4. Visual Culture Studies – Concepts and Agendas

Culture, the political, and visual culture

Whereas art history is a discipline in the classical sense, with a history of its own, visual culture studies is the product of a series of "turns" (linguistic, cultural, visual, pictorial) since the 1960s. This makes itself felt in the way visual culture studies has taken over concepts from various disciplines and theoretical fields. The following chapter therefore draws a map of the main concepts involved in framing visual culture studies' ways of seeing: identity, culture, visuality, and visibility. These in turn are framed by a political agenda whose lines are also drawn into this map.

Visual culture studies is a child of the present, of a reflexive movement in academia where paradigm shifts are proclaimed and institutionalized almost as soon as they occur (instead of this happening retrospectively, with a historicizing distance, as is more usual). This reflexivity has not, however, produced consensus on a definition of the discipline's name: the field is diffuse, the implications limitless, and there are as many genealogies of visual culture studies as there have been attempts to canonize this "indiscipline" (Mitchell), mainly in the form of readers and introductions published since the 1990s. Each of these books has a specific focus, shaped by the respective "native" discipline of the authors, by their critique of that discipline and, in some cases, by their hopes for the new field of visual culture studies. 2006 even saw the publication of a first "meta-reader" which brought together the introductory texts from the most important visual culture studies readers.[1]

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1   Morra, Smith, *Visual Culture*, Vol. I-IV. The first volume brings together introductions from other readers on visual culture studies, pre-faced with the editors' own version of a genealogy.

My approach to this sprawling situation is guided by the question of epistemic interests and their implications for the related *concepts of visuality*. My discussion of these concepts will trace two distinct developments, one academic and the other non-academic, the latter being, in my opinion, the fundamental one (in terms of both epistemic interests and models of visuality) and, chronologically speaking, predating the academic development by several years. The non-academic nexus joins politics and art, and my examination of it focuses mainly on Britain and the United States, beginning in the 1980s when the social and cultural tensions of the Reagan and Bush years culminated in the so-called "culture wars". Artists like Robert Mapplethorpe, Andres Serrano, Jenny Holzer or Barbara Kruger and activist groups of artists against AIDS, racism and sexism provoked the censors with their works, leading to withdrawals of public funding, in turn triggering fierce debates about artistic freedom and political activism in the struggle for social recognition of marginalized identities.[2] The paths of politics and art crossed here with unusual intensity, as the artistic strategies of the works deliberately involved images from non-art archives, subcultures and media, often using the methods of quotation and montage to highlight the social wounds of discrimination and a lack of recognition for specific ethnic and sexual identities.

After decades when political struggle and subversion had been associated with other things, above all equality before the law and access to education and economic resources (from class struggle to feminism to the independence struggles of former colonies) how did visual culture become a political battleground? This question of a concept of culture as a political resource brings us to the second development, beginning with the emergence of British cultural studies. In a 1990 essay, Stuart Hall, who founded Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in the 1970s and became one of the most important figures in the field, described how cultural studies formulated the concept of "culture as a social problem and a political task" against the background of a British class-dominated society plunged into profound crisis by the loss of empire.[3] "For me, cultural studies really begins with the debate about the nature of social and cultural change in post-war Britain." (12) The

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2   For an in-depth account, see Brian Wallis, Marianne Weems, Philip Yenawine (eds.), *Art Matters. How the Culture Wars Changed America* (New York 1999).

3   Stuart Hall, "The Emergence of Cultural Studies and the Crisis of the Humanities", in *October* 53 (1990), 11-23.

hierarchical structure of British society was shaped by traditional class structures which were now being shaken up by the new forces of mass culture and consumerism. Previously, "culture" had been the highbrow culture of the elites, only being considered culture if it stayed away from politics. In this crisis, the representatives of highbrow culture reacted with pressure and a restrictive, conservative definition of culture. There was increased insistence on preserving canonical national cultural assets, and this extended to knowledge policy in the humanities. In response, the New Left launched a debate on a new concept of culture in which it was less a matter of definitions and more about opening culture up to politics and sociality. What was new here was precisely this linking of culture with socio-political structures and issues – "the dirty outside world", as Hall called it – an approach for which a theoretical basis had first to be created. "Contemporary cultural forms", he wrote, "did not constitute a serious object of contemplation in the academic world." (15) The Centre for Cultural Studies therefore developed a strategy of "raids" on other disciplines "in order to construct what we called cultural studies or cultural theory". (16) This was joined by reading matter "from traditions that had had no real presence in English intellectual life" (16): since the 1960s, Gramsci, Benjamin and the Frankfurt School had been translated into English, published and discussed in the context of the *New Left Review*.

The key to Hall's account is that this linking of the concept of culture with politics was new in Britain at the time, resulting from upheavals in society after 1945. A further decisive novelty was the appearance of new social subjects in the ossified hierarchies of British society with the start of postcolonial migration. This marked the beginning of the "postcolonial, posthegemonic crisis" (17) which, according to Hall, still marked the late Thatcher era. It is here that we must look for the basic factors influencing the question of how culture was able to replace the previous key concepts in the political struggle: access to legislative and economic power was replaced by cultural recognition. Culture thus became a central arena of political battles, and the political was understood as highly symbolic: following Levi-Strauss, culture was defined as "the categories and frameworks in thought and language through which different societies classified out their conditions of existence..."; the way these categories are produced and transformed was conceived of by analogy with language, as an operation of producing meaning, as "signifying practices".[4]

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4   Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms", in *Media, Culture and Society* 2, no. 1 (1980), 57-72: 65. I do not deal here with the two paradigms discussed by Hall, the cul-

These concepts from the theories of structuralist linguistics and anthropology were to shape the interpretations of visual culture studies: here, too, the focus is on the production of "meaning" by "signifying" as a practice which forms both collective and individual identity constructions. Their medium consists of (visual) representations which now move into the centre of the struggle for political and societal recognition – and this not only and certainly not primarily in (academic) theory, but eminently in the political practice of activist groups since the late 1960s, including groups formed by artists. The best example of this paradigm shift towards strategies of *symbolic visibility* is probably the slogan of the Black Pride movement of the 1960s, "Black is beautiful".

In 2001, the success of this signifying practice was summed up by someone in the fashion scene as follows: "I absolutely think people are embracing the notion of 'Black is beautiful' – and I think we're better able to embrace it today than at any other time in this country. The '60s started the notion, but today I think we are truly living it."[5] Since racism operates with visual metaphors of colour, this paradigm shift which turns visibility into a resource for social presence is an especially fitting political strategy. At this point politics and visual culture become intensely interconnected. Three terms are central for a theoretical approach to this constellation of culture, visuality and politics: identity, signifying practice, and representation. Of fundamental importance to an in-depth understanding of concepts of visuality in visual culture studies is the concept of identity as it was discussed earlier in cultural studies.

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turalist and the structuralist. In the Anglo-American world, the structuralist approach has dominated which, as Hall shows, helps to avoid the dangers of essentializing tendencies. In German-language *Bildwissenschaften*, on the other hand, especially in Hans Belting's *Bildanthropologie. Entwürfe für eine Bildwissenschaft* (Munich 2001), the consequences of culturalist essentialism are clear. See Hanne Loreck, "Bild-Andropologie? Kritik einer Theorie des Visuellen" in Susanne von Falkenhausen, Silke Förschler, Ingeborg Reichle, Bettina Uppenkamp (eds.), *Medien der Kunst*, 12-26, and von Falkenhausen, "Verzwickte Verwandtschaftsverhältnisse".

5   Mikki Taylor, beauty director und cover editor of the magazine *Essence*, quoted in Kendra Hamilton, "Embracing 'BLACK IS BEAUTIFUL' – African American involvement in fashion industry, and consumer spending on apparel and beauty care products – Statistical Data Included", in *Black Issues in Higher Education* 17, no. 23 (2001).

Identity as a cultural and political concept

In 1986, Jacqueline Rose, whose book *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* combined feminist and psychoanalytical theory with visuality,[6] built a bridge between feminist approaches to identity as a political concept and psychoanalysis: "The question of identity – how it is constituted and maintained – is … the central issue through which psychoanalysis enters the political field. This is one reason why Lacanian psychoanalysis came into English intellectual life, via Althusser's concept of ideology, through the two paths of feminism and the analysis of film."[7] The same year, she took part in a symposium at the Commonwealth Institute in London that introduced a further difference/identity as a position within the field of seeing: *cultural identities*.[8] Theorists and filmmakers came together to talk about the possibilities for political avant-garde film. Cultural identity in the visual field was discussed in the context of tension between political activism and deconstruction. Films were shown by artists like Trinh T. Minh-ha, Chris Marker, Isaac Julien and by groups like the Black Audio Film Collective founded in 1982, that dealt with political and social aspects of postcolonial life under Thatcher: the position of immigrants from former British colonies and their hybrid identities as Black British citizens.[9]

The reader *Identity. Community, Culture, Difference*, edited by Jonathan Rutherford, was published in 1990; *Questions of Cultural Identity*, edited by Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay, appeared in 1996 with an introduction by Hall provocatively titled "Who needs 'Identity'?"[10] And in 2007, in his book *After Identity*, Rutherford noted: "By entangling identity in market transactions and

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6   See for example Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington 1984), the first book on the subject, and Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington 1988).

7   Jacqueline Rose, "Feminism and the Psychic", in *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (London 1986), 1-25: 5.

8   The papers and discussions from the conference were published in a special issue of the magazine *Undercut* (17/1988) and republished in Nina Danino, Michael Mazière (eds.), *The Undercut Reader: Critical Writings on Artists' Film and Video* (London 2003), 130-162.

9   I mention this here because reviews of the debates on race, class, sexual orientation, and gender mostly centre on discussions in America; however, as has already become clear concerning the genealogy of cultural studies, the postcolonial aspects of this debate were particularly acute in the former British Empire, recast as the commonwealth of sovereign states, in turn influencing debate in the United States.

10   Jonathan Rutherford (ed.), *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (London 1990); Stuart Hall, Paul du Gay (eds.), *Questions of Cultural Identity* (London 1996).

commodification, consumer culture has turned it against the individual."[11] This had already been stated in similar but far more political terms in 1992 by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who calls herself a "decolonized subcontinental". In *Acting Bits/Identity Talk*, she discusses the identity politics of the (de-)colonialized in terms of their complicity in current forms of imperialism, prompted by the Gulf War: "Our own complicity in our production [of identity] is another kind of translation of cultures, access to a 'museumized' identity, roots in aspic. ... Identity as commodity."[12]

Another book with *After Identity* in the title, a reader in law and culture published in 1994, contains a passage which I find helpful in addressing the history of the emancipatory concept of 'identity': "In what could be considered the first stage of identity politics, individuals identified with general characteristics such as race, gender, or national origin to contend that discriminatory distinctions should not be made on the basis of those categories. The early civil rights and women's movements, for example, argued that African Americans and women were entitled to the same rights as white men. Asserting that there was no significant difference between blacks and whites or between women and men, these movements aimed to achieve a system by which skin color or sex did not determine one's place in society. Subsequent movements rejected this paradigm of liberal pluralism on the ground that its colorblind and sexblind mentality obscured real cultural and political (and some even argued biological) differences between the groups. Some individuals and groups in a proliferating list of movements based on identity began proudly to (re)assert, or perhaps reclaim, their identities – as African-American, Asian-American, Latino or Native American, as female, as gay or lesbian, as disabled, as working class and so forth."[13]

The concept of identity as a collective definition thus derived from a form of *negative* identification for the purposes of exclusion from rights such as the right to vote. The early emancipatory movements then fought to neutralize this negation before the law. From the outset (and this is overlooked in the

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11   Jonathan Rutherford, *After Identity* (London 2007), 10. The same year, Georgia Warnke published *After Identity. Rethinking Race, Sex and Gender* (Cambridge 2007), with a pragmatic approach focused on multiple identities realized in the everyday life of an individual, and the consequences for normative processes in society.

12   Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Acting Bits/Identity Talk" in *Critical Inquiry* 18 (1992), 770-803: 798.

13   Dan Danielsen, Karen Engle (ed.), *After Identity: A Reader in Law and Culture* (London, New York 1995), Introduction, xiv.

legal overview quoted above) it was clear that the definition of these identities – woman, "negro" – went far beyond the legal context, being culturally and socially re-/produced. The problem of exclusion, then, could not be dealt with by policies of equality alone. Researchers of stereotypes within women's and African-American studies since the 1970s were not the first to examine the functioning of such reproduction and the impact of such definitions via visual representation. As early as 1900, with his portrait albums *Types of American Negroes*, the black scholar and civil rights campaigner W.E.B. Dubois tried to counteract the negative image of African Americans. He did this not by taking the stereotypes and trying to give them a positive spin, as in the aesthetic of "black is beautiful" and "back to the roots" more than 60 years later, but by clothing the image of the "negro" in the dress codes of the white middle-class male.[14] The visual evidence of these "bourgeois" portraits was intended to show that the "American Negro" had a self-evident claim to equal citizenship.

In its theoretical ramifications, the debate on identity as a cultural and thus political concept since the 1970s has drawn above all on theories of difference and hybridity; I will focus here on the central problems that also make themselves felt in visual representations of identity by both artists and activist groups. The basic problem with deploying identity as the basis of a political strategy lies in its imposition from *outside*, from where the power lies. Identity thus involves defining difference from groups of others for the purpose of discrimination and exclusion based on criteria of race, class, sexual orientation and gender. Identity in this sense is understood as immutable being, mostly on a biological basis, to which social and cultural stereotypes accrue in the course of history – or conversely: the historically formed stereotypes and their exclusion have often been justified, since the end of the 19th century, in biological terms. And in the 1960s and early 1970s, when the black liberation and women's movements, but also the gay and lesbian movement, picked up these stereotypes and attempted to give them a positive value, using them as representations to fight for recognition, opposition to this strategy soon emerged within these movements. I remember from the women's movement of the mid-1970s being accused, as an intellectual, of having a "male" socialization.

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14   See Shawn Michelle Smith, "Photographing the 'American Negro'. Nation, Race, and Photography at the Paris Exposition of 1900" in Lisa Bloom (ed.), *With Other Eyes. Looking at Race and Gender in Visual Culture* (Minneapolis, London 1999), 58-87, in particular 72-78.

Adopting the familiar stereotypes, even as an attempt to give them a positive turn, brought the associated exclusion into the groups concerned: those who didn't match the stereotype did not belong. Hall summarizes the problem in theoretical terms: "Precisely because identities are constructed within, not outside discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies. Moreover, they emerge within the play of specific modalities of power, and thus are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identical, naturally-constituted unity – an 'identity' in its traditional meaning (that is, an all-inclusive sameness, seamless, without internal differentiation). ... it is only through the relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks, to what has been called its *constitutive outside* that the 'positive' meaning of any term – and thus its 'identity' – can be constructed. Throughout their careers, identities can function as points of identification and attachment only *because* of their capacity to exclude, to leave out, to render 'outside', abjected."[15] But belonging was the basic condition for political effectiveness; individuals came together in groups via a shared identity. How, then, were differences within groups to be dealt with?

Firstly, it was necessary to confront the normative power of the term, its so-called essentialism – identity as destiny in the sense of an immutable being, based, for example, on biology. This was achieved by examining identity in theoretical terms as a cultural and social *construction*. Identity as destiny that offered a feeling of unity and community was now faced with anti-essentialist positions that conceived of identity as a formative process. The essentialism, unity and continuity that characterized modern identities (including the hegemonic identities of nationality) were contrasted with the anti-essentialist figures of discontinuity, construction/constructedness/deconstruction, plurality, fluidity and hybridity. Behind these theoretical impulses stood Foucault's postmodern critique of the subject and Derrida's theory of difference.

For the liberation movements of the time, these theoretical developments brought a new dilemma: on the one hand, a theoretical revision of the enlightened humanist philosophy of emancipation, calling the concept of the bourgeois, sovereign, self-identical subject into question; on the other, those

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15   Hall, "Who Needs Identity?", 4-5. He refers here to Jacques Derrida, *Positions* (Chicago 1981); Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (London 1990); and Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (London 1993).

groups to whom this status had to date been denied, also referred to in theoretical discourse as subaltern, campaigned to be recognized as "new" subjects of history and to have a "voice".[16] The conflict between these positions led to proposals like that of "strategic essentialism"[17] as a way of legitimizing the formation of identity-based groups and consciousness for a political practice of self-empowerment, even within the theoretical framework of radical deconstruction. However, such strategic essentialism demanded a constant awareness of the limitations and constructedness of the very identity that was supposed to be the driving force behind the cohesion and political activism of these groups – a psychodynamic balancing act both individual and collective. Looking back, it seems to me that the concept of identity never lost its fundamental stigma, its birth defect. Critiques of the concept of "identity politics" began to appear around 1991 (and this too is revealing in retrospect) around the time of the Gulf War that reinvigorated the debate on postcolonial imperialism, at a time when the discussion of multiculturalism was making waves in the United States.[18] The identity debate was thus a highly political one, as highlighted by a critical comment by Judith Butler from 1992: "I don't believe that gender, race, or sexuality have to be identities, I think that they're vectors of power."[19]

Back to visuality as a factor in identity-based strategies, and to the conflict that exists between the strategies of Dubois and the Black liberation movement. Although Dubois drew on a pseudoscientific discourse of race when he spoke of "types", his visual tactic produced positive evidence by trying to constitute these "types" via the cultural codes of clothing, thus arguing for culture, and specifically hegemonic culture, as a factor in identity: biologism crossed

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16   An important contribution to this discussion was Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Can the Subaltern speak?" in Cary Nelson, Lawrence Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana 1988), 272-313.

17   Spivak speaks of the "strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest" by subaltern subjects. As part of a "strategic interest in the self-alienating displacing move of and by a consciousness of collectivity, … self-determination and an unalienated self-consciousness can be broached." From "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography", in Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (London, New York 1988), 197-221: 205). Her "strategic essentialism" became a key concept of identity politics in the age of deconstruction.

18   See Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (New York 1992).

19   "The Body You Want: Liz Kotz interviews Judith Butler" in *Artforum* 31, no. 3 (1992), 82-89.

with cultural (hegemonic) identity as appropriation and process, which in turn points to another serious conflict within his strategy. "Black is beautiful," on the other hand, together with the "back to the roots" movement, with its insistence on, for example, the Afro as an appropriate, non-white hairstyle, constitutes visibility in the field of white hegemony via an image of Africanness for which Spivak's biting remark on "'museumized' identity, roots in aspic" is apt. Conversely, this image could also fit into the category of strategic essentialism, as developed by Spivak, as a group identity that supports solidarity and activist energy in what is referred to abstractly as "Otherness". Once again here, the basic problem of identity politics becomes clear: ultimately, there was no way out of the dilemma of the gap between negative definition from outside and positive definition from within which is always based on the original negative definition. This dilemma is not even resolved by a potentially endless multiplication of minority identities based on criteria of race, sexual orientation, and gender that would conflict with individual processes of attribution.[20] In the 1990s, a polemical version of such multiple identities circulated in the debate on political correctness in the form of the "black, Jewish, disabled lesbian".

Since 1990, when Judith Butler published *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*,[21] queer theory has sought to respond to the normative structure of these processes of attribution with a variant of anti-essentialist critique based on performativity. In art, this was reflected in a heightening engagement with the social significance of *identity-based visibility* and its forms of visual representation.

Political visuality: visibility as a contested resource

"Hardly a week has passed in the last two years without public attention being drawn to yet another battle over identity and culture." This is how the

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20   In 1991, to address this problem, Kimberlé W. Crenshaw proposed the concept of intersectionality, which plays an important role in feminist and queer theory. See Kimberlé W. Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color", *Stanford Law Review* 53, no. 6 (1991), 1241-1299.

21   Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London, New York 1990). For an introduction to queer theory, see Judith Butler, "Critically Queer", in Paul du Gay, Jessica Evans und Peter Redman (eds.), *Identity: A Reader* (London 2000), 108-117.

artist, activist and writer Coco Fusco began her text for the Whitney Biennial catalogue in 1993, and she offers some examples: *Who are we?* asks *Time* magazine. *Whose values?* asks *Newsweek. Whose museums and whose aesthetics?* ask the artists and curators. *Whose icons?* ask the multicultural theorists and activists. That sums up the situation quite well: the "ethnic makeup" of American society is changing colour, its basic tone becoming "increasingly non-white"[22] – a threat not only to the white right, but also to the liberal notion of a universally valid culture of values which, in the eyes of the "subaltern peoples", too often merely cements western-white power.

In Europe, Fusco continues, these ideological struggles usually have a geopolitical theme, whereas in the United States they focus on symbolic representation. Not only access to political power, she claims, but also the control of subaltern communities over their symbolic representation is restricted by the dominant culture. Systematic misrepresentation via stereotypes fuels their "disempowerment"; it offers the starting point for an understanding of "the racially inflected, voyeuristic impulses in Euro-American and other colonizing cultures". In the case of appropriation, for example, a buzzword of the postmodern art elite of the 1980s, this involved not just "disinterested pastiche or tracing one's creative bloodlines to Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol", but also, where non-western cultures and people were concerned, "forms of appropriation as symbolic violence". Fusco offers the following example: in 1992, Chicana actresses protested against Hollywood plans not to cast a Chicana actress in the role of Frida Kahlo in a film.[23]

This example shows why the battle for symbolic representation is fought not only, but primarily in the field of visibility. The defining and normative power of (visual) media in the United States seems to far outstrip anything yet seen in European societies. As a consequence, the activists of the gay and lesbian, feminist and African-American groups, including many artists, who in the 1980s fought for recognition (the feminist artists of the Guerrilla Girls, the black artists of the PESTS group) and against AIDS (ACT UP), were tactically correct to concentrate on culture and the media as their battleground. Their protest actions criticized the relations between culture, art practice, communities and public space; for Fusco, they are "some of the most interactive pub-

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22   Coco Fusco, "Passionate Irreverence: The Cultural Politics of Identity" in Elisabeth Sussman et al. (eds.), *Whitney Biennial Exhibition* (New York 1993), 74-85, reprinted in Wallis, Weems, Yenawine (eds.), *Art Matters*, 63-73: 63.

23   Fusco, "Passionate Irreverence", 65-67.

lic engagements with the media and the arts that have emerged in the past decade. … merging activism with spectacle”.[24]

For Fusco, the conflict over an essentialist concept of identity and its critique via a processual, open-ended concept of identity is a problem reflected strategically in a double objective: on the one hand, it is about the right to self-determination of one's “own” culture (this is especially true of ethnically defined groups in the diaspora) and on the other it is about a hybridization of these same cultures in the face of diverse, wandering influences and migration biographies. What is “one's own” must be kept open and constantly reshaped in order to integrate this hybridization – a balancing act of identity construction. Fusco herself, who migrated from Cuba to the United States as a child, tries to achieve this in her own work as an artist.

Looking back at the ACT UP protests, Mary Patten summed up as follows: “But perhaps we need to examine more closely and critically our notions of ‘visibility’, a key political buzzword used by the lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgendered (LGBT) communities. … ‘Visibility’ is posed as an inherent undifferentiated good – even necessity – whether we're debating our participation in the political process, examining images/representations of queers or homosexuality in the media and popular culture, or ‘discovering’ and ‘reclaiming’ literary or historic figures from the closets of the past. Only if we are collectively visible, the argument goes – … will we have power and be regarded as a force to be reckoned with in the larger culture.” The success of this strategy has its price, however: “But we need to acknowledge that our heightened visibility – even on our ‘own’ rebellious, seemingly autonomous terms – has hastened the absorption of ‘queered’ representations into the mainstream.” The hallmarks of queer identity, she writes, once “markers of rebellious subcultures” are now “individual identity ornaments promising the fulfilment of our desires”.[25]

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24   Ibid., 68.

25   Mary Patten, “the thrill is gone: an act up post-mortem (confessions of a former aids activist)”, in Deborah Bright (ed.), *The Passionate Camera. Photography and the Bodies of Desire* (London 1998), 385-406: 398.

The academic discourse of visuality

One of the two genealogical keys to visual culture studies is public visibility of subaltern and subcultural identities, marked by symbolizations imposed from without or claimed from within, understood as a strategy of subversion and self-empowerment, and practised by artists and/or activists on the streets, in the media and in the venues of alternative and established culture. This agenda also entered the university as countless individual studies on visual culture indicate which already in the title refer to identity, be it regional and national or relating to race, class, sexual orientation and gender.[26] It is all the more surprising that in the academic discourse of visual culture studies, two texts from art history that I have already presented as classics are often mentioned in connection with the search for the "roots" of the discipline: Baxandall's *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* and Alpers' *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century*. In view of attempts by visual culture studies to distance itself from art history, this is as astonishing as it is understandable, as such distancing manoeuvres concern close neighbours. Other often-cited "founding figures" are Warburg, Kracauer and Benjamin for German-speaking cultural studies, Barthes for semiotics, British cultural studies in general and specifically the "material culture" approach developed at British polytechnics, where training in creative practice in the broadest sense has been interdisciplinary since the 1970s.[27]

More important for the academic positioning of the discipline was the debate about a revision of the western-rational model of seeing, mostly exemplified by the philosopher René Descartes. The historian of philosophy Martin Jay called this model "Cartesian perspectivism"; in 1988, he opened a conference on *Vision and Visuality* at the DIA Art Foundation in New York with a concentrated summary of the debate and its prehistory. The conference brought together five writers from philosophy, art theory and psychoanalysis; it was followed by a publication of the same title that Jay later named as the moment "when the visual turn ... really showed signs of turning into the academic

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26   Of the veritable torrent of such publications, I will name just two examples here (more are listed in Dikovitskaya, *Visual Culture*): James M. McClurken, *The Way it Happened: A Visual Culture History of the Little Traverse Bay Bands of Odawa*, *East Lansing* (Michigan State University Museum 1991); Gen Doy, *Black Visual Culture—Modernity and Postmodernity* (London 2000).

27   Here I am following Morra, Smith, *Visual Culture*, Vol. 1, 12. See also Daniel Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (Oxford 1987).

juggernaut it was to become in the 1990s".[28] In retrospect, *Vision and Visuality* proves to be an exemplary "symptom" of the emergence of visual culture studies as an academic discipline.

By this time "Cartesian perspectivism" had already become a key negative metaphor in the poststructuralist critique of logocentrism. In psychoanalysis, philosophy, media studies, cultural studies and art history (with one example being Alpers' *Art of Description*), perspective as an early-modern model of seeing became the matrix of a western-rational, pseudo-humanist project of enlightenment that used reason as a practice of power. This 'project of modernity' was judged as failed, especially in view of the genocides of the 20th century. In his book entitled *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth Century Thought* Jay explains this critique and centres it within the history of French philosophy.[29]

The aim now was to break down the monolithic character of Cartesian perspectivism with the twin concepts of vision and visuality. On the one hand, *seeing* (vision) was no longer conceived of (only) as a mechanically-physically determined, predictable optical process, but (also) as socially and historically determined and hence subject to change. On the other hand, *visuality* brought a new concept into play, an umbrella term for *all relations* of seeing (and being seen) concerning the social as well as body and mind.

One-point perspective as a metaphor for rationalist cultures of power

What exactly are the accusations levelled at seeing as "the master sense of the modern era",[30] at one-point perspective as the practice corresponding to Cartesian perspectivism, at the theory on which it is based, and at the consequences of all three for visual practices and cultures? In oversimplified terms,

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28   Martin Jay, "Cultural Relativism and the Visual Turn" in *Journal of Visual Culture* 1, no. 3 (2002), 267-278: 267. On the conference, see Hal Foster (ed.), *Vision and Visuality* (Seattle 1988). Those involved were Martin Jay, Jonathan Crary, Rosalind Krauss, Norman Bryson and Jacqueline Rose.

29   Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth Century Thought* (Berkeley, Los Angeles 1993). I do not share Jay's position on French post-structuralism; it should be taken with a grain of salt, bearing in mind Jay's roots in critical theory.

30   Martin Jay, "Scopic Regimes of Modernity" in Foster, *Vision and Visuality*, 3-23: 3.

here are some of the charges (some of which have, in the ever-growing liter-ature on modern visuality since the 1990s, certainly degenerated into preju-dice): central perspective is a gaze that makes a clear distinction between its subject and its object; it is static and abstract, though pretending to be em-pirically "true"; it implies absolute control of the subject over what is seen; it is per se male (the usual example cited being Dürer's *Draughtsman Making a Perspective Drawing of a Reclining Woman*); it claims to give a consistent picture of the world and to be scientifically reliable; of what is seen, it implies "this is how it is", claiming an objective truth for its representation. In brief terms, it serves "metaphysical thought, empirical science, and capitalist logic all at once".[31]

The model of perspective as a way of viewing the world is seen as the foundation on which the western, white, male, autonomous subject is con-structed: "Certainly the entire discussion draws on analyses of the subject and the image derived from poststructuralism and psychoanalysis; in fact, vision is investigated as a structure instrumental to the (dis)placement of both these terms."[32] The debate on identity also touched on critiques of the subject; and the two debates meet up in visual culture studies: a specific gaze becomes a metaphor for the hegemony of the modern, autonomous, white, male subject.

One strategy used by critics of Cartesian perspectivism is the search for al-ternatives: examples named in *Vision and Visuality* are the cartographic gaze in the Netherlands of the 17th century, the multi-perspective spatial order of the Baroque, and the subject-less aesthetic of Japanese art. But *Vision and Visuality* had already set itself the task of criticizing just such critiques of perspective: the search for alternatives, it argued, led to new fixed oppositions, obscuring the fact that in historical practice, the model being criticized was anything but consistent or ubiquitous. Divergent practices had always existed. This critique of the search for alternatives as a way out of the constraints of perspectivism, "whether these are to be located in the unconscious or the body, in the past (e.g., the baroque) or in the non-West (e.g., Japan)", aimed to avoid rendering these differences uniform again, keeping them open, "so that different visual-ities might be kept in play, and difference in vision might remain at work".[33]

Vision and Visuality, then, is about the deconstruction of unitary concepts of modern seeing, not the establishment of alternatives that fall victim to the

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31   Hal Foster, "Preface" in Foster, *Vision and Visuality*, x.
32   Ibid., xiii.
33   Ibid., xiv.

very thing they claim to criticize: the claim to universal validity. This conflict recalls the above-mentioned dispute over the de-/construction of alternative identities in the field of visibility: consolidate and secure via exclusion and homogenization, or open up and expose to permanent precariousness? To this extent, the ideological and theoretical conditions for the two debates (on political identity and on perspective as hegemonic gaze) resemble one another. The debate touches on other areas such as the implications for the disciplines that deal with seeing. For Hal Foster, perspectivism is a concept on which the discipline of art history is founded; hence this debate "is also allied with a certain 'anti-foundational' critique, i.e. a critique of the historical concepts posited by a discipline (e.g., art history, for instance) *as its natural epistemological grounds* (my italics)." In other words, by engaging with the historical evolution of visuality, by introducing mental, sexual and gender-critical dimensions into its repertoire, and by developing a "semiological sensitivity to the visual as a field of signs produced in difference and riven by desire",[34] art history is touching on its epistemological foundations.

Jay is certainly right to see *Vision and Visuality* as a symptom of the academization of visual culture studies. But it is worth noting that the three art historians involved, Norman Bryson, Rosalind Krauss and Jonathan Crary, did not whole-heartedly defect to visual culture studies in the following decade like other representatives of their discipline. One reason for this may be their insistence on the special status of art as practice in contrast to the broad field of the visual – an insistence that manifested itself several years later in the much-quoted questionnaire on the relationship between art history and visual culture studies, and in a similarly much-quoted article by Rosalind Krauss polemicizing against the loss of art-historical skills (deskilling).[35] What was mainly at stake here, then, was the revision of art history as a discipline. The theoretical framework is, however, brought to the discipline from "outside": critiques of the subject from poststructuralism, psychoanalysis and semiotics, applied to vision and visuality, not only touch on the epistemological foundations of art history, but also produce new epistemes that visual culture studies seeks to incorporate. At the same time, the debates on vision and visuality really do feature many politically committed interests and positions pregnant with moral significance that were not previously at home in the

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34   Ibid., xiii.
35   "Visual Culture Questionnaire" in *October* 77 (1996), 25-70; Krauss, "Tod der Fachkenntnisse".

field of traditional art history; the correspondingly interest-driven projections associated with this from the outset, as well as the critiques and deconstructions of these projections, are also revealing, especially concerning questions of seeing and visuality.

The first such projection is the generalization that defines perspective as the modern scopic regime *tout court*. This basic assumption feeds into other projections – that can also be referred to as interpretations. I use the term *projections* because they set up an ideal opponent against which to argue; critiques of these projections can then be understood as *deconstruction*. One example: the assumption of a single, immutable, fixed perspective sees itself confirmed in a model of seeing which takes not two eyes but one, abstract eye as the basis for its construction of space in two dimensions. This model is critically deconstructed by assuming and researching a historically changing diversity of models of seeing, that is via a historicization of visuality. In this debate, Panofsky's essay on perspective is thus considered a pioneering work.

Martin Jay's discourse-historical introduction to *Vision and Visuality* compresses the critique of perspective into two pages (whereby it remains unclear whether or not he recognizes its implications in terms of projection).[36] In his account, one-point perspective, described as a scopic regime, is the object of several such projections. Firstly, the gaze of perspective is abstract, disembodied[37] and therefore cold (an anti-rationalist assessment) – the result is the emotional withdrawal of the painter from the objects captured in this abstract and thus cold, geometrized space. (But how, one might ask, looking at a painting, are we supposed to know about this supposed withdrawal? This assumption is, in other words, a projection.) Secondly, the participatory involvement of previous "more absorptive visual modes" has been reduced, "if not entirely suppressed", because the gap between "spectator and spectacle" has grown. (But, one might ask again, which visual modes before the Renaissance are supposed to have been "more absorptive"? Medieval stained glass windows? They had to be impressive as a visual event as a whole, but their sequencing of tiny, highly encoded scenes can hardly have fostered participatory involvement in the sense of identification). And thirdly, within the scopic regime of

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36   Jay, "Scopic Regimes of Modernity", especially 8-9. The writer Jay mainly refers to for these positions appears to be Norman Bryson, as well as Christian Metz, Rosalind E. Krauss, Sarah Kofman, Svetlana Alpers, Rodolphe Gasché, Christine Buci-Glucksmann, Irit Rogoff.

37   This criticism can essentially be traced back to Bryson's *Vision and Painting*.

one-point perspective the element of erotic desire in the gaze, as condemned, for example, by St. Augustine, is lost because the bodies of painter and viewer are eliminated from this regime in favour of an "allegedly disincarnated, absolute eye" (Jay's use of "allegedly" here is the only sign of his distancing himself from these projections). Where this kind of disembodied, male gaze falls on a desirable body, as in Dürer's *Draughtsman Making a Perspective Drawing of a Reclining Woman*, it objectifies this body and turns it to stone. Jay names exceptions: Titian's *Venus of Urbino* and Caravaggio's seductive boys avoid this fate because they look at the viewer, as does, much later, Manet's *Olympia*.

Here, if not earlier, confusion sets in. What does this looking out of the picture have to do with one-point perspective? Does it counteract it? No – it counteracts the projection of the divide between viewer and viewed allegedly created by perspective as a scopic regime. And it promotes a further projection: according to Jay, nudes that do not look out at the viewer radiate no erotic energy towards the viewer, meaning, conversely, that the figure's gaze at the viewer generates this energy. The opposite conclusion could also be drawn here: if the eyes of the (mostly) female nude are averted, although no dialogue ensues, the viewer absorbed in the act of seeing (if we follow Diderot's dramaturgy of empathy as discussed by Kemp) can give free reign to his erotic imagination. In any case, Jay equates perspective representation with de-eroticization. It wouldn't take much effort to turn these analyses on their heads: perspective aims to perfect mimesis, a goal produced by desire itself – a desire that can be traced from photography and film through to the latest achievements of imaging technology, always hand in hand with eroticism.

On to the next projection: the scopic regime of perspective is to blame not only for de-eroticization, but also for "de-narrativization or de-textualization". This is an astonishing conclusion,[38] as just a few years earlier, in *The Art of Describing*, Alpers had proposed a different polarization – associating text and narrative with the scopic regime of Italian one-point perspective which was created to tell stories with close textual links, whereas de-narrativization was associated with the empirically oriented multiple-point approaches of descriptive Dutch painting. From this charge, Jay then deduces that of formalism: the painter is more interested in reproducing "abstract, quantitatively conceptualized space" with the help of perspective construction than in the "qualitatively differentiated subjects painted within it" – three-dimensional

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38   Whether Jay shares this view or whether he is merely reporting it is not always clear.

representation as an artistic end in itself. "Thus the abstraction of artistic form from any substantive content, which is part of the clichéd history of twentieth-century modernism, was already prepared by the perspectival revolution five centuries earlier."[39] The realism effect of perspective, he continues, also led to pictures being enriched with more and more information that had nothing to do with the story being told, designed only to showcase the artist's technical virtuosity.[40]

For critics of Cartesian perspective, mathematically structured space as reflected in perspective-based painting stands for the neutral researcher's scientifically dispassionate view of the world and for the "fundamentally bourgeois ethic of the modern world",[41] thus elevating the critique of perspective to the status of a political project – and this in vehement terms: perspective is to be equated not with Alberti's window, for example, but with a "safe let into a wall, a safe in which the visible has been deposited".[42] This raises the question of who knows the combination for the lock on this safe, the combination needed to free the visible from the strictures of perspective's scopic regime? Jay then mentions some of the 'emancipatory' alternatives, including that of the Baroque: anti-static, anti-classical, open, "soft-focused, multiple".[43] Jay refers here to Christine Buci-Glucksmann, who suggests the "explosive power of baroque vision ... as the most significant alternative to the hegemonic visual style we have called Cartesian perspectivalism".[44] From an art-historical viewpoint, this is an astounding conclusion, since this alternative to the hegemonic visual style was in itself the expression of political hegemony: it was

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39   Jay, "Scopic Regimes of Modernity", 8-9.

40   According to Jay, this idea, which surprisingly links the representational realism of perspective space with the charge of formalism levelled at the "content-free" abstraction of modern painting, comes from Bryson: Norman Bryson, *Word and Image: French Painting of the Ancien Régime* (Cambridge 1981), Ch. 1. Like the polarization between realism and formalism as contested during the 20th century, however, this anti-formalism has a peculiarly moralizing tone.

41   Jay, "Scopic Regimes of Modernity", 9.

42   Here, Jay, ibid., is quoting John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London 1972), 109.

43   Jay, "Scopic Regimes of Modernity", 16.

44   Ibid.. See Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *La raison baroque: de Baudelaire à Benjamin* (Paris 1984) and *La folie du voir: de esthétique baroque* (Paris 1986). However, Foster's above-mentioned scepticism with regard to what I consider to be the highly projective search for alternatives shows that in the later 1980s, the discussion enters a new phase: from then on, it was impossible to attribute *specific* models with the desired liberating effect.

commissioned by absolutist monarchs and the counter-reformatory Catholic church.

If we give this range of negative attributions a positive turn, the agenda driving these projections becomes clearer. Two main trajectories can be noted: firstly, the *body* must be re-inscribed within the gaze – hence the accusations concerning both the abstraction of the viewing subject and de-eroticization; secondly, the *power structures* inherent in this gaze must be abolished – this also applies to the power structures of gender relations as analysed above all in feminist film theory and history of photography.[45] This is where the Lacanian model of the gaze enters the stage.

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45   See, among others, Mulvey, Solomon-Godeau.