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# Vision

Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor

"Visibility is a trap." This famous Foucauldian statement is a springboard for the last thirty-plus years of feminist visual studies. *Visibility* would seem to be, overall, a positive achievement: "being able to be seen" suggests presence, recognition. Feminist art theory, following Foucault, tells another story. The passive register of the word is critical: "visibility" is not simply a matter of physical vision but a matter of visibility: a matter, in other words, of power. In Western art, women, slaves, the working class, children – any not-quite-human being (from the superior perspective of the dominant class) – are "able to be visible," if at all, through a mediating male gaze. Woman herself is a cypher, as Mary Wollstonecraft puts it in *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) that gains significance only insofar as the male viewer confers it. Laura Mulvey's theory of visual pleasure and the gaze, appearing in 1975, illuminates the obscured workings of the Foucauldian visibility trap. The "hinge" to the trap is revealed as the very "event" of vis-(a)bility itself, a pleasurable event because the image of woman is a narcissistic formation. What is "able to be seen" is not a singular woman but a projection of a singular male's desire – itself a reflection of (unable to be seen) ideological figurings of gender and sexuality. Mulvey's intricate reading suggests that the event of a woman's (be)

240 coming-into-being-seen is at the fold of the visible and the invisible, and the self-reflection of the viewer.

The poet Christina Rossetti understood these dynamics implicitly. Observing the art practices of brother Dante Gabriel Rossetti and other Pre-Raphaelite colleagues (e.g., William Morris, John Waterhouse, John Everett Millais), Rossetti describes the “visibility trap” quite precisely, well over one hundred years before Mulvey’s psychoanalytic account, in a succinct fourteen-line sonnet she wrote in 1856:

One face looks out from all his canvasses,  
One selfsame figure sits or walks or leans;  
We found her hidden just behind those screens,  
That mirror gave back all her loveliness.  
A queen in opal or in ruby dress,  
A nameless girl in freshest summer greens,  
A saint, an angel; every canvass means  
The same one meaning, neither more nor less.  
He feeds upon her face by day and night,  
And she with true kind eyes looks back on him  
Fair as the moon and joyful as the light;  
Not wan with waiting, not with sorrow dim;  
Not as she is, but was when hope shone bright;  
Not as she is, but as she fills his dream.

– “*In An Artist’s Studio*” (*Complete Poems*, 796)

The nature of the trap is very clear. Furthermore, we might read from this poem a modification of Foucault’s statement: “*Vision is a trap.*” This recalls Susan Sontag’s early notion regarding vision and photography in *On Photography* (1977, 3): vision fetishizes the seen as the known; the reality of what is seen is presumed; the abstract becomes the concrete. Vision as fetish and as capture are antithetical to feminist ontology and feminist epistemology, equally.

Contemporary theories of *visuality* make possible, at least, a rescue from vision's "usage" as an (false) agent of truth and reality. Nicholas Mirzoeff's genealogy of the term traces a distinction between *visuality* and *vision* to a profoundly ideological debate, between social philosopher Thomas Carlyle on the one hand and artist J. M. W. Turner on the other regarding the authority of vision and *visuality*, respectively. Turner's progressive modernity meant a "refusal to adjudicate between what is seen, what is visible, what is in shade and what is imagined" (Mirzoeff 2006, 64). Turner thus anticipates our own contemporary focus on relations of power that inhere in the notion of *visuality*, which Mirzoeff describes as a "doubled interaction" (66), or even as "collision, intersection and interaction" (66).

"Collision, intersection, interaction": these are actually excellent descriptors of Turner's boldest work, those magnificent sea- and landscapes in which the viewer – as well as any hapless human figure within the painting – is hardly, if at all, able to discriminate one element from another. Turner's willingness to dwell in ontological and epistemological uncertainties represents a radical aesthetic standpoint remarkable for his time and place. These modes (of collision, intersection, interaction), Mirzoeff adds, "operate in deconstruction, as a relation of difference that is always deferred" (66), and thus beyond ideologic capture. This deferral of difference grounds a complex relational notion of vision and *visuality* that might usefully be considered, for the moment, as a Baradian **entanglement**. There is no easy separation of the seen from the being-seen; the co-constitution of the one mode and the other, adds Mirzoeff, creates a "space or area, ... not bounded by constant time but rather '*time as lived*', not synchronically or diachronically, but in its multiplicities and simultaneities, its presences and absences" (quoting Achille Mbembe, 76). This pregnant space opens to a simultaneous "sharing and dividing that is political and aesthetic at once" (76), he concludes, with a nod to Jacques Rancière. The multiple entanglements give this space its dimensionality and texture.

242 Laura U. Marks's elaboration of a *haptic visuality* attempts a further step away from the ongoing "suspicion of vision" and "critique of instrumental vision" (2002, 4), toward a theory of embodied perception. But her work hardly approaches the unique robustness of Karen Barad's work on entanglement *and/as touching*, offering a theory of relationality complex enough to account for the "working" of difference, without working through or out of it; indeed, such a working through or out is antithetical to "the really hard **work**" (2012, 215) of investigating "the infinity of constitutive inclusions – the in/determinacy, the virtuality that is a constitutive part of all finitude" (215–216). "On Touching," Barad's introduction to a 2012 special issue of *differences*, refers to *visual hapticity*, a reversal of Marks's formulation that signals Barad's prioritization of touch – not as *the* dominant faculty of sense but rather as the "primary concern of physics" (208), since touch is "enacted" from the quantum level upward. In physics, she notes, touch is explored for "its physicality, its virtuality, its **affectivity**, its e-motion-ality, whereby all pretense of being able to separate out the affective from the scientific dimensions of touching falls away" (209). The pretensions of Donna Haraway's "perfect knower" are, quite simply, scientifically and ethically unsound.

Barad's neo-Levinasian proposal that we face "the inhuman – the indeterminate non/being non/becoming of mattering and not mattering" (216) might also direct contemporary clarifications of an *ethics* of vision. The concept of entanglement could ground such an ethics. Barad proposes the "irreducible" binding of self and other, "otherness" being "*an entangled relation of difference* (*différance*). *Ethicality entails noncoincidence with oneself*" (217), seeing oneself, perhaps, as a stranger at least momentarily. Ethicality, she implies, asks us to see pro-visually and relationally, in recognition of the "noncoincidence with oneself." This kind of vision is self-reflexive but not in the narcissistic sense. To see both oneself and others differently requires, in other words, a **speculative** and *critical* practice. We must no longer see what is known to us, but see other-wise. Turner's critical art practice does

just this, challenging us to search for what appears invisible or obscured, but which is able-to-be-seen through the “really hard work” of confronting what is unknown or strange.

Vision cannot simply be conceived as a transaction that begins and ends with ourselves, any more than we can say that insofar as we see reality, we “make” it. Seeing speculatively, and critically, means recognizing that reality makes us, “[s]ee[ing] into the life of things,” as William Wordsworth puts it in a poem which is all about vision, in both its physical and abstract dimensions (“Tintern Abbey” 1798, lines 47–49). To envision is to **regard** the lives of things, of self, of others “in [their] multiplicity and simultaneities, [their] presence and absences” (Mbembe 2001, 1), and to identify the complicities of our own gaze. This is the “really hard work” Barad urges upon us: this is critique, which refuses the fetishizing of vision, and makes possible the envisioning of others-as-ourselves, and vice versa. These are more generous visions of worlds to come.

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