

Visuality as a Site of Struggle

Sight, the king of the senses, the line of vision down the barrel of a gun. Pleasure or torture, valuation or stoning, knowledge or annihilation—we all know the deal. We all deal, and we've all been dealt.

This topic, so urgent, so worn. Dealt to me 'cause I didn't watch enough TV in elementary and everyone made fun of me. Didn't have that social know-how, you know? The lube. Here are the Post-it notes we've written—those about visuality that did not get gathered into some other category. You know, extraction, visuality. Colonization, visuality, rewriting capitalism, visuality, After Globalism, visuality, back matter, visuality. These are the stragglers, still important, really just escapees. What today is really beyond visuality, outside it, without it, seeking to be out of reach? That explains some of the fatigue, the burnout from having to process all the images, to language them. All those screens and their command-control.

So, the Post-its: cameras conditioning labor. Torture paintings—which makes someone think of a convo around representation and, say, the Dana Schutz scandal at the Whitney versus sixties / civil rights struggles, Emmett Till, lynching photos. Jackie Goldsby. Visuality as zone of struggle. Can we decolonize the image? But isn't it a force of colonization? And of decolonization? Visualizations of knowledge—yes, but are these still “knowledge” then? Strictly speaking, I mean. Is an image ever knowledge, or is it an infinite invitation/command to production? Visuality as a space of struggle—it's a space? Erasure of visual presence—*Dios mio*, so many erasures, and not just of visual presence but of presence, of *the living*. Industrialization of the visual—yes, the cinema, the *chaîne de montage* and all of that. “Pix or it didn't happen.” Well yeah, unless the gestapo says it did. Visual culture . . . uh huh. What do pictures want? Easier to say what they don't want. They don't want to not affect every aspect of everything. Visual and material culture of finance—that's most of the world, except for all us animals, right? Selfies. Did someone say

selfies? How about otheries? Visualization of human knowledge. Again with the human?

It's that hour, I suppose. The hour when all those questions about visuality and the colonization of the senses, about capitalized machines putting the sensorium and the neural network onto the assembly line, seem to go to my head. Like a toxic martini. Not like a crystalline image of a Pepsi can, handed over from a Jenner to a cop and solving all problems of social unrest in a joyful reconciliation of opposites. But like a drug we've taken too much of and no matter how we parse the problem, we say with Gil Scott-Heron, "It might be a good idea if I never, never went home again."¹ Really, data visualization *über alles*, no? The mythic overlay dissolves to blood.

The calculus of the image—that's what we've got to face, to face up to, and what we've got to reface. Or deface. Call it the programmable image, the image that's been programmed and must be reprogrammed on a daily basis. The image is a screen. There's the injunction to work, and along with it the possibility of generating something transformational. The factory delivered right to your brain. Putting what's left of your mind to work. The brain, as has been said, is a screen. And the screen is a screen. Where we work is the place where we struggle for survival and perhaps something more—the life worth living. Networked, our struggle is waged in relation to other struggles, and sometimes on top of them. There are layers below us in the computational stack, and the weight of the infrastructure presses. All that "immateriality"—it presses like a mountain range of carbon credits on the global South, on the coltan mines and forced recyclers, the toxic waste, the surveilled, bombed, reported on, headlined, and unmentioned, as more machines of visualization are built and more visualizations are deployed to tick the machine, the World Computer, into another discrete state and advance the counters of monetization. A million trillion times per second.

The materiality of immateriality as an algorithm of world oppression. Yeah, that's it, the goddamned visual.

Notes

This essay was written collaboratively as part of a book sprint. See "How This Text Was Written" (in this issue) for more information on the process.

1. Scott-Heron, "Home Is Where the Hatred Is."

Reference

Scott-Heron, Gil. 1971. "Home Is Where the Hatred Is." *Pieces of a Man*. Flying Dutchman Records.