

Seeing Whole

Seeing Whole:

Toward an Ethics and Ecology of Sight

Edited by

Mark Ledbetter and Asbjørn Grønstad

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



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This book first published 2016

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-8707-2

ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-8707-6

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Asbjørn would like to thank the Bergen Research Foundation and his wonderful colleagues in Nomadikon: Tonje Haugland Sørensen, Pauline Hoath, Synnøve Vik, Henrik Gustafsson, Øyvind Vågenes and Gjartrud Kolås. Mark would like to thank his student assistant Priscilla Ly for her work in keeping everyone involved with the book aware of deadlines and formatting issues and the people of Cambridge Scholars Publishing for their commitment to the success of this project. Asbjørn and Mark also wish to thank all the participants in the Ecologies Conference in Albany, New York, who were inspiring, and in particular the contributors to this book for bringing their scholarly, creative, and imaginative gifts to this very important conversation.

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INTRODUCTION

SEEING WHOLE: TOWARD AN ETHICS AND ECOLOGY OF SEEING

MARK LEDBETTER
AND ASBJØRN GRØNSTAD

[I]f one is interested in the visual, one's interest must be limited to a technique of somehow treating the visual¹

In his book *About Looking* (1980), John Berger brings up the issue of what one might call fragmented visuality. Our investment in the visual world is too sectional, he observes, and our acquired proclivity for compartmentalization risks producing an insubstantial understanding of the visual. This optic one-dimensionality divides visuality into genres of “special interest” such as photography, painting and dreams. This comes at a cost, Berger says, because “what is forgotten – like all essential questions in a positivist culture – is the meaning and enigma of visibility itself.”² The alternative to such atomistic practices, as well as to attendant conditions such as myopia, prejudice and narrow-mindedness, is seeing whole. But what does that entail? And is it really possible?

For some, the concept might recall some dubious historical models, like for instance that of Jeremy Bentham's panopticon,³ which has a certain resonance in our contemporary moment in the extensive reliance on various surveillance regimes. The notion of seeing whole is possibly also evocative of Ralph Waldo Emerson's idea of the transparent eyeball, a permeable eye that draws in all of nature and heralds an existential state in which “all mean egotism vanishes.”⁴ This book's conceptualization of “seeing whole” is a different one. We do not intend for the term to signify any kind of ubiquitous vision. Instead, we would like to emphasize the degree to which processes of seeing are always embedded in particular material and symbolic contexts; in a living body, in a social setting, in

textual and aesthetic traditions. This applies not only to vision, to the act of seeing, but also to the things looked at – objects, paintings, buildings, photographs, drawings, films, landscapes, and other people. No visual artifact or act of looking can be separated from all the “stuff” that surrounds it, be it physical matter or immaterial signs. The visual world is a supremely relational one, which means that both images and processes of seeing are fundamentally inextricable from their immediate environment. No wonder, therefore, that research in the field of visual culture often requires approaches that are interdisciplinary. This volume explores the phenomena of sight and of seeing as embodied processes that straddle both mediality and perception, the psychic and the corporeal, the visual and the verbal, and the aesthetic and the political. Importantly, the essays in the anthology draw attention to the contextual dimensions of seeing, suggesting that the act of looking is always embroiled in a complex network of relations and conditions of possibility whose coordinates resemble, or may in fact even constitute, a visual ecology. The conceptualization at the heart of this book, then, may be grasped as a belated response to Susan Sontag’s closing appeal in her book *On Photography* (1977), in which she writes: “If there can be a better way for the real world to include the one of images, it will require an ecology not only of real things but of images as well.”⁵ In line with this thematic orientation, the essays below address and are particularly interested in images and modes of seeing that either generate or are expressive of visual ecosystems: intermedial encounters, overlapping spaces, images that produce their own spaces, images within images, and transaesthetic fields, to name a few. Resisting the compartmentalization of discrete media and art forms still all too common in art history and media studies, the articles in this book never lose sight of the inherent continuity of the various visual and forms, such as film, painting, photography, and performance. It is precisely the relations that exist between those media, we argue, along with the relations they establish with spectators and the public sphere, that constitute what we call ecologies of seeing, understood both as conceptual and material entities.

As the following essays make clear, seeing whole really means seeing *better*. In its own distinctive way, each chapter sensitizes us to the myriad connections that exist between images (and between images and their worldly contexts), as well as to the complex chemistry between visibility and invisibility, the local and the global, and the public and the private. How such relational issues are negotiated in ways that are often precarious is the subject of several of the contributions in this volume. In her work on the Hamburg cult figure Oz (Walter Fischer), Natalia Samutina develops

the striking concept of street art as an *exerciser for vision*, a new cultural practice that captures the rhythms, movements and sensations of metropolitan life in a way that rejuvenates the vision of those who occupy urban spaces. One important function of Oz's street art is to educate citizens to view their environment differently, both through disclosing urban problems and through drawing the viewers' attention to things routinely overlooked on one's paths through the city. The practices of street art, Samutina suggests, create images that can problematize the conditions of visibility impinging upon urban spaces. At the same time, these images also enable new communities of vision. This special power that some artistic practices enjoy to make us see what we do not normally see is also manifest in the work of the Icelandic-Danish artist Olafur Eliasson. In the large installation project *New York City Waterfalls* (2008), for example – in which the artist constructed four artificial waterfalls along the East River – public space is mobilized as an operational element in a process of aesthetic visualization. Both the street signs sprayed by Oz in Hamburg and these artificial waterfalls partake in what Claire Bishop has called “the ongoing struggle to find artistic equivalents for political positions.”⁶ In her perceptive reading of Eliasson's projects, Synnøve Marie Vik emphasizes their ecological context and suggests that they invite a particular kind of sensory and spatial experience. More concisely, works such as *New York City Waterfalls* foreground the technological mediation of nature and the ramifications of this process for our relationship with the natural world.

Lucy Bowditch shifts the nuance of conversation about public visualities by insightfully exploring the tensions between public and private space, addressing what she considers to be Baudrillard's “desperate claim that,” “It is the end of interiority and intimacy.” Looking at seven seminal works, Bowditch powerfully reminds us that “the binary construction of public and private is a mere starting point,” and in turn takes the reader on a wonderful journey of interrogating the fullness of what it means to talk about “seeing whole.”

But examinations of symbolic interventions into urban spaces are not the province of visual art alone. Literary fiction can also explore the architecture of the visual world, with all its spatial stratifications, indistinct zones, and convoluted geographies. In her astute, historically informed analysis of Louis Chu's 1961 novel *Eat a Bowl of Tea*, Jean Amato shows how geopolitical, cross-cultural and transnational forces in the first half of the 20th century map out bodies and spaces according to an ideological and symbolic binary of inside and outside. Chu's novel reimagines the cultural paradigm of *new/wai*, in which Chinese immigrant

women in New York's male-dominated Chinatown of the 1940s come to inhabit a space that represents domesticity, home and cultural belonging from a (normative) male point of view. Through her reading of Chu's narrative, Amato finds that urban spaces are permeable entities and that "no space can ever remain culturally isolated." People carry ideas with them, and these ideas animate a city's lived spaces, in the process reconfiguring them. The preoccupation with transnational ways of seeing is also a key concern in Jillian Sandell's essay about the current shift in cultural representations of globalization in American popular media. Keeping in mind the ways in which geopolitical, economic and affective factors are imbricated into one another, Sandell charts what she sees as the four central tropes of globalization. The first two – the idea of culture as a floating world, and the domestication of difference – are linked to neocolonial ways of seeing, whereas the other two – the network and the palimpsest – are more progressive tropes that, in the author's words, articulate "the possibilities of linking cultural representations and circuits of exchange to modes of accountability, shared responsibility, and complicity."

As the contributions by Samutina, Vik, Amato, Bowditch, and Sandell demonstrate, the process of seeing whole that aesthetic experience might instigate implies an amplification of our sensitivity to the cultural environment. But seeing whole can also be a phenomenon that is akin to a synaesthetic experience. In her incisive reading of *Cries and Whispers* (1972), cinema scholar Brigitte Peucker examines the intermediality of Ingmar Bergman's film, with a particular focus on color and décor. The film's multi-sensory aesthetic, she argues, produces an embodied form of seeing through the orchestration of tactile, painterly, theatrical, and olfactory modes of engagement.

Seeing whole also requires that we ask the question, "What do we not see when we look?" Theresa Flanigan answers this question with a question. How do we see the movement of the soul? She suggests that to see whole implies a conversation between the visual object and the viewer, but not merely to produce some definable other dimension of understanding and seeing, but rather an encounter in which the soul is believed to undergo "physical, psychological, and ethical changes." Flanigan does this through an engaging exploration of Alberti's *On Painting* and placing the treatise in an historical context that would allow for such expectation.

Robert Shane, echoing Flanigan's notion that there is more to seeing than "meets the eye," reminds us, drawing on the rich tradition of Thomas Mann and Michael Fried, that seeing is not a static exercise, "based on a

centuries old assumption of painting's atemporality." When we view paintings, Shane suggests that we awaken within us a rhythmic connection to what we see, much like we do when we "watch" dance, where looking alone is never enough, and suggests that our engagement with seeing whole is an exercise of performance where the very nature of our participation creates a moment that was not originally "seen." In other words, seeing whole for both Shane and Flanigan is a moment of unavoidable embodiment. Thus the very nature of "seeing" becomes aesthetically redefined.

And Mark Ledbetter agrees. His essay suggests that an ecology of seeing is much less about defining or naming a culturally agreed upon object and much more about an experiential need that is present in the act of seeing. There are no real images apart from experience, and even experience lacks any certainty outside the person who sees and what is seen. Ledbetter suggests that we not simply ignore boundaries of seeing but ask that we attempt to "not see" boundary at all and in turn see the possibility that whatever we may see is and can be something other than the obvious, what he calls "visual anarchy," or resistance to the iconic.

Jean-Louis Claret might well agree that there is a "visual anarchy" implicit in all works of art, the "obviously unseen" of an image. Claret suggests that it is the interrogation of the "in/visibilities" that inform our seeing whole. Looking in particular at Peter Bruegel's paintings, he playfully and seriously suggests that, "paintings help us see what is otherwise too directly accessible to be noticed." Bruegel's paintings move beyond the limits of visibility to arouse other senses and insights that are both unsuspected if not surprising. Is this Flanigan's movement of the soul, Shane's performance, Ledbetter's absent boundary? Perhaps, maybe, and not at all, which is why these essays remind us that seeing whole must make the seemingly invisible an important part of the conversation.

On a similar note, yet through a different medium, Susan Cumings's essay takes us into the world of "cripping," and suggests that disability and disability politics play an important role as an ecology of seeing video. With her wonderful engagement of the work of performer, dancer, choreographer and b-boy skater Bill Shannon, who has a visually ambiguous disability, Cumings poignantly reminds us that we must always be tentative in our assumption that we have seen the whole of anything and calls us to a "rare beauty" that will find us dare we open our eyes to the visibly disabled. Cumings wants us to look at disability and to allow spectacle to lead to an intimate knowing that participates in and celebrates the wonder and fullness of all lives.

In Darby Jean Walters beautifully engaging essay, she takes us into the world of Victorian Literature to explore the language and image of disability, and reminds us that *how* we see whole and *what* we see as whole, certainly as such ideas relate to normativity, have been problematic for a very long time. Such seminal works, as Harriet Martineau's *Deerbrook* and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, must be returned to again to learn that must never settle for "inscribing static meaning on dynamic flesh." Walters offers fresh voices from the past, which is to say that there is no "past" at all when it comes to the ecology of seeing, to remind us that we our need to even have an image of what is normal challenges our humanity. All the essays of this volume echo her sentiments.

Thus, we are back to our beginning. Each essay in this book is an invitation to embrace what Berger calls "the enigma of visibility." To see the world in its fullness, to see whole, is not to reduce embodied vision to homogenization, but rather to embrace a complex definition of wholeness that does not merely include space for the many in difference, but a wholeness that exists only in the context of the many and the different. With these essays, we invite the reader to enter such a complex, challenging, and ethically necessary conversation.

Notes

¹ John Berger, *About Looking*, (New York: Vintage, 1980) 45.

² Berger, 45.

³ Jeremy Bentham, *Panopticon: or, the inspection-house*, (Dublin, Thomas Byrne, 1791).

⁴ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*, (Boston: James Munroe and Company, 1836) 13.

⁵ Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, (London: Penguin, 1977) 180.

⁶ Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, (London: Verso, 2012).

CHAPTER ONE

TROPES OF GLOBALIZATION

JILLIAN SANDELL

The transnational focus in Women and Gender Studies, American Studies, and Visual Studies has brought critical attention to the ways that nationalism, empire, and global capitalism have shaped our methods, objects of study, and fields. As such, a transnational analysis typically brings into focus and helps us “see” the connections between geopolitical, economic, cultural, and affective registers. United States popular media from the first decade of the twenty-first century displayed a renewed interest in confronting how the United States is located within a broader global context. From TV shows about outsourcing to documentaries about climate change and hip-hop songs about blood diamonds, filmmakers, artists, and musicians increasingly address the uneven ways that the United States is connected to the rest of the world. But what forms of knowing and social relations are possible when we look and see with a transnational lens? What are the conditions of possibility for apprehending the myriad and starkly uneven ways that the local and global are intertwined? To invoke John Berger’s famous phrase about looking practices (1972), what kinds of cultural representations might invite “transnational ways of seeing”?¹

In noting the increasing interest in depicting the United States in a transnational context, I do not want to downplay the resilience of the Eurocentric and neocolonial gaze that sees the rest of the world as an exotic backdrop against which U.S. dramas can unfold. For every *Battlestar Galactica* and *Syriana* that offer complex narratives about interweaving global networks there is also a *Survivor* and *The Last Samurai* that recenter U.S. exceptionalism. I am also not suggesting that there have not been cultural representations of globalization prior to our own historical moment, whether hegemonic representations of colonial others or complex depictions of cultural contact and intersecting lives (cf. Grewal and Kaplan 1994 and 2001, Shohat 1998, Shohat and Stam 1994,

Spivak 1988). But the first decade of the twenty-first century witnessed a proliferation of representations that place the U.S. in a global context. In one recent survey of “the cinema of globalization” from the last seventy years, for example, three-quarters of the films discussed were made since 2000 (Zaniello 2007). Yet, even as some of these histories come into greater focus, other elements—and particularly those associated with long histories of militarism and with the intensification of neoliberalism—typically remain off-screen.

In my discussion below, I trace the contours of what I argue are four central tropes of globalization—recurring images and themes in cultural representations of the U.S. in a global context. Drawing on a range of media from the first decade of the twenty-first century, I take stock of this shift in cultural representations and identify recurring modes of representation, each of which make possible different understandings of globalization while also foreclosing others. Given that many of the images and technologies that invite a global consciousness (such as maps, photographs of the globe taken from space, the internet, or Google Earth) have historically been made possible by military and imperial missions and funding, it is perhaps not surprising that militarism affects our ways of seeing the world (cf. Enloe 2000, Mirzoeff 2013, Sturken and Cartwright 2009). I argue that even the cultural tropes we use to depict or invoke globalization sometimes confirm and normalize militarized neoliberalism.

Culture as a Floating World

The trope of culture as a floating world sees culture as a site for cross-national identification and solidarity outside of commerce and politics. This is part of a long tradition of U.S. cultural representations of globalization that celebrate depoliticized notions of transculturalism and cosmopolitanism, and this history haunts contemporary versions. In the 2000s, one such example is Claude Grunitzky’s book *Transculturalism: How the World is Coming Together* (2004), in which he argues that people can transcend national, racial, ethnic, linguistic, and other differences through a shared appreciation for culture. His book is filled with images of artists, musicians, architectural styles, fashions, and city neighborhoods that exemplify this mixing of global cultures. The trope of culture as a floating world also appears in the long-standing and often neocolonial theme in U.S. culture of Americans traveling around the world to “find themselves,” which found its twenty-first century iteration in the popularity of Elizabeth Gilbert’s 2006 memoir *Eat, Pray, Love* (2010), and in the films *Sex and the City II* (2010), and Woody Allen’s end-of-decade

trilogy *Vicki Cristina Barcelona* (2008), *Midnight in Paris* (2011), and *To Rome with Love* (2012). The trope was evident also in two films released at decade's end, each of which compiles footage from around the world taken on a single day in 2010, *Life in a Day* (2011) and *One Day on Earth* (2012).

The enduring influence of the trope of culture as a floating world and the ways it erases the U.S. military is also evident in such recent films as *Argo* (2012) and *The Act of Killing* (2013). While both explicitly show how U.S. film culture is one important way to understand, respectively, the 1979 Iranian hostage crisis and the 1965 Indonesian military coup, the formative role of the US military in establishing the regimes of Shah Mohammad Reza Palavi and President Suharto is marginalized. Audiences are invited to see important connections to the culture of the United States, but not to its military politics.

The phrase "the floating world" comes from and is associated with Japanese ukiyo-e prints and refers to the separation of the world they depict from the world from which they come. While the metaphor of culture as a floating world is evident across a range of media, it found its most literal enactment in the U.S. in the 2000s with a renewed interest in Japan—and particularly the figure of the geisha—following the publication of Arthur Golden's bestselling 1997 novel *Memoirs of a Geisha*. Golden's novel and its subsequent film adaptation, and the proliferation of coffee table books and exhibitions about the geisha, reinforce familiar narratives about globalization that recenter the United States. The resilience of the figure of the geisha in U.S. popular culture since the late nineteenth century can be traced directly to the U.S. military presence in Japan, with the 2000s being no exception. But the enthusiastic embrace of the geisha rarely makes this military history apprehensible.

Memoirs of a Geisha inspired at least two other meditations on Japan in the 2000s in which a shared appreciation of culture becomes the vehicle for a broader understanding of globalization: in Sofia Coppola's 2003 film *Lost in Translation*, the experience of feeling dislocated and jetlagged (a product of time-space compression associated with globalization) is temporarily resolved by singing English-language songs at a karaoke bar in Tokyo, which becomes key to the characters' understanding of Japan. In Iona Rozeal Brown's series of paintings entitled "Afro-Asiatic Allegory," it is a shared love for hip-hop that allows viewers to perceive connections between Japan and the United States. What is unseeable, within these representations, is that the presence and popularity of both karaoke and hip-hop in Japan is a result of the U.S. military occupation. The celebration of karaoke and hip-hop as forms of culture that travel around

the world providing platforms for cross-national identification, masks the ways that their travel was set in motion and made possible by U.S. militarism. Brown, Coppola, and Golden each deploy the trope of the floating world to depict an idealized world of culture and art separate from the world of commerce and politics. Their texts ostensibly depict U.S. fascination with Japan but enact its opposite, reframing U.S. cultural and military imperialism as Japanese love of American culture. What artists hope will be transnational ways of seeing thus often reproduce military routes: what is visible to U.S. audiences is Japanese appropriation of American culture, but the reverse—U.S. appropriation of Japanese culture—is naturalized. Ultimately, the trope of culture as a floating world outside of commerce and politics forecloses the possibility of identifying connections based on not consumerism and cultural appreciation but shared relationships to power.

Domesticating Difference

The trope of domesticating difference uses cultural representations to make claims of similarity through difference and by managing and reframing forms of national and other difference into recognizably domestic paradigms. As with culture as a floating world, this trope has a troubling colonial and Eurocentric history. In its twenty-first century iteration, these neocolonial ways of seeing were often confirmed by “focalizing” (Shohat and Stam, 1996) international issues through western celebrities or frameworks, such as in films like *Beyond Borders* (2003) and *Hotel Rwanda* (2004). For example, Edward Zwick’s 2006 film *Blood Diamond* and Kanye West’s 2005 song “Diamonds from Sierra Leone,” both translated to US audiences the issue of diamonds being mined and sold to fund the Sierra Leone Civil War.

Debates about foreign films in the U.S. also domesticate national difference. The Academy Awards, for example, has strict guidelines about what it considers appropriate congruence between a country and its national language (thus renationalizing and homogenizing what are often more multilingual and multicultural nations) and it typically honors films that confirm rather than challenge prevailing U.S. beliefs about other countries. In the 2000s, this trope also found expression within new forms of “neoliberal multiculturalism” and “multicultural nationalism” (Melamed 2006, Moallem and Boal 1999), where diversity within the United States becomes a signifier of managing populations in relation to global capitalism.

While the trope of domesticating difference appeared across a range of cultural texts, the resurgence of the popularity of the musical represents its most exemplary iteration because of the way it domesticates national and racial differences into harmonious melodies and is widely understood to be a genre that allegorizes a philosophy of *E Pluribus Unum*. From TV's *American Idol*, to Broadway's *The Book of Mormon*, to the popularity of musical films such as *Dreamgirls* (2006) and the remake of *Hairspray* (2007), the musical as a genre gained renewed critical and commercial success in the 2000s.

The musical is often celebrated as a particularly "American" genre because of its emergence out of specific historical forms such as vaudeville and tin pan alley, and its ability to resignify different popular musical traditions—including jazz, blues, swing, salsa, hip-hop, and punk—while maintaining a familiar and secure structure of individualism, freedom, romance, and redemption, all of which resonates with the mythology of the United States, which celebrates even as it commodifies, multicultural differences (Altman 1996, 294; Hayward 234; Knapp 3, 19-46). It is also a genre that has both historically and today been a particularly rich venue for queer characters and stories, both subtextually and textually. Yet the musical enacts a form of nationalism that erases transnational ways of seeing. What Richard Dyer calls the signature feature of the musical—how it makes you feel, rather than what it is about (Dyer 1977, 18)—conveys communitarian visions for the future that evoke the American Dream. Yet this national genealogy neglects the ways that the musical is less an American genre than it is a transnational genre and has been influenced by multiple non-U.S. musical traditions. Both formally and narratively, the musical thus often enacts a form of covert nationalism.

This mythology of the American Dream undergirds TV's *Glee*, which insists that all forms of difference can be mitigated or celebrated when included in a larger multicultural communitarian project. John Cameron Mitchell's film *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001) also illustrates this dynamic. Though the film was widely discussed as being about trans identity, the film is equally or more about transnationality (Sandell 2010). The film uses musical antecedents and calls upon histories of racial and national discrimination to frame the film's narrative about sexuality, domesticating sexual difference in relation to familiar forms of U.S. racial difference. The film acknowledges the presence of Armed Forces Radio and Television around the world, and that it can create desires to immigrate to the United States, but it does not link this to the presence of the U.S. military. Instead, the film reframes U.S. homophobic exclusions

as Cold War political and national exclusions, recentering the U.S. as a space of enviable multicultural diversity and democracy.

These first two tropes of globalization (culture as a floating world and domesticating difference) represent a continuation of nineteenth and twentieth century ways of seeing. Even as they circulate in complex ways to make visible more nuanced understandings of the U.S.'s relationship to the rest of the world, as tropes they exemplify the repetition rather than rupture in modes of representation. In this sense, they confirm what Geraldine Pratt (2010) argues, that seeing transnationally can sometimes mean seeing "like a state" (75), which leads to either humanitarianism (seeing other nations as in need of help) or multiculturalism (seeing other nations only in terms of how they shape the U.S.). The following two tropes (the network and the palimpsest) reflect emerging twenty-first century transnational modes of representation that explicitly try to dislodge neocolonial, assimilationist, isolationist, or exotifying ways of seeing. These tropes use rhetorical strategies to highlight the possibilities of linking cultural representations and circuits of exchange to modes of accountability, shared responsibility, and complicity.

The Web or Network

The trope of the web is perhaps the most commonly deployed metaphor found in cultural representations of globalization in the 2000s, and these representations explicitly acknowledge the complex relationship between cultural, political, and economic registers and also different sites and scales of experience. The web has become particularly effective for cultural representations of border spaces and experiences. Films such as *Maria Full of Grace* (2004), *Day Without a Mexican* (2004), *Fast Food Nation* (2006), and *Frozen River* (2008) depict the interlinking political and economic networks that shape the experiences of people who live on or who cross the U.S. border. While *Frozen River* is set in upstate New York, the other films (and most recent films about the border) depict the U.S.'s southern border, which reflects the nation's prevailing focus for discussions about immigration and border security. The web challenges the historically binary representations of borders that focus on fences, rivers, and walls (Fox 1999), not to downplay their presence but to depict the interweaving histories, geographies, and responsibilities.

The trope of the web is also commonly invoked to depict the connections among state data collection agencies. The popularity of the *Bourne* films (2002-present), the *Mission Impossible* (1996-present) franchise, and TV shows like *CSI* (2000-present) and *24* (2001-2010)

reinforces the importance of the trope of the web in the 2000s to depict an interlinking network of surveillance technologies that can track the location of an individual across different media and spaces. Images and evocations of the web or network are evident in television shows like *The Wire* and *Battlestar Galactica*. While there is nothing new about interweaving plots with multiple characters, the current importance of the web and network to cultural representations of globalization reflects debates about the network society and the centrality of the world-wide-web to modern life. Cultural representations of globalization that invoke the network explicitly acknowledge the complex relationship between not just cultural, political, and economic registers but also different sites and scales of experience.

As a trope, the web recognizes that everything is interconnected and makes it possible for audiences to identify their location in the network of relationships. Perhaps for this reason, it has been commonly used in activist and independent media that offer critiques of state power and that want to identify sites of complicity. One example is the proliferation of cultural activism that has emerged to raise awareness about violence against women in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, where, since 1993, hundreds of women have been murdered or disappeared. Numerous documentaries, art projects, narrative films, and other forms of cultural representation have circulated since the turn of the century, protesting the inaction of state and legal agencies by invoking the broader networks of corporations, governments, and law enforcement agencies that are complicit in the violence.

The web, as a metaphor, always implies something in which we are all caught. The web of complicity pushes this even further to suggest that we are all culpable. Lourdes Portillo's documentary *Señorita Extraviada* (2001) and Alicia Gaspar de Alba's novel *Desert Blood* (2005), for example, map out the myriad actors and agencies that together create the conditions of possibility for the violence to continue. Since discursive practices have been central to how information about the violence circulates—practices that include how officials name and respond to crimes; how journalists depict them; and how human rights organizations make claims about them—discursive practices will be an important element in ending the violence (Fregoso 2003). Gaspar de Alba and Portillo use the trope of the web of complicity to link the local to the global without recourse to liberal notions of universalism or fetishizing the local, providing effective opportunities for viewers, readers, and participants to apprehend and act upon the transnational dimensions of the violence. Yet as a trope, the web can sometimes unwittingly spatialize

different forms of violence. The terms “blowback” and “spillover violence,” for example, acknowledge the connection between apparently unanticipated violence and its more deliberate forms. But by making these moments of “blowback” or “spillover” exceptional, the militarization of everyday life and violence associated with it is normalized as always being “elsewhere” not “here.”

The Palimpsest

Where the network offers a mechanical image of interconnecting parts, the palimpsest attempts to dislodge realist notions of time and space to map multiple and discrepant networks of influence and power. Where the web directly references the network society and world-wide-web and often implies a closed network, the palimpsest deploys modes of representation associated with digitized data. From twitter trends revealing flu epidemics to the integration of social media in all forms of social and political life to Wordle images, the algorithmic mapping of information has become a commonplace way to understand one’s relationship to the world. Filmmakers, artists, and websites in the 2000s using juxtaposition rather than connection invoke the palimpsest to invite transnational ways of seeing. By arranging information in non-sequential and discontinuous ways, the palimpsest suggests not only the multiple histories and geographies that precede and make legible the U.S. in a global context but also the contingency and unexpected outcomes of these histories and geographies.

The palimpsest gestures to rather than delineates multiple histories and geographies. As both M. Jacqui Alexander and Ella Shohat have suggested, it is a useful metaphor through which to think about the spatial and historical aspects of globalization and the ways that the “then and there” always haunt and are present in the “here and now” (Alexander 2005, 190; Shohat 1998). Juxtaposition allows texts to evoke the multiple, contradictory, and contingent nature of connections and to remap networks of power outside of real time and space. Mapping is always a representation of not the world but one’s relationship to the world, and since the 1990s, there has been a dramatic increase in artistic uses of maps and mapping. Unlike earlier colonial and Eurocentric uses of maps to depict conquered lands and peoples, artists such as Mark Bradford, Julie Mehretu, and Paula Scher resist the imperial and cartographic gaze and offer alternate maps of objects, languages, and social relationships that disrupt rather than consolidate hegemonic representations of the United States.

As a physical representation of space and time that makes visible traces from the past, the palimpsest allows us to think about the uneven historical and geographical reverberations of globalization. Evident in the increasingly popular “scrambled” films such as *Syriana* (2005), the palimpsest is key to a style of film indebted to digital data that Alissa Quart (2005) calls “hyperlink cinema,” a term she uses to refer to what she calls “Google meets Robert Altman” (48), meaning texts that move back and forth across storylines, such as *Crash* and *Magnolia*. The technique was most enthusiastically embraced by Guillermo Arriaga and Alejandro González Iñárritu, two filmmakers who between them were involved (separately and together) in *Amores Perros* (2000), *Babel* (2006), *Burning Plain* (2008), *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* (2005), and *21 Grams* (2003), all of which exemplify hyperlink cinema.

González Iñárritu’s critically acclaimed film *Babel* (2006), which depicts transnational connectivities among families from Japan, Morocco, Mexico, and the United States, offers perhaps the exemplary mainstream use of the palimpsest as a transnational way of seeing. With its multi-story structure that depicts a global chain-reaction of events, *Babel* powerfully communicates in both form and narrative the uneven violent reverberations of globalization. The film does not attempt to speak *for* those who are impacted by U.S. militarized neoliberalism, but rather self-reflexively depicts *how* U.S. desires, powers, and interests are centralized and violently impact the lives of others. Yet, the palimpsest as a device can still tacitly inhabit neoliberal ways of thinking such as individualism. *Babel* offers global humanism as a counter to the military might of the U.S. and this recourse to the most local of human relationships—love between parents and children, individual acts of love—centralizes the family and individuals rather than broader collective movements as the site of redemption.

Conclusion

In tracing the contours of these recurring cultural tropes in US-based representations of globalization, my goal is to emphasize what I believe are some of the broader implications of the shift in U.S. cultural representations of globalization in the first decade of the twenty-first century. While at first glance the more mainstream representations associated with “Culture as a Floating World” and “Domesticating Difference” might seem easy targets of critique, I caution against seeing the documentaries or more avant-garde forms associated with “The Web” and “The Palimpsest” as having any kind of political guarantee. (I would

argue that *Crash*, for example, a film both formally and thematically similar to *Babel* unwittingly consolidates rather than critiques the intersecting forms of prejudice it depicts). Finally, we must ask: whose interests are served in such representations—those doing the representing or those being represented? (Spivak 1999). Who benefits when the United States is depicted as part of a global network? As Nicholas Mirzoeff argues, the capacity to visualize human experience and social relations has been central to the operations of power: in warfare, in the plantation, in the colony, in the prison, on the border, in corporations, among other spaces. New regimes of visualization, even ones that ostensibly reveal important histories and geographies of power, thus deserve our critical attention. Even when texts confront U.S. complicity in geographies and histories of empire and immigration, what sometimes typically remains unseeable—and depends upon remaining unseeable—is how militarized neoliberalism often make transnational ways of seeing even possible.

Notes

¹ This essay is drawn from a book-length manuscript in progress entitled *Transnational Ways of Seeing*.

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