

INTERVIEW WITH NICHOLAS MIRZOEFF. CONTRAVISUAL GESTURES FROM ACADEMIA AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

ENTREVISTA CON NICHOLAS MIRZOEFF. GESTOS CONTRAVISUALES DESDE LA ACADEMIA Y LOS MOVIMIENTOS SOCIALES

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ABSTRACT

The text addresses the conversation held with the Visual Culture theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff.¹ Although the author is a central reference in the field of Visual Studies —with wide reception in the Ibero-American academy thanks to the publication of books in Spanish such as *An Introduction to Visual Culture* or *How to See the World. A New Introduction to Visual Culture*— a fundamental part of his most recent contributions, which present an eloquent colonial critique, has been scarcely reviewed in our region, including conceptual approaches around “visuality complexes”, “countervisuality” and “the right to look”. This interview recovers these notions with the aim of putting them into dialogue with the decolonial perspectives and the symbolic and material struggles of the Global South.

Keywords: countervisuality, visual culture, right to look, decolonize, statues, social movements

RESUMEN

El texto recoge la conversación mantenida con el especialista en teoría y cultura visual Nicholas Mirzoeff.¹ Si bien el autor constituye un referente en el campo de los estudios visuales —con amplia recepción en la comunidad iberoamericana gracias a publicación de libros en español como *Una introducción a la cultura visual*, o *Cómo ver el mundo. Una nueva introducción a la cultura visual*— parte fundamental de sus aportaciones más recientes, que contienen una marcada crítica colonial, han sido escasamente revisadas en nuestra región, incluyendo los planteamientos conceptuales en torno a los “complejos de visualidad”, la “contravisualidad” y “el derecho a mirar”. Esta entrevista busca retomar dichas nociones para ponerlas a dialogar con las perspectivas decoloniales y las luchas simbólicas y materiales del Sur global.

Palabras clave: contravisualidad, cultura visual, derecho a mirar, descolonizar, estatuas, movimientos sociales

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INTRODUCTION

The interview with the theorist and visual activist Nicholas Mirzoeff was held during my doctoral research² dedicated to dismantling the hegemonic imaginaries around technology, particularly through Latin American aesthetic and political practices. From the platform of the arts and visual studies, together with decolonial perspectives, the work is based on the premise that there are multiple actions, images and other-stories that are powerful drivers of countervisualities, which operate by challenging the algorithmic complex of visibility.

The previous formulation draws on concepts and theoretical approaches from critical studies of visibility, especially from Nicholas Mirzoeff's work. The review of "El derecho a mirar" (2016)³ and other publications of his authorship (2011, 2019, 2020)⁴ during the investigative process allowed the structuring of concerns regarding certain "myths" or dominant discourses around technology, which could be understood and problematized from the visibility-countervisuality tension.

In the analysis of the use of the term "visibility" in English, Nicholas Mirzoeff finds Thomas Carlyle, particularly with a reactionary text, but very influential in the 19th century aristocracy, titled *On the Hero* (1840), which mentions a vision "from above" as an almost divine capacity and power of a few. This precedent will be an important trigger that will allow Mirzoeff to generate a particular journey around the construction of this concept, intrinsically linked to power.

A significant contribution of the author consists, precisely, in the disarticulation of the neutral conception of visibility—generally understood as the set of images or the field of what is visible at a given moment—to situate it, instead, as an eminently strategic function, as long as: "the action of visualizing refers to the production of visibility, that is, to the ordering of the processes of History in such a way that they are perceptible to the authority" (Mirzoeff, 2016, p.33).

Synthetically, we could say that visibility is the result of the visualization process as a police-strategic operation that acts in the production, reproduction and legitimization of

- 2 Interview conducted on July 6, 2021 for the doctoral thesis *Critical Algoritmia. Technopoetics and hacktivisms in the construction of Latin American countervisualities* within the framework of the Doctorate in Arts Program (Visual Arts, Performing Arts and Interdisciplinarity) of the National Institute of Fine Arts and Literature (INBAL, Mexico).
- 3 The article "El derecho a mirar" published by IC. *Revista Científica de Información y Comunicación* in 2016 is a fragment translated into Spanish from his book *The Right to Look a Counterhistory of Visibility* (2011) and served as the gateway for a more detailed approach to the author's theoretical production. <http://icjournal-ojs.org/index.php/IC-Journal/article/view/358>
- 4 Mirzoeff, N. (2011). *The Right to Look A Counterhistory of Visibility*. Duke University Press; Mirzoeff, N. (2019). "Preface: Devisualize" in Aidan McGarry et al. *The Aesthetics of Global Protest*. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9789048544509-003>; Mirzoeff, N. (2020). "Artificial vision, white space and racial surveillance capitalism" *AI & SOCIETY*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00146-020-01095-8>

its own authority. In contrast, the right to look is “a right that refuses to allow authority to suture its own interpretation of the sensible with the aim of generating spaces of domination, first through laws and later through aesthetic practice” (Mirzoeff, 2016, p. 35). In short, countervisuality is posed as a claim and a resistance to the identification, standardization and control of subjectivities and experiences.

This introduction, rather than offering a summary of the interview, succinctly provides the context of its emergence, marked by my interest in the *countervisual gestures* present in the aesthetic and political practices of the global South. The conversation is oriented to deepen some of the author’s approaches, emphasizing his conception against logics of colonial domination, the ethical dimension of academia, the political implications of technology, as well as the tensions between visibility and counter-visibility, which are manifest through struggles and social movements around the world.

Sofia Sienna Chaves [SSC]: The book «The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality» was originally published in 2011.5 In perspective, what do you consider to be the main findings and limitations of it?

Nicholas Mirzoeff [NM]: If I analyze this now, two things stand out to me. One is very clear, and it is that the area that received the strongest reception of the book was my connection to the history of Atlantic slavery and a visualizing that I call «oversight». The idea of the «overseer», which works in English—I believe it doesn’t really work in Spanish in the same way—is the following: There is this individual who has surrogated sovereign power through his ability to conduct surveillance across an entire plantation; all animals, all humans, all biomatter, to regulate by means of sight and, through that regulation, punishment will be administered as well, and violence becomes intimately imbricated into that oversight. I think such connection has been the strongest part of the reception of the book.

The second aspect, looking back on it now, is the idea of «countervisuality», a very important one for me, which I was grasping for while writing this book. It was difficult to envisage as we were living in George Bush’s America, there was a war with Afghanistan, and everything seemed pretty bleak. But the week I launched a blog to promote the book was January the 25th, 2011, which is the day Egypt rose in Tahrir Square and suddenly then, you began to see what I had called “the right to look”: the exchange where I look at you and you look at me and there is an attempt for the two of us to invent each other in space. It suddenly took on live form in Tahrir, then in M15, then in Occupy Wall Street. I had a supporting role in that movement and that changed everything I thought.

5 Mirzoeff, N. (2011). *The Right to Look. A Counterhistory of Visuality*. Duke University Press.

Since then, Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, and the enormous movement around the George Floyd uprising became worldwide.

We now have all this experience to draw about what kind of counter-visualities we should like and how each one of them functions. These successes and failures are really what I have been working on these past ten years. However, in 2010–2011, when the book was being finished, this was something you could imagine or sense it in a way, but I relatively rarely experienced that during the long dark night of neoliberalism, although I had seen real examples of it with the Madres in Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires.

Now, though, it has gained a very different level of resonance, which I think is why the book has acquired interest. At first it did well, then it took a less prominent place, and in the last few years people have really picked up on it. The reason I think it makes sense now is that people have lived some of this experience, and they think “Oh, I see what he’s talking about”. This idea of an exchange between people makes sense to them now.

The critique I would have for myself is the following. I think one of the things we have learned through social movements is that “the right to look” is an abstraction—not that I wanted to frame it that way, but it might have come across a little bit that way—in fact, it is always grounded, it is always in a specific place. Particularly in the Americas, it is always a matter of stolen land. I am on stolen land right now, I am in the Lenapehoking, which is the ancestral lands of the Lenape people. They have been forcibly dispersed from here for centuries, but there is still a presence, and one has to learn to think that in relation to any space, any activist space, any educational space. There are ways that have been offered to us, those of us who were not indigenous.

This gives us a practical way to think about the fact that there is always an inequality, there is always a structural imbalance. How do we begin to approach? How do we begin to think about engaging with others? Whether they are people like us or people not like us, there are always imbalances and that is something we have learned by doing this in real space in real-time. I think that is an important correction to what I was doing before *The Appearance of Black Lives Matter*, which is a book that I published online in 2017.

I call that «groundwork» and there are a variety of meanings we can go into, but interestingly, I have noticed that some African American scholars in completely different contexts and without knowing what I was doing have also started using that term quite recently. Therefore, we are thinking about land and being in an actual historically structured space, rather than in some sort of abstract space. As a matter of fact, I think that is a critique of visual culture as well.

SSC: Your proposal regarding “visuality complexes” and their classification, separation and aestheticization operations has been quite relevant. Is this conceptualization still productive for you as a theoretical tool? How does the “coloniality complex” that you have developed lately work in relation to the previous ones?

NM: I think that the difference is that, at that time, we were still in a mode where American higher education was very dominated by what we called French Theory or what the French call Human Sciences, and I was overly focused on trying to reproduce a kind of Foucauldian set of breaks and epistemes. I think what I have learned through the experience of direct action is that coloniality can't be broken, at least not that simply.

There is genuine continuity between 1492 in the Americas, 1440 in the Canary Islands, the 14th century in North Africa; the experience of Europeans seeking to dominate others. In my most recent work, what I call "white sight" is a kind of critical tool in that colonial regime. In everyday life, we have this connectivity between older historical practices and what is happening now.

I have been very interested in this particular movement around statues and their take-down. There is a very noticeable movement in Chile where the mapuche were significantly involved in taking down the statues of the *conquistadores* and hanging their heads. And since then, we have witnessed this dramatic series of events where a constitutional convention is held, and the president of that convention is a mapuche woman. It is quite an interesting set of developments, in the sense that something that starts as a symbolic contestation of power, ends up as a very real reconfiguration of what theoreticians called «constituted power», that is to say, writing a constitution. That is something that is taking place in Chile as we speak, and I think it is remarkable. I want to be cautious here, I am not saying that bringing the statues down caused the constitutional convention or anything of the sort, but it is part of, and a critical part of that interaction process, whereby symbolic power is directly contested.

For a mapuche person involved in those protests, 1492 is now, in the same way that in Australia, 1788 is now, and in North America, 1492 is now. This shifts our sense of temporality, and it should. That doesn't mean that nothing has changed; of course, things change, and it is important to designate such things. There was a time when it was thought that critique could bring about some kind of change by itself, and that is clearly not true. What is true, I think, is that if we do a series of exchanges between making theory through social movements, taking it back and reflecting on it, and then bringing it into a social moment to live, listen and learn together, then we will be starting to make real progress.

I feel strangely optimistic about our current situation in the sense that the stakes are visible to a certain extent. Another Latin American theoretician worth mentioning in this regard is Verónica Gago and her work *Feminist international*,⁶ where she talks about «visibilizing». Apart from what is visible and invisible—something that has always been a structural consideration for visual culture as a practice— she talks about visiblizing, the active intent to make certain practices visible and she talks about the strike as a lens through

6 Gago, V. (2020). *Feminist International: How to Change Everything*, Verso.

which visibility happens. This leads me to think about what artist Claire Fontaine calls “a human strike”, and how we can make and implement that strike in practice by refusing to carry on as we always have done.

It seems to be the end of the pandemic, it is a remarkable moment because the basic operation of capitalist extraction, which is work, has been fundamentally challenged. In the United States there is a level of so-called “essential workers” that we have invented; what was essential about them was they had to go to work no matter what, whether they wanted to or they didn’t. And now that the situation is at least briefly better, people do not want to return to the working conditions they left in March 2020. But they may be forced to.

My university, for example, is requiring me to go back into the classroom next year. I think that when we return to the classroom, we will say: What is this? What are we doing here? What is the point of this? The pandemic surely made us all question what other things we were doing running around. Not that working from home is necessarily a great solution, especially for people who have to care for their children, but I believe that what we are trying to do now is to recenter the regime of what I call authority in *Right to look* away from power in the traditional sense of imposing, and towards what Gago and others called *potencia*, considering the possibility to center it around care, rather than to center it around extraction.

There are all kinds of obvious reasons why we have to do that. Françoise Vergès, who produced a lovely little book called *A Decolonial Feminism*⁷ asks this simple question: Who cleans the world? Who cleans every seminar that one goes to? Who cleans every university classroom one is in? Who cleans that room? Who makes it habitable? Who cleans Wall Street at night? Who gets up at 4:00 in the morning to clean those offices? And so on. And then she introduces a broader ramification, which is: Who cleans the world? Today it is unbearably hot here, I can’t breathe outside. In the United States this situation is from one end of the country to the other, so we must literally clean the world, but who’s going to do that? And we have to recenter our priorities away from extraction to a form of caring.

At this point, a genealogy that goes back to Occupy Wall Street comes to mind; one of the slogans used for it emerged from a short story by Herman Melville called *Bartleby the Scrivener*.⁸ Bartleby is working on Wall Street and his lawyer comes to him, he is a clerk, and he is supposed to do some work and he said, “here, this is what you do” and Bartleby says: “I would prefer not to”. We made that into a slogan, we put stickers all over New York which said, “I would prefer not to,” yet I think we are in that moment again, a very Bartleby moment. I think people are saying “You know what? I would prefer not to”.

7 Vergès, F. (2021). *A Decolonial Feminism*. Pluto Press.

8 Melville, H. (2012). *Bartleby, The Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street*. CreateSpace.

This leads to the fury of the United States' capitalism because people are unwilling to go back to work, as they blame it on the still very miserable levels of social provision offered by the government. So, people are actively choosing to be essentially quite poor, rather than returning to work. That is Bartleby's choice, and it is because it is not worth it. I think that as we start to reconvene, if we can do so, or if we are made to reconvene, which is more likely, we will examine the processes of convening. And that is then a coming together, it is a «Right to Look» moment, a moment when we see each other again, hopefully, as if it were for the first time, and say: What are the conditions on which this should happen? On what ground are we? Whose ground is this? What are the stakes? What do we need to visibilize? What do we need to strike to provide ourselves with the lands to see what needs to be seen?

SSC: Considering the current context of algorithmization and quantification of existence, do you think that this affects visuality complexes? Is this "algorithmic reason" included in what you have already developed? Do you think it's something to keep thinking about?

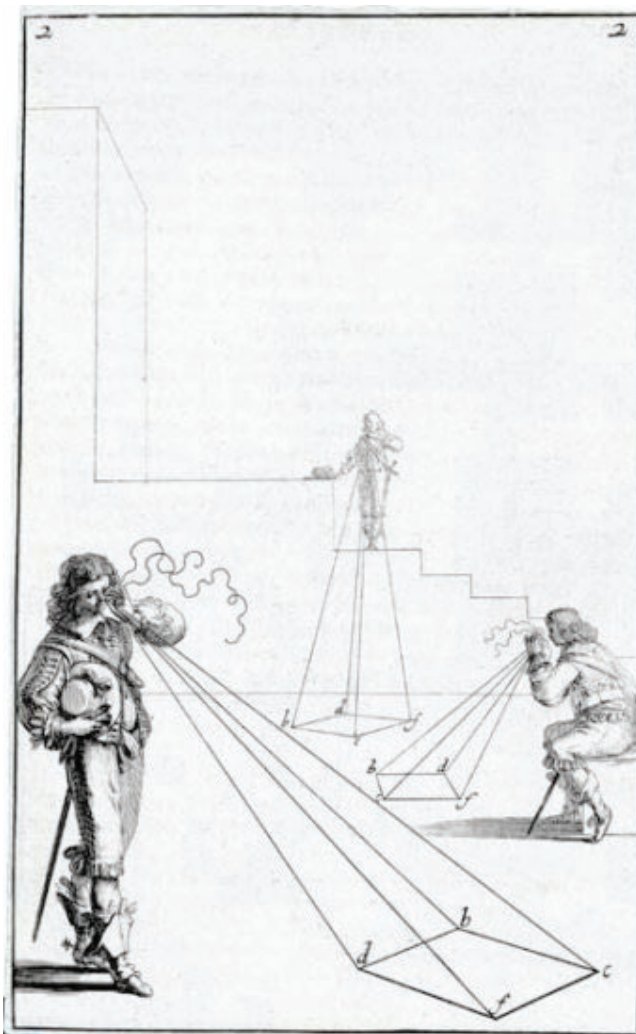
NM: That is a very important question so let me begin by saying that what I think we have perceived to be the difference of the algorithmic moment was that it is distributed. In other words, power has always tried to contain and control multiple outlets, but although it is usually based in a particular place, whether it is the center of the «panopticon», or the plantation overseer or the foreman in the factory. There is a specific point from which this surveillance is done. What we have now is «this distributed surveillance», where a drone can be wherever it wants, wherever the commander wants it to be, and there can be multiple drones.

One thing that we have seen recently is that history is teaching us, which is not entirely new, in the sense that the statues are also a distributed network, and that they take all over. I have traveled all over Latin America, but in a place like Buenos Aires, for example, where there are colonial statues everywhere, you can't help but notice them. One of the things we have learned by taking statues down is that they are a distributed network because they don't stop working simply because you take down one or ten or twenty. I don't yet know now what the number of statues is we will have to take down to stop that network from working. It seems like it is going to be many, and I think what we will have to do is what I call "unbuild the process of «statuing»" if you will. So now we have a parallel, although what the drone does is something very different.

The distinction I would make here is something I had to teach myself. If you look at one of the first editions of *An Introduction of Visual Culture*,⁹ you will come across an example

9 Mirzoeff, N. (2000). *An Introduction to Visual Culture*. Routledge.

Fig. 1. Illustration published in the book *Manière universelle de M. des Argues pour pratiquer la perspective par petit-pied comme le géométra*, Abraham Bosse (1647).



we analyze. We use this perspective drawing made in the 17th-century by a man called Abraham Bosse. Some lines are coming out of his eyes and there is a little box on the floor. We discussed that as a vision, but it was not a vision but a perspective, and Bosse is very clear on that. What he does is to create a space on the ground that is erased of whatever may be there already —indigenous cultures, animal life, plant life, and claiming it— that is the process of the «white sight».

Now, if you look at a drone's footprint, it is similar, in the sense that they have these boxes, and the United States Army actually has a field manual called «kill box» and it is exactly what it sounds like. It is a box of what the drone can see, and anything that is in there, it can kill. Thus, there exists a kind of continuity, but also an enormous acceleration.

One of the things we have learned with algorithms over the last 20 years, and about people like Safiya Noble, Wendy Chung and others, is that the algorithm learns from humans, which is to say, that it has learned to be a white supremacist. It has learned to be racist and sexist. What the drone has now learned from humans is the most characteristic

aspect of coloniality that exists, which is to kill everything in sight, and it is making its own decisions to do so.

I say it is learned because that is what AI (Artificial Intelligence) does, and one of the things AI specialists will tell you, is that you don't really know what the AI is doing, you start it, and off it goes. It is quite obvious, I think, that what AI does is to make visible what humans do, or to be more precise, what white people do. What white people tend to do is to be racist, to kill people to claim space that isn't necessarily theirs, and that is what AI and algorithms are doing. Therefore, it seems to me that we have a real problem now.

SSC: Clearly technology as a human production, far from being objective, exposes the same ideological biases and problems that we have as a society. Going back to Black Lives Matter and social movements, I have noticed this interest in decoloniality not only in your articles and references, but also in initiatives you have mentioned, such as tearing down the statues of colonial conquerors and heroes. What has been the contribution of the Latin American decolonial perspective to your work?

*NM: In *The Right to Look*, I tentatively used decolonial rather than postcolonial; it was very much divided from Walter*

Mignolo and from Catherine Walsh, Maria Lugones, and Huaroma Vasquez, and so on. I spent a lot of time thinking about it, and it is there, but you have to be tuned into it as you are to notice it. I think what has happened is a convergence of social movements. We took a lot of energy from Zapatismo, through Occupy Wall Street, the idea of the *Fourth World War*¹⁰ and the idea of convivial research.

All those practices seem symbiotic with the study, so while doing this work, very practical examples come to mind such as the museum. When I was young or starting out in visual culture, people criticized museums, which was done full time and it kind of disappeared. If we are honest, the question is very clear now, that the museum is a colonial institution, and we are learning from Latin American, African and Asian people who are saying “Hey! give us our stuff back”.

It has been a shock to North American and European culture to realize that people consider this loot, rather than something that is properly preserved in suitable conditions. What I think coloniality has done is to displace temporality, which could be important so that we can look over it. I think we need to look over the long frame, but secondly—and I think this is in conjunction with African American and black movements in general—to make us think systemically. We inherited from post-structuralism a great suspicion of structure and we mistook structure for system, so people are very cautious and nervous about using that kind of vocabulary.

The first Black Lives Matter movement took place in 2014, and I was just essentially following the movement doing what people asked me to do. I didn’t feel it was a load for me as a person who is identified as white in the Americas to be in the front of the line. I just showed up when they asked me to show up and did what I needed to do. Later in November 2014, when Darren Wilson, the police who killed Michael Brown was not even indicted for that murder, the District Attorney, Ferguson Missouri, released all the materials from the grand jury, which is very unusual. Normally, they are secret, but I had a fairly large number of photographs. I could look at those and see if there was something to say, and I looked at them and something was evidently wrong. I looked at the first volume of the text transcript and something was wildly wrong, and then I thought: “You know what? This is what I do, this is a relation of the visible and the sayable in an archive as a constituted archive here”. I gathered data and we published it online in a journal that no longer exists and 100,000 people looked at it on the first day. Then, academia became interested and asked me to give talks, etc. and so I ended up publishing this article. To sum up, they liked the article but the one thing they said to me was: Are you sure you want to say “systemic white supremacy”? And I replied, “yes of course, what else would I say?”.

10 Rowley, R. (2003). *The Fourth World War*. Documentary. 78 min. Production: Big Noise Tactical Media.

One of the things that I think is very important around decoloniality is this idea of “de-colonial love” that Chela Sandoval has mentioned, and she does not do it from a Valentine’s Day notion of love, she talks about a breaking through. I think that is exactly what we need to do. It is about taking care, not extraction. It is about thinking about intimacy as something that has been colonized, something that is imperialized and this is very visibly true in Britain, where I am from. We can think of the prosecution of Oscar Wilde in 1895, Alan Turing being chemically castrated by the British government leading to his suicide, and, in both Britain and the United States, we are very much remembering right now the age of the epidemic, because COVID is so reminiscent of what happened at that time. We are learning still from Act Up and the way that they engaged the pharmaceutical complex, what they were able to do and how it seems extraordinary now.

The other day I was watching a television program from the early 2000s, and I couldn’t figure out why gay men couldn’t get married, they couldn’t get married back then, it is crazy, right? That was not so long ago. So, that kind of notion of decolonial love and what that will mean, how we care for each other and how we relate on a very personal level to our own history sent to our own collectivities and connectivities seems to me to be perhaps one of the most fruitful of the many strong connections that we have had with that body of thought.

SSC: Finally, I would like to lead the conversation towards the social function of the academy and the ethical basis for thinking about, from or with “the others” —whether they are oppressed, marginalized, exploited—. How do you understand his own place of enunciation as an activist-researcher, being a white man, a university student from the global North? Which also leads me to ask: What do you think is the role of researchers and academics, with opportunities and privileges, in the face of deep inequalities and social injustices?

NM: It is a very important question one should always ask. Since 2016, I have been practically working on exactly this issue of being a white person and what that means. I believe part of that is about my visibilizing of myself. So, in order to put oneself in a position to engage performatively with others who are less privileged by the structures in which we live, it is necessary to visiblize one’s situation. Whiteness studies have a bad reputation, which was fairly deserved for being a little solipsistic and kind of self-indulgent, but this is the aspect that black academics asked of me directly when I was working on Black Lives Matter. I was told that they wanted to see me take on the «white side» —that is what I am calling it, but they didn’t call it that— and this is what I have been doing for the last five years.

In 2014 when Michael Brown was killed, as I mentioned before, people on the ground, predominantly African American, were very keen to circulate images of Michael Brown’s body; very difficult images to look at, but they wanted people to know at this time. I think that was true for about a year, maybe a year and a half, and then, in late 2015, there came

a point when leaders of Black Lives Matter said, “Ok enough, no more images of black death or black pain, if you don’t get it by now, you’re never going to get it”. So here, we see an extraordinary fact; Darnella Frazier’s video of the murder of George Floyd which I have never been able to watch the whole way through. It became endlessly visible, and we know this is a tense academic or intellectual dilemma, because, logically, we want that man to not get away with that murder. The more you want that murder not to happen, the more you want police not to look at black people, not as people, but look at them as people who can do anything they want to.

In this case, it seems to me that you have to make a series of structural choices, so in this book that I am trying to finish on whiteness,¹¹ I have taken some decisions. For example, I am not going to show black bodies or racist caricatures of black bodies. I am simply using Photoshop to erase the African because I don’t think we need to see that and if we feel we do, then we have a question to ask ourselves: What is it that we really need to see here?

On another level, something I have learned as a teacher for many years is that racist imagery exists because it is so much in favor of the settler-colonial racist white society; it is as if it were downloaded immediately. It makes such an impact that you stand in front of the class and explain why this history exists, why it looks like this, but the damage is done the second you put that image up. And it is not just about images in the classroom, but about images in the public space.

I tell this story about taking students to the American Museum of Natural History to try to get them to understand the way that the museum naturalizes racial hierarchy, and it does it outside with that awful statute. I lead them inside the museum, into this great historical debate, and then we come out. At this point, I think maybe people will be ready to see this thing for what it is, and I remember vividly standing next to it and next to a young woman who was from Senegal. She was as cosmopolitan as she wanted; she lived in Paris, she have lived in London, she spoke multiple languages and she looked up at this thing, this kind of awful caricature in Africa next to a huge white man on a horse and her eyes just filled with tears and she said: “Why? Explain this to me.” So, I tried to, but you could still see that it didn’t register nearly as much as the dramatic visual impact. This is why I am in favor of taking statues down because they download, they do the damage in front of you, it can’t be explained, that is the power of the visual. This is visual culture 101, it is like there is an enormous amount of information up there if you want to talk about it in terms of data.

SSC: It is an eloquent example. In any case, it is worth asking ourselves if it weren’t for the statue, the young woman would have experienced that internal mobilization, including the

11 Mirzoeff, N. (2023). *White Sight. Visual Politics and Practices of Whiteness*. MIT Press.



connection with her past. Do you think it is possible to address these issues not necessarily by removing the statues and what they represent or tell from history, but by speaking and being critical based on them?

NM: What statues tend to do is invisibilize themselves. Now it is something visible because we have done all this work, but what they want to do, as Robert Musil talked about in the 1930's, is to fade into the background, to become part of the landscape, the apparatus. In that sense, there is a kind of unnoticed but persistent aesthetics of white supremacy. In the case of United States all the Confederate statues are themselves an «erasure of history», because what they try and do is erase the period of black reconstruction in the late 19th century from 1865 to 1880, in which new African American governments made remarkable progress, created public schools, created schools for people with disabilities, wages, they truly did remarkable things. All of that was wiped out by the Confederate remembrance movement "lost cause". We still hear virtually nothing about that reconstruction, but we hear about the confederacy every day. Statues and flags have created this aesthetic of white supremacy, that is everywhere, literally everywhere.

In Britain, for example, when a statue like (Edward) Colston's is taken down, people cover it with paint, they write things on it. I think there's something to be said for that, like taking them off the pedestals, knocking them down on the ground by turning them around, so that they face the wall. There is a famous Holocaust Memorial that gradually sank into the ground which has disappeared, so the same could be done with one of Rhodes, couldn't it? It could gradually sink into the ground, so that for a period of time, perhaps a year, we will actively talk about it, although then it will disappear because otherwise it will just do the job it does. More importantly, this is the kind of conversation we need to have.

«Fig. 2. Monument against fascism by Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz (1986-1996).¹²

Christina Sharpe refers to the ethics of seeing, we never really talked about it like we talk about it as if it were a simple physiological process, which is not. What you choose to see, what becomes perceptible to you, what becomes visibilized, that is every day in every moment. And going around noting these things doesn't necessarily make you a popular human being: "this is racist", "this is settler-colonial". People may not want to hear that every minute of every day, but it is necessary.

You were also addressing the ethics of the researcher. I think the ethics of the research depends entirely on your situation. I now spend time actively looking at levels of invisible things, like recruiting graduate students of color. I was invited to be on a panel just recently

¹² Shalev-Gerz, E. (1986). "The Monument Against Fascism". Website: <https://www.shalev-gerz.net/portfolio/monument-against-fascism/>

at the International Visual Sociality and they wanted me to quote visual culture. I looked at the panel and there were no people of color. I am not going to sit down and say “well, this is unfortunate”, I am just not going to go. If people don’t agree to go to panels that are not fully diverse and inclusive, then people start doing that.

This is not everything, but it is something. If you try to apply that standard to all the different things that you do knowing that we are far from perfect, things will change. I don’t want to stand here and pretend that I am perfect. I am not. There are all kinds of contradictions that one could go through, but you do like Samuel Beckett, you fail and then you get up and you fail better.

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