Celia Lury, *Global Culture Industries* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2007).

Feminist Ways of Seeing

Feminist scholars note how visual technologies and medical scientific discourses have granted fetuses personhood, effectively constructing a new public citizen of sorts, while simultaneously erasing the female body.¹⁸ Lynn Morgan illustrates this swiftly in her analysis of the embryonic subject.¹⁹ According to her, the embryonic subject became a political actor as early as in the 1910s when new visualization techniques enabled medical professionals to describe the embryonic form. Sarah Franklin similarly argues that visual technologies along with scientific accounts have produced a new social category of fetal personhood.²⁰ According to Franklin, today's fetus is "the little commander in the womb".²¹ In sharp contrast, women, within this transnational infant commodity industry, are positioned as caretakers and consumers. Barbara Rothman positions pregnant women as labourers; (white) babies as precious products; and the female body as a commodity.²²

Barbara Duden traces the historical developments in fetal imaging technologies.²³ To her, visualization technologies have turned pregnancy into a "technogenic" experience. Pregnancy becomes "real" at the sight of the fetus. The ultrasound image is a form of "technological quickening" that takes place several weeks before pregnant women can feel fetal movements.²⁴ Pregnancy is now determined on the basis of blood work, pregnancy tests or an early ultrasound image.²⁵ Pregnancy is also re-positioned from a private, personal experience to a mediated and semi-public experience. The ultrasound has opened up the womb to individuals other than the pregnant woman herself.²⁶

¹⁸ Lynn M. Morgan, "Embryo Tales", in *Remaking Life and Death: Toward an Anthropology of the Biosciences*, ed. Sarah Franklin and Margaret Lock (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 2001); Sarah Franklin, "Fetal Fascinations: New Dimensions to the Medical-Scientific Construction of Fetal Personhood", in *Off-Centre. Feminism and Cultural Studies*, ed. Sarah Franklin, Celia Lury and Jackie Stacey (London and New York: Harper Collins Academic, 1999); Barbara Duden, "The Fetus on the 'Father Shore.' Toward a History of the Unborn", in *Fetal Subjects, Feminist Positions*, ed. Lynn M. Morgan and Meredith W. Michaels (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999); Barbara K. Rothman, "Motherhood Under Capitalism", in *Consuming Motherhood*, ed. Janelle S. Taylor, Linda L. Layne and Danielle F. Wozniak (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004).

¹⁹ Morgan, *op.cit.*

²⁰ Franklin, *Fetal Fascinations*.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 194.

²² Rothman, *Motherhood Under Capitalism*.

²³ Duden, *op.cit.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ See also Dion Farquhar, *The Other Machine. Discourse and Reproductive Technologies* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996).

²⁶ José van Dijk, *Transparent Bodies. A Cultural Analysis of Medical Imaging* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2005).

Pregnancy is no longer an individual experience (interpreted by the woman) but a collective experience, commented upon and interpreted by medical professionals, family members and friends.

One of the most profound feminist critiques deals with the presumed erasure of the female body.²⁷ Imaging technologies force the mother to turn away from her embodied experience in order to make the fetus visible.²⁸ To Rothman this particular construction has its roots in Western notions of the autonomous subject. The sonographers inadvertently position the fetus as an autonomous and independent individual. Rothman says: “To make the fetus visible, the mother becomes invisible, even to herself. She turns away from her own body, away from her lived experience of the fetus, and watches it on the screen”.²⁹ Meredith Michaels adds that fetal imaging re-positions paternal bonding as important.³⁰ The technology “dethrones” the female experience, prioritizes the fetus, disembodies the experiences of pregnancy and re-positions the father and/or the medical doctor as the ultimate creator.³¹

Some feminist scholars point to the pleasures of reproduction that women get from the ultrasound session.³² Taylor notes that the ultrasound exam provides evidence that the prospective mother’s hard work is paying off.³³ It creates a “performative arena” in which a pregnant woman can demonstrate her mothering skills to others.³⁴ To this extent, pregnant women appropriate the technology. As noted by Dion Farquhar: “This discourse about domination is not only impervious to the pleasures of stimulation that prenatal technologies offer women. It also ignores the way even dominant, routinized technologies unwittingly mobilize diverse opportunities for perverse appropriation and strategic opposition”.³⁵ While Taylor re-positions the pregnant woman into the role of an active consumer, Farquhar proposes that women appropriate fetal imaging, thereby intensifying the mother-fetus relation.

²⁷ Barbara Rothman, “Caught in the Current”, in *Consuming Motherhood*, ed. Janelle S. Taylor, Linda L. Layne and Danielle F. Wozniak (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004); Duden, op.cit.

²⁸ Rothman, *Caught in the Current*.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 285

³⁰ Meredith Michaels, “Fetal Galaxies: Some Questions About What We See”. In *Fetal Subjects, Feminist Position*, ed. Lynn M. Morgen and Meredith Michaels (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).

³¹ Dijk, *Transparent*, 106.

³² Janelle S. Taylor, “A Fetish Is Born. Sonographers and the Making of the Public Fetus”, in *Consuming Motherhood*, ed. Janelle S. Taylor, Linda L. Layne and Danielle F. Wozniak (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004); Lisa M. Mitchell, op.cit.; Farquhar, op.cit.

³³ Janelle S. Taylor, *A Fetish Is Born*.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 154.

³⁵ Farquhar, op.cit., 168.

Taylor's work is particularly pertinent, as it positions the fetus as well as the ultrasound session in consumer culture.³⁶ According to her, the fetus temporarily is situated in the commodity situation: "Through obstetrical ultrasound as it is practiced in the United States, then, the fetus is commoditized and personified, 'produced' as an object for exchange and for consumption".³⁷ The fetus as well as the ultrasound session is an event-in-the-making. Seeing the fetus becomes, as argued by Taylor, synonymous with bonding with the fetus; shifting from a medical gaze of seeing the baby to a mediated and familial gaze of recognizing "it" as not just any baby but *my* baby.

Scientific seeing derives much of its power from the fact that it involves seeing the invisible. Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright note that not only the fetal image, but also the image instrument is celebrated in scientific seeing.³⁸ The narrator's professional authority combined with the near invisibility of the image instrument creates an illusion of objective truth.³⁹ The fetal sonogram is not simply a scientific image but much more profoundly a cultural image that requires translation.⁴⁰ Lisa Mitchell in her fieldwork at Canadian hospitals aptly demonstrates this. Technicians in her study readily translate the blurry, grey and white, 2D image by applying well-known metaphors in their assignment of fetal personhood.⁴¹

While scientific seeing inspires conventional stories, the technology itself is neither good nor bad. As noted by Rosalind Petchesky, context is important.⁴² Women are not simply victims of fetal imaging technologies but consumers of it. Sturken and Cartwright concur: Women who pin their ultrasound image on to their refrigerator doors are "appropriating medical culture's artifacts to construct cultural narratives inflected by other aspects of their worlds".⁴³ Similarly, the ultrasound image itself holds multiple meanings. Women who undergo high-risk pregnancy do not bond with the ultrasound image to the same extent as women who opt for a "bonus" 3D ultrasound session.⁴⁴ Again, the context in which the ultrasound image is received is crucial.

³⁶ Taylor, *Image of Contradiction and A Fetish Is Born*.

³⁷ Taylor, *A Fetish Is Born*, 159.

³⁸ Sturken and Cartwright, op.cit.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Sturken and Cartwright, op.cit; Taylor, *A Fetish Is Born*; Lisa M. Mitchell, op.cit.

⁴¹ Lisa M. Mitchell, op.cit.

⁴² Rosalind R. Petchesky, "Foetal Images: The Power of Visual Culture in the Politics of Reproduction", in *Reproductive Technologies: Gender, Motherhood and Medicine*, ed. Michelle Stanworth (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

⁴³ Sturken and Cartwright, op.cit., 296.

⁴⁴ Barbara K. Rothman, *The Tentative Pregnancy: Prenatal Diagnosis and the Future of Motherhood* (New York: Viking, 1986).

Mummy Tummy Sightseeing

Representations of the body in scientific discourses draw upon popular culture and closely approximate a new form of tourism.⁴⁵ While feminist scholars poignantly have demonstrated ways in which scientific images are used within consumer culture, the main argument here is that medical images themselves are infused with popular culture. Kim Sawchuk has coined the term “**biotourism**” to suggest the fantasy of travelling in the inner body.⁴⁶

Participants of the ultrasound session are motivated to view fetal activities as they take place in real time. The session (or tour as we may here choose to call it) is designed to show the fetus. Participants are expected to marvel in the revelations. The experience is, thus, not only about a particular way of seeing, although sight is prioritized, it also demands a particular type of performance. As noted by scholars within tourism studies: “Tourism is not so much about going places as it is about particular modes of relating to the world, encountering, looking at it and making sense”.⁴⁷ During the ultrasound session, the pregnant woman is both the one toured upon and the tourist. She shares the host position with the sonographer but also occupies the position of a visitor. Sonographers actively encourage women as well as their accompanying guests to become co-performers and co-facilitators of the experience. The ultrasound session, then, speaks to a particular way of seeing, sensing and relating.

Bio-tourism involves several key aesthetic and rhetorical features that all relate to the visual consumption of the fetus. Firstly, bio-tourism turns the miniature into something large.⁴⁸ The 26 week old fetus estimated to weigh an approximate 800 grams looks almost like a fully grown baby on the flat-screen TV. Parents frequently note the double chins, fat legs and bulky cheeks: “I can’t believe how baby-like he is”, one pregnant woman announces.⁴⁹ Siblings who are present during the ultrasound session also make note of the fetus’ size, position and colour. For instance, a 6-year old girl about the colour of her little sister’s image says: “Is my sister really gold-coloured?”⁵⁰ The sonographer narrates the fetal size by both positioning the fetus as a real-size baby

⁴⁵ Kim Sawchuk, op.cit.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Jørgen Ole Bærenholdt et al. *Performing Tourist Places* (Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2004), 2.

⁴⁸ Sawchuk, op.cit.

⁴⁹ Observations made during Fall 2007 fieldwork.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

but also as a small baby. Body parts such as a foot are measured and the participants respond by expressing awe of how small or large the foot is.

Fetal ultrasound imaging transforms inner space into a familiar setting of sorts. Sawchuk points to the tendency to describe inner space as a type of landscape, or more precisely, a bioscape, that can be mapped.⁵¹ During the three-dimensional ultrasound session, inner space is most frequently defined in light of a well-known (and conventionally acceptable) baby milieu. The umbilical cord is cast as a toy (or in the Danish context where pacifiers are commonly used, also as a pacifier); the placenta as pillow and the uterus as baby's first home. The sonographers frame inner space as a loving, familial, secure, playful and educational space. This use of metaphors makes inner space both recognizable and unique.

The bio-tourist narrative invokes what Sawchuk calls a rhetoric of pilgrimage in which the technological experience is somehow "sacred".⁵² In the ultrasound session, we travel to never-before-seen space only to return with an awe-inspired experience and transformed by it. It is, as noted by Ellen Strain, described as a "tale of discovery"⁵³ when we enter the exotic landscape of, in this case, the uterus. Much like the anthropologist, we are invited to observe the fetal environment, organs and fetal movements. "I think I am going to cry", one expectant aunt says.⁵⁴ "This is just really incredible", a future grandmother comments at the sight of her grandson's four-chambered heart.⁵⁵ Frequently participants ask if the ultrasound can be "felt" by the fetus or whether it disturbs it. At times the sonographer presses on the stomach in order for the fetus to move, the expectant father speaks to the fetus, also to encourage it to move, or the pregnant woman turns on her side to allow a more photographic angle of the fetus to emerge.

Body parts are named and explained, leading expectant families to feel that they are getting the "real" thing: "The little things that look like bubbles, that is actually her umbilical cord", one sonographer announces.⁵⁶ The experience is narrated as "extraordinary", "special" and "unique" by sonographers and participants alike although also as understandable, as noted by one

⁵¹ Sawchuk, op.cit.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ellen Strain, *Public Places, Private Journeys: Ethnography, Entertainment, and the Tourist Gaze* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, London: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 2.

⁵⁴ Observations made during Fall 2007 fieldwork.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

expectant father: "This is finally something I can understand",⁵⁷ and familiar as noted by another: "It feels just like the movie theatre: We are only missing the popcorn".⁵⁸ The sonographers emphasize the extraordinary moments as well: "Look at the foot soles. Aren't they cute?"⁵⁹ Seeing the beating heart the sonographer exclaims: "I never get tired of seeing that. That is so beautiful".⁶⁰ In this manner, the tour is taken out of the world of medical jargon and made understandable without losing sight of its specialness and unique moments.

While the experience is computer-mediated and as such simulated, the technology is demediated to suggest a smooth transition between interior and exterior space.⁶¹ The experience is so make-believe that the computer-mediated aspect is (almost) erased. This form of "staged authenticity"⁶² is further assisted by the fact that prospective parents' gaze is directed at the projected image and not the ultrasound machine. The baby gets introduced to the parents and here most notably the father when the sonographer says: "Well, hello! There's your daughter, your sweet little girl".⁶³ Extraordinary moments such as the sight of fetal fingers, toes and face, because they appear make-believe, are seen and presented as authentic. Parents readily comment on who the baby looks like: "She's got your nose", a grandmother says.⁶⁴ Or one mother notes: "She has my grumpy face".⁶⁵ When the sonographer announces: "You can see that the kidneys are working. I think she just peed", the experience is deemed extraordinary.⁶⁶ During these "surprise" moments, participants and expectant parents laugh and joyfully partake in the event.

Pregnant women are invited to engage in bio-tourism by entering a new spatial experience. While they frequently focus on the projected image, they also interact with the fetus. They massage or push on their belly, jump up and down to change fetal position, imitate the fetus' facial movements, or they talk to the fetus. Several of them note that it is "cool" to jointly feel, interact and see the fetus. To this extent, they engage in a conventional mother performance: They lovingly and enthusiastically discipline and "hold" the fetus.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Observations made during Fall 2008 fieldwork.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Strain, op.cit.

⁶² A term used by Dean MacCannell in his work *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Schocken, 1989).

⁶³ Observations made Fall 2008.

⁶⁴ Observations made during Fall 2007—Fall 2008 fieldwork.

⁶⁵ Observations made during Fall 2008 fieldwork.

⁶⁶ Observations made during 2007 and 2008 fieldwork.

Touring the inner body also holds transformative potential. As noted by one of the pregnant women: “It is great that he (the father) now better understands what I am going through”. Another woman shows great enthusiasm that her husband, temporarily deployed from Afghanistan, “meets” the baby prior to going back. Referring to his DVD and 3D photo that he will take with him back to Afghanistan, he notes that it is going to make a lot of his fellow soldiers envious.⁶⁷ Experiencing the ultrasound collectively transforms the participants into good mothers, understanding fathers and devoted, loving nuclear (heterosexual and monogamous) families.

New Interactions, Old Stories

New technologies invite new forms of interactions. According to Lash and Lury, technological developments allow us to depart the world of interpretation and enter the world of navigation.⁶⁸ With a specific reference to new technologies, they say: “We do not ‘read’ them so much as ‘do’ them or do with them”.⁶⁹ While Lash and Lury by no means discuss ultrasound imaging, their observation that we, as consumers, today operate more out of a navigational and interactional mode, provides us with critical insights into the interactions that take place during the elective ultrasound session.⁷⁰

Three-dimensional ultrasound imaging moves the pregnant woman and her accompanying participants from the position of the **spectator** to the position of **spect-actors**. According to Michael S. Bowman, the position of the spectator (and its connotations of passive viewing) does not accurately represent today’s tourists.⁷¹ Inspired by the work of Augusto Boal, he suggests instead the term “spect-actor”: “An interactive co-creator of the performance who may take a more or less important role in it”.⁷² Bowman’s development here interestingly describes the more participatory engagement that frequently gets displayed during the 3D ultrasound session and that has come to signify the “good” session by sonographers and clients alike.

⁶⁷ Observations made during Fall 2008 fieldwork.

⁶⁸ Lash and Lury, op.cit.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 8.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Michael Bowman, “Looking for Stonewall’s Arm: Tourist Performance as Research Method”, in *Opening Acts. Performance in/as Communication and Cultural Studies*, ed. Judith Hamera (Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006).

⁷² Ibid., 104.

The following segment from an ultrasound session demonstrates this:

S: **Sonographer**
F: **Father**
M: **Mother**

During this ultrasound session the pregnant woman is accompanied by her male partner. She already has a five year old son but this is his first child.

S: This is the heart.
F: It really looks great. Really fine.
S: I am going to take a closer look at it.
F: It looks great. Imagine—that's something you have created
 —your body (*to the mother, looks at her belly*).
S: Now I move down a little further. His waist measures 27 ½.
 He is a little Chubby.
F: That's what I said—a Champ.
M: What are they typically when they are ready to be born?
S: The average is 3300.
M and F: Then he needs to slim down (*both M and F smile*).
S: This is his pulse (*the sound of the technological pulse is
 very clear*).
F: Wow, that is great, uh?
S: He is moving a little bit now.
F: That's because he was told that he is too fat.
 Now he is exercising. FAT BURNING!
S: He is really growing well. He'll probably end up being
 4200 at a minimum.
F: You shouldn't have told her that (*everyone laughs*).

Ultrasound Session, November 2007.

Clients do not only gaze at the 3D image but are instead constitutive actors in the meaning-making process. While the sonographer plays an important role in setting the stage, choosing and framing the image, she is playfully joined and sometimes challenged by the pregnant woman and her

accompanying family members and friends. In the above scenario, the father engages in a distinct fatherly performance: Slightly over-enthusiastic, naive but also dominant and celebratory, he positions the mother's body on a pedestal and himself as the translator or co-interpretator of the images.

While new images invite new stories, old stories sometimes linger on. The assignment of fetal sex is an example of a playful and stereotypical performance. Both sonographers in the Danish clinic think that the baby's sex almost can be determined on the basis of facial features. Girls' faces are fine and round whereas boys have rougher features. Girls are "princesses" while boys are little "criminals".⁷³ The narration speaks to this stereotypical gender assignment. In one session the sonographer announces: "She is right there, biting her foot. That also shows it's a girl. Boys can't do that".⁷⁴ Girls' modesty (crossed legs), physical flexibility (the foot in the mouth), dancing (kicking and moving of the legs), and Hollywood lips (big lips) is contrasted to the boys' likelihood of showing it all (the penis is seen floating in the amniotic fluid), playing soccer (kicking with his feet) and Kim Larsen mouth (a popular singer in Denmark who has a wide, big mouth). The following example aptly illustrates the way in which sexing frequently takes place.

S: **Sonographer**
M: **Mother**
F: **Father**

At this ultrasound session the pregnant woman is accompanied by her male partner.

S: Oh yes. It is true. It is a little princess. This is how girls look
 (everyone looks at the labia in 2D). That's how it is supposed to look.
M: That is good.
M: She moves around quite a bit.
S: They love the umbilical cord. She is so cute right there.
 What a fine little nose she has.
F: That must be mine *(laughs to the mother)*.
S: Look at the eye lashes there.

⁷³ Observations made during Fall 2007 fieldwork.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

- F: Are they fully developed?
S: Oh yes.
M: She can have her dad's eye lashes.
S: Oops, she opens her eye right there (*dad laughs*).
She is really just perfect. She also looks like a little girl.

Ultrasound Session, November 2007.

The sonographer reassures the parents that the fetus not only is a girl but also looks like one (long eyelashes and a small nose). As the small up-turned nose is a characteristic Scandinavian look, the sonographer engages in not only a gender performance but in a distinct ethnic and national performance as well. Participants enthusiastically partake in the gender assignment. One father joyfully announces that his son has a wide chest, while other expectant parents comment on fetal penis size by saying that they are “well-equipped”.⁷⁵ A few also express some worry about the baby's gender appropriate appearance. “Does she have fat legs? I hope she doesn't get that. She also needs to be pretty”, one prospective mother announces.⁷⁶ In this manner, gendering takes place within a rather set framework of how girls and boys are supposed to look and behave.

Assignment of sex is also undertaken within a heterosexual framework. When told that they are expecting a girl, one father jokingly, yet also repeatedly, expresses worry that they will now have to end their friendships in fifteen years time (all of their friends are having boys). Sonographers frequently kid expectant fathers about their presumed position as protectors of their daughter's virginity. Viewing a fetal girl's genitals, projected on to the wall, one sonographer, for instance, notes: “Definitely a little girl. Here is one of her thigh bones. Here is the other. And this is right between her little legs. And I see no penis and probably not for another thirty years, right dad?”⁷⁷ Gendering in general and heterosexuality in particular is a currency that assures the parents that the baby is healthy. It reiterates a set of very stereotypical gender expectations, yet it is also an aspect of the ultrasound session that participants find especially enjoyable.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Observations made during Fall 2008 fieldwork.

Seeing/Hearing/Touching

A visit to the ultrasound is an intersensory experience. While sight plays an important role throughout the ultrasound session, we should not be blinded to the engagement of other senses as well. David Howes uses the term “inter-sensoriality” to impress on us that sight is not “the only sensory show in town”.⁷⁸ Marshall McLuhan concurs and describes the television viewer as a type of “skin diver”⁷⁹ largely attributed to the fact that all senses are used. To him, the televised image is not just sight and sound but has a distinct tactile function as well that he refers to as television’s “sight-touch powers”.⁸⁰ Similarly, the ultrasound session embodies this sensory experience. The “baby” is frequently admired as if held by a parent. An older sibling walks up and touches the screen and a grandmother gestures that she “cannot wait to hold her granddaughter”.⁸¹

The sonographers’ skilful framing of the ultrasound image combined with the quality of the image opens up for a play on all of our senses. Clients see the flow of blood in the umbilical cord colour coded; they hear the heart-beat while they simultaneously, at times, see the heart and the four chambers moving; they watch facial expressions including sucking on the umbilical cord and little movements with the mouth (usually interpreted as smiles) and add to this their own hopes, dreams and expectations. In this mediated environment, the experience is framed to invoke all of our senses.

Concluding Thoughts

New imaging technologies appeal to more of our senses and invite new types of interactions to take place. New possibilities for interactions emerge, yet old stories prevail. As noted by Matthews and Wexler: “For images to yield new meanings, rather than merely cement the old defeats, new stories must interrupt old discourses”.⁸² This is not to suggest that pregnant women are victims of reproductive technologies. Elective ultrasound clinics encourage pregnant women to participate in the ultrasound session and to this extent

⁷⁸ David Howes, “Introduction: Empire of the Senses”, in *Empire of the Senses. The Sensual Culture Reader*, ed. David Howes (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2005), 12.

⁷⁹ Marshall McLuhan, “Inside the Five Sense Sensorium”, *Empire of the Senses. The Sensual Culture Reader*, ed. David Howes (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2005), 44.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁸¹ Observations made during Fall 2008 fieldwork.

⁸² Matthews and Wexler, *op.cit.*, 232.

three-dimensional ultrasound technology puts the interpretation and navigation of the image more so in the hands of the clients. Yet, the sonographers' skilful framing of the image is of utmost importance as well. The ultrasound session, then, is appropriately cast as both fluid and created through performance. It is about storytelling, chatting and sharing what is cast as a special family moment.

To view the 3D ultrasound session as a bio-tourist performance is a productive metaphor for understanding the dynamic aspects of the experience. The ultrasound session is a highly mediated event that mobilises and reconfigures inner space while simultaneously positioning clients as co-performers. Viewing the ultrasound session as a performance also encourages us to think of the ways in which the mediation of the fetal image continues past the ultrasound session. Prospective parents narrate stories about their child-to-be during the session and continue to later circulate these through the Internet, phone messages and postcards.

Feminist theories on visual culture and new technologies have added important insights into understanding the fetal image as first and foremost a cultural image. Three-dimensional ultrasound imaging calls for a re-interpretation of feminist visual culture. The findings here are also applicable to the education of professionals, such as sonographers, midwives and medical doctors. Medical practitioners can aptly apply an intersensory approach to the narration and mediation of new technologies while also situating biomedical experiences in the midst of consumer culture.

As we come to understand the potentials of new imaging technologies and the joint process of navigating and interpreting the image, it also begs for the application of different methods. Ethnographic fieldwork is one such method that reminds us that the study and teaching of visual culture is not only about the image but also about interacting, narrating, performing and remembering.

Questions for Review and Discussion

- What are some main feminist visual culture perspectives on fetal ultrasound imaging?
- How is bio-tourism defined?
- What are aesthetic and rhetorical features of bio-tourism?
- How are biomedical experiences (such as ultrasound sessions) intertwined with consumer and experience culture?
- In what ways, if at all, does haptics technology affect the ultrasound experience?
- What are some key differences between the concepts “spectator” and “spect-actors”?
- What are some characteristics of an intersensory approach to fetal ultrasound imaging?
- What consequences, if any, does an intersensory approach hold to professionals working within healthcare settings?

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CHAPTER 7

The *Potentia* of Novelty. Through the Prism of Visual Representations of Human in Vitro Fertilization (IVF)

Edyta Just

The contemporary landscapes of medicine are populated with various types of medical imaging technologies. Different visualizing techniques such as electron microscopy, medical radiography, computed tomography, magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), ultrasonography, positron emission photography (PET) or endoscopy that utilize X-rays, electromagnetic fields, sound or cameras attached to cables sending signals to a computer monitor are applied on a daily basis in medical centres.¹ Various images of the body's interior are produced in the course of their application. Furthermore, new "treatments" have been practised in hospital wards despite their sometimes controversial ethical nature. Human in vitro fertilization (IVF) certainly qualifies as one of these. Its ethical ambiguity has primarily to do with the fact that IVF undermines the well known *status quo* regarding issues of reproduction, sexuality and parenthood.²

The development and gradual implementation of new **medical imaging technologies**, the production of different images together with various forms of medical practices such as IVF have triggered many scholarly discussions, especially within feminist circles. The specific characteristics of new visualization techniques and images have been extensively commented upon. The epistemological and ethical consequences of their application and the production of the body's interior images have been focused upon and investigated by scholars such as Braidotti, Balsamo, Newman, Shohat, Sawchuck, Franklin and van Dijk. Regarding IVF, its very positive assessment³ has been accompanied by balanced evaluations,⁴ but also by its complete rejection and

¹ Dijk, *Transparent*.

² Michelle Stanworth, ed., *Reproductive Technologies. Gender, Motherhood and Medicine* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987); Sarah Franklin, "Postmodern Procreation: A Cultural Account of Assisted Reproduction", in *Conceiving the New World Order: The Global Politics of Reproduction*, ed. Faye Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

³ Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2003).

⁴ Michelle Stanworth, *op.cit.*

condemnation.⁵ Yet, from my perspective, the medical imaging technologies, produced images and **assisted reproduction** (though not altogether free from having a possibly negative impact) have the potential to transform existing ideologies, beliefs, discourses and norms concerning female and male bodies/subjects when it comes to their medical, philosophical and cultural/social aspects.

In contemporary medical practices, almost any procedure involves an application of visual technologies, and behind many medical protocols there stands a particular visual apparatus. The technique/practice of human **in vitro fertilization** is no exception. IVF is conditioned and can only be performed due to the application of visual techniques. To be more precise, it was because of the introduction of visual apparatuses in the medical field that the development and performance of IVF could happen in the first place. As assisted reproduction is based on the application of visual technologies, the extensive visualization occurs and many images are produced throughout the whole process. These images are frequently used to visually describe human in vitro fertilization to the general public. The visual media, Internet included, that stand for the major commentators and negotiators of contemporary events and phenomena, become a platform on which to display the progress of medicine. “Not only the print media but the visual media now use a range of reproductive imagery, facilitated by the various scanning, screening, and other imagining technologies . . . ”.⁶ Not surprisingly then IVF has its many visual descriptions present in various media.

The visual media play a very significant role in influencing the ways in which one evaluates, judges and adapts to the surrounding “reality”. Visual representations can create concepts one may have regarding various, potentially important, issues and phenomena. The shape of public imagery remains under the influence of the images delivered through the visual media. In addition, it is rather difficult to deny that the “visual” is in fact “everywhere”, and everyone who is capable of seeing is literally exposed to both the visual media and visual representations. The “visual”, as already indicated, is capable of establishing certain concepts and influencing human behaviour.

⁵ Rita Arditti, Renate Duelli Klein and Shelly Minden, *Test-tube Women. What Future for Motherhood?* (London: Pandora Press, 1984); Gina Corea, ed., *Man-Made Women. How New Reproductive Technologies Affect Women* (London: Hutchinson and Co. (Publishers) Ltd, 1985); Gina Corea, *The Mother Machine. Reproductive Technologies from Artificial Insemination to Artificial Wombs* (New York: Happer & Row, 1986).

⁶ Franklin, *Postmodern Procreation*, 325.

In consequence, the representations of human in vitro fertilization circulating in the media do not remain indifferent to the way people think about this particular type of medical procedure, but also about female and male bodies/subjects.⁷

As I have previously indicated, the visual representations of human in vitro fertilization (IVF) on the Internet could appear due to the application of new imaging technologies throughout this medical procedure. Therefore, these visual representations allow commenting on both the medical imaging techniques and IVF itself. In this chapter, I want to establish whether the visual representations of human in vitro fertilization (IVF) that can be found on the Internet⁸ do justice to the promising and transformative potential of medical imaging technologies, produced images and assisted reproduction; and whether they allow this potential to be actualized. In this way I want to probe if the viewers of visual representations of IVF have a chance to encounter new perspectives on female and male bodies/subjects and thereby transform their own concepts regarding these matters.

This chapter seeks to be of relevance to the teaching of visual culture. It emphasizes the potential of medical imaging technologies and produced images and it tests the capacity, scrutinizes the veracity and offers a critical reading of visual representations, especially those addressing human (assisted) reproduction. Therefore, the research findings (revealed in this chapter) can be applied in curricula for 1) students of media studies, 2) those involved in “meaning-making”, “construction” and the proliferation of body’s visual representations, and 3) doctors, nurses, social workers involved in meeting prospective parents who opt for IVF.

The *Potentia* of Medical Imaging Technologies

New visualizing techniques are believed to deliver images that stand for the “perfectly mechanical reproduction of . . . bodily interior” objective visual representation, accurate, unmediated evidence and “solid scientific and defini-

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ The choice to focus on this particular type of medium is based on the realization that nowadays Internet not only stands for, but also is treated and used as, one of the major suppliers of many kinds of information and as the site of public debates. On the countless number of pages IVF becomes visually represented. To list a few: <http://www.advancedfertility.com>; <http://www.ivf.net>; http://uuhs.utah.edu/andrology/photo_gallery.html; http://www.ihr.com/infertility/articles/infertility_photos.html; http://www.infertilitytutorials.com/procedures_members/invitro.cfm#; <http://www.cbv.ns.ca/young/reproduction.htm>; <http://www.scinetphotos.com/webpage.html>; <http://www.stanfordivf.org/index.html>.

tive proof”.⁹ Visual technologies are said to increase the accessibility of the body.¹⁰ These technologies enable the visualization of the body’s inner organs and its tiniest, invisible components. They go deep into the labyrinths of human corporeality, focusing on an organ, a tissue, a cell. The parts and “dimensions” of the human body, which before could only be accessed when operations or post-mortem dissections were performed, have become reachable due to the application of these new techniques. Medical imaging technologies certainly give “the public access to new images of the body and what it is made of . . .” and “new images allowing us to perceive what happens inside the body”.¹¹ The increased possibilities of seeing result in the presence of fragments and corporeal bits-and-pieces enclosed within various images. When these technologies become applied and images are produced, the whole body as an organic unity is absent. The body becomes fragmented, disassembled and turns into a collection of physiological pieces. Braidotti points to this when she writes: “greater power of vision” is responsible for “the unity of the organism” being “dissolved into smaller and smaller living parts”.¹² Anne Balsamo also emphasizes the same: “A range of new visualization techniques contribute to the fragmentation of the body into organs, fluids, and gene codes . . .” and “fractured into functional parts and molecular codes . . .”.¹³ The “contours” of female and male bodies disappear from the picture. With these technologies and images, the feeling, acting body/subject interacting with its particular environment and being affected by it becomes invisible. A particular disembodiment takes place, as it is difficult to guess whom the corporeal fragments belong to. Donna Haraway emphasizes: “The eyes have been used to signify a perverse capacity—honed to perfection in the history of science tied to militarism, capitalism, colonialism, and male supremacy—to distance the knowing subject from everybody and everything in the interest of unfettered power. The instruments of visualization in multinationalist, postmodernist culture have compounded these meanings of dis-embodiment”.¹⁴ Furthermore, the elements and components of the human body whose existence was not realized could eventually be “discovered”. Balsamo makes it very clear when saying that “the application of

⁹ Dijk, *Transparent*, 86.

¹⁰ Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects. Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); Sawchuk, op.cit.; Dijk, *Transparent*.

¹¹ Merete Lie, “New Perceptions of Gender and Reproduction”, *NIKK Magasin* 3 (2006): 7.

¹² Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, 67.

¹³ Anne Balsamo, *Technologies of the Gendered Body* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996), 5.

¹⁴ Haraway, *Situated Knowledges*.

new visual technologies—such as laparoscop—literally bring new social “agents” into technological existence”.¹⁵ Newman also refers to this: “Highly technical skills and complex instruments . . . make visible objects and relationships which were invisible, and which cannot be judged against a perceived real”.¹⁶ In the same vein Braidotti points out: “We are moving beyond the idea of visibility, into a new culture of visualization; thanks to ultrasound techniques the invisible itself can today be visualized; that which the naked eye does not even begin to grasp can be the object of imaged representation”.¹⁷ Furthermore, medical imaging technologies and images produced during their application result in creating the autonomy of what gets visualized. As Braidotti emphasizes, “visual techniques give a great autonomy or independence to the object they represent. The image acquires a life of its own, distinct from anything else”.¹⁸ With the inner elements on display, which as Braidotti stresses, are given a particular autonomy/independence, the body “they come from” becomes a supplier of the desired materials. Furthermore, it seems that when autonomy is given to the visualized elements, they appear to be able to function by themselves as if they do not need to belong to the whole complicated corporeal system in order to exist. The authors of *Global Culture, Global Nature* refer to it when they stress that “the cell is endowed with self-regulating properties that are central to its survival, and furthermore, it is represented as an independent entity whose protective surface defends it against invasion from the outside”.¹⁹ They also quote Emily Martin, who points out that “in earlier time, the skin might have been regarded as the border of the individual self, now these microscope cells are seen as tiny individual selves . . .” which, as they put it, are “invested with an almost human motivation or agency . . .”.²⁰ Furthermore, medical imaging technologies do not allow us to easily associate the visualized fragment with an organic, bodily or human entity. As Braidotti writes: “Under the imperious gaze the living organisms, educed to an infinitely small scale, lose all reference to the human shape and to the specific temporality of the human being”.²¹

¹⁵ Balsamo, *op.cit.*, 83.

¹⁶ Karen Newman, *Fetal Positions, Individualism, Science, Visuality* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1996), 14.

¹⁷ Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, 68.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Franklin, Lury and Stacey, *op.cit.*, 38 and 41.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, 47.

Medical imaging technologies and the images produced during their application certainly have profound epistemological and ethical implications. Undoubtedly, some of them can be counter-productive and, as such, negative. The belief that visual techniques and images deliver a “solid scientific and definitive proof” may be very misleading, as the road from what is seen to the diagnosis and the proper course of action is not linear, straight and obvious. The (prospective) patients can very easily fall into a belief that the body can be understood, explained, fixed and controlled whereas the “reality” proves to be slightly different. To access and to visually encounter does not necessarily mean to comprehend and to cure. Furthermore, the circulating bits-and-pieces and the visible lack of the organic unity of the body may cause one to overlook various bodily connections/encounters that can result in certain conditions or complaints. They may make one forget that different corporeal components do interact with and influence each other. An impairment or failure of one organ or tissue usually results from many interacting elements, not only bodily ones, but also those coming from the environment one experiences psychologically and physically inhabits. What is more, the production of images of the body’s fragments and sensations of fragmented and disassembled female and male bodies can convince us that our bodies may be very easily re-arranged or arranged anew. The absence of the “contours” of female and male bodies, their daily interactions and experiences together with the sensations of disembodiment may open the door to a belief that the bodies/subjects lack their particular multiplicity, difference and intrinsic singularity. The distinctive corporeality and geo-political/social/cultural location may seem unimportant if not altogether non-existent. Moreover, the autonomy of the visualized bodily fragments may lead us to ignore the embodied and embedded “nature” of female and male subjects. Finally, the lack of resemblance between the visualized and the human-corporeal may lead to the belief in the objectification and negligence of the female and male body/subject while exposed to medical mediation.

With the pitfalls listed, one may certainly wonder where then the *potentia* of the medical imaging technologies and produced images lies. The application of medical imaging technologies and the production of images do have productive and positive aspects. Undoubtedly, the increased accessibility of the body and the possibilities of seeing, allow us to map out certain of the body’s alternations and undertakings, hopefully, successful actions. They

may also enhance knowledge concerning the human corporeality. The bits-and-pieces, fragments and parts of female and male bodies enclosed within images may move one beyond the stiff borders and framed identities constructed by various discourses around these bodies/subjects. If there are only organs, tissues and cells on display, then the harmful definitions and concepts concerning bodies/subjects can undergo positive metamorphoses. Ann Balsamo recognizes this potential when she asks: “When the human body is fractured into organs, fluids, and genetic codes, what happens to gender identity? When the body is fractured into functional parts and molecular codes, where is gender located?”²² The “division” lines between female and male bodies/subjects may affirmatively dissolve, leaving one with a conviction that there are indeed “division” lines, not between female and male bodies but between countless numbers of various bodies. If there are endless configurations of bodies then it is fair to say that there must be endless configurations of subjectivities/subjects and/or genders. Balsamo claims that “Gender like the body, is a boundary concept. It is at once related to physiological sexual characteristics of the human body (the natural order of the body) and to the cultural context within which that body ‘makes sense’. The widespread technological refashioning of the ‘natural’ human body suggests that gender too would be ripe for reconstruction”.²³ With the lack of the “contours” of female and male bodies and with sensations of disembodiment, the bodies can be conceptualized as released from the cultural and social constraints. The public discourses/ideological beliefs concerning the bodies, the expectation assigned to the bodies and multiple codes inscribed on them²⁴ vanish in a mass of unrecognizable fleshy images of the human’s interior. Both the body and subject can then be conceptualized as a process, a becoming and a possibility. Furthermore, the sensations of autonomous body fragments may convince one that the body is an agent, an intelligent matter and not a passive “fleshy” burden attached to the controlling consciousness, a governing headquarter of the human subject. The body becomes a result of various encounters, an assemblage and an unpredictable *a priori* landscape. What is more, the visualized fragments, fluids and codes and the uneasy associations of what is visualized with what is recognized as organic, bodily or human allow us to see the body/subject as already beyond

²² Balsamo, op.cit., 6.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses. Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), 169.

the anthropocentric beliefs and convictions. The human body/subject appears to share much in common with other non-human agents; it therefore becomes affirmatively inhuman itself.²⁵

The *Potentia* of Human In Vitro Fertilization (IVF)

Human in vitro fertilization has been seen as a procedure that can release women from the shackles of reproduction and eventually make men responsible for childrearing.²⁶ It has also been evaluated as a threatening and harmful phenomenon. The most negative assessment comes from such feminists as Gena Corea, Renate Duelli Klein, Jalna Hanmer, Barbara Katz Rothman, or Robyn Rowland, associated with Feminist International Network on Resistance to Reproductive and Genetic Engineering known as FINRRAGE. For these feminists IVF technology/practice is an invention of an oppressive man. As men are said to aim at oppressing, abusing and controlling women/female bodies, new reproductive technologies, which are thought to be a male invention, are immediately seen as equally oppressive and abusive. IVF is considered to affect solely women and never men. It is believed to be aimed at the maintenance of heterosexual families and a strengthening of the notions of motherhood. Furthermore, in vitro technique/practice is said to be responsible for the control, objectification and commodification of the female body/subject. In addition, assisted conception is blamed for taking reproductive power away from women and their bodies, leaving them with no other choice but to opt for and participate in technologically mediated reproduction, invented by (and maintaining) a patriarchal system. Women are said to become nothing more than prostitutes and/or animals, passive victims under severe surveillance when assisted reproduction is at stake. Moreover, IVF is talked about as an “unnatural” procedure constructed as superior to the dysfunctional body and a particular form of “artificial invasion” that dehumanizes, fragments and disassembles women and their bodies. It is evaluated as separating women/bodies from the naturalness of conception, pregnancy and birth. However, human in vitro fertilization can be assessed in a completely different manner. First of all, IVF requires the presence of both female and male bodies and both have to undergo various evaluations

²⁵ Rosi Braidotti at the seminar “Ethics of Complexity”, 27 November 2008, Utrecht, The Netherlands.

²⁶ Firestone, op.cit.

and assessments. It makes clear that organs “responsible” for reproduction do not always function as the culture would like them to. Secondly, it is available not only to heterosexual, but also to lesbian/gay couples, which indicates that it does not necessarily aim to maintain heterosexual families and compulsory motherhood. Moreover, IVF introduces a form of reproduction lacking a physical encounter, thereby divorcing sex from reproduction. Furthermore, it stands for a landscape of connections, negotiations and transformations where not only doctors/techniques have their say in the course of action, but so do female and male bodies/subjects. IVF is also a procedure that bulldozes through ambiguities and empowers female and male bodies/subjects. In addition, in vitro entails only a twenty-five percent chance of getting pregnant; it is therefore an exaggeration to speak about the full control of the body, its “artificial invasion” and a subsequent process of dehumanization.

One might assume, especially after becoming acquainted with the radical feminists’ scholarship, that IVF has no *potentia* to positively transform existing ideologies, norms, beliefs and discourses concerning female and male bodies/subjects. The technique/practice of in vitro can make one believe that bodies/subjects have no chance to go beyond the patriarchal order and ideology. The female body is first and foremost linked to reproductive practices, with the “mother label” attached irremovably. Her body must produce children, her subjectivity must nurture and care for them, and her desires are coded forever. Furthermore, the female body/subject is caught in the net of man-like oppression and abuse with no perspective of release. The female body/subject is under control; no resistance, no opposition, no “going astray” is allowed. Moreover, it is impaired, in need of help and as such monitored and constantly “invaded”. If reproduction is not actualized, the female body is to be blamed. It is disposable, objectified and used. On the other hand, male bodies/subjects can “go” for any label yet “production” (not reproduction) appears to be the most welcomed one. Looking at IVF through the radical feminists’ lenses is also to conclude that female, but also male, bodies/subjects “have it all set” only when they are joined together and form “proper” family configurations.

However, the technique/practice of IVF can shed a completely new light over female and male bodies/subjects. When approached from a different angle, IVF can facilitate a realization that female/male bodies are not necessarily “reproductively fit”, that the link between reproductive organs and

reproduction is a very fragile one, implying that parenthood is not a destiny but a possibility. Moreover, IVF serves to show that not “every” female body can be freely associated with reproductive practices (i.e. lesbian couples opting for IVF). The female body does not have to be the reproductive body. Her body is “destiny-and-obligation free”. The female body/subject can actualise itself in countless practices. Motherhood is just one option among many. A woman does not have to become a mother. IVF, by divorcing sex from reproduction, allows female sexuality to “move freely” and “become everything” it wants to: a pleasure, an excitement, an experiment. With IVF it becomes obvious that the subject wants to know; it is fuelled by a desire that turns the subject’s actions into affirmative desiring production (i.e. searching for clinics, undergoing tests, examinations, scans). The subject negotiates and is able to resist (i.e. some couples do leave the IVF programme). The body is never under full control; it cannot be completely comprehended and it is an agent, an intelligent matter, a negotiator (i.e. IVF offers only a twenty-five percent chance of becoming pregnant). Furthermore, *in vitro* may establish the concept of a male body’s being connected to practices of reproduction, not only “production”, as an object of medical assessment and mediation. The male body fails sometimes in its reproductive efforts. The technique/practice of IVF promotes a realization that both female and male bodies/subjects can “have it all set” when not following heterosexual prescriptions and when forming kaleidoscopic-rainbow-like family configurations.

The Visual Representations of IVF on the Internet

The visual representation of human *in vitro* fertilization on the Internet usually consists of three types of images. The most common images are those of the interior design of infertility clinics. The images range from those representing cabinets, in which the observation of stimulated ovaries and the retrieval of egg cells take place, laboratory spaces, where microscopes and micromanipulator controllers are used for IVF-ICSI (Intracytoplasmic Sperm Injection), incubators, plastic dishes with the genetic material, controlled rate freezers, straws to freeze embryos in and storage tanks where sperm and embryos are kept, to the rooms where fertilization is performed with the help of highly sophisticated equipment. Also visually present are people at work who operate various apparatuses, control their application, check progress as well as supervise and monitor the whole process.

These images are usually accompanied by those of the human body's interior. When the stimulation of ovaries or the egg retrieval process are visually presented, what can be seen are the ultrasound images of dark, grey, white, shapeless, formless and balloon-like stains and dots with blurred and effaced boundaries. If the image is of an egg aspiration, the needle can easily be distinguished as a long thick white line. The egg cells and spermatozoids constitute a high percentage of all the displayed images. Their shapes vary. The mostly grey, big, round, oval or ellipse-like forms can be more or less fragmented. Sometimes the egg looks like an empty balloon; on occasion this balloon contains smaller rounded circles, and sometimes those rounded forms are situated on its curved edge. The spermatozoids appear as grey, black or white dots in different shapes and sizes with long, winding and split grey lines behind them. Next to these, the image of a spermatozoid being inserted into an egg can always be found when IVF is visually described.

The images of embryos constitute the third type of images used to visually present human in vitro fertilization. Similarly to those of ovaries, egg cells and spermatozoids, the embryo images vary significantly. There can be many circles joined together forming nice, clover-like forms or there can be one big oval containing different pieces varying in sharpness and resembling mountain peaks. Some can look almost like the face of Mickey Mouse, and some like antique clepsydras.

Actualizing the *Potentia* of Medical Imaging Technologies (?)

The interior design of medical centres, the various tools, unrecognizable apparatuses, metal instruments, tubes, cables, people with masks over their mouths, ovaries, eggs, spermatozoids, the sperm and egg with a pipette, the push, the fertilizing drop, eggs dividing, embryos, technological devices, human actors (medical staff) and fragments of reproductive matter in the front row—can anyone see something other than the techno-omnipresent and omnipotent takeover of organic matter, the full comprehension of invisible cells and tissues, and the successful mastery of an unconscious fleshy environment? This is an egg, this is a sperm, this is fertilization and this is an embryo. The visible and easy “truth” with no organic mysteries and ambiguities, and with no doctors’ miscomprehensions and failures attached. The history of the egg or sperm remains misty. Was it left in a polluted spot, were there too many

cigarettes in the morning and too many deadlines in the afternoon? It is also difficult to ascertain whether it was chemotherapy or a fault in the pituitary gland or thyroid that caused the fertility problems. It does not matter; the body is a flexible/malleable thing, and “things” can after all be arranged or rearranged. Is it all just a disposable piece of meat? Does Cartesian dualism win? It looks as if it is the same egg over and over again, the same sperm, the same embryo. There are variations, but the general form/shape remains the same. Is the body/subject’s difference and singularity lost? Can one actually sense the variety of bodies and subjectivities/subjects and their unpredictable *a priori* transformation? I would say that the constant repetition of the used images (a tool, an egg, a spermatozoid, their conjunction) makes it difficult to skip the overwhelming feeling of sameness and uniformity, as well as the predictability of identifications. Can the firm “division” lines between the female and male body dissolve? I would argue that the displayed egg and spermatozoid prevent the borders from being affirmatively “dissolved”. They act as guardians of firm biological and gender divisions. The images of female and male reproductive “ingredients” and the visualized moment of fertilization assembled together render it a challenge to believe that cultural/social convictions or expectations regarding female and male bodies can positively vanish. Reproduction, and more importantly heterosexual reproduction, is what matters and should be protected and maintained. Apparently, female and male bodies/subjects do have jobs to do in the contemporary cultural/social settings. Is it then possible to sense the body’s agency, ambiguity, resistance and opposition or is it only its humble submission that one may witness? It appears to me that the image of spermatozoid being inserted into an egg cell makes one more prone to conclude that the body is after all passive, something that is easy to monitor and control. Do then the visual representations allow us at least to conceptualize the human body/subject in its post-anthropocentric condition? Can the body/subject’s affirmative inhumanity and resemblance to non-human agents be recognized? I would hesitate to answer this, as the visible egg, sperm or moment of fertilization may possibly be seen as belonging to the corporeality of non-human actors.

Actualizing the *Potentia* of Human In Vitro Fertilization (IVF) (?)

Merete Lie emphasizes that “currently, the egg and sperm are generally used to illustrate stories about new reproductive technologies”.²⁷ With the visualized “tango” of egg and sperm it is possible to conclude that the female body/subject stands for a reproductive entity and a mother to be. There is no way out. The woman body has the capacity to desire, produce and nurture children and this capacity must be actualized by all means. Reproduction is what matters and female bodies/subjects should not try to escape this “obligation”. Female sexuality has to be “used” strictly for reproductive purposes. The laboratory spaces, tools and machines on display, together with the images of doctors and technicians, may make one believe that bodies are in need of help due to their “natural” impairments and dysfunctions. These images also give rise to the conclusion that bodies can remain under full supervision and control. The reproductive process appears to be a predictable and very successful one. Bodies can be taken care of, their mysteries discovered and their failures confirmed, and more importantly repaired. The agency of the body, its stubbornness, specific intelligence and wit, as well as its pain, remain invisible factors. Steven Mentor writes that as far as the visual representations of IVF are concerned “there are no pictures of women undergoing IVF or the related procedures, but we do see diagrams of laparoscopy and ultrasound aspiration”.²⁸ In a similar vein, Laura Shanner referring to Stabile emphasizes how “women literally fall out of view in prenatal imaging techniques”.²⁹ The eggs and spermatozooids on display may then result in a belief that the body/subject is merely a supplier of needed materials, something to be used, something very easily objectified. The images of doctors, eggs, sperm, the insertion of spermatozoid into egg cells do not easily allow one to conclude that the subjects do want to know, and that their actions do signal a desire for production. Similarly, the subjects’ negotiations and resistance can also hardly be noticed. In addition, as “the moment of conception used to be symbolised by a love story, that is today depicted as a story about the egg and sperm” what is achieved is “the undisturbed image of a monogamous, heterosexual union of he and she”.³⁰ In this sense, when exposed

²⁷ Lie, op.cit., 7.

²⁸ Steven Mentor, “Witches, Nurses, Midwives and Cyborgs. IVF, ART, and Complex Agency in the World of Technobirth”, in *Cyborg Babies. From Techno-Sex to Techno-Tots*, ed. Robbie Davis-Floyd and Joseph Dumit (New York and London: Routledge, 1998), 75.

²⁹ Laura Shanner, “Procreation”, in *Companion to Feminist Philosophy*, ed. Alison M. Jaggard and Iris M. Young (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 430.

³⁰ Lie, op.cit., 7.

to the visualized moment of fertilization, the potential viewer can conclude that the best way to “dress” in the contemporary landscapes is in the well-known heterosexual gown. Yet, the images of doctors, tools and apparatuses indicate that even though humans do have procreative organs, they do not always reproduce with ease. As such it is possible to conclude that parenthood is indeed a possibility and not a destiny, a *sine qua non* of every body/subject. Although lesbian and gay family configurations are not visible, nevertheless the very fact that bodies may not be able to reproduce allows for an understanding that the female body/subject is “not-always-reproductive” and “not-always-mother-to-be”. Furthermore, the endless images of spermatozooids undoubtedly indicate the male body/subject’s participation in reproductive practices. They allow us to conceptualize the male body/subject as desiring children, as a reproductive rather than merely “productive” entity, which can fail to fulfil its reproductive obligations.

Conclusion

The visual representations of human in vitro fertilization (IVF) on the Internet facilitate commenting on both the medical imaging technologies and IVF. They make it possible to map out how the promising and transformative potential of new visualizing techniques, produced images and human in vitro fertilization is actualized through them. Undoubtedly, medical imaging technologies and IVF do have the *potentia* to positively change existing ideologies, beliefs, discourses and norms regarding female and male bodies/subjects in their medical, philosophical and cultural/social aspects. However, in my view the visual representations of human in vitro fertilization on the Internet do not really do justice to this promising potential. They do not allow this potential to be fully actualized. It is rather impossible to see that there can be countless configurations of bodies/subjectivities/subjects. It is difficult to conceptualize female and male bodies/subjects as released from the cultural/social constraints, as a becoming, a process, a possibility. It becomes a challenge to define the female body/subject other than as a “reproductive-mother-to-be” entity. It is also rather difficult to conceptualize female sexuality as a pleasure and experiment. The desiring, wanting to know, negotiating, resisting and active “nature” of the human subject is impossible to detect. Furthermore, it is difficult to comprehend the body as an intelligent entity, an agent, a

negotiator, an assemblage, never fully comprehended and never completely under control. On the other hand, the visual representations of IVF circulating on the Internet do enable, to certain degree, the formulation of new concepts and the positive transformation of beliefs/discourses regarding female and male bodies/subjects. With these representations one may be prone to re-defining the human body/subject as affirmatively inhuman and as sharing much in common with other non-human actors. The visual descriptions of IVF also remind us that female and male bodies are not always reproductively fit; that parenthood is a possibility and not a destiny; and that the male body is reproductive rather than merely “productive”.

The visual representations in general, including those of IVF proliferating within various visual media, may definitely influence the way people approach and make sense of the “reality” surrounding them, including female and male bodies/subjects. It is certainly a lost possibility that the visual representations of human in vitro fertilization do not fully actualize the *potentia* of medical imaging technologies and IVF. It is surely a disappointment that viewers of visual descriptions of IVF do not have the chance to encounter new perspectives on female and male bodies/subjects and thereby transform their own concepts.

The manner in which the medical field tends to transmit its knowledge; the “tradition of display”³¹ firmly established in medicine; the beauty of invention (IVF); the unavoidable “involvement” of eggs and sperm; the possibility of creating embryos and the commercial reasons behind IVF, do influence the final “shape” of IVF’s visual representations. The manner in which reproduction is thought about and conceptualized, that is, as an activity located “only” in the “body zone below the navel”, certainly impact on the selection of displayed images. Medical imaging technologies and the images produced can be powerful allies in the process of re-definition. They both have the potential to trigger a re-conceptualization concerning female and male bodies/subjects. What is crucial are the new means of visually describing the IVF phenomenon. A task faced by those “populating” visual studies/practices is to emphasize the need for different representations of IVF; they should also discuss the appearance of such representations and the message that they should deliver.

³¹ Jordanowa in *Medicine and Genres of Display* (1995) argues that in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the medical field became scrutinized and widely criticized. As a result, those associated with medicine had to display the safety and sufficiency of their applied methods, but they also had to make people trust them again.

Questions for Review and Discussion

- How can the *potentia* of medical imaging technologies be “optimally” actualized?
- Can other forms of visual representations do justice to the *potentia* of both medical imaging technologies and human (assisted) reproduction?
- What kind(s) of visual representations could produce affirmative and positive concepts regarding human (assisted) reproduction?
- What type(s) of visual representations could result in affirmative and post-phallogocentric concepts of the human body/subject?
- What are the best ways of transmitting to a wider audience the findings of feminist cultural studies concerning science and technology and of feminist visual studies?

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CHAPTER 8

The Affective Turn and Visual Literacy

renée c. hoogland

In these so-called post-theoretical times, the turn away from “high theory” often implies a (re)turn to notions of experiment and experience, as well as a (renewed) emphasis on motion and becoming, on actualization and expression, and a concurrent focus on process, sensation and **affect**. Welcomed by some as a “surge of interest in affect, feeling, wonder, and enchantment”,¹ while dismissed by others as a premature abandonment of the attempt to develop “generally applicable” models of thought in favour of the “unexpected, the singular, or indeed the quirky”,² it seems clear that the “fast-changing conditions” of our times, the “transformations, metamorphoses, mutations and processes of change” that Rosi Braidotti presciently—or perhaps not so presciently—identified, in 2002, as the “one constant” at the “dawn of the third millennium”,³ have not left the field of critical theorizing unaffected, and that yet another “turn” is on its way—if it is not already in full swing.

Somewhat paradoxically, the invocation of affect, or the “**affective turn**” hailed by some critics, as Clare Hemmings sceptically remarks, as the “privileged ‘way out’ of the perceived impasse in cultural studies”,⁴ has led to a certain reevaluation of, if not, occasionally, a retrenchment into, disciplinary domains, and an all too eager and under-reflected rejection of the transdisciplinary projects of poststructuralism and deconstruction, as well as of attendant “minority studies”, such as feminist, critical race and queer theory. However, the new millennium has also called into being the relatively new, and fundamentally interdisciplinary, field that stands at the centre of this collection, alternately called “visual culture studies”, “visual culture theory”, or, simply, “visual culture”. If visual culture is, as the editors of the present collection maintain, a “postdisciplinary” field of study organized around the problem of visibility in its many manifestations, guises and social effects, the simultaneous coming into prominence of the problem of affect—post-deconstruction—may

¹ Rita Felski, “From Literary Theory to Critical Method”, *Profession* (2008): 114.

² Clare Hemmings, “Invoking Affect: Cultural Theory and the Ontological Turn”, *Cultural Studies* 19.5 (2005): 550.

³ Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, 1.

⁴ Hemmings, *op.cit.*, 549.

not be so much a coincidence as an overdetermined inescapability. My purpose in this chapter is hence not only to explore the significance of currently circulating notions of affect for the study of visual culture, but also the joint emergence of these two buzzwords in the wider realm of critical theorizing across the humanities and social sciences. If we have moved into a theoretical location beyond representation, and if affect can be claimed to open up.

Let me be clear about my investment in this debate, however. If the “affective turn” can, indeed, be maintained also to permeate the field of visual culture, the question remains whether a post-ideological perspective may prove helpful in a liberatory critical practice of visual culture, especially if such a critique is undertaken from a feminist, or otherwise defined “minority” position. While I am weary of relatively uninformed embraces of the affective turn by students/scholars jumping on to the post-theoretical bandwagon, particularly if, as Hemmings makes poignantly clear, such a redirection of critical focus is accompanied by a knee-jerk rejection of what some by now consider traditional or even old-fashioned poststructuralist critical analyses, my observations will nonetheless serve to suggest why the turn to affect may not only prove helpful, but, indeed, be key to effective post-ideological critiques of especially mass mediated visual cultural production. If we have moved into a technovisual realm beyond representation, and if, as I will suggest, it is on the level of affect that the majority of (mass-mediated) visual culture can be claimed to obtain, it is not only on a theoretical level, or on that of individual experience, or even on the sociopolitical level that we must develop the necessary thinking tools to explore its effects. We should also teach ourselves to teach our students to become visually literate, and provide them with a vocabulary that will enable them to interrogate visual culture in all the intersecting and co-constituting processes of change and transformation that mark our times.

The reason why I became interested in exploring these issues is, in effect, two-fold. First, a few years ago, when I found my own research concerns expanding from the function of fantasy, and, in its cultural expression, of artistic production, in processes of corporeality, to include the interrelations between aesthetics and ethics, I realized that I was no longer exactly thinking within the theoretical frameworks that had for several years formed and continued to constitute the basis of my teaching practice. If my formerly thoroughly poststructuralist and deconstructive framework for cultural analysis no longer appeared to satisfy my scholarly needs, how could I justify my reliance upon

such frameworks in trying to help my students to become the critical readers of their cultural contexts I hoped they would, by, among others, taking my classes? Clearly, I had to reconsider the use and recommendation of theoretical tools that failed fully to fulfil their purpose, both inside and outside the classroom. Second, an experience that even more directly relates to my life in the classroom, that is, of a growing dissatisfaction on my own, and on my students' part, with the critical explanations and analytical tools offered by available textbooks on the newly emerging visual culture market. Both the increasing discrepancy between my changing scholarly perspective and the equally shifting intellectual demands of undergraduate students urged me to reflect upon the affective turn and its ethical implications. To clarify the latter, let me briefly dwell upon a recent textbook often used in undergraduate cultural studies classes, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*, jointly authored by Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, first published by Oxford University Press in 2001, and currently in its second edition.⁵

According to the publishers' blurb, *Practices of Looking* comprises a "comprehensive and engaging introduction to visual culture", providing an "overview of a range of theories about how we understand visual media and how we use images to express ourselves, to communicate, to experience pleasure, and to learn". Up to date in their selection of visual culture, including paintings, prints, photographs, film, television, video, advertisements, news images, the Internet, digital images and science images, Sturken and Cartwright do a pretty good job exploring how images gain meaning in different cultural arenas, how they travel cross-nationally and cross-culturally, and in assessing how visual culture forms an integral and important aspect of our lives by analyzing specific images in relation to such issues as desire, power, the gaze, bodies, sexuality, ethnicity and in the context of different methodologies, including semiotics, Marxism, psychoanalysis, feminism and postcolonial theory. In all fairness, the book is an excellent introduction for students coming to the study of visual culture for the first time, offering concise and accessible explanations of the fundamentals of the selected theories while presenting visual examples of how they function. As such, it is a text I have gratefully adopted for cultural studies as well as gender and sexuality courses, and will continue to do so. Whence, then, the earlier noted dissatisfaction on both my own and my students' part?

⁵ Sturken and Cartwright, op.cit.

Although my own problems with this book are of a slightly different nature than those of my students, both are rooted in the same soil, that is, the exclusively poststructuralist framework in which the authors place their critical discussions, and the ambivalence arising from their nonetheless strenuous attempts at taking into account the incisive critiques to which theories of sociocultural and discursive construction have, since their emergence, been subjected. Within the realm of critical theorizing per se, such critiques are neither particularly new nor controversial, as is adequately illustrated by, for example, the thirty years of discussion of Laura Mulvey's seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema".⁶ Almost immediately after its publication in 1975, feminist and other minority critics began taking Mulvey to task for presenting the ideological operations of mainstream Hollywood cinema as inescapable, non-negotiable and determinative, rendering the female film spectator utterly helpless and without any power to resist the medium's oppressive operations. In addition to the perceived disempowering implications of some "hard-core" poststructuralist theorizing, more recent critiques, for instance, those deriving from so-called new materialist approaches, have focused on such models' discursivization of everything to the neglect of the materiality of social structures, of human bodies or "the flesh" and of other less easily deconstructible aspects of/in the world.

Sturken and Cartwright appear to be cognizant of such critiques, but since in some, even the most intellectually "enlightened" parts of the world, the basics of poststructuralist theory have hardly entered the undergraduate classroom yet, and the main purpose of their book is to move beyond still largely prevailing common sense—read liberal humanist—notions of meaning and being, their perceptible ambivalence about the confining and, indeed, politically disempowering implications of, for instance, Lacanian and Foucaultian thought is neither very outspoken nor explicitly addressed. What is more, in order to counter the determinist implications of some of the theories that frame their arguments, the authors take recourse to precisely the conceptual framework their book aims to call in to question and supersede, by re-introducing a notion of individual and collective agency firmly based in the liberal humanist concept of the rational and volitional subject. Because of its theoretical inadequacy, it is this "solution" to the problem of the power and effects of images, over and beyond their ideological operations, that forms the main source of my ultimate

⁶ Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure*.

dissatisfaction with *Practices of Looking*. My students, although most of them are unable to grasp its theoretical implications, tend nonetheless equally to perceive quite clearly that—if not altogether why—the suggested possibility of agency fails to explain, first, their own, often highly divergent engagement with and responses to the bombardment of images that constitutes the context of their everyday lives, and second, their inability, despite their conscious and cognitive awareness of its potentially oppressive and pernicious operations, to effectively resist their subjection to their compelling force.

In order to salvage the important—and, indeed, empowering—lessons of poststructuralism, and familiarize students new to the field of visual culture with its analytical tools and their critical and political potential, while at the same time maintaining the possibility of resistance without reverting to obsolete notions of subjective agency, I suggest certain forms of post-ideological thought, especially those generating from and within the “affective turn”, may not only prove pedagogically helpful, but also politically indispensable.

For one, the cinematic model underlying much poststructuralist/deconstructive models of visual analysis may not have become altogether obsolete; it nonetheless no longer seems adequate to the task of accounting for the functioning and operation of visual culture in the digital age. I am not only referring to the radical difference between non-interactive media such as cinema and traditional television, and the interactive information and communication technologies that form an intrinsic and increasingly everyday part of our lives in a post-mechanical society. In a way, the change from visual consumption to media interaction had already been effected by the introduction of the VCR, gaining mass popularity in the late 1970s, early 1980s, with its possibilities for freeze-framing, fast forwarding, slow motion and (endless) repetition. Allowing for the manipulation of visual/representational time and the material basis of temporal experience, the technology of the VCR dramatically transformed the organization of perception, forging a new relation between the spectator/participant and the cinematic apparatus that had been the centre of attention for film scholars in the 1960s and 1970s. The digitization of the image, both in popular cultural domains and in new media art, constitutes yet another radical transformation of structures of perception, or rather, opens up perception in its processual, material dimension. The manipulative aspects of VCR—freeze-frame, slow motion—enabled us to see the interstices, or what Mark Hansen calls the “between-two of images” of film, that is, to see things that are not

available to human perception in the linear, cinematic unfolding of the flow of images. It is, according to Hansen, the uncompromisingly anti-mimetic nature of the digital image, the fact that there is no longer any referential layer underlying them, that, paradoxically, calls for a re-theorization of perception as a technically-enabled re-materialization of the body, an embodied framing of affect.⁷

In his thorough investigation of the interrelations between technology, digitization and the body—to the complexity of which I can by no means do justice here—Hansen discusses Bill Viola’s *Anima* (2000), *Dolorosa* (2000) and *Observance* (2002) slow-motion digital video installations to argue that the technological possibilities of contemporary digital media do not so much allow us to perceive the “between-two of images”, but rather urge us to “experience the imperceptible in-between of emotional states”.⁸ By exploiting the technical capacity of shooting film at high speed, and, after its conversion to digital video, to “project it seamlessly at normal speed”, Viola is “able to supersaturate the image, registering an overabundance of affective information normally unavailable to perception”. The image as such thus becomes the support for the “registration of affective microperceptions”, entailing an intensification of perception as embodied activity, therewith laying bare the “embodied materiality of subjectivation” itself.⁹ What Hansen’s analysis makes clear is that the digital image, having lost any connection with an independent reality—its “infrastructure” being, in Patricia T. Clough’s words, no more than “layers of algorithmic processing of a matrix of numbers”—has become a process, an activity that not merely “invites the user’s interaction” but rather “requires the human body to frame the ongoing flow of information, shaping its indeterminacy into meaning”.¹⁰

In naming the intensification of bodily experience, that is, its expansion to the experience of the “imperceptible in-between of emotional states”, affectivity, Hansen follows the lead of one of the most influential theorists of affect, the Canadian philosopher, writer and political theorist Brian Massumi, whose *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, and Sensation* (2002) offers an insightful and straightforward account of the need for and possible development

⁷ Mark Hansen, “The Time of Affect, Bearing Witness to Life”, *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2004): 591.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 589.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 594.

¹⁰ Patricia T. Clough, “The Affective Turn: Political Economy, Biomedicine and Bodies”, *Theory, Culture & Society* 25.1 (2008): 5-6.

of a theory of affect without undoing the deconstructive work effectively carried out by poststructuralism.¹¹ Taking various (empirical) studies of the emotional effects of media as his starting point, Massumi first establishes that the strength and the duration of an image's effect are "not logically connected to the content in any straightforward way". Indeed, the measured physiological and subsequent verbal responses of research subjects to selected visual material suggests that the "primacy of the affective is marked by a gap between *content* and *effect*".¹² In other words, there is a certain indeterminacy in the embodied response to the image that distinguishes affect, the level of automatic physiological response, from both conscious perception, language and emotion. An almost too obvious instance of such dissonance, or indeterminacy, is the moment when we find ourselves being pleurably affected by an image of sadness. While language and social context largely determine the qualities (or content) of a perceived image, the strength or duration of the image, Massumi proposes, with reference to Deleuze, to designate "**intensity**". While both intensity and qualification are equally immediately embodied, he continues, there is a critical difference, in that "intensity is embodied in purely autonomic reactions most directly manifested in the skin", whereas embodied functions such as heartbeat and breathing are "depth reactions" that belong more to the "form/content (qualification) level" of response, marking a "reflex of consciousness into the autonomic depths, coterminous with a rise of the autonomic into consciousness". Intensity, on this perspective, remains "beside this loop", being a "non-conscious, never to be conscious autonomic remainder" of primary affect. Language does not necessarily operate in opposition to intensity: if matter-of-fact or commonsensical, it may have a dampening effect, interfering with the image's effect; if punctuating narrative with qualifications of emotional content, in contrast, language may enhance intensity, resonating rather than interfering with it.¹³

Because of the reorganization of subjectivity in the age of digitization, approaches to the image in its relation to language fall short, if they merely operate on the semiotic and/or semantic level. The integration of intensity into cultural theory would help to (re)gain what such approaches inevitably lose: the "expression *event*—in favor of structure". Massumi explains the "ex-

¹¹ Brian Massumi, "The Autonomy of Affect", in *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, and Sensation* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 23-45.

¹² *Ibid.*, 24.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 25.

pression-event” as the “system of the inexplicable: emergence, into and against regeneration (the reproduction of a structure)”, the inassimilable. Actualized in the expressive **event**, affect or intensity is that which remains outside and eludes theories of signification that “are still wedded to structure even across irreconcilable differences”.¹⁴ Conscious perception and emotion put limits on the opening up of embodied, affective events, rendering determinate, for example, in the form of narration, what is, and must remain indeterminate, emergent, in the expression event qua event. As such, affect is not the description of a concept, but rather a term that attempts to think, in Braidotti’s terms, “through flows and interconnections”, to expand a theoretical reason that is “concept-bound and fastened upon essential notions”, in favour of representations for “processes, fluid in-between flows of data, experience and information”.¹⁵

By equating intensity with affect, Massumi is capable of establishing a clear distinction between the latter, as embodied indeterminacy, as potential and emergent, and emotion. Emotion is a “subjective content”, qualified intensity captured and fixed in language, appropriated and recognized in signifying terms, and henceforth defined as personal. Intensity, in contrast, may be qualifiable as an emotional state, but it is not to be associated with linear processes. Affect or intensity is a state of suspense, “potentially of disruption”, running parallel, but not reducible to sociolinguistic capture, nor to personal psychology. Affects are not pre-social. As Braidotti reminds us, “affects are the body’s capacity to enter relations—to be affected”, and such relations—“the virtual links that a body can form with other bodies”¹⁶—are not restricted to intersubjective forms of empathy, sympathy, love or, indeed, hatred or disgust, but rather cut across the boundaries between species, allowing for multiple, non-unitary, heterogeneous flows of affect in an ongoing process of becoming (other). Emotion and affect, Massumi hence maintains, “follow different logics and pertain to different orders”, and what is at stake in this distinction, both theoretically and politically, is “the new”.¹⁷

There appears to be increasing consensus among media, literary and art theorists that the cultural condition of post-secular, post-ideological high capitalism is marked by a “surfeit” of affect. If we are going to make sense

¹⁴ Ibid., 27.

¹⁵ Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, 2.

¹⁶ Ibid., 104.

¹⁷ Massumi, *The Autonomy of Affect*, 27.

of our increasingly image-saturated and digitally mediated culture, and if the challenge is not only to make sense of a world in which the so-called master narratives are no longer viable, but also to enable possibilities for change, then we need a new vocabulary to theorize affect. Affect, not emotion, for theories of emotion tend to return to traditional psychological categories that eventually both personalize and depoliticize the operations of our current information- and image-based culture.¹⁸ Sturken and Cartwright may be perfectly right in problematizing the confining and deterministic implications of certain post-structuralist theories: their attempt to escape from the reproduction of structure, and to explain the potentially disruptive, enabling and innovative effects of images alongside their reactive, reterritorializing operations, by reverting to traditional notions of individual and collective agency, however, is not only a theoretical error, but also politically inadequate.

In her critical evaluation of the affective turn cited earlier, Clare Hemmings points to the “myriad ways that affect manifests . . . not as difference, but as a central mechanism of social reproduction in the most glaring ways”, mentioning the “delights of consumerism, feelings of belonging attending fundamentalism or fascism”, as just a few contexts in which affective responses reinforce rather than challenge or dislodge a dominant social order.¹⁹ Whereas Hemmings may be right in taking to task the advocates of affect theory for not giving enough attention to the fact that affect operates in unpredictable ways, and that “good” and “bad” affect inevitably function simultaneously, sometimes reciprocally and interdependently, I would suggest that it is precisely on account of its complexity, indeterminacy and ultimate unassimilability, while yet pertaining to sociality on its multiply entwined levels, that we need to find ways of thinking about its processual operations outside the linearity of conceptual reason. Indeed, the very coexistence of hyper-individualism, personal and corporate greed, diverse forms of religious fundamentalism, a mass media system that continues to produce mind-numbing and degrading reality shows, providing us with disinformation and feeding us sensationalist junk, the spectacularization of politics and so on, playing on and to the “bad” affect that is indisputably rife in an increasingly global informational and communicational culture, in tandem with a grassroots movement—making effective use of the Internet and other current technologies—that helped to

¹⁸ See Rei Terada’s challenging study *Feeling in Theory: Emotion after the “Death of the Subject”* (Cambridge, MA and London, UK: Harvard University Press, 2001) for an argument running counter to these assertions.

¹⁹ Hemmings, *op.cit.*, 551.

bring Barack Obama to the Whitehouse, and allowed even the staunchest of Republicans to support and vote for the first African American presidential candidate, growing ecological concerns that urge even the most automobile minded Americans to put their faith in gas sipping, or otherwise “green” vehicles, the promotion of a culture of relationships through web-based social networks and online communities, the access to and sharing of increasingly diversified information and different viewpoints through blogs, wikis, chatting, tagging and other responsibility and community-building phenomena engaging “good” affect, in its irreducible complexity and resistance to structural analysis, require us to think through and account for the operational potential of affect, in both its “good” and its “bad” effects.

Massumi’s examples of affective responses do not only show what bodies can do, but, as Clough astutely points out, they also “show what bodies can be made to do”.²⁰ Responsible and irresponsible behaviours co-exist and are partly, if not largely, instigated by new media whose productive and/or destructive potential can neither be predicted in advance nor explained within the terms of structural frameworks that clearly separate emancipatory aspirations from conservative or even reactionary drives, whether of a nationalist, ethnic or religious nature. As Braidotti forcefully argues, the “point is not to know who we are, but rather what, at last, we want to become, how to represent mutations, changes and transformations, rather than Being in its classical mode”.²¹ If we are not to slip back into sociological or psychological categories, and reify existing structures of signification and modes of being, but, instead, seek to understand and mobilize individual and collective levels of undecidability, of newly emerging systems of becoming—“good” or “bad”—what is called for instead is, in Massumi’s terms, an “asignifying philosophy of affect”²² that will enable a more complex and more sophisticated critical apparatus to develop and teach a sociocultural literacy, adequate to the challenges and possibilities of a sociocultural realm of information and communication that is an increasingly visual, if not multisensual and shifting hybrid of fluctuation, change and transformation.

The critical potential of the mass media today, in the context of post-modern power relations, does not lie in the individual subject’s conscious ability to negotiate, whether in agreement or in opposition, the qualita-

²⁰ Clough, op.cit., 5.

²¹ Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, 2.

²² Massumi, *The Autonomy of Affect*, 27.

tive and/or signifying effects of the image/expression events in which she is inescapably, increasingly immersed. Obviously, ideology is not a thing of the past, and critical analyses of ideological operations remain crucial. It is just as important, however, to try to understand the ways in which the image's effects take hold on the immediately embodied level of affect: affect or intensity cuts across different structures differently in every actual case, resonating in its specificity with other layers, other orders of the system, enabling moments of emergence, of productive disruption, as much as of reactive regression, ideological retrenchment. The political potential of affect lies in its openness, its directness, its operation in an unbounded field of possible actualization. The undecidability of political processes—quite poignantly manifested in the 2008 US presidential elections—equals the unpredictability of economic developments in high capitalism, as reflected in the recent “credit crunch”, the *démasquée* of mortgage bankers and/or the fall of the Detroit automobile industry. In both realms, it is affect that seems to produce the most powerful effects, over and above the power of politics and economics themselves. Image reception is deeply enfolded in the domain of affect that is virtually everywhere: the ways in which blocs of affect shift into potential actualization are increasingly utilized by both the reactive and liberatory apparatuses through which they are relayed. If we do not develop a cultural-theoretical vocabulary with which to think affect, cultural studies, in both theory and practice, both inside and outside the classroom, will lose the critical momentum generated by the affective turn in its current (re)emergence.

Questions for Review and Discussion

- Different thinkers make different distinctions between “emotion” and “feeling”, and between “emotion” and “affect”. Reflect upon such distinctions and discuss their significance.
- Shifts in critical trends are always linked up with developments in the wider social context. Why would the affective turn have come about at the dawn of the 3rd millennium?
- One could argue that music is as closely bound up with affect as is visual culture. Why would visual culture be nonetheless privileged in recent debates on affect?

- Why does the question of minority perspectives—feminist, queer, postcolonial, critical race—take on particular significance in discussions of the affective turn?
- In what ways does the invocation of affect represent an “ontological turn”, as Claire Hemmings suggests?

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CHAPTER 9

Seeing Differently: Towards Affirmative Reading of Visual Culture

Marek M. Wojtaszek and Dorota Golańska

Paradigms of Representation

Since neither vision nor visibility are simple processes or acts, visual culture belongs to the most celebrated yet simultaneously hotly debated technologies of self and sources of knowledge. Given that different practices of seeing, looking and being looked at (i.e. representing and being represented) are thought to organize and restrain processes of subjectification, the concept of representation has contemporarily come to be seen as a central issue in the study of culture, knowledge and intersections, overlaps and intra-actions among them. Theorizing representation—be it linguistic or visual—has never been a univocal practice due to the complexity of epistemological and methodological approaches involved in the study of the concept as well as its processual character. Both visual culture and the study of the image have recently acquired currency in the field of culture/cultural studies. They draw critical attention to the concept of representation and reassert its supremacy as a theoretical paradigm or mode of both experiencing the world and of making these perceptions meaningful. In spite of recent academic and artistic interest in the concept, we need to keep in mind that the mechanism of representation has been established as a prevailing paradigm of experiencing and theorizing the world since the Platonic inception of **Western philosophy**, one which has played a major role in asserting sexual dominance through masculine construction of the subject who represents and in whose image and from whose perspective the system of signs and meanings is tailored.

One can identify three dominant strands of critical analysis of language and visual culture, which differently conceptualize **the mechanism of representation**. Although all these approaches are similar in their dualistic construction (which is derivative of the Western metaphysics), they vary in what concerns the relations of image/word vis-à-vis the real as well as the role of the subject in the process of both representing the world and being represented. Taking this into account, we propose to follow Stuart Hall¹ and

¹ Stuart Hall, "The Work of Representation", in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall (London: Sage, 1997), 24.

distinguish between mimetic (reflective), intentional and constructionist (constructivist) approaches to representation. Each entails different consequences for the conceptualization of image and subjectivity. The former two establish an unbridgeable hierarchical gap between the subject and object of vision and between the original and the copy at the level of ontology. The latter, dispensing with such crude oppositional figurations, aligns subjectivity with image in the process of construction, nonetheless enclosing it within the realm of ideology. These paradigms serve to explain how representation of meaning is effectuated through language and image, how meaning is constructed, where it comes from or where it is produced, whether or in which circumstances we can speak of meaning and how to problematize its origin in, or impact on, the real world. The distinction between the idea of reflection and representation as a construction of the material world (either intentional or not) is sometimes difficult to make since they might overlap and transcend each other. Keeping this in mind, we will now turn to a brief description of these three conceptual modes of representation in order to both sketch the most significant differences between them and to expose their investment in the maintenance of the dominant dichotomized logic

Mimetic Approach

The **reflective approach** takes its origins in the ancient notion of *mimesis*, which assumes the principle of resemblance to or, rather, reflection of reality in language/image/metaphor and so on. Put differently, the mechanism of imitative representation relies on the fundamental and unconditional principle of similarity between the form (the original) and its appearance (the copy). This foundational dyadic construction is far from symmetrical. Conversely, the copy—posited as secondary—always refers us back to the original, where the latter is a source and *conditio sine qua non* of the former. By setting up this rigid distinction, Plato creates an ontological hierarchical dichotomy of essence and representation, further perpetuated by the intrinsically negativistic logic of Western culture. The original is valued to the detriment of the copy (i.e. non-original or other-than-original), and the latter is thereby posited as inferior, mere appearance, the virtual.

The mimetic approach explains that image (or other form of representation) mirrors objects that already exist. The meaning is always wrested from the

real—it is presumed to reside in nature, fixed objectively in the real world. In this view, words or images are thought to mimetically resemble reality, which inevitably posits them as secondary and derivative of the latter. Although visual signs might bear some similarity to both the shape and texture of real objects, they can never be substituted for them. Thus, mimesis is never perfect or ultimately accomplished (it is more about similarity than sameness), being only a false version of the real or something that precludes the experience of the real. Consequently, the original stands at the centre of the system, its actual existence, nevertheless, can only be inferred from its numerous appearances.

The overinvestment in the processes of seeing as a means to achieve knowledge as well as increased interest in images as representations of meaning (both seen as functions of digitalized twentieth century culture) lay at the heart of Jean Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality.² Turning Platonism on its head, in *L'Echange Symbolique et le Mort*,³ he argues that the logic of contemporary culture relies on the fact that the representation precedes that which is represented. Logically, the represented object in **hyperreality** becomes the object of excessive visual consumption to such an extent that its presence is obliterated. The irreversible loss of the real engenders a new landscape of simulacral experience, one which substitutes for the reality. Living in the post-modern world is comparable to the state of pure presence, where everything seems to be transparent, visible and exposed.⁴ The Baudrillardian lament of the loss of the real only seemingly signals the collapse of the dualism of an original and a copy. In fact, this binarity gets even more extrapolated, since the distance between the two is extended to infinity. Intended as an ultimate critique of representation, the poststructuralist endeavour of turning the original into a simulacrum, whereby our experience of the real world is inevitably lost, relies on the dualistic framework of thought. The simulacral image gets substituted for the real and various representational codes of the former function to emphasize the “realness” (albeit simulated) of the latter, thereby producing the hyperreal. The exposure of the illusion of the original, sustained in its alleged authenticity through incessant iteration and repetitive reference to other

² Hyperreality is a term that Baudrillard uses to describe the situation of a simulation of reality where the simulated reality has no referent in the real world. Importantly, in simulation its various elements work to increase the “realness” of what is actually simulated, therefore hyperreality ends up being more authentic or more persuasive than what it substitutes for; it becomes “more real than the real”.

³ *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, 1976

⁴ Jean Baudrillard, “The Ecstasy of Communication”, in *The Anti-Aesthetic*, ed. Hall Foster (Washington: Bay Press, 1983).

simulacra, does not culminate in the eventual explosion of the binarized system. Conversely, it amounts to a mere reversal of terms, which further polarizes the established opposition of the real versus the virtual.

Intentional Approach

Next to the object-derived knowledge or meaning (but equally dualistic) is the **intentional approach**, which commences with Kantian philosophy of knowledge as necessarily starting from the subject rather than the world of things. The Enlightenment effectuates a shift away from the speculative reflections on forms versus appearances, focusing on representational powers of the subject which inaugurates a novel, *intentional* construal of representation. Claire Colebrook explains the modern epistemological prerequisites of modernity as follows: “To be known or experienced a thing must be other than the knower; it must be *given* to the knower. As *known*, things are only as they are re-presented to a subject”.⁵ Rendering a subject (instituted by representation) a necessary condition of knowledge of the world, Kant introduces a separation between the subject who knows and the world which is known. The world can be knowable solely through the subject’s representations. It is the human reason’s capacity for self-representation that engenders this gap. Accordingly, the image exists for the subject (since the world is what is represented to a subject) and is guaranteed therewith. Subjectivity and identity become procedures of representation.

This point has been taken further by Marx in his critique of idealism. Reverting to the concept of **ideology**, Marx set off to suggest how real and material exploitation is masked by images of the dominant group. Understood as *false consciousness*⁶ and disseminated by dominant powers, ideology exposes the oppressive character of the mechanism of representation. The coercion of the masses through imposition of a falsified vision of reality is, accor-

⁵ Claire Colebrook, *Philosophy and Post-structuralist Theory: From Kant to Deleuze* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 2 (original emphasis).

⁶ The concept of “false consciousness” derives from Marxist theory of class-structured society. Even though Marx himself did not use this term, its meaning and usage are explicitly connected with his philosophy. Marx preferred to speak of “ideology” or “commodity fetishism”, concepts related to “false consciousness”. It was introduced to philosophical discourse by twentieth-century thinker György Lukács, who dedicated a more systematic attention to the Marx’s theory of consciousness and ideology thereby underscoring their proximity. It allows us to question the seeming objectivity of social structures as well as reproductive activities and thus to expose masculine domination as a socio-historical construction not merely of cultural institutions but also and, most crucially, of the cognitive mechanisms which effectuate them as oppressive. See György Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Merlin, 1971 [1923]).

ding to Marx, necessary for the whole system to operate. In such an account, an image—as a product of ideology—becomes an intentional distortion of reality, by means of which its author (i.e. the subject) imposes their meaning on the world. The Marxist critique, which originally concentrated on the issue of class as a fundamental dimension of exploitation, was expanded by the feminist thinkers who added a patriarchal layer to it. In so doing, they have enlarged and complexified the scope and functions of dominant ideology. Oppressed by the structures of capitalist patriarchy, women are to challenge the system by unravelling how dominant ideology, articulated in writing and visual media, reproduces the prevailing patriarchal assumptions about femininity in general and about women's involvement in the social sphere, in particular. In a similar vein, Simone de Beauvoir⁷ emphasizes the structurally discriminatory character of “difference”, an indispensable component of the masculine logic of domination. As she argues, feminine difference via juxtaposition against masculine sameness emerges as otherness. De Beauvoir lays bare the false universality of the Western subject of knowledge (i.e. the one which has the power to represent) by pinpointing its implicit gender construction. Being a source of representation, the subject constitutes himself by expelling his others (i.e. not-men). Therefore, feminist cultural critics labour to expose how patriarchy distorts women's consciousness in the interests of capitalism.

Inspired by Lacanian psychoanalysis, Louis Althusser moves the notion of ideology away from its conceptualization as a reflection of the conditions of the world (whether false or not) and points instead to its role as a necessary precondition of both subjectivity and human sociality. Understood as the representational means through which we can experience and think of reality and standing for an “*imaginary* relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence”,⁸ ideology “has the function of ‘constituting’ concrete individuals as subjects”.⁹ It is only within ideology that we become subjects. Who we are is an outcome of the process of interpellation which consists in naming or calling us to recognize ourselves or identify with the ideal subjects procured by ideologically constructed images. Images “hail” the subjects and encourage them to take their place in the ideological system. Consequently, viewers are allocated positions which they are interpellated

⁷ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (London: Picador, 1953).

⁸ Louis Althusser, “On Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes Towards an Investigation”, in *Lenin and Philosophy*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1971), 162 (our emphasis).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 160.

to take. Working to recruit subjects, representation is, therefore, considered to be constitutive of (ideological) subjectivity.

The ideological function of representation which is explored in the intentional approach emphasizes the increasing role of images (i.e. representation) in diverse aspects and areas of human life. For example, feminist critics have been engaged in elucidating the gap between representational norms and identities paying particular attention to the mystificatory function of images of femininity and masculinity and formulating their politics around the issue of rendering representation more accurate and truthful. In doing so, they rely on the dichotomous logic, which runs the risk of replicating and perpetuating the dominant masculine point of view.

*Constructionist Approach*¹⁰

Performative approaches to representation are marked by two conceptual shifts: from meaning to knowledge and from language (verbal or visual) to discourse which overcome the distinction between language (or structure) and practice. **Discourse** is understood as a set of representational practices which both define and limit what can be said about something or how something can be visually represented. Michel Foucault claims that both a text and a practice belongs to a *discursive formation*,¹¹ which is constitutive of knowledge (enmeshed with power) and of the subject (the process of construction of subjectivity being simultaneously restrictive and productive). Critical is Foucault's suspension of repressive hypothesis—no longer is power understood as simply oppressive vis-à-vis the subject. Rather it becomes a productive mechanism, which proposes an immanent view of subjectivity and power. Representation is considered in terms of what it *does* and not in terms of its accuracy; it becomes a constitutive force through which both the subject and the object are effected. Colebrook evinces that Foucault grants to discourse the status of a “force or event in its own right and not as an expression of some pre-given or transcendent logic”.¹² Neither does representation reflect nor express mea-

¹⁰ Although we follow Stuart Hall in his taxonomy of representational paradigms, we do not focus on the semiotic approaches which he includes within the constructionist strand. In this chapter we are more concerned with approaches studying visual representation rather than language, therefore we mention here only discursive or performative approaches to representation, leaving the issue of semiotics or myth making beyond the scope of this argumentation. See Hall, *The Work of Representation*.

¹¹ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* (Brighton: Harvester, 1980).

¹² Colebrook, *Philosophy and Post-structuralist Theory*, 182.

ning; rather, it becomes constitutive of the couple of the subject and object. The constructionist approaches are unique in their insistence on the process of de-centring of the sovereign subject. Being no longer an autonomous agent, it is situated already within discourse and spoken by it.¹³ The image implies an ideal subject-position, which is the place discourse asks a spectator to take within it. Foucault speaks of the instrumental function of images in the production of docile bodies and pinpoints the role of the imagined regulatory gaze in the structure of visual, yet invisible, surveillance which produces the conforming behaviour.¹⁴ In a constructionist account, the realm of images becomes a space wherein constant production of meaning is effectuated and from where we—as subjects—derive our sense of self. Either compliance or resistance is possible alone from within discourse.

The shift from expressive to performative functions of image/representation is introduced by Judith Butler who thus reformulates the meaning of gender. For Butler, performativity must be understood “not as the act by which a subject brings into being what she/he names, but, rather, as that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains”.¹⁵ In such an account, an image—as a symptom and product of the normative discourse—is equipped with a performative power capable of impelling itself on the processes of materialization which are never complete. Importantly, Butler notices, “There is no subject prior to its constructions, and neither is the subject determined by those constructions; it is always the nexus, the non-space of cultural collision . . .”.¹⁶ Aligned with the culturally determined image of the necessarily gendered subject, subjectivity in Butler’s model cannot be seen as coherent and autonomous. In its performative character, however, there “resides the possibility of contesting its reified status”.¹⁷ This means that the norm/the ideal can be repeated or reiterated disloyally in order to be subsequently reworked. Gender is a performance, a theatrical “act”, a cultural significance codetermined through various acts and their cultural perception which is being incessantly rehearsed. Even though it is going on

¹³ Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power”, in *Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, ed. Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (Brighton: Harvester, 1982).

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995 [1975]).

¹⁵ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge 1993), 2.

¹⁶ Judith Butler, “Gender Is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion”, in *Feminist Film Theory. A Reader*, ed. Sue Thornham (New York: NY University Press, 1999), 338.

¹⁷ Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory”, *Theatre Journal* 49/1. December 1988, 519.

before the actors who *perform* it arrive on the scene, it nevertheless requires them “in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again”.¹⁸ That which is performed and who performs it must be necessarily and immanently linked to each other in order to produce an illusion of some ground.

Mike Nichols’ *Closer* (2004) might undeniably be read in keeping with the approaches presented above. From a critical feminist perspective the film can be viewed representationally, ideologically or as a performative practice. Such readings, however, do not let us move beyond the negative logic inscribed in the representational thought (of which ideology and performativity are more concrete illustrations). Moreover, revealing the oppressive character of visual culture, they seem to be incapable of envisaging pleasure other than in strictly negative terms. As such, they leave no room for its affirmative rendering, especially if one subscribes to feminist thinking. Visual enjoyment remains essentially dependent on recognition (representation of oppression), which disabuses us of experiencing it in a positive manner. Consequently, the only possible strategy critical viewers can adopt is resistance to what and how they see rather than aesthetic engagement with pleasurable experience of non-representational seeing, which makes possible unconditional affirmation of difference beyond the structures of dualism. Distancing ourselves from such representational accounts of visual culture, in what follows, we would like to offer an alternative affirmative reading of *Closer*. This consists in a radical delinking of visuality from representation through employment of novel figurations (simulacrum, becoming and the virtual).

Seeing Differently

The notion of “visual culture” has predominantly figured as a function of twentieth-century culture, one that revitalizes the question of images and re-emphasizes their centrality to the representation of meaning in the world. Feminist critiques have been invested in studying the negative influences which the dominant visual representations (e.g. of identities, bodies, cultural practices, etc.) exert on the empirical lives of women and men, exposing their pernicious effects and documenting how they continue to uphold masculine domination. Paradigmatic has been the assumption about the power wielded by the male subject, exercised by means of vision. Culture is considered to be arranged

¹⁸ Ibid., 523.

and organized around masculinity and moulded in its image. Thus, the gaze or scopophilia, associated uniquely with men, plays a structural part in the historical fashioning and development of Western societies. The ongoing feminist project of rendering visible, analyzing and ultimately dismantling instances and sites of oppression has been commonly addressed as the assault against the legacy of the dominant Western dualistic metaphysics (i.e. binary pairs). It aims to de-centre masculinity by conceptualizing alternative corporeal modes of subjectivity. This allows for a broader spectrum of the senses in reconfiguring our sense of self, which consequently strips vision of its conventional supremacy, showing it as intermingled with other perceptual forces.

Grown out of Western ontological dualism, the prevailing feminist epistemologies utilized to examine visual culture (e.g. representation, ideology, performativity) in many respects sustain the divide between a viewing subject and an object seen, the true world of forms or form-giving subject juxtaposed against the false world of appearances. Image stands either for a copy of an original (representation), or a subjectively manipulated portrayal of reality (ideology), or as de-linked from mimetic reproduction, it becomes itself a constant production of meaning (performativity). In this account, **visual culture** remains inextricably intertwined with representation, which is believed to effectively bridge the ontological gap, and in so doing produce and adequately communicate meaning. In seeing an image, we, as subjects, recognize the image (of reality), decipher and analyze its content or context. Alternatively, our sense of self can be understood to derive from the realm of images, which we carry on making. Implicit in this is the presumption that it is our consciousness that effectuates images *from* or *of* things, that our perception—grounded in representation—is a natural capacity and as such immaculate. Perception pertains to an underlying subject, who works as mediation for any experience whatsoever. The subject perceives and in perceiving the world it represents it to herself/himself. Everyday visual experience boils down to an operation of conjunction of the passage of divergent images into recognizable, that is, immobilized and ordered, sequences. These, however, remain derivative of a transcendent world, which they represent. Logically, gender can well be viewed either mimetically (i.e. as an expression of sex), or as an ideological outcome concealing hierarchical relations between the sexes, or as a cyclical iterative social-cultural performance (i.e. productive of the illusions of the natural sexes). It matters little whether reality is represented adequately or

falsified; both possibilities assume the notion of truth. Consequently, feminist analyses have been mostly focused on disproving any claim to essence (i.e. denaturalization), which facilitated reconstruction of feminine subjectivity away from dominant masculine representations of womanhood. Assuredly, as it has been remarked many times before (by, for instance, Genevieve Lloyd,¹⁹ Elizabeth Grosz²⁰ or Claire Colebrook²¹), insofar as they oppose (i.e. negate) the dominant scopic regime, they willy-nilly replicate and reinforce the existent dichotomous, if perhaps not hierarchical, social relations. This type of critique consists in reversing the relation between elements and tends to affirm that which hitherto has been negated.

In order to eschew the enclosure that representation generates, a different logic is necessary; one, which in the critique of ossified masculinist structures of thought rediscovers a potential for creation of the new. It is precisely by virtue of its dominant status and popular character in the contemporary world—which again illustrates the primacy of vision in Western tradition—that visual culture may prove to be one of the most salient and rigorous exponents and proponents of such an affirmative shift. This, we suggest, becomes best exemplified in the cases of films and, perhaps, other visual arts as well, which being highly problematic to and contested by feminist critics when considered in representational terms (i.e. psychoanalytic, ideological, performative), nevertheless incite pleasurable experiences, not infrequently generating a long-lasting admiration and desire. Put differently, why is it that we continue to like something regardless of, or even despite, its oppressive character? Such a question cannot be exhaustively and satisfactorily responded to and elucidated otherwise than by resorting to an altogether different framework of thought and perception. The **affirmative turn** is distinguishable in that it departs not by merely critiquing representation, but rather by inveighing against the source of cultural valuation, that is, the origin of binaristic representational thinking: ontological dualism and a presumed notion of the thinking subject (which demonstrate a specifically masculine manner of understanding and relating to the world). Put another way, it enlarges the critique by moving it way beyond everyday perception and the mechanism of recognition this implies. Rather than cling to the empirically

¹⁹ Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason: "Male" and "Female" in Western Philosophy* (London: Methuen, 1984).

²⁰ Elizabeth Grosz, *Space, Time, and Perversion: Essays in the Politics of Bodies* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995).

²¹ Claire Colebrook, "Incorporeality: The Ghostly Body of Metaphysics", *Body & Society* 6 (2000): 25-44.

given and the various categorical classifications to which it is submitted, one ventures to surpass the human perception and intuit its creative ontology. “True perception”, as Gilles Deleuze puts it, “is never conditioned by mechanisms peculiar to the subject; by escaping the mediation of the subject it becomes total, objective and diffuse”.²² Visual culture with its emphasis on the role of images in the process of culture-building may be at a forefront of this affirmation-driven transformation.

Undeniably, such an affirmative and creative manner of delivering a critique, inspired from Friedrich Nietzsche and Gilles Deleuze,²³ bears an explicitly aesthetic dimension. Thus, it directly corresponds with the domain of visual culture and its products. Derived from the Greek *aisthetos*, which denotes “perceptible to the senses”, the term implies immediacy (i.e. through no detour of the subject) and a far broader field of applicability than the subjective judgment allows (i.e. a conjunctive and synthetic use of the senses). To perceive visually, to see, no longer implicates recognition, which occurs only with the mediation of the subject. Rather, it is the living body which simultaneously produces, radiates and receives sensory impulses, thus immanently and sensuously becomes with the world. Seeing is a bodily encounter yet beyond its empirical conditions. Drawing on the outcomes of the past studies on *Ganzfeld*, Brian Massumi asserts that “Pure visual experience results in a complete absence of seeing”.²⁴ It is only on the transcendental level that one can well acknowledge the fact that visual perception is never purely visual. Vision is embodied, and as such, it melds with other senses with which it cooperates. It consists in (de)forming a pulsating vortex of perceptions, indeterminate and incomprehensible in phenomenological terms. This sheds an altogether different light on the conception and reception of visual culture.

²² Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 64.

²³ This mode stands in glaring contradistinction to Kant’s account of critique, which in Deleuze’s estimate, proves incapable of criticizing established values. See, for instance: Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 87-94; Michael Hardt, *Gilles Deleuze. Apprenticeship in Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 50-53; Paul Patton, *Deleuze and the Political* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 22-23.

²⁴ Brian Massumi, *Parables For the Virtual: Movement, Affect, and Sensation* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 145. Research on the so called *Ganzfeld* (i.e. total field of vision) was a project within scientific psychology carried out from the late 1920s well into the 1960s. Aiming at singling out elementary conditions of visual perception and understanding its nature, scientists conducted experiments which led to the conclusion that at the roots of vision there is only light striking the retina. Subjected to an experiment of producing a pure vision, subjects reported that they had difficulty in discerning what they actually had seen other than as anomaly. *Ganzfeld* turns out to be ungraspable in phenomenal terms, thus beyond the field of the everyday construal of experience.

To paraphrase Deleuze and Guattari, the aim of visual art is “to wrest the percept from perceptions of objects and the states of a perceiving subject”,²⁵ where percept has nothing to do with a registered, that is, recognized (thus represented), image of an object but introduces a singular state independent of an experiencing subject and experienced object. Put differently, it stands for a pure perception, a vital and vibrant moment of intense creativity and rapid movement, “in the midst of things, throughout its own proximity . . . the prehension of one by the other or the passage from one to the other”.²⁶ It appears more adequate to render it in terms of inter-actions or productions which continuously occur in the in-between on the plane of the space-time continuum. To the extent that it does not allow any transcendence, be it that of the subject, the mind or the world, this kind of aesthetic experience remains absolutely immanent, which makes subjectivity undone and diluted in the fluidity of sensible perceptions. No longer is there a distinction between mind and empirical reality. Only then is it possible to view culture as a collection of indifferent objects which can be represented or intended by a subject. Visual culture effectively pulverizes such dual figurations merging images and things in a highly creative act of moving beyond, that is, deepening and mobilizing, traditional metaphysics. The visual becomes dispersed and multiplied. Visual culture emerges as a perceptually synesthetic production of encounters which continuously happens on the plane of radical immanence.

We will now proceed to consider how this shift toward affirmative and creational reading of visual culture is articulated in and through the cinema, drawing particular attention to the three propositions which might roughly be viewed as alternatives to the dominant methodological approaches discussed in the first part of the chapter—that is, the notion of the simulacrum (image without resemblance), becoming (desubjectification) and the virtual (de-historicized and de-spatialized time).

If **vision** rediscovers its genetic condition beyond the actual act of seeing in its own abstraction, that is, imperceptible molecularization—“visual chaos”,²⁷ then to begin *seeing differently* entails disjunction from the habituated trust in the dogma of “what you see is what you get” and the creative

²⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 167.

²⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. B. Massumi (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 311.

²⁷ Massumi, *Parables For the Virtual: Movement, Affect, and Sensation*, 147.

recombination and refinement of our visual perception. Life begins from perceptual experience, a flow of perception, unimaginable within the logical framework of transcendental philosophies that have dominated Western thinking. Their argument of necessarily having some sort of transcendental foundation, most often, the subject, that explains experience can offer but a negativistic account of images and movement. The subject as a self-abstraction has come to dominate the empirical field, immobilizing the perceptual flow of forces into extended images. Movement is seen as a linear and ordered passage of separate images. In Gilles Deleuze's estimate, it is the mechanism of the cinema which succeeds in overcoming the metaphysically supported visual stasis by giving us an image of pure movement²⁸ and an image of pure time,²⁹ thus facilitating our re-naturalization. "It is through the body—and no longer through the intermediary of the body—that the cinema forms its alliance with the spirit, with thought", claims Deleuze.³⁰ Human (visual) perception frees itself from representation and reconnects with the immanent and creative perceptual, yet imperceptible, flow and whole of virtual life.

The cinema intensifies our **perceptual experience** by opening it to the images of unsullied movement and time. We tend to watch films in an analogous fashion as we visually live our daily life which takes motion to be a passage of immobile objects. In the cinema, however, it is not simply that things move, which maintains the perspective of the unitary and immobile spectator; rather, through the auto-movement of the image we experience movement itself (e.g. that of the camera, of moving bodies). Through this image of movement itself, which dilates vision by re-mobilizing images and multiplying points of view, we also get an indirect image of time—time as a becoming, pure motion and productive perception.³¹ Even though one does not yet see time itself, one is already invited to experience movements, flows and becomings in lieu of things or sequences of immobilized images. Akin to movement, time is conventionally—both in everyday life and in the cinema—viewed as derivative of movement of fixed things or images.³² As such, time is thought of as an overarching unity which connects and combines se-

²⁸ Deleuze, *Cinema 1*.

²⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 189.

³¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Pourparlers 1972-1990* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 2003), 92.

³² Gilles Deleuze speaks of the "Kantian revolution" which the cinema accomplishes when it liberates time from its subordination to movement. See Deleuze, *Pourparlers 1972-1990*, 92.

parate parts. Cinematographic time and movement immediately combine with the body, animating the process of its becoming. They disrupt actual images by triggering their auto-production. In so doing, time breaks free from the subordination to the passage of instilled images; we are given the image of time itself, that is, the virtual. Human perception works by slowing down or otherwise delaying the intense flux of images to allow itself room for recognition and representation-driven perception. The cinema's *forte* resides in activating and mobilizing, thus shattering, static or otherwise fixed images through its technological capacity to expose our perception to immediate image of movement and time—that is, becoming and the virtual. Thus, the cinema liberates pure flux fraught with varied forces, imperceptible and resilient genetic conditions of immanent life, which continue bombarding our senses, incessantly causing pain. Brian Massumi speaks justifiably of the palliative function of the empirical, which is to assuage the pain implicated in the perceiving, which, importantly, accounts for the intrinsically aesthetic (i.e. creative) function of the visual.³³ Insofar as the empirical is immanently constituted and avoids danger of objectification (recognition), it remains necessarily an open system, prone to creativity and change. Fulfilling Nietzsche's postulation of *amor fati*, visual perception welcomes pain as its immanent aesthetic force which triggers the process of a larger becoming-life thus affirming the beauty of life. The cinema deterritorializes any perceptual (visual) fixity for the sake of another sensibility: immediate and immanent. Introducing a novel function of an image immanently constituted through motion and virtualization, the cinema emerges as "pedagogy of perception" suited to the technological advancement of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.³⁴

The Simulacrum

The concept of the **simulacrum**, as it is retrieved from within Platonism by Deleuze, is given absolutely positive meaning and function. As a rudimentary structure of the dominant conception of the world, representation is based upon an ontological dualism instituted between an original, true, world and its legitimate image, that is, its copy, linked to it by an underlying principle of resemblance. Deleuze argues that it is only by widening this gap that we can

³³ Massumi, *Parables For the Virtual*, 160.

³⁴ Deleuze, *Pourparlers 1972-1990*, 100.

rediscover the forgotten (by Plato himself) element; another kind of figuration whose essential capacity inaugurates a different logic, away from that of similarity. Rather than resemble the (presumed) true nature of things, the simulacrum carries a potential of simulating these natures, which inevitably pulverizes any dualistic correspondence. The simulacrum does not imitate that which it simulates. Prioritizing the world of identity and similarity (i.e. of representation) over difference and simulacra, Platonism subordinates image to some reality, of which it is considered reflective. Plainly, such a rendering exhibits a preference for stability and harmony, which only the principle of being and sameness can ensure. This homeostasis works by hierarchical ordering, which assigns everyone and every thing their place in the system in keeping with the dichotomous logic. Appearances (i.e. images) are inseparably and automatically submerged to their identities. This classical framework is erected upon a denial of “the metamorphosis or transformation of the original, the possibility of attributing any particular form to it, in short, creation”.³⁵ At the same time, acknowledging the existence of the simulacrum even as an instance of falsification, Platonism provides a possibility of its own overturning, “where overturning means denying the primacy of original over copy, of model over image; glorifying the reign of simulacra and reflections”.³⁶ From a feminist vantage point, it is crucial to emphasize that there is no longer any dyadic structure of a degraded copy or difference related to some prior identity. Conversely, the simulacrum overcomes such a dualistic relation, by affirming the primacy and immanence of difference and becoming. Deleuze advocates a categorical reversal: “Being is said of becoming, identity of that which is different, the one of the multiple . . . that is revolve around the Different: such would be the nature of a Copernican revolution which opens up the possibility of difference having its own concept”.³⁷ That which representation codifies as artificial or unreal (i.e. a copy), shattering its likeness to a transcendent world, acquires independence by changing its nature into an aesthetic simulacral auto-production.³⁸ Images cease to be modelled on a prior original and regain

³⁵ Gilles Deleuze. *Essays Critical and Clinical* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 105.

³⁶ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 66.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 40-41.

³⁸ Hence the diabolical power of the simulacrum, which crushes the sanctified binaristic and naturalistic (i.e. God-given) order. In an essay “The Simulacrum and Ancient Philosophy” Deleuze notes, “God made man in his image and resemblance. Through sin, however, man lost the resemblance while maintaining the image. *We have become simulacra. We have forsaken moral existence to enter into aesthetic existence*”. See Gilles Deleuze, “The Simulacrum and the Ancient Philosophy”, in *The Logic of Sense* (London and New York: Continuum 2004), 295 (our emphasis).

purity as simulacra—in-*formal* because trans-*form*-ational, thus ideally creative of difference. The fixity and reflexivity of images is substituted for the immanent power of imaging (i.e. the simulacrum). Putting to an end the Baudrillardian lamentation of the loss of the real, Deleuze affirms the simulacrum as formative of new, non-representational, reality: “Simulacrum does not replace reality, it is not an equivalent that stands for reality, but rather it appropriates reality ... it produces reality on the new full body that replaces the earth”.³⁹ This introduces a highly creative and unprecedented theory of images which not merely reverses but entirely undermines traditional understandings of vision, thus also of visual culture. Releasing images from representational function, it threatens the possibility of smoothly distinguishing between real identities and illusions, thereby making any claim to centrality and eternity untenable. Morality of judgment is replaced by aesthetic of creation. Leaving the old metaphysics of separation and discontinuity, seeing emerges as an immanent and continuous process of conjunctive *autopoiesis* of reality. There is no viewing subject juxtaposed against world viewed; rather, as Deleuze evinces:

There are images, things are themselves images, because images aren't in our head, in our brain. The brain is just one image among others. Images are constantly acting and reacting on each other producing and consuming. There is no difference at all between *images, things, and motion*.⁴⁰

The leading musical theme from *Closer's* “Can't Take My Eyes Off You” opens us up to the experience of the simulacrum which intensifies in the sequence of Anna's photo exhibition. Entitled *Strangers*, it already implies a flight from the representational rendering of images, dispensing with the recognition of an underlying ground thus immediately (i.e. without subjective mediation) generating the zone of visual production. Far from belying some existent realities, Anna-photographer regains the fabulatory force of a lie and uses it creatively to rebuild the touch with the immanent flow of being, that is simulation itself. Photographs become alien to themselves as much as Alice is an aesthetic autoproduction of herself. “The pictures make the world *seem* beautiful so the exhibition's reassuring, which makes it a lie”, comments Alice. In stating so, she points to the essence of the visual pleasure: “Everyone loves a

³⁹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. *Anti-Oedipus*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 228.

⁴⁰ Deleuze, *Pourparlers 1972-1990*, 61 (original emphasis).

big, fat lie”, taking us on the vertiginous voyage to the land of wonders, where visual perception dilutes into pure difference in a parade of simulacra melding beings with images.

Becoming

The overthrowing of the ordered world of being already implies the retrieval of **becoming** as the force of the simulacrum itself, where it designates a movement or alteration. “Pure becoming, the unlimited, is the matter of the simulacrum insofar as it eludes the action of the Idea and contests *both* model *and* copy at once”, states Deleuze.⁴¹ It has nothing, however, to do with a philosophy of dialectical *Aufhebung* which renders becoming as a progression of some identity. Deleuze is insistent that becoming bears no relation to imitation or mimesis, which always entails conformity to some truth. “One imitates only if one fails, when one fails . . . Thus imitation self-destructs, since the imitator unknowingly enters into a becoming that conjugates with the unknowing becoming of that which he or she imitates”.⁴² Becoming, as much as simulacrum, recruits from the representationally obliterated middle, which otherwise accounts for a zone of indiscernibility. It remains beyond everyday empirical perception by virtue of its creational intensity which molecularizes subjective and objective polarities. “As someone becomes, what he is becoming changes as much as does himself”.⁴³ It allows depersonalization along the unforeseeable lines and trajectories of becoming, a becoming-image, one’s own creative simulation. Exposing us directly to the flows and motions of images, cinema appears to be a perfect technology to trigger the movement of metamorphosis. Far more ingenious than theatre in this respect, by making characters and things coalesce with images, cinema generates and animates immanent experience of the process whereby metaphysical binaries dissimulate into thousands uncontrollable becomings. As Deleuze proposes: “Cinematographic perception works continuously, in a single movement whose halts are an integral part of it and are only a vibration on to itself”.⁴⁴ Perception sharpens, deepens, becomes more intensive. This essentially creative character of becoming as a force of

⁴¹ Deleuze, *The Simulacrum and Ancient Philosophy*, 4.

⁴² Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 336.

⁴³ Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues II*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (London and New York: Continuum, 2006), 2.

⁴⁴ Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 22.

clashing images belongs to, and can be felt at, a different, more sublime, level. It is only through a deterritorialization of the figure of the subject that the production of subjectivity as an immanent process of individuation, can emerge, “a whole world of micro-perceptions which lead us to the imperceptible”.⁴⁵ Our perception is an immanent plane of imaging and simulation, no longer bounded to the human subject as a central and distributive point of perception, but rather inhuman percepts, in-*formal* forces, constitutive of a larger becoming-imperceptible. To see, therefore, is an act of pure sensation, a becoming-imperceptible. Viewing a film becomes an aesthetic adventure which never leaves us the same again, unchanged. Kaleidoscopic, that is, molecularized, moving and transforming, images abduct viewers and immediately engage them in the process of an artistic becoming. To put it another way, one can do (and does!) a lot more watching a film than solely follow the narrative or identify with the characters on screen. De-centring human perception, it opens it up on to non-human sensations recruiting from unmediated participation in the intensive effectuation of reality—that is, in life. Moving simulacra of the cinematographic technology meld with the immanent imagistic production of reality, constituting “the universe as cinema in itself, a metacinema”,⁴⁶ a vital and intensive “open whole whose essence is constantly to ‘become’ or to change, to endure”.⁴⁷

“I am no one”, disarmingly states Alice in one of the concluding scenes of *Closer*. Throughout the narrative she has been all but an identity—a multiplicity of images endlessly changing in the flow of difference. The book about her life, *The Aquarium*, disrupts the linear passage of recognizable people and events, highlighting liquidity and the rhizomatic changeability of her becoming. “We were all fish before we were apes”, remarks Larry-dermatologist, rediscovering the genetic conditions of perception—one which is fluid, de-centred, sensational and which does not imply a unitary subject. Such a deterritorialization liberates us from the burden of subjectivity, making joyfully bearable the lightness of our being. The depth of perception realizes itself in surficial becoming, the multiplicity of micro-perceptions; in *Closer* images become characters and characters merge with images, mirror reflections, words, sounds or landscapes encountered in the productive yet imperceptible experience of life itself. “Everything is a version of something else”, notices

⁴⁵ Deleuze and Parnet, op.cit., 36.

⁴⁶ Deleuze, *Cinema 1*.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 23.

Larry who calls himself “a clinical observer of a human carnival”, pointing to the fluidity of becoming, constant change which hides no truth beneath. The movie brilliantly shows the simulacral conditions of living in the world-image, ungraspable from within culture which always tends to subordinate an image to some kind of ground or nature. Freeing image from its imitative or expressive functions, *Closer* produces an entirely novel perceptual experience, an aesthetic and immanent quest of a creative becoming-other.

The Virtual

Such an expansion of perception beyond the naturally and strictly human (i.e. empirical) possibilities on to the transcendental terrain of their effectuation (which cinematic technology enables) makes visual experience an essentially virtual one, where simulacra composed of differences and becomings immanently effectuate subjectivity. Whereas classical metaphysics enforces a view of the actual world which is then represented in virtual figures, expressed in signifiers or metaphors, Deleuze proposes a monistic formulation, that is, reality is an immanent plane of imaging, pure perception, of which human vision is a contracted and impoverished version. Jean-Luc Nancy states:

Gilles Deleuze’s philosophy is a virtual philosophy, in the sense which we use this word today when we speak . . . of virtual reality or image—designating a universe entirely formed from images, and not only images as high quality illusions of the real, but rather those that leave no place for the opposition between the real and the image. The virtual world is a universe of image-effectivity.⁴⁸

The virtual neither stands for an extra layer (most often, technologically mediated) added to an existent reality as it is in a classic account, nor denotes in a postmodern manner the loss of sense of reality. Conversely, there is only one plane of non-subjective imagistic generativity which fuels the immanent flow of non-human perception. For Deleuze, the virtual designates the transcendental level of productivity and emergence, which is otherwise called varying difference. “Actualization of the virtual always takes place by difference, divergence or differentiation. Actualization breaks with resemblance as a

⁴⁸ Jean-Luc Nancy, “The Deleuzian Fold of Thought”, in *Deleuze: A Critical Reader*, ed. Paul Patton (Oxford: Blackwell Publications, 1996).

process no less than it does with identity as a principle. Actual terms never resemble the singularities they incarnate”.⁴⁹ Insofar as the realms of virtuality and actuality adhere to one immanent plane, “they are indistinguishable”.⁵⁰ Virtuality does not need actualizing and vice versa; one is always already immanently engendered by and involved in the other. As such, they realize the ontological postulate of ongoing creation. The virtual, that is, the pure image of time, to which the cinema exposes us by imaging time’s deregulated, non-linear and de-centred flows, necessitates disruption of actual structures and undermining of any sense of presence (e.g. irrational cuts, abrupt shifts, retrospections). Far from being a sense which works by recognizing and representing external world to a subject in line with existing dualistic categories (e.g. man—woman, master—slave, subjectivity—Otherness, etc.), vision emerges as a creative exercise, which carries a political potential of deviating from the norm.

In a narrative ridden with characteristic temporal irregularities (i.e. flashbacks, abrupt cuts, parallel and overlapping sequences, slow-downs and speed-ups), the film frees time from its subordination to movement into the virtual. That which best illustrates the power of the virtual appears to be the ubiquitous theme of love, which suggests yet another manner of viewing. Being (culturally) intimately tied up with vision, love—especially that at first sight—becomes a genuinely transcendental experience, which the virtual offers. Importantly, it emphasizes the continuity and non-teleology of virtual love. The tagline aptly states: “If you believe in love at first sight, you never stop looking”. The ephemerality and imperceptibility that this novel figuration brings in is well articulated in Alice’s provocatively rhetorical query: “Where is this love? I can’t see it, I can’t feel it, I can’t touch it”. Afar from promising a heavenly union of originally split halves, the virtual (i.e. love)—creatively using the diabolical powers of simulacra and becoming—accounts for an emergence of a zone of intensity. This engenders love as pure immanence, whose shimmering presence is throughout the film brilliantly captured in the notes of Mozart’s *Così fan tutte*, getting us carried away by the flow of becoming-music and dissolved in the blissful plane of the virtual. *Closer* effectively rids us of any metaphysically fabricated and symbolically sustained illusions; Larry points out: “Heart is a bleeding muscle”.

⁴⁹ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 212.

⁵⁰ Deleuze and Parnet, op.cit., 114.

In *seeing differently*, we call forth “a new earth, a new people”.⁵¹ We watch a film in order *not* to see (i.e. recognize or capture) reality; the cinematic experience enables us to see “seeing” itself. In this account, viewing a movie appears to be a perceptual voyage in *autopoietic* intensity, unrestricted to the capacity of the human eye, welcoming a conglomerate of visual percepts and sensible encounters combining from colours, shapes, lines, angles, lights, shades, movements, lumping together with affective flows of bodily memories and sensations. Read affirmatively, visual culture—away from ideological or constructionist models—may be understood as an immanent and aesthetic field of production, which by molecularizing vision, dismantles its complicity in the dominant reality. It demotes entrenched intellectual structures and habits by rediscovering the immanent power of the simulacrum, movement of becoming and time of the virtual. Nowhere is it better expressed than in the words of the leading musical theme of *Closer’s* soundtrack “I Can’t Take My Eyes Off You, I Can’t Take My Mind Off You...”, which brilliantly points to the hypnotic powers of *seeing differently* and amazingly captures the creative exuberance of kaleidoscopic visual experience.

Implications for Teaching

It is important to emphasize that the affirmative turn both in the process of teaching and studying visual culture as well as its individual experience in no sense amounts to the mindless and uncritical affirmation of the dominant—undeniably oppressive—status quo. On the contrary, it must be viewed and considered in keeping with the critical tradition as its deepening and enriching. It is essential, however, that the critique be thought of as unrestricted to the bounds of the established order of representation and its dualistic logic. Critique discovers its essence in immanent (non-subjective) aesthetic creation. Therefore, this requires a sharpening of one’s critical skill in that one needs to be cautious not to fall in a trap of affirmation of the oppressive system. The affirmative reading entails shifting the emphasis away from separability and oppositionality to creativity and affirmative aesthetic experiences. In addition, it encourages us to broaden the scope and definition of critique by figuratively and imaginatively engaging with visual cultures. It also aims to provide novel positive (i.e. non-representational) ways of understanding the self and

⁵¹ Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, 99.

advocates a reconceptualization and enriching of the experience of pleasure by moving beyond negativity towards immanent sensibility.

Questions for Review and Discussion

- Explain the differences between the “linguistic” and “affirmative” turns and discuss their implications for reading visual culture.
- Consider whether and why it is possible to like a movie or an image regardless of, or even despite, its oppressive character. Think of examples of films or images which, being oppressive when read along ideological lines, are at the same time enjoyable to look at.
- Explain both the negative and positive meaning of the simulacrum and discuss their relation to image/representation.
- How can subject/subjectivity be understood within different paradigms of representation and how can it be conceptualized in affirmative terms?
- Explain the epistemological reverberations which the affirmative approach carries for feminist critique.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Cecilia Åsberg, PhD, works within the field of feminist cultural studies of technoscience. She is a Linköping University Research Associate and an Assistant Professor at the Department of Gender Studies, Linköping University, Sweden. She is setting up her own research program and team of doctoral students as the Director of The Posthumanities Hub. She has taught at Utrecht University and has published within the areas of visual culture, cultural memory and everyday life history-use, feminist science studies and feminist cultural studies on science within popular culture.

Dorota Golańska holds a PhD in Humanities and an MA in International Relations. She is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Transatlantic and Media Studies and affiliate researcher at the Women's Studies Centre, University of Łódź. Her research activities are in the field of interdisciplinary gender studies. She is interested in feminist theories of visual culture, criticism of representation as well as in different intersections of culture and politics. She has recently worked with such diverse concepts as intimate citizenship and nationalism on the one hand, and visualization technologies, critique of representation and affirmative turn on the other. She has also published in all these fields.

renée c. hoogland is an Associate Professor of English at Wayne State University in Detroit, where she teaches cultural studies, gender & sexuality studies and critical theory. She is the author of *Elizabeth Bowen: A Reputation in Writing* (1994) and *Lesbian Configurations* (1997), and has published widely on feminist and queer theory, psychoanalysis, popular culture and Anglo-American literature. hoogland is currently working on a book interrogating the interrelations between ethics and aesthetics, exploring the possibilities for aesthetic practice in the service of developing an ethics of everyday life.

Edyta M. Just holds degrees in Political Science (Master) and Gender Studies (PhD). She is an affiliated researcher with Gender Studies at the Department of Media and Culture Studies and the Graduate Gender Programme of the Faculty of Humanities of Utrecht University, the Netherlands. Her professional profile at present can best be described as cultural studies of science and technology, with a strong interest in the epistemological and ethical implications of technologies and visualization techniques. Furthermore, her field of expertise also includes Ethics and Political Sciences.

Redi Koobak is a PhD candidate at the Department of Gender Studies, Linköping University, Sweden. She has studied Women's Studies at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, USA and holds a Master's degree in Gender Studies from Central European University, Hungary. Before relocating to Sweden, she taught textual analysis, translation, academic writing and gender studies as an assistant lecturer at the Department of English at the University of Tartu, Estonia. Her current research interests include feminist visual culture studies, feminist philosophy, feminist science and technology studies and postcolonial theory. Her PhD project concentrates on the notions of self-representation, agency and empowerment, in particular in and through self-portrait photography in multiple contexts (online photography groups, social change photography projects and feminist art) and she is increasingly inspired by theories of sexual difference and reflexive writing methodologies.

Charlotte Kroløkke holds a PhD in Communication Studies from the University of Minnesota, USA. Her area of expertise includes feminist communication studies and new reproductive technologies including the rhetorics surrounding sperm donation, fetal ultrasound imaging and fertility tourism. She is the co-author of *Gender Communication Theories and Analysis* as well as author of several articles published in *Women's Studies in Communication*, *Journal of Consumer Culture*, and *NORA*.

Elżbieta H. Oleksy is Full Professor of Humanities at the University of Łódź and the University of Warsaw. She is Chair of the Department of Transatlantic and Media Studies and Founding Director of the Women's Studies Centre, both at the University of Łódź. She has authored, co-authored as well as edited and co-edited twenty-one books and reports, including *Intimate Citizenships: Gender, Sexualities, Politics* (Routledge 2009), *Gender and Citizenship in a Multicultural Context* (Peter Lang 2008), *European Perspectives on Men and Masculinities. National and Transnational Approaches* (Palgrave Macmillan 2006); *Men and Masculinities in Europe. Critical Research on Men in Europe* (Whiting & Birch Publishing 2004), *Waste of Talents: Turning Private Struggles into a Public Issue. Women and Science in the Enwise Countries* (European Commission 2004); *Representing Gender in Cultures* (Peter Lang 2004), as well as over 100 articles, book chapters and interviews on gender and feminism. She has been an expert of the European Commission and the European Court of Auditors since 2002. She has acted as coordinator/contractor in a number of international projects funded by Framework Programme 5&6, European Science Foundation, European Parliament, TEMPUS-PHARE, the United Nations Development Programme and the British Council. She is Polish representative of the Socrates Women's Studies Network NOISE and the Socrates Thematic Network ATHENA II. Her research interests concentrate on issues of gender in visual cultures.

Aleksandra M. Różalska is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Transatlantic and Media Studies, University of Łódź. In 2006 she defended her PhD dissertation *Representations of Ethnic Minorities in Contemporary American Television*. Since 2002 she has been an affiliate of the Women's Studies Centre, University of Łódź. In 2005-2006 she was a Fulbright fellow at the American University, Washington, D.C. Apart from studies on television, multiculturalism and diversity in the United States and in Europe her research interests include: intersections of gender, ethnicity and class in the media; relationships between the media and politics as well as audience studies. She has published on images of minorities and women in film and television (American and Polish) as well as on theories of spectatorship.

Joanna Rydzewska is a lecturer at the Department of Media and Communication at Swansea University. Her research interests focus on feminist film theory and Hollywood and European cinema with emphasis on British and Eastern European cinema. Recently she has published “Beyond the Nation State: Discourses of ‘New Europe’ and British Identity in Pawel Pawlikowski’s *Last Resort* (2000)” in *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* (2009), “Imagining Englishness: The Mapping of Identity in Pawel Pawlikowski’s *My Summer of Love* (2004)” in *New Cinemas* (2009), and “Gendered Discourses of Nation(hood) and the West in Polish Cinema” in *Studies in European Cinema* (2007).

Marek M. Wojtaszek completed his PhD study in the Department of Transatlantic and Media Studies at the University of Lodz, Poland. His research accounts for his critical-creative engagement with feminist post-structuralist philosophies, gender and visual studies and Deleuze’s and Guattari’s philosophy.

Teaching Visual Culture in an Interdisciplinary Classroom

How to deal with gender, women, gender roles, feminism and gender equality in teaching practices? The ATHENA thematic network brings together specialists in women's and gender studies, feminist research, women's rights, gender equality and diversity. In the book series 'Teaching with Gender' the partners in this network have collected articles on a wide range of teaching practices in the field of gender. The books in this series address challenges and possibilities of teaching about women and gender in a wide range of educational contexts. The authors discuss pedagogical, theoretical and political dimensions of learning and teaching on women and gender. The books in this series contain teaching material, reflections on feminist pedagogies, practical discussions about the development of gender-sensitive curricula in specific fields. All books address the crucial aspects of education in Europe today: increasing international mobility, growing importance of interdisciplinarity and the many practices of life-long learning and training that take place outside the traditional programmes of higher education. These books will be indispensable tools for educators who take serious the challenge of teaching with gender. (for titles see inside cover)

Visual literacy is crucial for understanding the role of visual culture as a key factor in processes of globalization, technologization and multiculturalization, which are all part of our historicity. Certainly, the study of the visual is not limited to the study of images, but also of their effects, material practices they entail and creative potential they offer. Therefore, it is of critical importance to work out new approaches to study both epistemologies and ontologies of the visual. *Teaching Visual Culture in an Interdisciplinary Classroom* weaves together various critical paradigms, theories and methodologies within the common field of feminist visual culture. By doing so, it demonstrates the importance of the analysis of the visual for feminist studies as well as the need to increase visual literacy in general. The volume provides theoretical and methodological support and examples of possible analyses for researchers and students interested in the field of feminist visual culture or, more generally, women's studies, gender studies, visual studies, art studies and science studies. It presents feminist theories and methodologies, which were influential for the field of visual culture and encourages readers to think critically about the visual.

From *Introduction*

The books are printed and also published online. Contact athena@uu.nl or go to www.athena3.org or www.erg.su.se/genusstudier to find out how to download or to order books from this series.

