

Globalizing the Image: Spectacular Society and Autonomy

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[Note: What I have submitted below amounts to a standard short presentation length conference paper. However, in line with the unique format of the conference, my presentation will deviate from this prepared text and travel in more informal and, hopefully, more speculative directions.]

Everywhere throughout the world one finds the same bad movies, the same slot machines, the same plastic or aluminum atrocities, the same twisting of language by propaganda, etc.... [O]n the one hand, [the developing world] has to root itself in the soil of its past, forge a national spirit, and unfurl this spiritual and cultural revindication before the colonialist's personality. But in order to take part in modern civilization, it is necessary at the same time to take part in scientific, technical, and political rationality, something which very often requires the pure and simple abandonment of a whole cultural past.

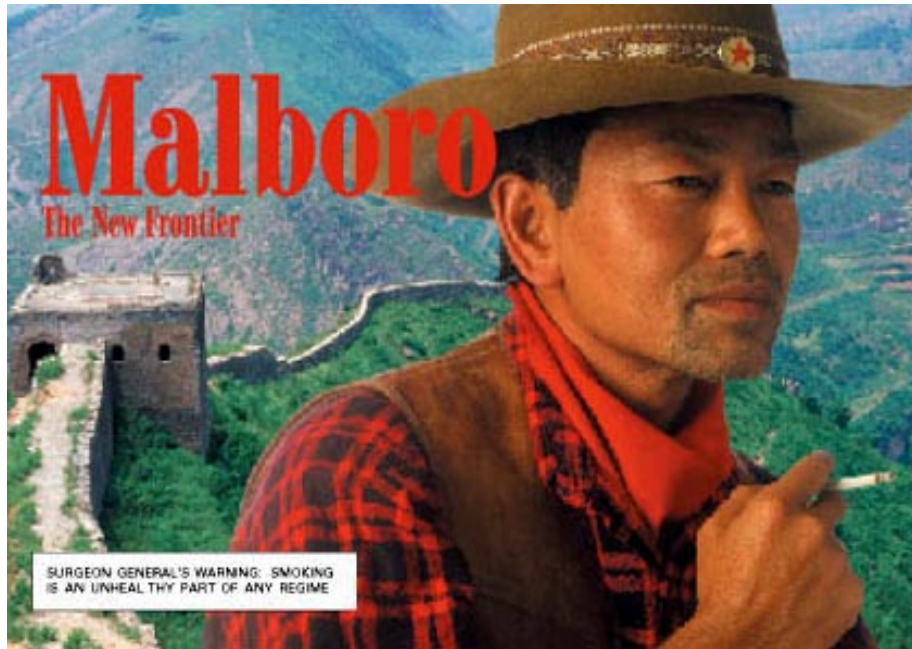
—Paul Ricoeur, “Civilization and National Cultures”

I want to begin by showing two images. The first is one of the numerous posters that adorned the walls of Paris during the May 1968 worker and student revolution [figure 1]; the second is an example of a more contemporary representational and aesthetic practice designed to take on the global reign of images at the level of the image itself [figure 2]. What I want to trace in this paper—or, at the very least, begin to trace, offering the outlines of a project that remains to be more thoroughly filled in—is the distance that has been traveled from 1968 to the present. There are innumerable ways to name this distance: from Fordism to post-Fordism, late modernity to post-modernity, the presumptive ontological solidity of the gold standard to the properly capitalist marketplace in which money travels as a sign without a signifier. The one that I want to consider is the passage from a moment before globalization, when the theory of the society of the spectacle was first announced, to the fully globalized present, when this

phrase, “the society of the spectacle” is once again on everyone’s lips, taken as a code that will let us in on the secret of globalization in terms of culture, the media and the visual. What I want to highlight in these images is another distance: from a politics of the collective to one that is almost always focused on the individual—from a *politics of politics* one might say, to a *politics of consumerism*.



[Figure 1]



[Figure 2]

The epigraph from Paul Ricoeur that begins this paper, now more than forty years old, speaks to the situation we still find ourselves in when we consider the culture (broadly understood) in relation to globalization. In an effort to understand the ferocious processes that are taking place around us in the sphere of culture—processes that are felt everywhere—we continue to think globalization as an invading force in relation to some fixed other. And so, we try to make sense of the politics of the contemporary moment through the conjunction of globalization and indigenous culture. And we need to note, too, that in the way that this conjunction is still most commonly read, what is at issue here is *not* the relationship between the set of processes (occurring at different levels, scales and speeds) that have come to be called “globalization” and something of a radically different order: the culture of the indigene. Rather, what is being placed into relation and opposition are *two* kinds of culture, a vision of what might yet (or should) constitute culture versus what culture has perhaps, if in incomplete and contradictory

ways, already come to be. To no one's surprise, this opposition contains a host of others buried within it: the horrors of consumer culture vs. something purer and non-consumerist; unfettered flows vs. age-old fixities; the rise of cosmopolitan subjects vs. the global eclipse and proletarianization of the peasantry; the individual vs. the collective; America vs. the world; and finally, in the stark images that Ricoeur paints, the cheap plastic of the modern vs. the true grit of native soil.

All of these oppositions are of course shot through with a politics, and point further to the deep connections between culture and socio-economic processes that cultural critics have been intent on identifying for half a century. What they also point to is a more fundamental opposition at their core—that of capitalism standing against some inchoate political other that has yet to emerge, but which we cannot help but feel must bear some relationship to the categories of the political with which we are familiar. But at least in Ricoeur's formulation, the promise of this political other has been exhausted even as it named. The arrow of time here points in only one direction. Modernity, which marches forward without fail, can be halted only temporarily by a rearguard insistence on the priority of the indigenous—an action whose very necessity only further confirms the powers of the modern. And so politically, at least in this formulation of the terms of globalization and indigenous cultures, one is inevitability and unfortunately always placed on the side of the loser: lamenting what is, pining (if with some ambivalence) for what was, and hoping to re-conceive the past for the future against the present.

There are no doubt more sophisticated ways of thinking about the oppositionality of alternative modernities or other cultural modalities, or about the very real political productivity of the indigenous today (whether one thinks of the re-emergence of various

forms of national cultural protectionism, or the actions of landless movements like Movimento sem Terra, or even of alternative trading blocks—the recent assertion of MERCOSUR against the attempted full imposition of the Washington Consensus as embodied in the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas). But with respect to our understanding of our cultural situation within globalization, I cannot help but feel that we continue to work within the terms laid out by Ricoeur. Except in some versions of cultural studies, it does not seem possible to stand confidently on the side of slot machines, aluminum atrocities, or even technical rationality, and not only when we think of the looming ecological consequences of a world built of plastic and aluminum. And yet this inability also seems to strands us politically and philosophical in a way that can only be seen as both questionable and unproductive. It is not simply that a more complex or dialectic account has to be offered of both sides of the conjunction of globalization and indigenous culture (which would be to read the “and” differently, that is to say, to allow that it means that *both* exist in the world today in some yet unresolved and contradictory relationship), but rather, that the politics of culture that has long emerged out of this conjunction needs to be re-conceived. Of the choices offered to us after 9-11—liberal democracy or fundamentalism—Slavoj Zizek argues that neither is really *our* choice, that it is necessary to rethink the situation in a way that reveals the essential falsity of these polar limits, which are limits, too, on our imaginations. Something similar might be said about globalization and indigenous culture: we need to begin taking up the real problem that this conjunction names, not in terms of an “either/or” governed by a temporal scheme that drains the political out of discussions of culture in advance, but a “and/both”

that helps us to understand the circumstances that produce this conjunction *and* our usual political responses to it.

One of the things that I hope to accomplish in the longer project that this paper introduces is to do just this: to understand better the role of culture in globalization, with specific reference to forms of visual culture. It is this project that I would like to present the bare outlines of here today. The project explores what I take to be one of the major claims in discussions of culture and cultural identity in the context of globalization. This is the claim that we are living through a moment in which the *visual* dominates, and does so on an unprecedented global scale. Not only does the visual dominate other forms of culture, but with this domination comes intensified and extensified forms of what can still only be described as “cultural imperialism”: the global intervention in and disruption of indigenous cultures everywhere by forms that originate elsewhere. The immediate example that comes to mind is of the global circulation of Hollywood films—a ready-to-hand example of the traumatic ‘bad’ side of the globalization of culture, in which the promise of (say) U.S. teens avidly watching the best of East Asian cinema is replaced by the reality of audiences packing theatres worldwide to see *Independence Day*. Even in Cuba, a trip to the cinema to see the intriguing sounding *Los Hombres en Negro* leads one to an encounter with Will Smith and Tommy Lee Jones fighting against alien baddies (which can of course, itself be read, as metaphor for globalization). There is little doubt that forms of visual culture are being spread around the world and that humanity as a whole mediates its individual and collective experience through visual forms—film, television, the Internet, advertising—to an ever greater degree. It is a common point, perhaps, but worth insisting on nevertheless: it is only in the past twenty years that the

visual has become both global *and* instantaneous, as the circulation of the photos from Abu Ghraib and the images of 9-11 confirm. But what are we to make of this of this situation, especially in terms of the politics of culture and the activity of critique?

It is one thing to claim that the visual dominates and another to impute a politics to this particular form of cultural domination, even if these claims are often folded inseparably into one another. In the larger project, I hope to understand both theories of the visual as they relate to globalization and various practices of the visual today, from new graphic design practices (such as those of Bruce Mau), to large-scale art photography (from Andreas Gursky to Edward Burtynsky), to a comparative analysis of national news broadcasts. In exploring both theories and practices, I want to understand better the politics and new found power that has been *accorded* to the visual as the possibility of its intensified mass circulation has become a reality, as well as to try to measure some of the *actual* dimensions of the power of the visual.

These are not the same things. For the claims that have been made for the visual in the era of globalization do not necessarily match its realities; theoretical hyperbole makes for interesting writing, but often for bad politics. In general, it seem to me that for all that has been written about the effects and impact of various forms of visual culture, there is in fact remarkably little theorization of the specific character of the global visual—theories which assess both the differences of the global visual vis-à-vis other historical periods, as well its continuity as an expression of underlying changes in capitalism—the *only* economic mode, it should be pointed out, in and through which truly visual cultures have ever been produced. What has assumed the place of such theories are assertions that simply equate the visual with globalization as such. At the

outset of *Introduction to Visual Culture*, for instance, Nicholas Mirzoeff writes that “Seeing [today] is much more than believing. It is not just part of everyday life, it is everyday life” (1). The global visual, taken in this way to be omnipresent—as nothing less than Guy Debord’s spectacle writ large over the whole planet—is further connected indelibly to the culture of consumerism, and is understood to be the main way in which consumerism is both experienced and reproduced. And there is one additional connection made: why the visual is especially dangerous and especially troubling is that it is assumed that it never misses its mark. Its very omnipresence ensures that visual images always eventually become material and take effect. Once the flow of images begins, the pleasures and the horrors of consumer culture are soon to follow; to return to Ricoeur again, once consumerism appears, cultures can only retreat to nationalisms of various kinds before finally, inevitably embracing plastic and aluminum.

These assertions about the power of the global visual are familiar to all of us, forming not only the basis of much academic writing, but also underwriting the projects of various new visual avant-gardes, like the practices of ‘culture jamming’ associated with the magazine *Adbusters* (an example of which can be found in Figure 2) or of groups like the International Network on Cultural Policy, an organization intent on challenging measures within international agreements which limit the ability of nation’s to intervene in the market to protect their indigenous cultures). What is less clear is the politics that accompanies this particular formulation of the problem (since it is almost always seen as a problem) of global visual culture. To put it crudely: if the visual is a problem because it produces consent or spreads consumerism, offering up and endlessly reproducing the dominate narratives of capital while doing away with historical through

its insistence of the new, what is the ‘solution’ posed to the reign of images? To do away with television? To limit or eliminate advertising (as has been done in some countries in children’s programming, or almost entirely in Cuba, where the cityscape of Havana occupies the opposite visual pole from the neon orgy of Shanghai’s Nanjing Lu)? The idea that new collectivities can come into existence only through by strictly regulating or banishing images altogether is an interesting fantasy, but little more than that; and yet it seems to me that this remains our way of thinking about the power of images—an idea born out of worries about the production of consent in the West, now seen to be spread over the whole of the world.

In his assessment of the current state of investigations of the visual, W.J.T. Mitchell has summarized the deficits of our current imaginings of the visual as follows:

The fantasy that images and visibility are the decisive political forces of our time is, in fact, one of those collective hallucinations that should be a problem for investigation in visual culture, not one of its constitutive axioms. The emergence of a ‘visual politics’ in which the antagonists are visual images (stereotypes, caricatures, misrepresentations, fetishes, and ideological illusions) opposed by heroic, iconoclastic critical theorists ought to remind us of the Young Hegelians parodied in *The German Ideology*: ‘the phantoms of their imaginations have gotten too big for them. They, the creators of their imaginations have gotten too big for them’” (542)

And yet this still leaves unanswered the question of how we are to think about the role of the global visual, especially in relation to the conjunction of globalization and indigenous culture. How can we attend to the problem and power of the visual without evoking the

politics of representation which Mitchell criticizes? What should the interrogation of the visual focus on, if not the ideology behind images or the cultural fantasy which they invite us to participate in? Are there other questions that we need to be asking?

Let me offer a tentative response to these questions. It is telling that in a book that mentions almost everything else, there isn't a single word in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire* that sounds anything like standard media criticism: there are no worries about the operations of the global media (in all their forms) or of their role in "manufacturing consent." In one sense, this is consistent with their championing of immanence over transcendence, which leaves certain worries and forms of criticism out in the cold. It points as well to an absence in our theories of the visual that is in need of filling. For Hardt and Negri, global power is exercised biopolitically: through the coordination of bodies and intensities through institutions, and, increasing, through looser, more flexible systems and modalities which make up Gilles Deleuze's "societies of control." What we lack is an account of the visual culture which understands its specific forms of biopower; and why we lack this, I'd like to argue, is because of where theory has long situated all forms of mass culture. Theorists of the social power of institutions, whether we think of Althusser or Foucault, Weber or Bourdieu, have always implicitly envisioned them as occupying the space of the public. In turn, mass culture has been what occurs at home, or at the level of the individual—that is, at the point where the social intersects with the individual, which is quite different than the submission of the individual to the social in the prison, the school, and so on. The terms in which we have thought mass culture has thus emphasized consciousness, desire, and volition, even while

in another register it has been given the status not as one institutional element of society, but, with the advent of globalization, as equivalent to the social itself.

This is how it appears from the increasingly frequent appeals to Guy Debord's idea of the 'society of the spectacle,' an idea in all its suggestive and mutable vagueness has enjoyed a new found vogue as the description *par excellence* of culture in the era of globalization. *Adbusters* [Figure 2] is not mistaken to find in Debord and Situationism the kind of politics of representation and avant-gardism that has underwritten much cultural criticism; for Debord, after all, Lautréamont offered a model of how one should *épater la bourgeoisie*. There is, however, another Debord and another idea of the spectacle that can guide us in re-imagining how we are to think about the visual today. This is the Debord who insisted on the spectacle as not the "collection of images," but as "a social relation among people, mediated by images." But further still, it is the Debord whom Anselm Jappe has characterized as heir to the thought of György Lukács—a Debord who is not a theorist of the visual and of images at all, but of abstraction and reification. On this reading, the spectacle comes to be "the most highly developed form of this tendency [of capitalism] toward abstraction" (9). It is with a more thorough-going analysis of how the visual amplifies and extends this process of abstraction—how it participates formally, if that is the right word, in the process of capitalist reproduction—that my project will begin. This is still work to be done; suffice to say, however, what will be at issue is not whether and how Ricoeur's aluminum atrocities make their way across the earth and how they deform 'indigenous' cultures, but how the visual helps to manifest and reproduce what is the nightmare of every social system: capitalism.

References

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