



Book Reviews 2: Surveillance and the Visual

González-Crussi, Francisco (2006), *On Seeing: Things Seen, Unseen, and Obscene*. New York: Overlook Duckworth.

224 pp. Hardcover \$24.94 (US), £14.99 (UK); ISBN-10: 1585676748, ISBN-13: 978-1585676743

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Not only is vision a complex physiological and psychological matter in itself, but also *the objects* of vision are relevant to its overall working, which is the reason why sociologists are generally interested in relationships of seeing and being seen. We happily learn that they are not the only ones. In a refined essay, F. González-Crussi, professor emeritus of pathology at Northwestern's medical school, advances a series of reflections that delve into the particularities of the vision of the human body. Drawing on examples and cases from a wide variety of sources, ranging from myth, to history, through his own medical practice, González-Crussi has written an erudite yet enjoyable book that is insightful and potentially inspiring not only for the general public but also for a sociological readership.

The book does not advance a single central thesis; rather, it presents in the form of a literary essay a rich phenomenology of vision and emergent relations between the viewer and the viewed. Almost paradigmatic of bodily visual relationships is the taboo associated with the vision of the genitals, in particular female genitals. An old story of male desire and its fateful consequences runs from Actaeon being turned into a stag for having watched Diana bathing to two modern voyeurs executed in 1790 on the Champ-de-Mars in Paris on the eve of (and partly even triggering!) the French Revolution. More recently, controversial shows and performances such as Annie Sprinkle's *A public cervix announcement*, where members of the audience are invited to use a medical speculum to examine the performer's *cervix uteri*, document the paradoxical endpoint of this type of voyeuristic drives. Sexual desire is not, however, the only driving factor in voyeurism. Other bodily events such as childbirth are turned into spectacles, despite the fact that they can be spectacles of pain rather than pleasure. Childbirth is one of those circumstances where symbolism and reality can be quite at odds. In providing these examples, the author also rightly stresses that the private and public dimensions of bodily events are historically and socially shifting. Members of the royal families in the past were objects of constant scrutiny. Both Maria de Medicis and Marie Antoinette had to give birth to their children in public. Likewise, in modern Europe kings were ceaselessly surrounded and watched by members of the court, even while carrying out their bodily functions.

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The boundaries between the will to knowledge and the morbid fascination involved in the observation of the body can be difficult to establish, as the case of the corpse makes sufficiently clear. On the one hand, the exploration of human anatomy through autopsy has been fundamental to building the modern medical knowledge of the body; on the other hand, however, there are always deep psychological motives quite apart from knowledge that push people, professionals and not, to seek the sight of a corpse. For instance, at the end of the 19th century the Paris morgue, eventually closed to the public in 1907, reached a million visitors per year. González-Crussi also reports that in the course of his career as a hospital pathologist he had to reject an incredibly high number of requests to visit the hospital morgue. What repels also attracts, and what is forbidden does so to an even higher degree. The modern spectacle of the execution, not inaugurated by but still unmistakably associated with Mr. Guillotine's creation (aimed, as is widely known since Foucault's analyses, to achieve a less barbaric and more efficient infliction of death) raises *inter alia* the problematic issue of the curious and craving crowds. The lust for the vision of the body of the condemned is worrying to the modern observer, but on closer scrutiny one realizes that the same psychological and sociological mechanisms – disguised in a variety of ways – might well still be at work nowadays. Vision and violence have a long, intertwined history.

The power of vision is also power of the eyes. In this respect, one of the most fascinating chapters in the book reports on the conception of the eyes as points of energy concentration, a conception that proceeds from antiquity to hypnotism and, through it, psychoanalysis. The ancient theory of the eye as an active organ emitting particles has been replaced by modern optics, which sharply separates sight and touch, as well as, more broadly, distance and proximity senses. In the modern imagination, sight allows for no direct contact between the subject and the object. However, the explanation of the reaction to the other's gaze that the modern theory of vision allows is far from complete or even sufficient, and in fact we are left with not much more than ancient spiritualistic symbolisms of the eye, such as the symbolism of fire. The author also reports on an intriguing 1921 experiment by Charles Russ on the power of the eye to set objects in motion, but curiously refuses to take a position on its validity, evading the issue on the basis that "today's scientists have other priorities" (p. 114). In conclusion, the visual predator-prey relationship is recalled and the "biological mark" it has left on the human being *qua* potential prey, which adds a very important dimension but does not really give more than a hint for directing future inquiry on the gaze.

While some of the author's claims – such as that "what we see in the world depends on our desires, hopes, fixed attitudes, prejudices, and expectations" (p. 122) – come as no surprise to sociologists, from the cases discussed in the book a number of interesting suggestions also follow for those who are interested in visual and visibility relations from a sociological perspective. Observed in this light, a point that emerges forcefully from González-Crussi's exploration is that vision or, better still, visibility arrangements are constitutive of the domain of the public and how bodies enter this domain. Although not all of the presented illustrations are poignant to the same degree, the book effectively documents the tensions, the points of continuity and reversal, between an essentially heterogeneous vision of the body present in most human cultures, according to which the body is divided both in extension and in depth into visible and invisible zones and layers, and an essentially homogeneous vision, heralded by the modern medical gaze, according

to which the body is an entirely mechanical and visible matter, the *fabrica humani corporis*. To resort to Durkheim, this is the distinction between the spheres of the sacred and of the mundane. Because of its ambiguous location, the body always lies at the intersection of the two domains of the public and the private, of the visible and the invisible. Ultimately, this motif leads back to the continuous and diverse *investments of meaning* in the body and its images that are richly reported and discussed in the book.

Shih, Shu-mei (2007) *Visuality and Identity. Sinophone Articulations Across the Pacific*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press.

243 pp. Paperback \$21.95 (US), £35.96 (UK); ISBN-10: 0520249445, ISBN-13: 978-0520249448

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Shu-mei Shih's *Visuality and Identity. Sinophone Articulations Across the Pacific* is a multi-layered text that forges into and across the fields of postcolonial studies, area studies, visual culture, cultural linguistics, and cultural globalization to address visuality as an emergent mode for the articulation of identity struggles. Shih's study is concerned with the transnational movement and translatability of culture and responds to scholarly discourses that privilege metaphors of global flows, cast the "Third World" as a site of contemporary cosmopolitanism, and celebrate the potentials of flexible de-territorialized subject positions in late capitalism. She argues that the rhetoric of flexibility and its speculations about the liberating potential of hybrid subjectivity not only elides historical differences and asymmetrical power relations but participates in a form of universalism that implicitly assumes the authoritative presence and gaze of "the West."

In *Visuality and Identity* Shih introduces the notion of the "Sinophone" by which a heterogeneous and localized "Chinese" culture has developed historically through a network of cultural producers external to China. Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, with its refusal to homogenize the discordant accents of its actors and uphold the diction and syntax of standard Mandarin through the routine post-production practice of dubbing for martial arts films, stands as a particularly stark example of a Sinophonic production, while also troubling the extent to which such a cultural product is understood to signify across contexts. That *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* met with a lukewarm reception when first released in Sinitic language-speaking communities, while receiving overwhelming ticket sales in the United States and an Oscar for best foreign film, reveals a central tension that is of particular concern to Shih's project: the tension between the linguistic and the visual. For non-Mandarin speaking audiences, the multiply-accented approach of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* that jarred Sinitic-speaking audiences was imperceptible and the sleek and exotic visuality of the film was emphasized. Shih argues that visual forms, facilitated by the rapid movement of culturally translatable images, are fast becoming the primary mode for the negotiation of cultural identity. This work interrogates the differences and similarities of linguistic and visual articulations of

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identity struggles on the uneven terrain of global cultural production and consumption, acknowledging that the dynamics of global politics, marked by the hegemony of Euro-American culture, are directly implicated in the translatability of images across the Pacific.

Drawing on film, visual art, television, literature, and newspapers from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the United States, Shih works against the organizing notion of the Chinese diaspora, arguing that “China,” “Chinese,” and “Chineseness” are constructs negotiated within a “transpacific sphere of cultural politics” defined by, on the one hand, China’s emerging economic and political ascendancy in the global context and, on the other hand, the U.S. which, as a superpower, has considerable interest in the consumption of contained representations of “authentic” China, or what Shih refers to as “China knowledge.” The empirical examples of visual media that Shih works from elucidate her challenge to dominant scholarly discourses that were deployed explicitly in the flurry of academic work, particularly in the field of cultural studies, that anticipated Hong Kong’s turn over from Britain to China in July 1997. For instance, in Frederic Jameson’s appeal to national allegory as a mode of interpretation for “Third World” texts, Shih observes “the West’s” nostalgia for its imagined past. Shih’s critical analysis of a diverse selection of Sinophonic productions facilitates her distinction between metropolitan cosmopolitanism and vernacular cosmopolitanism, both of which find expression amongst the cultural examples provided within the text. Vernacular cosmopolitanism stands as a challenge to metropolitan cosmopolitanism by virtue of the unique interculturalism embodied by marginalized subjects to the extent that they participate in metropolitan language usage while simultaneously making productive use of nonstandard languages and cultural formations in a refusal of not only the binaric logic of postcolonial discourse but also its third terms, such as hybridity. Shih observes that third terms like hybridity may be a symptom rather than a challenge to colonial influences. In her analysis of media that deploy vernacular cosmopolitanisms, Shih uncovers the potential for a “responsible multiplicity” that transgresses the reductionist dynamics of the norms of global multiculturalism and its rules of political recognition.

A limitation to this project is illustrated in a critique of the work of visual artist Hung Lui, when Shih’s otherwise sharp and insightful argument slips into momentary reifications of gender that threaten to undermine the theoretical orientation of the book as a whole that strives, usually with striking effect, to trouble nodal points that secure privileged regimes of signification. In attempting to mediate between “traditional patriarchy” and “Maoist patriarchy” to demonstrate justifiably that both constitute forms of domination, Shih appears to assume a natural and unified gender subjectivity external to relations of power. For example, Shih writes: “The woman’s bound feet may have been ‘liberated’ in Mao’s China, but the woman has become more like a man devoid of gender subjectivity” (72). Shih’s statements in this part of the book seem to suggest the existence of an authentic formation that could represent a femininity outside of power and appears to take for granted rather than challenge categories of femininity and masculinity as political and cultural constructs in a way that stands in contrast to her advocacy of an embrace of ambiguity and the destabilization of such binaric identity formations in relation to national identities.

Some fascinating and challenging implications explicit to Shih's work deserve mention, as the rich accomplishments of *Visuality and Identity* offer critical and incisive openings into other areas of study. The conception of the Sinophone highlights the intersections between time and place in the formation of identity. First, Sinophonic studies stress that practices are place-based, hence, diaspora is subject to "an expiry date." Second, it acknowledges that linguistic communities are subject to change, therefore, language is no longer tied to nationality. With these assumptions, which stand to make productive contributions to a range of historical and political programs of cultural study that incorporate visual media, such as but not limited to postcolonial studies, globalization of culture, and area studies, *Visuality and Identity* calls for a place-based, double orientation to critique that refuses the tendencies towards an either/or strategy of critique that targets either countries of origin for external consumption or imperialist cultural practices for a presumed audience within an imagined homeland.

Reinhardt, Mark, Holly Edwards, and Erina Duganne (eds.) (2007) *Beautiful Suffering: Photography and the Traffic in Pain*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

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Apel, Dora and Shawn Michelle Smith (eds.) (2007) *Lynching Photographs*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press.

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Representational art and documentary photography can be understood as acts of surveillance. Whilst the act of taking a photograph may not have exactly the same dynamics or politics as a CCTV system, national identity card or a supermarket loyalty card, it likely has a number of points of overlap at higher levels of abstraction. Self-reflexive photographers and those who study photography have explored a number of areas regarding the ethics and dynamics of image making, of which the student of surveillance should be aware, lest we either ignore these debates or re-visit already explored terrain, ignorant of what has gone before. This review examines two collections which would assist the surveillance audience in this field: *Lynching Photographs* by Apel and Smith, and *Beautiful Suffering* by Reinhardt *et al.* Both collections engage with the darker side of photography; images of people in suffering and pain.

Lynching Photographs contains two essays, 'The Evidence of Lynching Photographs' by Shawn Michelle Smith, and 'Lynching Photographs and the politics of public shaming' by Dora Apel, which engage with troubling photographic representations of the practice of lynching in the US South. An effective introduction is provided by Anthony Lee.

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Smith's chapter uses a single emblematic image of a lynching in Indiana in 1930, photographed by Lawrence Beitler, to highlight the problematic way in which photographs serve as evidence of the occurrence of an activity or practice. She asks exactly what it is that this photograph is evidence of, and provides a genealogy of interpretations and re-articulations of this image. She shows how various historical actors have understood and used the same image in multiple ways, and through this highlights the elasticity and fluidity of photographic meaning. These uses range from postcards depicting the lynching sent by white supremacists to their friends in distant parts of the country, to a French textbook focussing on racism in the United States whilst eliding France's own colonial history. Smith shows effectively how photographic meaning is never fixed or univocal, but instead profoundly partisan, shaped by context and by viewers, and utilised for multiple particular ends.

Apel examines lynching photography from the sociological perspective of social shame. She draws five key points in the history of lynching photographs and traces the expansion of the circulation of the images from within the southern white supremacist community to wider national and then international audiences. Shame, for Apel, is a response which anticipates the disapproval of a larger community. Whilst in the communities in which lynching occurred, the activity was socially accepted and the reaction of the crowds demonstrates their identification with established power structures. The expanded circulation of lynching images exposed these images to condemnation, provoking shame which persists to the current day. This has implications for the contemporary politics of recognition and 'conciliatory atonement' that Apel explores in the latter part of the essay. The larger question Apel raises is, by showing images of a crime such as lynching, do you further injure and exploit the victim, or would not showing the images of suffering obfuscate the event and allow it to be ignored? Both Apel and Smith conclude that we should view such images, because refusing to do so is an unethical choice that threatens to obscure the reality of the world.

Beautiful Suffering is the title of Reinhardt *et al*'s book reviewed here, and also of the Williams College Museum of Art exhibition upon which the book is based. The authors intend to use the essays in the collection to expand upon the concerns and questions raised by the curatorial process of putting together this exhibition, focussed upon the pervasiveness of images of pain and suffering in the mass media. As such the collection presents an insight into the self-reflection occurring in representative media - the thought processes of image makers as surveillance agents. The book reproduces in full colour the images of the exhibition, and whilst few of them make for easy or comfortable viewing, their presence is necessary to involve the reader in the aesthetic and ethical complexities of viewing images of the suffering of others.

Mark Reinhardt's chapter 'Picturing Violence: Aesthetics and the Anxiety of Critique' examines the unease, both emotional and political, felt when considering images of suffering. He engages with the aestheticisation critique found in the work of both Walter Benjamin and Susan Sontag, by which aesthetic photographic images of suffering are understood to be inherently reactionary, both politically and artistically. Such images mistreat the subject and invite passive consumption, narcissistic appropriation, condescension or even sadism on the part of the viewer. Reinhardt argues that this approach is simplistic, slipping from a position in which images are condemned because

their *purpose* is to provoke the ‘disinterested pleasure’ of Kantian formal beauty, to a position which condemns *any* formal content whatsoever. Reinhardt is right to suggest that few if any images of suffering are framed as purely art for art’s sake.

The condemnation of images on the basis of formal artistic properties is continued in John Stomberg’s analysis of 1930’s documentary photography, framed as a conflict between Margaret Bourke-White and Walker Evans. The documentary tradition draws upon Evans’ critique of Bourke-White to condemn images that are overly ‘artistic’ and composed, and instead attempts to document things *as they are*. This effaces the very real presence of the photographer and Stomberg finds little real distinction between the methods of the two schools of documentary photography apart from a successfully presented and disseminated narrative strategy. Similarly, this debate is also picked up by Erina Duganne’s analysis of the supposed differences between photojournalistic and artistic images of suffering. Duganne shows how representations are not objective nor are the meanings of images of suffering encoded in, or intrinsic to, the photographs, the type or format of the camera, or even the subjects, but are instead shaped by the visual tropes of the culture that views the images. However, the artist is still present in the images and Duganne resists any attempts (by photographers) to adopt a ‘neutral’ viewpoint, reminding us that any image is a product of a choice of what to photograph, and how to photograph – a selection of representational strategies drawn from a near infinite variety.

Mieke Bal’s ‘The Pain of Images’ also engages with the extent to which images of suffering can be considered ‘art’ and with the concept of ‘political art’ as such. He examines how photographic exposure at the moment of suffering can become a second suffering. This builds upon Reinhardt’s account of the photographs showing US military personnel torturing Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib, in which the very act of being photographed, with the implicit threat of the distribution of those images to the prisoner’s community, composed a very real part of the torture. More generally, Bal’s chapter presents the greatest insight into the curatorial process of the *Beautiful Suffering* exhibition, which thankfully includes a comment that the very act of placing the pictures together in a collection imposes unification upon a very diverse set of images of very diverse forms of suffering. The chapter provides a great number of questions and productive starting points for debate.

Holly Edwards uses an approach similar to Shawn Michelle Smith, this time to trace the life cycle of Steve McCurry’s ‘Afghan Girl.’ The striking image first appeared on the cover of National Geographic in 1985 and since then has been frequently republished in multiple contexts. For Edwards, the circulation of the image betrays distinct Orientalist convictions about the suffering of the beautiful Other, in contrast to the western experience, and also shows how images of pain, *qua* commodity, have become endemic to contemporary visual culture. Edwards rightly draws attention to both the economics and the politics of image circulation. The chapters by Edwards, Bal and Duganne all explore the extent to which photographers can feel justified in helping to alleviate the suffering of others by attracting public attention and aid, whilst at the same time they themselves gain financial reward and celebrity from the image as commodity. This is the implicit reason for Apel and Smith’s conclusion that we should be made aware of the suffering of others through images of that suffering. Whilst some images may motivate intervention of some sort, many do not. Can photographers rely upon the possibility of

their images doing good to offset the exposure, exploitation and potential shame they may bring upon their subjects? Bal states that subject's exposure often becomes 'somebody else's merchandise' (95).

A potential criticism that can be levied at both books is their US-centric focus. This is perhaps more excusable for *Lynching Photography*, given its specific intentional focus upon the particular historical American manifestation of the phenomenon of lynching. However, in asking what 'our' reactions are when 'we' look at images of suffering, or in asking are 'we' justified in looking at images of the suffering of others, the authors in *Beautiful Suffering* are implicitly asking about the reactions and feelings of an American audience. Certain authors are guiltier of this than others - Stomberg's genealogy is of a particularly American form of documentary photography. Even when the other is encountered, it is western eyes that are doing the observation, whilst photojournalists follow the global expansion of US backed corporate and military projects (for example in Afghanistan or Abu Ghraib). Duganne and Bal's chapters in *Beautiful Suffering* best resist this tendency, partly due to their drawing upon Orientalism to look at how the Other is constructed.

Both books are at their strongest when presenting the thesis that images do not intrinsically contain objective meaning, and must be interpreted through cultural frames and contextual information external to the image. *Beautiful Suffering* adds to this by showing that there are no neutral ways of producing images. The meaning of any given image is a combination of cultural context, the intentions and decisions of the photographer (even if unconscious and 'cultural') and the subject matter. This lack of inherent meaning, and the absence of any automatic political effect of images (e.g. not automatically counter-revolutionary) means that images can have a range of political effects. These insights can be expanded from the worlds of art, documentary photography and photojournalism to the world of images more generally and even to all acts of representation. The claims of photography to have privileged access to 'the real' or to truth, are contested in a number of ways. This has parallels to discourses which construct technologically mediated surveillant practices as more objective than their alternatives. When looking at these practices we should avoid technological determinism and bear in mind the complex of relationships and interactions between technology, audience, 'artist' or image maker and the culture in which the images (or outputs of surveillance technology) are situated. These two books assist in this task.