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ON THE ACTUARIAL GAZE

From 9/11 to Abu Ghraib

Since the first Gulf War, we have witnessed a global repositioning of the visual communication practices, utilities and techniques of the state and media as regards political mobilization, identity formation, geographic perception, political violence, urban planning, public safety and human rights. The circulation, of anthropologically threatening images of violence, terror, covert infection and social suffering has intensified in our public culture. Examining perceptual systems of global risk, this essay asks: what is the visual structure of the historical catastrophe as mediatic event? How do visual cultures and technologies of risk and threat perception stratify sensory experience? How do visual cultures of risk affect how perpetrators and victims of violence and human rights violations depict their political experience as historical truth?

Keywords visual culture; political violence; Abu Ghraib; catastrophe; aesthetics; risk

Thus does the daily accident itself, with which our newspapers are filled, appears nearly exclusively as a catastrophe of a technological type.
(Junger 1993, p. 31)

While disciplinary power isolates and closes off territories, measures of security lead to an opening and globalization; while the law wants to prevent and prescribe. In a word, discipline wants to produce order, while security wants to guide disorder.

(Agamben 2002, p. 1)

Introduction

Since the first Gulf War, we have witnessed a global repositioning of the visual communication practices, utilities and techniques of the American state and media as regards political mobilization, identity formation, geographic perception, political violence, urban planning, public safety and human rights.

The circulation, of anthropologically threatening images of violence, terror, covert infection and social suffering has intensified in our public culture. This iconography of threat has been stabilized and positioned to serve various political agendas and pedagogies that speak to global risk perception. The World Trade Center disaster in New York, the 'Shock and Awe' display and the Abu Ghraib abuses in Iraq were key global and spectacular expressions of this process. In each case, from differing ideological perspectives, real and imagined threat situations, and attempts to redress harm, or to forestall risk and harm, were visually codified in material destruction, ruins and catastrophic imagery. The scenography of the World Trade Center, Shock and Awe and Abu Ghraib constitutes both an enchainment and an enchantment of ruins, and thus a sequencing of directional history. These disasters became a series of flash images, whose mode of display and circulation specified the danger, aggressiveness and material-reproductive efficacy of imaging technologies as much as they reported the danger, harm and power inherent to terror and war.

To say there can be no war without the production of images, is to say there can be no war without the flash of the camera . . . Linking war in photography and weapons to images, [Ernst] Junger argues that modern technological warfare gives birth to a specifically modern form of perception organized around the experience of danger and shock . . . he notes that the moment of danger can no longer be restricted to the realm of war. Identifying the contemporary zone of danger with the realm of technology in general he claims that the modern type is arising in response to the increased incursion of danger in everyday life.

(Cadava 1997, pp. 51–2)

Writing in 1931, Junger states:

Thus does the daily accident itself, with which our newspapers are filled, appears nearly exclusively as a catastrophe of a technological type . . . the registration of the moment in which danger transpires – a registration that is moreover accomplished whenever it does not capture human consciousness immediately – by means of machines . . . Already today there is hardly an event of human significance toward which the artificial eye of civilization, the photographic lens is not directed. The result is often pictures of demoniacal precision, through which humanity's new relation to danger becomes visible in an exceptional fashion. One has to realize that it is a question here much less of the peculiarity of new tools than of a new style that makes use of technological tools . . . As during the inflation, we continue for a time to spend the usual coins without sensing that the rate of exchange is no longer the same.

(Junger 1993, pp. 31–2)

Aggressive technologies of image making and image imposition, whether used by ‘terrorists’ or the state apparatus, do not simply refract or record an event, but become the event by materially transcribing a political code onto the built environment, cultural memory and the politicized body, and by immersing spectator-participants in fear provoking simulations of space-time actuality. Further, optical technics that crosscut military and civilian practice have been weaponized as both strategic instruments and recreational instruments (such as first-person shooter games), thereby blurring whatever boundaries still pertained between war, desire and pleasure. Examining perceptual systems of global risk, I ask: what is the visual structure of the historical catastrophe as mediatic event? How do visual norms fashion postures of attention and inattention, memory and forgetfulness? How do visual cultures and technologies of risk and threat perception stratify sensory experience? How do visual cultures of risk affect how perpetrators and victims of violence and human rights violations depict their political experience as historical truth?

The cinematics of risk

It should be no surprise that a mystified consciousness of the risk structure of modernity has taken the form of terrorist threat, nor that the political response to accelerated risk assumes the cultural modality of ocular aggression.¹ For as Ulrich Beck informs us:

By risks, I mean all radioactivity which completely evades human perceptual abilities, but also toxins and pollutants in the air, in the water and foodstuffs, together with the accompanying short- and long term effects on plants, animals and people, They induce systematic and often irreversible harm and generally *remain invisible* . . .

(Beck 1992, pp. 22–23, emphasis added)

In this context, the risk structure of modernity is the structure of the imperceptible, that which transcends human perception in everyday life despite its immanence in, and parasitic relations to the everyday. Invisible risk both instigates and is the product of a technologically enhanced gaze devoted to the exposure, fixation and optical stabilization of threat and hazard. Ulrich Beck implicitly posits the risk structure of modernity as a cinematic structure. What eludes everyday sensory perception becomes socially available to experience in the prosthetics of media pictures and reports:

the institutions of industrial society present the dance of the veiling of hazards that are not merely projected onto the world stage but really threaten, and are illuminated under the mass media spotlight.

(Beck 1995, p. 101)

An Enlightenment inspired panoptical dream of control reproduces itself in the dialectic of the veiling and unveiling of hazards (Foucault 1978, pp. 6–19). Bio-political threats are projected onto a multiplicity of world screens in order to hygienically filter and *screen out* negating penetrations from viruses to terrorists. I term this cultural-political agenda the *actuarial gaze*, by which I mean a visual organization and institutionalization of threat perception and prophylaxis, which cross cuts politics, public health, public safety, policing, urban planning and media practice.

The political character of the actuarial gaze is explicit in its hierarchical distance from everyday life structures, and in its devaluation of everyday experience and immediacy in favour of the prognostics of expert knowledge and Enlightenment metaphors of achievable social transparency.² That the sphere of risk transcends the human sensorium carries three serious political implications: the wish for the prosthetic extension of the human sensorium (deemed inadequate to modernity); the consequent assignment of sensory capacity, power and judgment to machinic, automated and institutionalized instruments of perception; and the alignment of risk perception with the wish image. That threat becomes socially available through media pictures and reports is not necessarily a case for a visual realism, as Beck believes, but rather entangles the actuarial gaze with perceptual practices of visual desire and visual commoditization. Threat-perception is subjected to rumour, the imaginary and to marketing. The visual culture of risk reportage circulates catastrophic images as a psychosocial and, ultimately, political desire and currency, from which dubious equivalences and linkages are carved and facile political values are extracted. However, as Junger pointed out, the rate of exchange, the norms of commensuration are not explicit in these equations of insecurity. I will attempt in this essay to excavate the structure of commensuration that organizes the current ratio between risk and violence, the visible and the invisible, embodiment and disembodiment in recent political culture.

Though I do not deny that there are persons, institutions and populations that are at risk, affected by risk, or that reproduce risk, we cannot artificially separate the risk-object from the practices of intervention mandated to identify, classify, underwrite and to interdict threat and hazard. Nor can we ignore the violence generated by interventions to reduce harm. A critical theory of socio-political risk cannot be a simplistic classification of prospective objects of intervention; it must theorize the institutional contexts from which risk-related interventions emerge as well as autonomous responses to risk management; there is no risk data outside of this highly normative context. Risk norms arise from the clash of diverse risk perception systems and threat experiences that order the relations of expert knowledge systems, everyday life actors and structures, and so-called information-rich and information-poor communities and spaces. Risk classifications in the United States, particularly since 9/11, have been arbitrarily fused with categories of race, class ethnicity,

religion, immune system status and political geography. Risk classifications and objects emerge at the intersection of criminalizing, medicalizing and public safety techniques and ideologies, and have no autonomous existence apart from this discursive nexus. Therefore, the risk object is both a hybrid social fact and an internal product of a specialized scopic regime, a constructed registration of radical difference.³ Further, I would contend that the risk object inadequately names culturally and historically problematic blind spots that resist absolute representation, and can only be codified symbiotically in admissible and frequently distorting cultural symbols.

Ulrich Beck writes:

The immediacy of personally and socially experienced misery contrasts today with the intangibility of threats to civilization, which only come to consciousness in scientized thought and cannot be directly related to primary experience . . . The cultural blindness of daily life in the civilization of threat can ultimately not be removed: but culture 'sees' in symbols. Making the threats publicly visible and arousing attention in detail in one's own living space— these are cultural eyes through which the blind 'citoyen' can win back the autonomy of their own judgment.

(Beck 1992, p. 52)

However, under emerging post 9/11 public safety regimes, the everyday is more than just the sphere of visual error, where the imperceptible fails to be objectified, but is increasingly treated as a breeding ground of duplicitous surfaces and structural subversion. The objectification of threat requires a concerted ocular and expanding material occupation of the everyday, which is posited as an obstacle to forensic control of the bio-political sphere and to the ongoing reproduction of stable and governable biopolitical subjects (Agamben 1998, p. 6). Here, we can appreciate to what degree the actuarial gaze replicates the chasm between transcendental sovereignty and the instability of everyday life structures. The actuarial gaze promotes a political technology that unifies culturally dispersed bodies under the symbolic order of a vulnerable yet sovereign national body. In this process, habeas corpus and the body as private property are subjected to an overdetermined fusion: the right to claim bodily integrity, to present before the state and citizenry, a body that is safe, that abjures risk, and is thus combinable with the sovereign body of mass political subjects. To be risk-free or risk-insulated becomes a claim on sovereignty and the elevation or reduction of risk exposure defines citizenship and its alters.

This is why Appadurai identifies growing structural contradictions between social intimates, citizenship and national identity that can culminate in ethnocidal and genocidal wars of racial and ethnic cleansing (Appadurai 1998). Social intimacy and ideologies of sovereignty are polarized, often along highly visual fault-lines of threat perception, in a globalized post-coloniality.

Social intimacy becomes the enabling network along which contamination moves and through which purifying expulsions are violently performed in order to sort out the constitution of the sovereign corporate body. Appadurai proposes the concept of forensic violence, as that which took place in Rwanda and the Balkans, which he associates with the 'vivisectionist' tendencies of ethnocidal atrocity and mutilation. Forensic violence disfigures and opens the victim's body to a screening gaze, and symbolically affixes and repairs biopolitical identity. Appadurai sees such forensic mutilation as an iconic and stabilizing operation reacting to the transitive structure of social identity and the post-colonial nation-state under globalization.

This production of excessive, chronic violence and death by forensic violence, beyond any conceivable means-ends instrumentality, refracts Bataille's notion of alienated sovereignty as a spectacle of excess and wastage (Bataille 1993). Here, the imputed catastrophe is both the object for exercising sovereignty and sovereignty's mirror image; statist intervention in the catastrophic frequently culminates in the 'rational' administration of excessive violence and the ritualized expenditure of technical, economic and human resources.

Global scenography of the sleeper

However, forensic investigation of deviant bodies is not limited to ethnic cleansing, which is but one possible response to globalized insecurity. In the aftermath of 9/11, and the violation of the American corporate body, forensic penetration – in the form of state surveillance, aggression and violence – has been repositioned to investigate, visualize, expose, display and to affix the identity and location of hidden terrorist agency and other circulating transnational threats. These agents of risk include mobile labour, refugees, ethnic and religious diasporas, radioactive material and viral organisms. With the declaration of new global campaigns of public safety, classifying and surveilling pathogenic spaces and their inhabitants have expanded as geopolitical strategies, precipitating a political aesthetics of landscape and social space. Currently *securocratic* scenography is fashioned through a variety of siting prisms that, like the Claude (a black lens used in landscape pictography), impose moralized and disciplining valence on bodies, space and place. These political prisms include, among others, the televising smart bomb, global satellite cartography, urban policing, biometric scanning and the closed circuit camera of the gated community and armoured office building (Davis 1992, Weizman 2004).⁴ War-scapes, famine-scapes, degraded urban environments, the AIDS- and hunger-ravished body, and other images of social risk and/or suffering form a moralized and selective scenography of the Other. This scenography is the creation of the state and the media dedicated to

identifying, managing and the mass marketing of risk. As technologically structured images of catastrophe take on a life-form and agency of their own they cease to merely report threat and become productive and reproductive mechanisms, specifying both the limits and the programmatic targets of sovereignty and governmentality. Under catastrophic conditions, projections and fears, visual culture becomes material culture. Ulrich Beck's cultural symbols through which society 'sees' risk, are not solely cognitive ideations, but have to be fabricated from concrete circumstances and bodies, and then forcefully retro-branded onto social subjects and spaces that are seen as originating and circulating risk.

Charged with restoring or sustaining security, catastrophe-response takes the form of forensic visualization of the now globalized sleeper-body: the secret sharer and social intimate who harbours covert violence, disease, spatial delimitation, religious alterity or alternative economic practice (Feldman 1997, Nicholas Mirzoeff personal communication) The global sleeper subverts transnational networks of commoditization and must be rendered post-circulatory to the degree that the sleeper harbours the end of mandated forms of economic, sexual and bio-political circulation. At the same time, as a profiled bearer of risk, the sleeper body is the enabling currency of the public safety apparatus. Bio-political policing does not eradicate its object, but requires its managed reproduction within discreet security and publicity apparatuses; the ongoing retrieval and presentation of threat-profiles legitimates the security archive (Feldman 1994, Feldman 2003, Agamben 2002).

Bearers of risk are projected as symbolic anti-capital, their spatial purchases on the social are subject to interdiction within labour, sexual, political and speech economies. For the actuarial gaze, the global sleeper screens off its identity behind the ostensibly duplicitous social surfaces of everyday life; here that which is screened-off must be recoded by media and government into surfaces of threat- display, a security profile and an alarm signal. The arresting power of optical technology to stabilize image flows, to freeze temporalities of urban and global circulation, is conjoined with legal and militarized powers of arrest and apprehension. The actuarial gaze is concerned with the powers of arrest in its fullest perceptual and criminalizing gauge. At sites like Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib, in the local policing of economic, racial and class margins, and in the medical and economic management of compromised immune systems, the actuarial- forensic gaze renders risk perception haptic, tactile, penetrative and transformative.

This new ideological environment promotes 'a police concept of history,' that is the reframing of historical process into the divisions of ideal safe space and duplicitous, distopic and risk-laden space (Ranciere 1988). In this history, visible spaces of order are undermined by invisible yet impinging spaces of disorder. The police concept of history advances the normative sociology and

visual culture of the profile: who belongs to and who is out of place and the enforcement of spatial behaviours (Ranciere 1998). What Ranciere did not anticipate is that the police concept of history would be retooled for the new globalized economy, to the degree that it promotes a normative notion of the transnational system as an orderly space of economic circulation in which bodies and persons fulfil proper functions and occupy proper differential positions. Improper or transgressive circulation, symbolized in icons of mobile biosocial pollution, is feared and attacked. The infiltrating terrorist is thus both an instance of, and a catchment concept for, the idea of improper circulation. Cognate transgressors from drug dealers to undocumented immigrants partake in the illicit substance of the terrorist.

Policing in this framework of ordered/disordered circulation is about the visible distribution of differential functions and position within a society and between societies; it stands opposed to the emergence of new subjecthoods who resist the norms of circulation and/or who practice illicit forms of cultural/economic/sexual/political exchange and transaction that are deemed infra-political. These are people who 'are between several names, statuses and identities; between humanity and inhumanity, citizenship and its denial' (Ranciere 1992, p. 61). This form of policing emerges with the disappearance of enforceable physical national borders and compensates for the loss of tangible borders by creating new boundary systems that are virtual and mediatized, such as satellite, biometric and digital surveillance nets. In turn, the virtualized border gives rise to the politics of the spectre: the ghost in the circulatory machine, such as the ever elusive Bin Laden, border-crossing drug mules, migrant- conveying coyotes, compromised immune systems and biochemical weapons.

Interruption and interdiction of the moral economy of circulation is characterized as a distopic 'risk-event,' a disruption of the imputed smooth functioning of the circulation apparatus in which nothing is meant to happen, where people, things, and cultural traffic are meant to keep to mandated channels and spaces. 'Normalcy' is the non-event, which in effect means the proper distribution of functions and positions, and the maintenance of appropriate social profiles. However circulation is bivalent, it is the visual structure of social surfaces, the armature of everyday life, the insignia of modernity, and yet, it betrays and harbours dangerous and infecting alterity.

The actuarial gaze, and its forensic interface with circulating clandestine bodies, intensifies and imperially expands the ideology of Bertillon's and Gallton's nineteenth-century bio-metric and surveillance methodologies, which articulated policing criminal photography, phrenology, finger printing and state archives (Sekula 1986). Agamben sees the origin of bio-power in the nineteenth-century fusion of policing and public health, resulting in the emergence of a concerted public safety and policing ideology (Agamben 2002: 147). This fusion of the police concept of history and public health was

exemplified by the Fascist articulation of biological sovereignty and symbolic geography as Ernst Bloch identified in the 1930s:

The nation . . . becomes in medical terms . . . a unity filled with blood, a purely organic river basin from whose past humanity stems into whose future its children go. Thus, nationhood drives time, indeed history, out of history, it is space and organic fate, nothing else . . . Nations are units of blood says the Fascist sociologist Freyer.

(Bloch 1990, p. 90)

Bio-politics, as visual culture, spatializes the historical, an appropriate response to the vertigo of urban and globalized economies that are both feared and fantasized as made up of mobile streams of economic, ideological and microbiological infiltrators. With globalization, and the consequent destabilization of the cartographic nation-state, the medicalized-forensic nation-state reconstructs hegemony through foundational spatial metaphors of 'homeland security', and total information awareness systems. In turn, corporate antibodies, or infiltrating trans-national moles and sleepers, are represented as purely spatial threats and not as indicative of historical contradiction, politically constructed cultural difference and unreconciled counter-memories of social suffering.

Screening traumatic realism

The actuarial gaze is not only pre-emptively deployed, as in the orchestration of the invasion of Iraq, but also practices an aesthetics of space/time compression that renders unfolding disaster serviceable to the expansion of this scopic regime. Consider media's stabilization and synchronic reorganization of diachronic fragments in the circular video repetition of the attack, burning and collapse of the World Trade Center. The actuality aesthetic of televisual witnessing used mechanical repetition and digital manipulation, such as freeze-framing, and slow motion, to reverse, spatialize and petrify violence; thereby extracting the event known as 9/11 from chaotic temporal debris and from the affective flows of terror and disorder. This aesthetic of catastrophe was not qualitatively different from the space-time compression of the descending televising smart bomb during the first Gulf War. In both instances, the long prepared for gravitational pull of advanced optical technologies, the fusion of mass production and mass destruction technics, and cartographic air dominance, formed a media and military aesthetic that was transposable to a number of locales – a series of Ground Zeros, as both battlefields and as memorials of retribution. The monument and the catastrophic are two sides of the same gaze, or two symmetrical modalities for producing and anchoring

mass spectatorship. Since the Lisbon earthquake (1755), catastrophe has leant itself to a monumental and memorializing panoramic aesthetic. However, in late-modernity, panoramic visualization of disaster is no longer simply an after-effect and a recollection of violence, but rather the vehicle for the delivery and legitimation of a violence that now advances geo-political visual sovereignty.⁵

The video extraction of 9/11 created a temporal stasis, or at least reinforced and visually elaborated a stasis that originated in the immediate shock of the assault. However, in the news cycle of visual repetition – the buildings attacked, the smoke and flames, and the eventual collapse – televisual actuality also imposed an artificial and eminently normative and fictive linear time onto the event horizon of 9/11. Television ultimately endowed a restorative linearized chronology to structural chaos. The temporal fragments of the attack were instantaneously assembled as a narrative, a reconstruction that was serviceable as an ‘arché’ or origin point for a new global risk reduction agenda: ‘the war on terrorism.’ In this manner, a cogent traumatic structure was generated by compressing the time-locus of the attack and the simulated times of its video reiteration; the synthesis of the two temporalities both produced and managed shock as a public emotion. I suggest that this screen experience was also a *screening-off* of the actuality, by which I mean the visual displacement of the complex social suffering and unreconciled history expressed, mobilized and created by the attack; a displacement and editing that rendered the event narratable to an anesthetized cinematized consciousness. Hal Foster has identified this process of screening/screening-off as ‘traumatic realism’ (Foster 1998, p. 354). For Foster the activation of traumatic repetition needs to be distinguished from the analogical representation of violence and catastrophe:

Lacan describes the traumatic as a missed encounter with the real. As missed the real cannot be represented; it can only be repeated . . . repetition is not reproduction in the sense of representation (of a referent) or simulation (of a pure image, a detached signifier). Rather repetition serves to screen the real understood as traumatic . . . repetition produces a second order of trauma, here at the level of technique.

(Foster 1998, pp. 354–358)

The political emergency inaugurated by 9/11 emerged as a visual construct that stranded the American polity in what Foster identifies as a second technical order of screening/repeating shock and trauma. This technical instrumentation of reproducible trauma is now embodied in the prosthetics of the emerging forensic state apparatus, in the advanced technology of Shock and Awe warfare, in the negative optics of collateral damage, and, most recently, in the Abu Ghraib torture regimen and photography. I would contend that the actuarial gaze, which screens, repeats and screens-off shock and trauma, has

been progressively institutionalized as a technical order of total spectrum dominance. Under regimes of spectrum domination, risk production becomes optically circumscribed, while the depth structures and contingencies of historical emergency and crisis remain functionally shrouded. Spectrum dominance is a forensic fixation on bio-political exposure, on the coercive displacement of bodily, and socio-political interiors onto the outside, and yet, it is also an exposure and a posing of threat where much is excluded, filtered and deleted.

What is screened out of this traumatic repetition frequently becomes the terrain of human rights violation. The actuarial gaze, as much as it exposes and classifies, also creates zones of visual editing, structural invisibility, and *cordon sanitaire*, resulting in the decreasing capacity of surveilled, stigmatized and vulnerable groups, classified as risk-bearers, to make visible their social suffering, shrinking life-chances and human rights claims in the global public sphere. To the very degree that the traumatic realism of the state and media monopolizes truth claiming about hazard, threat and violence over and against the everyday life experience of populations and spaces objectified as affected and infected by risk, human rights violations are rendered invisible or marginal.

In the aftermath of the World Trade Center attack, the manipulation of visual debris and fragments, and the screening of trauma through cinematic repetition was not a self-evident or foregrounded fact for the televisual spectator, who was immersed in the seeming totality of actuality simulation, and not in its conditions of visual production. The visually protective shock/numbing – created through replay, optical stabilization and the ordered chronology of linearity promoted by rerunning the disaster – can be characterized as mediatic therapeusis. Out of the raw material of 9/11 the media constructed the kernel of a visually tangible traumatic and repeatable periodization, a before and after, and persisted in retransmitting it endlessly like a binary signal, and as a national alarm. Here repeatable trauma was both a temporal construct and subject to spatial duplication or mimesis. Ground Zero, as temporal marker, would be geographically disseminated as historical origin for other societies, as was to occur in the bombing of Shock and Awe, and the subsequent regime-change and compulsory democratization of Iraq. The traumatic realism of Ground Zero mutated into the production of two intersecting forms of the historical: history as phantasmagoria and history as ruined nature.

Phantasmagoria comes into being when under the constraints of its own limitations, modernity's latest products come close to the archaic. Every step forward is at the same time a step into the remote past.

(Adorno 1981, p. 31)

Under commodified image regimes, the phantasmagoric conceals the conditions of its production, screens off its own origins and is presented as nature, as originary. Catastrophe reactivates gnostic history that naturalizes the political in a theory of evil; gnostic theodicy organizes time and space into fixed moral dualities that cannot to be undone by transcultural process and counter narratives of domination.

Shock and awe, collateral damage and the mass subject at Abu Ghraib

It is no coincidence that the two governing tropes of recent public safety warfare have been the technological onslaught of shock and awe and the excuse rationality of collateral damage; both forms of violence are invested in regulating the circulation of images. Shock and awe and collateral damage, like the police concept of history, visually distribute death and destruction into domains of the event and the non-event, the visible and the invisible. Though here normalcy is predicated on what is not seen, that damage which is supplementary and incidental; undetailed death enframes 'Shock and Awe' as an antiseptic digitized and visually seductive war. Anonymous victims of collateral damage stand in visual opposition to the sensational violence of 'Shock and Awe'. The special effects of Shock and Awe can be seen as yet another screening strategy that visually displaced the horrific material consequence of massive bombardment from the air. The dialectic of Shock and Awe and collateral damage, what is repeatedly shown and what is not shown or protectively screened-off, orchestrates the public sensorium of televisual spectators for whom violence is performed, displayed and shrouded (Feldman 1994). This dialectic creates structures of attention and distraction for the polity of televisual witness. A political economy of attention realigns perceptual systems with political agency and elicitation of consent. Perceptual alignment or consent is not necessarily the persuasion of opinion, what it achieves is to structurally circumscribe opinion formation within a closed circuit of visual rhetoric and visually elaborated truth claims, and thus, within a mediatised politics of suggestion. Ideology can be internalized or resisted, but both stances will never be completely detached from the machinic and digital appropriation of the witnesses' gaze and its positioning within a media structured consciousness that has a long perceptual history centred on the automation of attention.

In her study of African- American rumour-lore, Patricia Turner links a politics of suggestion to risk perception, in this instance a preoccupation with the protection of bodily boundaries, as exemplified by widespread stories about toxic fast-food products targeting black consumers and conspiracy theories regarding the invention of AIDS (Turner 1993). Beyond the historical

specifics of African American rumour lore, we can recognize a politics of suggestion in the post-catastrophic political culture of 9/11, with its fixation on at-risk social and bodily thresholds. Turner's linking of rumour, commodification and public health with a sense of threatened anthropological integrity situates a politics of suggestion within formal mass communicative structures and everyday perceptual structures, as opposed to its confinement to exceptional or idiosyncratic forms of human communication. Peter Sloterdijk also traces a pre-Fascist politics of suggestion to early mass media culture, by examining popular tutors and books on autosuggestion and wakeful self-hypnosis in Weimer Germany:

One bibliography lists for the period of the Weimer Republic alone around seven hundred scientific and popular publications on the themes of Couéism, hypnosis, auto hypnosis and suggestion . . . In contrast to Freudian psychoanalysis . . . [tutors of self-suggestion] . . . emphasize not problems of the conscious and the unconscious but those of attentiveness and inattentiveness. The phenomenon of suggestion touches on the domain of automatic consciousness not the unconscious as such.

(Sloterdijk 1987, pp. 490–493)

Sloterdijk captures the technological colonization of modern consciousness in the political passage from the unconscious to automatic consciousness, and to a politics of suggestion as a function of mass spectatorship. The coupling of such a politics with an automated consciousness is possible when perception has been mechanized, mediatized and detached from the individual spectator and given over to an apparatus of interpellation formative of a collective subject of perception and witnessing. Walter Benjamin observed this dynamic when he comprehended orchestrated and cinematized Nazi political rallies, replete with awe-inspiring light shows, as an aestheticization of modern violence. The Fascist political rally was a theatre that incorporated the individual spectator into a virtualized corporate body of sovereignty. The construction of this virtual mass subject aligned political attention, and a politics of suggestion; with mass consumption aesthetics (Buck Morss 1988). This was mechanical reproduction in the service of the mythographic spectacle, in which violence was sold as a political commodity, as a binding media of crowd formation, and through the cinematics of the mass rally, made palatable as a mechanized and routine efficacy. The aestheticization of modern violence was only possible through political technologies of suggestion and visually orchestrated mass consciousness, which conveyed perceptual agency to the screen, the lens and to the virtualized mass bodies that were integral to the spectacle of Fascist sovereignty. Shock and Awe, and its light show, just as much as the 1930s Fascist spectacle, with all of its advanced visual and sonic effects, constructs the crowd, the polity, as both a cinematic object and as mass spectatorship.

Michael Warner has identified the virtual body of the 'mass subject' of modernity as a creation of visual ideology and optical technologies:

Where printed public discourse formerly relied on a rhetoric of abstract disembodiment, visual media – including print – now displays bodies for a range of purposes, admiration, identification appropriation, scandal and so forth.

(Warner 1993, p. 242)

For Hal Foster, Warner's mass subject is explicitly associated with the perception and management of catastrophe and virtual embodiment:

The mass subject cannot have a body except the body it witnesses . . . disaster and death were necessary to evoke this subject, for in a spectacular society the mass subject often appears as an effect of the mass media, or of a catastrophic failure of technology (the plane crash), or more precisely, of both (the news of such catastrophic failure) . . . in its guise as witness the mass subject reveals its sadomasochistic aspect, for this subject is often split in relation to a disaster; even as he or she may mourn the victims, even identify with them masochistically, he or she may also be thrilled sadistically by the victims of whom he or she is not one.

(Foster 1998, p. 366)

The mass subject comes into visibility as simultaneously the witness and victim of the catastrophic. Adorno explicitly related the formation of the mass subject to the mass production of the catastrophic in modernity:

In the concentration camp it was no longer an individual who died, but a specimen . . . Genocide is the absolute integration, it is on its way wherever men are leveled off . . . until one exterminates them literally as deviations from the concept of their total nullity. Auschwitz confirmed the philosopheme of pure identity as death.

(Adorno 1973, p. 362)

For whom was the victim of genocidal catastrophe a singular deviation from collective nullity and ultimately fated to be re-embodied as a specimen? In the camps it was not only the camp personnel, but also the symbiotic mass subject of the Nazi Reich whose identity was structurally embedded in the expulsion and extermination of a typified Other. Such acts of mass violence were enabled and aestheticized by technocratic rationality, mass production techniques and mythographic racial reduction in which the bodies of victims were handled and circulated as mass articles within the state apparatus.

As I shall discuss, in reference to the photography of Abu Ghraib, the creation of one ascendant mass subject requires the repeatable catastrophic

production of another. In the aftermath of an unrepresentable Holocaust, the technologies of the screen have intensified their display of disaster and death as mass commodity that visually orchestrates and circulates disfigured bodies as political specimens and stigmatized emblems of risk and threat. The mass subject, the subject of mass threat and violence, and the subject of mass spectatorship of violence, are both products of the traumatic realism of the screen/ spectator dyad. The media construction of the mass subject through violence becomes an explicitly political problematic when we recognize that the mass subject is a technologically mediated response to the problem of popular sovereignty. Claude Lefort has proposed that under democratic regimes, popular sovereignty is a empty signifier, a vacancy, that is intermittently occupied and activated by virtual representations and surrogates of 'the people' – a transcendental political subject that, in late modernity, transmutes into media-centered virtualized mass spectatorship (Lefort 1988, p. 17).

Shock and awe is more than a military tactic; it is simultaneously an exercise in war as visual culture for the consumption of the televisual audience, a technology of mass spectatorship, and an ideology of American modernization. Hegel viewed the march of Bonaparte's armies across a national geography as materializing the idea of progress (Buck Morss 2000). The destructive progress of aerial bombing across a civilian terrain has much the same effect. In 1900, Georg Simmel identified sensory shock as the price of progressive modernity and urbanism; perceptual shock was the psychological medium in which the modern announced itself and refashioned new forms of personhood. Modernity's shock was a conversion experience creating new social subjects, amenable to emerging technological and commodity regimes and work disciplines (Simmel 1971). The current ideology of shock and awe fuses technological and theological norms, for it too is a form of accelerated conversion: the rapid Americanization of the Oriental Other through technological onslaught and subsequent post war therapeutic treatment and rehabilitation. President Bush's proposal to tear down Abu Ghraib prison encapsulates the core assumption of securocratic modernization and its incomprehension of the situation and nation it seeks to transform. The attempted erasure of Abu Ghraib, and its replacement by a sparkling new up-to-date American designed prison, simply extends the motivating logic of the invasion and occupation of Iraq as a campaign of political conversion much more encompassing than regime-change. Already the new supposedly torture-free wing of Abu Ghraib that has been established in the wake of the scandal has been baptized 'Camp Redemption.'

The televised dialectic of Shock and Awe and collateral damage cohere into an apparatus of traumatic realism that fashions spectatorship to the degree that this dialectic both shows and repeats the traumatic, while screening the viewer from historical contradiction and the contexts of social suffering. The

spectatorship of Shock and Awe/ collateral damage did not only encompass the audience in the American living room, but those soldiers commissioned to liberate and occupy Iraq, including those soldiers and civilian experts who administered Abu Ghraib prison; the very jailors who viewed interrogation violence as necessary collateral damage to the prevention of terrorism, and yet were compelled to consume and disseminate their collateral damage as a visual artefact. These interrogators were culturally positioned within an optical circuitry and prosthetics of traumatic realism that stitched together the moralized ruins of the World Trade Center disaster, Shock and Awe and their own ruinous image making at Abu Ghraib.

We have glimpsed the violence of the actuarial gaze in the exercises of torture and humiliation Iraqi detainees were compelled to rehearse at Abu Ghraib. The first series of photographs released from Abu Ghraib had the celebratory and horrific carnivalesque atmosphere of the picture postcards that were sold as souvenirs of the lynching and mutilation of African-Americans in the 1920s (Allen 2000, Antiwar.com 2004). These scenes also resembled the practice of 'battle proofing,' endemic in the Vietnam War, in which new 'in-country' soldiers were ordered to bayonet massed piles of Vietnamese corpses as an exercise in dehumanizing the enemy, thereby desensitizing and inuring the greenhorn soldier to the human consequences of their violence (Feldman 1991, p. 233).

In contrast, the second wave of released Abu Ghraib photographs revealed another more operational reality: the mundane programmed logistics of an extremely violent sensory deprivation and behavioural modification regime (Antiwar.com 2004). These photos are frequently taken from a prison tier above the enacted violence, or at a remove from the scene of torture, and capture the viewpoint of an omniscient clinical spectator monitoring a series of experiments meant to trigger signs of subjugation obedience, confusion and capitulation, i.e. shock and awe. Here, the camera is not just a recording instrument but also a penetrative device appropriating the psyche, sexuality and gender identity of the hooded Iraqi detainee as his body is turned inside out by the regimen. We view a well-oiled apparatus going through its daily round of exercises. There is nothing shameful or hidden here, nothing clandestine, the photographer is part of the apparatus of intimidation and exposure. This clinical photography completes the jailors' visual and spatial command over the hooded and rigid Iraqis who have been deprived of sight, bodily mobility and sexual integrity. As in the televisual logic of the first and second Gulf wars, that fused spectatorship at home with satellite imaging, real-time reportage and visualizing smart bombs abroad, the Abu Ghraib photos are a continuation of American spectrum dominance over the recalcitrant body of the 'terrorist' Other. It is the dependency of the actuarial gaze on the visual/virtual command and control of the terrorist Other that also explains the trickster photographs of American soldiers celebrating their sexual humiliation

of Iraqi men (Antiwar.com 2004). What was staged in these scenes is both an annotation to the routine photographs of day-to-day sensory deprivation and engineered terror, and an extension of the behaviour modification culture of 'Gitmoization' (interrogation practices deployed at, and disseminated from, Guantanamo prison).

The 'porno' photos and tableaux were an empowering projection of American fantasies and sexuality onto Iraqi bodies. The figure of the woman as the agent of humiliation, subtended by those pictures of detainees wearing women's underwear or leashed like S&M actors, was axial to this fantasy formation. We are reminded of those carnival rites of inversion that Natalie Zemon Davis characterized as woman on top (Zemon-Davis 1975). Posed astride these huddled naked bodies, with her thumb jutting into the air, Private Englund was a transitional mediating figure and a symbolic conduit who acquires male gender power and cache from her victims wherever she performed her dominance over naked Iraqi men; power that passed through, her, like sympathetic magic, to be mimetically transferred to the watching male interrogators through these very poses and images. The Iraqi detainees, in turn, were subjected to a gender inversion, they were feminized through the visual exposure of vulnerable bodily orifices by and for their custodians. This gender inversion may refract simplistic and reductive assumptions about Arab masculinity held by the jailors, but the latter were not passive bystanders to their own experiments with the Iraqi body. If Iraqis are being reduced to a feminized passivity and vulnerability, then conversely their Americans abusers, through their female surrogate, were being (re) masculinized by their acts and images.

The visual circuitry of gender reversal between the prisoners and the jailors is an early admission on the part of line soldiers that the liberation of Iraq has descended into mission drift. The scope and effectiveness of the Iraqi resistance, the chronic attacks, the steady haemorrhaging of American casualties, the general antipathy of the Iraqi masses towards their putative liberators, has positioned American soldiers in a position of 'feminized' vulnerability; for they lack control over the integrity of the American military body confronted with unmanageable terror – the very post 9/11 condition Iraq was invaded to interdict. Just as much as political support at home for the war is contingent on an orchestrated and highly edited flow of identity-sustaining images, Abu Ghraib revealed that the Americanization of Iraq had first to be mimetically experienced as visual substance if it was to be credible and tangible to those charged with carrying it out at the front line. Thus, these photos were circulated and consumed by military personnel as recreational artefacts both within and outside the prison. Some soldiers sent these images home to their families.

The Abu Ghraib rituals were ceremonies of nostalgia by which the perpetrators reacquired, if only in an allegorical idiom, their former sense of

mastery and command in a situation that is rapidly lurching beyond their grasp. That is why we know that the extraction of information was not the terminal goal of these rituals. For the hooded and faceless bodies were manipulated and posed as depersonalized and typified ethnic specimens, that is as mass subjects and virtualized bodies and not as information bearing individuals capable of discourse and confession. In fact, the useful military intelligence obtained at Abu Ghraib has been deemed negligible by army command (Danner 2004).

Abu Ghraib was a forensic operation, employing vivisectionist forms of optical penetration to produce images of subjugation that would conversely restore and suture the threatened thresholds of the corporate American military body. It is my suggestion that these images circulated as protective charms, a sympathetic magic, in which optical appropriation and virtual possession of the subjugated, abstracted body of the Iraqi terrorist mimetically empowered the military spectator. The image making by American soldiers, intelligence experts and private security contractors at Abu Ghraib, most of whom were also televisual spectators, repeated, as grotesque farce, the tragic assumptions of a national 'catastrophilia' that precipitated and legitimated the post-9/11 invasion of Iraq.

Catastrophilia is a particular form of risk perception, to the degree that it mobilizes the politics of ruins, in which an emblematic act of material destruction materializes directional historical time such as narratives of modernization, political conversion, regime change, compulsory democratization and the idea of progress (Sloterdijk 1987): 'In allegory, history appears as nature in decay or ruins and the temporal mode is one of retrospective contemplation' (Buck-Morss 1988, p. 168).

As I have discussed earlier, both the attack on the World Trade Center, and its mimetic repetition in the Shock and Awe display, were images of ruin that were mediatically structured as motors of linearized time. These events were depicted as cosmogonic ruptures that inaugurated or exemplified a new historical direction, a newly discovered political telos, which replaced the bipolar politics of the last half of the twentieth century. This teleology of allegorical ruins can be identified in the torture/humiliation practices at Abu Ghraib. The photographs of naked, leashed Iraqi male bodies and their exposed orifices may not have shown classical skeletal images of *memento mori*, but never the less, these photos were made to show specimen bodies, de-socialized, de-Islamized and de-masculinized, whose displayed organs and mortified flesh exposed a subjugated and damaged interiority. The photographs captured now ruined bodies owned, penetrated and fully occupied by American captors and their cameras. Thus, it is no coincidence that the American military has also occupied and militarized major archaeological ruins of Iraq such as the cultural heritage sites of Babylon and the Ziggurat of Ur (BBC, 15 January 2005). The American military has turned heritage sites into weaponized base camps, and in doing so, they further damaged these already pillaged locales. This

militarization of the Iraqi heritage landscape is an occupation of primary visual anchors of residual Iraqi national identity. Laying claim to, and nationalizing ruins, in Iraq or at Ground Zero, is to lay claim, to historical time. Laying claim to ruins, in the form of cultural artefacts, buildings or bodies, is to assert that the proprietary agent controls and manages historical catastrophe, which can be embodied in the manipulated iconography of the fragmented. Finally, laying claim to ruined spaces and bodies is to establish an aesthetics of catastrophe, a visual idiom that was integral to recent political periodization from 9/11 to Shock and Awe.

Conclusion: auto-immunization of the mass subject

Political violence achieves a new semiosis in a globalized media terrain. Modern visual media has encouraged the myth of totalizing depiction, it fashions a world picture that Kracauer as early as the 1920s identified as a reduction, a concentrate and abbreviation that passes itself off as the whole: 'The aim of the illustrated newspaper is the complete reproduction of the world accessible to the photographic apparatus' (Kracauer 1995, pp. 57–8).

Kracauer saw such photographic actuality as a visual process of displacement and as a form of material violence, which excluded non-depictable and non-visual terrains of memory and everyday life experience. This process of iconic displacement or what I have termed screening-off, can be characterized as sacrificial substitution, a mythographic operation wherein the visual part stands in for the experiential and historical whole. Traumatic realism, as the aesthetics of catastrophe, is exactly this process of repeatable sacrifice, object substitution, displacement and filtering. The cultural logic of sacrificial depiction is not representation but substitution (Girard 1977). Post 9/11 risk perception, terrorism and torture, concentrate multiplex social identity or terrain in typified staged and surrogate forms that are aggressively refashioned to display visually accessible political transcripts. Abu Ghraib abuse was a sacrificial manipulation and reconstruction of the prisoners as political specimens and as pacified images of interdicted threat, rendered amenable to political circulation, at least among the occupation forces. Modern sacrificial violence, from state torture to suicide bombers, depends on, and reinforces mediatic displacement and surrogation. Mediatic depiction of the catastrophic, and the sacrificial act of violence both reduce and restrict the real to repeatable screening codes of abbreviation, metaphor and architectural and somatic allegory which can sustain and orchestrate risk perception and related truth claims. In this framework, the ideology of spectatorship and the visual artefacts that emerged from Abu Ghraib were not aberrations but integral components of the visual culture of risk screening that emerged from the 9/11 catastrophe.

Ernst Junger was perhaps the first to comprehend that media technology dematerialized modern warfare and transformed vision into a material force and weaponry; he saw the camera lens as capable of freezing the moment of danger which enframed traumatic shock in a manageable virtual format. For Junger, optical technology creates an aesthetic of detachment, the only mode of perception, following Simmel, that can be commensurate to the incursions of technological shock in everyday life. Photographic detachment neutralizes social pain, for the photograph

. . . stands outside the realm of sensibility. It has something of a telescopic quality: one can tell that the object photographed was seen by an insensitive and invulnerable eye. The eye registers equally well a bullet in midair or the moments in which a man is torn apart by an explosion.

(Junger 1989, p. 208)

The subordination of everyday life to spectral appropriation creates a technology of spatial control and occupation:

Photography is an expression of our characteristically cruel way of seeing. Ultimately it is a new version of the evil eye, a form of magical possession. One feels this acutely in places where a different cultic substance is still alive. At the moment when a city like Mecca can be photographed, it moves into the colonial sphere.

(Junger 1989, p. 209)

The mediatization of war and the weaponization of media produces a new armoured perceptual structure:

If one were to characterize with a single word the human type that is evolving in our time, one might say that among his most obvious characteristics is his possession of a second consciousness. This second, colder consciousness shows itself in the ever more sharply developed ability to see oneself as an object . . . the second consciousness is focused on the person who stands outside the sphere of pain.

(Junger 1989, pp. 207–8)

I have theorized that the Abu Ghraib photographs and the wider culture of risk imaging in post 9/11 America function as a form of sympathetic magic, providing a protective charm for the spectator/consumer of risk and threat. Alain Corbin described the hygienic deodorization and sterilization of the medicalized body in the nineteenth century as the origins of a modern narcissistic subject of modernity, the self-obsessed armoured subject compulsively monitoring bodily thresholds for signs of contaminating penetration and compromise (Corbin 1988). Today, compulsive visual and aural consumption

of risk, threat and catastrophe now function as hygienic exercises writ large, in which the bodies that are monitored and surveilled are the virtualized bodies of the risk-bearer and the at-risk spectator. Both the media and the state promote a hygienic discipline-of-the-spectator-self, by which the catastrophic is simulated in the form of containable information and constrainable bodies. The current informatization of consciousness is advanced through a politics of suggestion – the media’s rehearsal of repeated catastrophe and the virtual auto-immunization of American bodies through this very economy of attention.

Paul Virilio (2000) has identified technological modernity with the utility and cultural centrality of the accidental and the disastrous, core epistemological events that allow for technocratic correction, and ultimately societal self-definition. His theory of accident-ridden modernity as the idea of progress, establishes catastrophilia as integral to the perceptual and technocratic structure of contemporary everyday life. Catastrophe is instrumentalized as a classification system and as chronotope creating normative time. Consequently, I would suggest that the cultural narcissism of the mass subject of risk and threat perception takes the form of the desire to consume virtual and symbolic disaster as a prophylaxis against the real. There is an actuarial structure of perception, a cultural underwriting of risk perception and risk exposure, which relies on media virtuality and the visual manipulation of other people’s bodies, usually along cultural, race, class, gender and religious fault-lines. This optical engagement in risk and threat, despite its position of exposure and actuality simulation, is lulled and reassured by the promised rigor of antiseptic and virtualized state technics and violence, and enforced by the constructed blind spots or screens of collateral damage. Thus, despite distaste and momentary horror, the American viewing public recognized their secret sharers and doppelgangers, and an optics of participation, in the acts and vision of fellow citizen-spectators at Abu Ghraib, where current American catastrophilia was made manifest in the falsely redemptive screen of the disfigured Iraqi body.

Notes

- 1 Ocular aggression, in the form of beliefs concerning the ‘evil eye’ is a mainstay of the Anthropology of the Mediterranean and is usually classified as an involuntary gesture of the body. Thus, despite its pre-modern antecedents, the practice of ocular aggression and the modern visual ideologies this essay addresses share certain traits: automatism, a reaction to spatial impingement, and ideologies of pollution and purification (see Gilmore 1982, pp.175–205 for further discussion and bibliography).
- 2 Since many of the tendencies being discussed in this essay are associated with an ideology of compulsory democracy, I should call attention to one of the major studies of early democracy and media, Jean Starobinski’s *Invention of*

- Liberty, 1700–1789*, which discusses the relation of utopian democratic spaces and the aesthetic of visual transparency, particularly in relation to Rousseau's notion of the Festival (Starobinski 1987).
- 3 'This is the politically visible, that horizon of actors, objects and events that constitute the worldview and circumscribed reality of the political emergency zone – the gathered and linked components of crisis... By a scopic regime I mean the agendas and techniques of political visualization: the regimens that prescribe modes of seeing and object visibility and that proscribe or render untenable other modes and objects of perception. A scopic regime is an ensemble of practices and discourses that establish the truth claims, typicality and credibility of visual acts and objects and politically correct modes of seeing' (Feldman 1997, pp. 29–30).
 - 4 Claude Lorrain's (b.1600, d.1682) 'Black Glass' or 'the Claude' was used to filter out certain colours in landscape prospects in order to achieve a unity of tonal intensity in the painting of the scene, The Claude was used to fashion a moralized and sentimentalized landscape. Later European painters used the instrument to Europeanize alien colonial landscapes in accordance with romantic aesthetics.
 - 5 The Lisbon earthquake of 1755 was the major world event of the period to be repeatedly subjected to panoramic display and commemoration by a variety of pre-cinematic technologies throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These exhibits pioneered the fusion of disaster reportage and panoramic optics as both news and recreation

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