

Rogoff, Irit: *Terra infirma: Geography's visual culture*.
Routledge, London 2000, p.20 ff; p. 28 ff

My particular effort is to situate this discussion within the field of vision and of its articulation within the arena of visual culture. It might be useful at this point to elaborate briefly on some of these contexts of vision and the visual for the discussion of signs of identity, displacement and location or dislocation. The links between visibility and identity/location are of interest because they establish references to, and enable the inclusion of, far broader materials than those which could be categorized as visual arts or visual representations. Visual culture is a form neither of art history nor of art criticism – it designates an entire arena of visual representations which circulate in the field of vision establishing visibilities (and policing invisibilities), stereotypes, power relations, the ability to know and to verify: in fact they establish the very realm of 'the known'. Why then 'geography' and why locate it within the field of vision?

Geography and spatialization as epistemic structures

Geography is at one and the same time a concept, a sign system and an order of knowledge established at the centers of power. By introducing questions of critical epistemology, subjectivity and spectatorship into the arena of geography we shift the interrogation from the center to the margins, to the site at which new and multi-dimensional knowledge and identities are constantly in the process of being formed.

What is geography beyond the charting of land masses, climate zones, elevations, bodies of waters, populated terrains, nation states, geological strata and natural resource deposits? Geography is

- a theory of cognition and a system of classification
- a mode of location
- a site of collective national, cultural, linguistic and topographical histories
- a homogeneous space which becomes an order of knowledge through universal indexical measure of the land.

Geography therefore is a body of knowledge and an order of knowledge which requires the same kind of critical theorization as any other body of knowledge. Geography as an epistemic category is in turn grounded in issues of positionality, in questions of who has the power and authority to name, of who has the power and authority to subsume others into its hegemonic identity (as France subsumes North African identities, Israel subsumes Palestinian identities, Anglo-American ideology in the USA has until recently subsumed ethnic minority identities etc.). Critical activity which locates geography as its field therefore pursues an active form of unnamng, renaming and the revising of such power structures in terms of the relations between subjects and places.

In the wake of such work as Derek Gregory's *Geographical Imaginations*²⁴ which articulates the connections between social practice, cultural production and human geography; of David Hooson's edited collection *Geography and National Identity*²⁵ which undoes the supposedly symbiotic relationship between named geographies and national identities; and of Neil Smith's *Uneven Development* with its articulation of 'deep space' as quintessentially social space – 'a physical extent infused with social intent'²⁶ – one does not need to labor to insist that geography is knowledge underpinned by nationalism, sustained by the regulating bureaucracies of the state and disseminated through cultural fantasies of otherness. All this has been operating in the name of a traditional and centuries-old assumption. All had been made possible through a traditional assumption which, to quote Blaut's *Colonizer's Model of the World*, is grounded in 'The unique historical advantage of the West – the West makes history, it advances, progresses, modernizes . . . the rest of the world keeps up or it stagnates'.²⁷ Blaut argues that the entire geographical world system was constructed through a process of 'Eurocentric diffusionism' – the flow of cultural processes over the world as a whole. This in turn was founded on the myth of 'the autonomous rise of Europe' (a myth which persisted concerning the period prior to 1492 and up to the advent of colonialism and large-scale European/Non European interaction).

These combined conceits, of influencing all global presents while not being influenced by any forces outside of Europe, make up Blaut's model of the colonizer's vision.

To counter this basic assumption of modern Western thinking about place and its relationality, geography, as it is perceived today within cultural studies, is as much an issue of positionality, a situated knowledge, as are the critical models of gender and race. In addition to geography, there is an ever more urgent need to engage with issues of space and the spatialization of social relations and epistemological conventions. For while geography can be viewed as the relation between subjects and places refracted through orders of knowledge, state structures and national cultures, that relation is produced as socio-cultural narratives which are geographically emplotted. Space on the other hand is the production of another dimension of inhabiting location through subjectivity and representation. The connection between discourses on geography and those on space is the understanding that power produces a space which then gets materialized as place. Thus spatialization precedes geographical determination conceptually while at the same time it is one of the tools by which geography might be analyzed theoretically as a structure of subjectivity. Claude Nicolet, a historian of the early Roman Empire, argues in his book *Space, Geography and Politics* that the transition of Rome from a free republic to an empire is rooted in considerations of space.

In order to set boundaries to their empire and to claim to have reached those that have been marked out, the Romans needed a certain perception of geographical space, of its dimensions and of the area they occupied . . . Yet this space was forced upon them, to the extent that they had to become and remain its masters, to dominate its overwhelming distances, to recognize and exploit its resources, to gather information and convey orders from one end of the empire to the other, to assemble troops or have them patrol this space. The ineluctable necessities of government are to understand (or to believe one understands) the physical space that one occupies or that one hopes to dominate, to overcome the obstacles of distance.²⁸

Thus in Nicolet's terms 'empire' is the spatialization of a concept which is played out through the evolution of technologies of mobility and surveillance and through a consciousness of boundaries that expand far beyond the self. The expanding boundaries inhabited by the self or by the republic as a greater self are termed by Nicolet 'an inventory of the world', an index of measure – of territory, of 'empire', of the known inhabited world – that

can be viewed from a position that is detached from the self as the locus of viewing.

The dimension of subjectivity and of differentiation is added to the model of geography as named and emplaced location with the analysis of space, through the social and psychic constitutions of differentiated and defined realms. Its significance initially for a critical discussion of 'geography' is that space is not understood through the named activity for which it is intended (a tennis court as a place in which the game of tennis is played) or through the titles that its buildings or other solid entities might uphold. Instead an active process of 'spatialization' replaces a static notion of named spaces and in this process it is possible to bring into relation the designated activities and the physical properties of the named space with structures of psychic subjectivities such as anxiety or desire or compulsion. Therefore the meaning of a named place is never its designated activity or physical properties but their interaction with far less obvious subjectivities and with the actions and signifying practices that elicit (or mask) these.

Henri Lefebvre – whose *The Production of Space* has inspired many of us to integrate the critical concept of spatialization into our various projects – brings as an example for this psychically constituted space the concept of the antechamber, a space of negotiation between absolutist royal power and those of lesser status who are petitioning it.²⁹ In this space they (the petitioners) become more empowered since they are representing others outside of the space, while the absolute monarch diminishes in power, as his space has been infiltrated by commoners. The space of the antechamber is a space of negotiation, the exact same space whose physical extent or aesthetic properties never changes, gets re-written and re-constituted through conjunctions of social position and psychic subjectivity. The enormity of Lefebvre's contribution which introduced the notion of 'social space' was to shift from space as a context for material activity or manifestation to space which is produced by subjectivities and psychic states, and in which nevertheless social relations take place.

In the same way both feminism and post-colonial theory have insisted on the need for a multi-subjectivity, so does the critical process of geographical spatialization insist on the multi-inhabitation of spaces through bodies, social relations and psychic dynamics. This is in contrast to nation states, for example, which insist on a singular spatial inhabitation under one dominant rule, and the pragmatic result of a spatial multi-inhabitation within the context of the nation state is armed conflict. A spatial analysis puts into play a dialectical system in which opposing claims can be positioned in a relation to one another which is not conflictual.³⁰ Lefebvre, whose work on space is too rich and too complex to be reduced to a schematic summary, nevertheless insists on some fundamental points of departure for his argument.

First, space is social as opposed to the mathematical space of Euclidean geometry, to mental space or to dream space. This is not to categorize distinct spaces named this or that, but to insist that no space, including the Euclidean space guided by strict rules of geometry or the dream space subject to irrational and unconscious forces, is ever devoid of social relations.

Second, that space is constantly in the process of production: 'Spatial practice consists in a projection onto a spatial field of all aspects, elements and moments of social practice'. Since all of these are contingent and in constant process of renegotiation, so therefore is the space which come into being via this form of projection.

Third, Lefebvre speaks of spatial analysis as negating the illusion of transparency. Since it is this illusion of transparency that naturalizes knowledge and power relations between subjects and since it is situated within the field of vision, it is a very important part of the discussion on conjunctions of geography and visual culture. Within the illusion of transparency, Lefebvre argues, space appears as luminous, as intelligible, as giving action free rein. It is a view of space as innocent and free of traps.

Anything hidden or dissimulated – and hence dangerous – is antagonistic to transparency, under whose reign everything can be taken in by a single glance from that mental eye which illuminates whatever it contemplates . . . Comprehension is thus supposed, without meeting any insurmountable obstacles, to conduct what is perceived, i.e. its object, from the shadows to the light. It is supposed to effect this displacement of the object either by piercing it with a ray or converting it from a murky to a luminous state . . .

The illusion of transparency turns out to be a transcendental illusion: a trap operating on the basis of its own quasi-magical power, but by the same token referring back immediately to other traps – traps which are its alibis, its masks.³¹

Lefebvre's negation of the illusion of transparency is of the utmost importance to numerous endeavors in cultural studies and cultural criticism. It provides a critical apparatus for dealing with positivistic thought and with analyses which do not take on board issues of situatedness, of unmediated positionality, and which believe unselfconsciously both in exteriority and in the ability to define the realm of the 'known'.

Visual culture – vision as critique

The structures of knowledge and the situated images I have been discussing come together in the field of vision and are part of what we now term visual culture. How can we characterize the emergent field of 'visual culture' as an arena of study? To begin with, we must insist that this encompasses a great deal more than the study of images, even the most open-ended and cross-disciplinary study of images. At one level we certainly focus on the centrality of vision and the visual world in producing meanings, establishing and maintaining aesthetic values, gender stereotypes and power relations within culture. At another level we recognize that opening up the field of vision as an arena in which cultural meanings get constituted also simultaneously anchors to it an entire range of analyses and interpretations of the audio, the spatial, and the psychic dynamics of spectatorship.

Visual culture thus opens up an entire world of intertextuality in which images, sounds and spatial delineations are read on to and through one another, lending ever-accruing layers of meanings and of subjective response to each encounter we might have with film, television, advertising, art works, buildings or urban environments. In a sense we have produced a field-of-

vision version of Derrida's concept of *différance* and its achievement has had a twofold effect both on the structures of meaning and interpretation and on the epistemic and institutional frameworks which attempt to organize them. Derrida's conceptualization of *différance* takes the form of a critique of the binary logic in which every element of meaning constitution is locked into signification in relation to the others (a legacy of Saussurian linguistics' insistence on language as a system of negative differentiation). Instead what we have begun to uncover is the free play of the signifier, a freedom to understand meaning in relation to images, sounds or spaces not necessarily perceived to operate in a direct, causal or epistemic relation either to their context or to one another.

If feminist deconstructive writing has long held the place of writing as the endless displacement of meaning, then visual culture provides the articulation of the endless displacement of meaning in the field of vision. This insistence on the contingent, the subjective and the constantly re-produced state of meanings in the visual field is equally significant for the institutional or disciplinary location of this work. If we do not revert to ascribing meaning exclusively to an author, nor to the conditions and historical specificities of its making, nor to the politics of an authorizing community, then surely we simultaneously evacuate the object of study from the disciplinary and other forms of knowledge territorialization. Only then are we at long last approaching Roland Barthes's description of interdisciplinarity not as surrounding a chosen object with numerous modes of scientific inquiry but rather as the constitution of a new object of knowledge.³⁸

The following brief attempt to engage with the arena of visual culture will touch on some of these themes as well as on the thorny politics of historical specificity, its advantages, its limitations and the dangers inherent in attempting to move out of a traditional and internally coherent and unexamined model of what it means to be historically specific.

In today's world, meanings circulate visually in addition to orally and textually. Images convey information, afford pleasure and displeasure, influence style, determine consumption and mediate power relations. Whom we see and whom we do not see, who is privileged within the regime of specularly, which aspects of the historical past actually have circulating visual representations and which do not, whose fantasies of what are fed by which visual images? Those are some of the questions which we pose regarding images and their circulation. Much of the practice of intellectual work within the framework of cultural problematics has to do with being able to ask new and alternative questions, rather than reproducing old knowledge by asking the old questions.

By focusing on a field of vision and of visual culture operating within it, we create the space for the articulation (but not necessarily for the

answering) of such questions as: What are the visual codes by which some are allowed to look, others to hazard a peek and still others forbidden to look altogether? In what political discourses can we understand looking and returning the gaze as an act of political resistance? Can we actually participate in the pleasure and identify with the images produced by culturally specific groups to which we do not belong?

These are the questions which we must address to the vast body of images which surrounds us daily. Furthermore we need to understand how we actively interact with images from all arenas to remake the world in the shape of our fantasies and desires and to narrate the stories which we carry within us. In the arena of visual culture the scrap of an image connects with a sequence of a film and with the corner of a billboard or the window display of a shop we have passed by to produce a new narrative formed out of both our experienced journey and our unconscious. Images do not stay within discrete disciplinary fields such as 'documentary film' or 'Renaissance painting', since neither the eye nor the psyche operate along or recognize such divisions. Instead they provide the opportunity for a mode of new cultural writing existing at the intersections of both objectivities and subjectivities. In a critical culture in which we have been trying to wrest representation away from the dominance of patriarchal, Eurocentric and heterosexist normativization, visual culture provides immense opportunities for rewriting culture through our concerns and our journeys.

The emergence of visual culture as a trans-disciplinary and cross-methodological field of inquiry means nothing less and nothing more than an opportunity to reconsider some of the present culture's thorniest problems from yet another angle. In its formulation both of the objects of its inquiry and of its methodological processes, it reflects the present moment in the arena of cultural studies in all of its complexities. How would I categorize this present moment?

From the perspective I inhabit it seems to reflect a shift from a phase of intensely analytical activity we went through during the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s – in which we gathered a wide assortment of tools of analysis – to a moment in which new cultural objects are actually being produced. While deeply rooted in an understanding of the epistemological denaturalization of inherited categories and subjects revealed through the analytical models of structuralist and post-structuralist thought and the specific introduction of theories of sexual and cultural difference, these new objects of inquiry go beyond analysis towards figuring out new and alternative languages which reflect the contemporary awareness by which we live out our lives. All around us fictions such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, autobiographies such as Sara Suleri's *Meatless Days*, films such as Terry Zwigoff's *Crumb* and complex multi-media art installations such as Vera Frenkel's

Transit Bar live out precarious and immensely creative relations between analysis, fiction and the uneasy conditions of our critically informed lives.

One of the most important issues cultural studies has taken on is to provide a 'hands-on' application of the epistemological shift. Gayatri Spivak has characterized this as follows: 'It is the questions that we ask that produce the field of inquiry and not some body of materials which determines what questions need to be posed to it.'³⁹ In doing this we have affected a shift from the old logical-positivist world of cognition to a more contemporary arena of representation and of situated knowledges. The emergence of a relatively new arena such as visual culture provides the possibility of unframing some of these discussions we have been engaged in. Among them are ones regarding presences and absences, invisibility and stereotypes, desires, reifications and objectifications from the disciplinary fields – art history, film studies, mass media and communications, theoretical articulations of vision, spectatorship and the power relations which animate the arena we call the field of vision – which first articulated their status as texts and objects thereby unframing them from a set of conventional values as either highly valued or highly marginalized or outside of the scope of sanctioned vision altogether. Equally they are unframed from the specific histories of their making and the methodological models of analyses which have more recently served for their unmaking. The field that I work in, which labors heavily under the title of the critical theorization of visual culture, or visual culture for short, does not function as a form of art history or film studies or mass media culture but is informed by all of them and intersects with all of them. It does not historicize the art object or any other visual image and provide for it either a narrow history within art or a broader genealogy within the world of social and cultural developments. It does not assume that, if we overpopulate the field of vision with ever more complementary information, we shall actually gain any more insight into it.

Nor does this field function as a form of criticism – of art or of any other visual artifact. It does not serve the purpose of evaluating a project, of complementing or condemning it, of assuming some notion of universal quality that can be applied to everything. Furthermore it does not aim at cataloguing the offenses and redressing the balances, of enumerating who is in and who is out, of what was chosen and what was discarded. These were an important part of an earlier project in which the glaring exclusions, erasures and distortions of every form of otherness – women, homosexuals and non-European peoples – had to be located and named and a judgment had to be passed. All of this, however, would constitute a 'speaking about', an objectification of, a moment in culture such as an exhibition or a film or a literary text, into a solid and immutable entity which does not afford us (the viewing audience) the possibilities of play, the possibilities of

set of images, viewed through specific apparatuses and serving the needs of distinct subjectivities.

Furthermore, the discussion of spectatorship (rather than and) sexual and cultural difference, begun within feminist film theory and continued by the critical discourses of minority and emergent cultures, concerns itself with the gaze as desire which splits spectatorship into the arena of desiring subjects and desired objects. Currently such binary separations have been increasingly tempered by the slippages between the ever-eroding boundaries of exclusive objecthood or coherent subjecthood. At present we have arrived at an understanding that all sexual and racial identity in the field of vision is formed out of processes of negative differentiation – that whiteness needs blackness to constitute itself as whiteness, that masculinity needs femininity or feminized masculinity to constitute its masculinity in agreed-upon normative modes, that civility and bourgeois respectability need the stereotypical unruly ‘others’, be they drunks or cultural minorities or anyone else positioned outside fantasmatic norms, to define the non-existent codes of what constitutes ‘acceptable’ behavior. But at the same time we have understood that all of these are socially constructed, ‘performative’ rather than essentially attributed, and therefore highly unstable, entities. Thus the field of vision becomes a ground for contestation in which unstable normativity constantly and vehemently attempts to shore itself up. Films such as *The Crying Game* or *The Last Seduction* played precisely with the erosion of assumptions that something – gender identities in both cases ‘looks like’ that which names it – and the cataclysmic results which such processes of destabilization have. Spectatorship as an investigative field understands that what the eye purportedly ‘sees’ is dictated to it by an entire set of desires and by a set of coded languages and generic apparatuses.

Finally, the field of vision is sustained through an illusion of transparent space. A perfect example of the conjunction of political discourse, disavowed spectatorship and the illusion of transparency can be found in this quotation from Newt Gingrich: ‘I raise my eyes and I see America’ (*New York Times*, April 19, 1995). In this scenario he has the ability to see. America, in all its supposed unity and homogeneity, is there available to his vision, it can be seen by him and the space between them is a transparent entity in which no obstacles obscure the directness and clarity of (his) vision. To return to Lefebvre’s formulation:

Here space appears as luminous, as intelligible, as giving action free rein. What happens in space lends a miraculous quality to thought, which becomes incarnate by means of a design (in both senses of the word). The design serves as a mediator – itself of great fidelity – between mental activity (invention) and social

activity (realization); and it is deployed in space. Anything hidden or dissimulated – and hence dangerous – is antagonistic to transparency, under whose reign everything can be taken in by a single glance from the mental eye which illuminates whatever it contemplates.⁴³

To some extent the project of visual culture has been to try and repopulate space with all the obstacles and all the unknown images which the illusion of transparency evacuated from it. Space, as we have understood it, is always differentiated, it is always sexual or racial, it is always constituted out of circulating capital and it is always subject to the invisible boundary lines which determine inclusions and exclusions. That is to some extent what is happening in the arena of spectatorship: we have left behind the simple binaries of male gazes objectifying female subjects and expanded the arena to contain all the nuances of located difference. When Kobena Mercer writes his critical responses to the photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe he is simultaneously a Black critic (British/Ghanaian) marking a White (American) photographer’s objectification of black male bodies (African-American). At the same time as a gay man he writes in his desire for those bodies and his readings of a language of gay erotica which nevertheless functions also outside of gay culture as a language of racialized menace and fear of black bodies.⁴⁴ Mercer transforms these images into a dialectical space of the relations between race and desire which produce one another. He has spatialized his responses by producing a geography of desire in which positionality – an endlessly conflicted and unresolved positionality – allows for the multi-inhabitation of a problematic.

Clearly space is always populated with the unrecognized obstacles which never allow us actually to ‘see’ what is out there beyond what we expect to find. To repopulate space with all of its constitutive obstacles as we learn to recognize them and name them is to understand how hard we have to strain to see, how complex the work of visual culture.

These then are the modes by which we can link the important discussions of situatedness, of positionality, of visuality, of spectatorship and of spatialization to geographies. In the following chapters I attempt to read some components of the geographical vocabulary as a set of signifying processes and practices which are being re-written and renegotiated from within contemporary visual culture.