

The Visual, the True, and the Political

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Some medial questions consistently recur, requiring that we re-tread old territories to identify new developments in light of shifting formations. Visuality is one such medial nexus, bound to fundamental epistemic and political contestations and continually the site of technological and discursive novelty. Visuality encompasses light, interfaciality, mapping, the technics of screens and images and projections, the whole panoply of representational theorization, the dialectic of the visible and invisible, the priority of certain senses above others and their relationship to the perceptible, the knowable, the actionable. In all these forms, the visual turns upon and contributes to a regime of truth, and a horizon of political possibility. Thus, the question of the visual, as Judith Butler (2009, p. 64) puts it:

is hardly new but bears repeating... that whether and how we respond to the suffering of others, how we formulate moral criticisms, how we articulate political analyses, depends upon a certain field of perceptible reality having already been established”.

The basis of the political is a field or condition of truth: what is registered as real and as requiring address—the episteme in which struggle, violence, or resistance occurs—shapes and directs those vectors of action. What is visible shapes what is valued. In turn, the political contestation of this very visible field—what is seen and what is registered—inflects any regime of truth. In this way, the visual straddles the concerns of both truth and politics, revealing their mutual imbrication.

Visuals encompass live-streams, videos, photographs, artwork, memes and cartoons that are utilised as tools for social and political commentary. They represent acts of political defiance seeking to challenge underlying power relationships. The mediatization of violence brings atrocities into the public eye, and compels authorities and social media audiences to respond to them, whether with action, denial, dissimulation, or distraction. In the digital landscape, the circulation of visuals works as a powerful force for activism, political engagement, solidarity and for speaking truth to power (Kasra, 2017) as is evidenced by numerous local and global examples. Video footage of George Floyd’s death in police custody undoubtedly propelled a resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement, mobilised activism and sparked global protests. Bearing witness to violent deaths involves taking responsibility for the plight of others which compels people to act in support of the victims as an expression of solidarity.

Kari Andén Papadopoulos introduced the term “citizen camera witnessing” to describe the practice of using mobile phones to take photographs that highlight injustice (2014, p. 753). In the digital age, capturing and circulating images of violence is easier than ever before. Through the mediatization of violence, the impact of violent acts extends well beyond those who are personally impacted by these incidents to include large numbers of people who encounter these forms of violence via various forms of media. Digitally networked images provide a forum for political advocacy and are instrumental in triggering action — “Indeed, image-based activism via snapshots, avatars, and selfies” can be harnessed to “construct new collective, political, and protest identities on social media” (Kasra, 2017, p. 51). Activist images are shared and re-shared across social media and can be remixed by users to achieve their own aims. In this way, digitally networked images can invoke or motivate political action, but posting and to a lesser extent viewing the images is in itself a form of political action. The mediatization of public

violence has also given rise to the mediatization of mourning so that it is not just acts of violence but also related emotions that flow through the media.

Yet such political aspirations remain complicated by their mediation, which as ever is an active factor in the process of representation. Dorothy Santos draws attention to the racialised underpinnings of the representational spaces that social media proffers in her article *Mediating the Social: The Excesses of Racial Representation within (Trans)formative Digital Space* (pp 69-76). Expanding upon Herman Gray's notion of the "excesses of representation," Santos shows how social media spaces do not merely convey the political transparently, but actively work to shape social affect. Conveying the political is not merely a correspondence between an immediate social truth and its representation, but is shot through by reified categories, amplification, and silencing. Nevertheless, we continue to see attempts to communicate across and through this excess: the visual is not ceded for its representational failures, but remains ever more contested.

Users over the last decade have enacted this will to communicate visually through the mediation of platforms, whilst the possibilities for visibility are increasingly entangled in algorithmic and platform logics. We can observe visual content being beholden not only to platform rules, but also to a commercial imperative; one that is operationalised and enforced through algorithmic logics of filtering, optimisation and personalisation. This mediation of content is inherently political as precisely put by Tania Bucher, "algorithms establish the conditions through which visibility is constructed online" (Bucher, 2012). Fisher & Mehozay (2019, pp 1188) argue that the contemporary algorithmic episteme sees its audience not as individuals, but as an aggregate of human behaviour within digital media: "These epistemes are performative: they not only assume a certain human being, but also construct an individual which they presume merely to measure or identify." On one hand, the power of algorithmic visibility and logics of engagement have contributed to a rise in extremism, and fake news, or what Luke Munn describes in the final chapter of this issue, as "the post-truth condition" (pp 60). On the other hand, creators of content must also contend with the politics of platforms and algorithmic visibilities in order to be seen. In their contribution, *Chinese Video Creator Identities - a Cross-Platform Social Media Perspective*, Ziying Meng & Bjørn Nansen explore Chinese content creator identities on video sharing platforms (pp 23-39). The authors move beyond an established western centric focus of research, to include Chinese platforms Bilibili, Douyin and RED. Through their ethnographic work with nine Chinese content creators, Meng & Nansen explore the cross-platform and transnational tactics of these creators as they navigate and contend with the politics of online video sharing platforms, algorithmic constraints, as well as advertiser demands for a unified identity across platforms.

Algorithms deployed within social media allow for greater and greater optimisation, offering the ability to optimise images, video, audio, faces (through filters) as part of an overall effort to optimise the self (McKelvey & Neves, 2021). Through an analysis of YouTube videos, Lawrence May's article *On the Road: Emergent Spatiality in #Vanlife* considers Vanlife travellers' use of digital media practices, objects and networks to construct emergent spaces (pp 52-68). May argues that these videos work to construct and redefine travellers' experiences and illustrate the fluidity of spatial meanings. Though this offers "Vanlifers" opportunities for expression and creativity, May contends that these idealised visual spaces are not free from intrusions and disruptions from the external world.

Beyond and beneath these more overt sites of struggle, visuality as a conflux of sensing and representing necessitates engagement with the multi-scalar structures of media. Wendy Chun, in discussing the visual hegemony of software, argues that "interfaces seem to concretize our relation to invisible (or barely visible) 'sources' and substructures" (2011, p. 59). The visuality of computation is organised by the interfacial abstractions of GUIs and parsed at different levels by various coded forms, from higher-level programming languages on down. Medial grammatisations of different software standards, codecs, or hardware conventions organise and distribute regimes of sense, grounding the very formal conditions of any possible expression. As Bernard Dionysius Geoghegan (2021, p. 1094) argues regarding digital formats such as the JPEG,

It is not that the territory of the digital image has one or another political orientation; on the contrary, it is an orientation unto itself. The spatial expanses digital formats assign on the screen are part of a seamless fabric of global technical standards shaping an order of things in lived space. The dream of a “world wide web” rests, among other things, on a uniform system of technical writing integrating users from California to the Caspian Sea via shared formats.

Formats and forms, infrastructure and codes constitute a global arrangement of technical conditions that are in turn their own politics, producing a way of speaking and communicating across older political geographies. In her paper, *Crowdsourcing Women's Experiences of Space: Empowerment, (In)Visibility, and Exclusions - A Critical Reading of Safetipin Map*, Trang Le interrogates the use of Safetipin as a form of crowdsourced mapping designed to convey spatial patterns of gender violence in urban areas (pp 40-51). Le draws attention to underlying forms of exclusion and regimes of knowledge production that are perpetuated in crowdsourced maps. In this way, the new visual modes of presentation remediate political geographies via structured modes and models, encoded into software systems and deployed in increasingly sensor-laden cities. The computing and sensing of digital infrastructures penetrate into the minutiae of social fears and bodily harms, producing a new iteration of a political visuality.

In turn, this computing and sensing megastructure that spans the Earth can produce its own visual orientation of truth: the M87 black hole could only be imaged by virtue of a network of telescopes that constitute “an aperture as wide as the Earth” (Bratton, 2019, p. 6). Crucial, but often invisible infrastructures for the internet and cloud computing therefore require close analysis: Samuel Kininmonth draws our attention to the growing phenomenon of data centre tour videos, in *Lasers, Mantraps And Alligators: Visualising Physical Security In Data Centre Tour Videos* (pp 9-22). Through a content analysis of 66 data centre tour videos, Kininmonth focuses on the foregrounding of physical security in the videos, including human labour, which is juxtaposed against the backdrop of the data-driven, networked infrastructure of the data centre itself. He argues that these tour videos constitute a security theatre, in which they “perform a security discourse of control over territory, people and data.”, (pp 9). He examines the visualisation of these infrastructure’s security apparatuses, revealing the underpinning relationships to labour, risk, and brand identity. The physical infrastructure of datacentres is often obscured, hidden from sight, except for curated presentations such as the security demonstration videos Kininmonth analyses. Such representations are revealing both in what they show and in what they hide, simultaneously working to “foreground security guards as working within layers of security,” (pp 13), while also working to “smooth the tension of perceived risk”(pp 17) by ensconcing these same guards within those same layers as surveilled subjects. Thus the visualisation of infrastructure itself becomes folded back into technical-financial apparatuses for determining funding, resource-allocation, and the very self-image of planetary computation.

This double movement of visuality, the advertising of the hidden, securitised site, may be emblematic of a larger shift, diagnosed by Jean Baudrillard (1988, p. 22):

It is no longer the obscenity of the hidden, the repressed, the obscure, but that of the visible, the all-too-visible, the more-visible-than-visible; it is the obscenity of that which no longer contains a secret and is entirely soluble in information and communication.

The long-discussed spectacle of the image appears, in this sense, to degrade the epistemic function of visuality, breaking the bonds between the visible and the true, supplanting it instead with a simulative hyper-visibility. Truth recedes in favour of the communicable image, a realpolitik that favours a duality of hyper-skepticism and religious faith. Luke Munn’s article, *Have Faith and Question Everything: Understanding QAnon’s Allure* (pp 77 -94) addresses the epistemic nexus that sustains QAnon’s conspiracist media. By analysing an archive of a year’s worth of Q’s posts, Munn traces the interplay between religious narratives and critical thinking discourses, where the immediately visible reality remains subtended by an

invisible deep-state that must be doggedly brought to light by adherents. The truth which lies beneath our immediately visible realities, then, is not itself a non-ideological substructure, but rather also a site of political contestation and uncertainty.

The papers in this issue address this challenge of the visual, asking how contemporary medial practices enact or alter the dynamic relation between the true and the political. Far from attempting to reduce one to the other, or take either pole as given, they demonstrate again the old lesson that the medial cannot be taken for granted: the territory of seeing and being seen contains its own mediations, fractally folding. Visuality, truth, and politics, taken as a nexus, demand the careful traversal of these distinctions as an epistemic concern and a demand of technological life.

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