

## Irit Rogoff

### STUDYING VISUAL CULTURE

I raise my eyes and I see America.

(Newt Gingrich, *New York Times*, 19 April 1995)

'And please remember, just a hint of starch in Mr. Everett's shirts.' For one brief moment their eyes actually met, Blanche was the first to look away. 'Yes ma'am.' After Grace left the kitchen, Blanche sat down at the table. Was it just the old race thing that had thrown her off when her eyes met Grace's? Her neighbor Wilma's father said he'd never in his adult life looked a white person in the eye.

(Barbara Neely, *Blanche on the Lam*, 1992)

His smoldering eyes saw right through my tremulous heart.

(Barbara Cartland, *The Pirate's Return*, 1987)

**H**OW CAN WE CHARACTERIZE the emergent field 'visual culture'? To begin with, we must insist that this encompasses a great deal more than the study of images, of even the most open-ended and cross-disciplinary study of images. At one level we certainly focus on the centrality of vision and the visual world in producing meanings, establishing and maintaining aesthetic values, gender stereotypes and power relations within culture. At another level we recognize that opening up the field of vision as an arena in which cultural meanings get constituted, also simultaneously anchors to it an entire range of analyses and interpretations of the audio, the spatial, and of the psychic dynamics of spectatorship. Thus visual culture opens up an entire world of intertextuality in which images, sounds and spatial delineations are read on to and through one another, lending ever-accurring layers of meanings and of subjective responses to each encounter we might have with film, TV, advertising, art works, buildings or urban environments. In a sense we have

produced a field of vision version of Derrida's concept of *différance* and its achievement has had a twofold effect both on the structures of meaning and interpretation and on the epistemic and institutional frameworks that attempt to organize them. Derrida's conceptualization of *différance* takes the form of a critique of the binary logic in which every element of meaning constitution is locked into signification in relation to the other (a legacy of Saussurian linguistics' insistence on language as a system of negative differentiation). Instead what we have begun to uncover is the free play of the signifier, a freedom to understand meaning in relation to images, sounds or spaces not necessarily perceived to operate in a direct, causal or epistemic relation to either their context or to one another. If feminist deconstructive writing has long held the place of writing as the endless displacement of meaning, then visual culture provides the visual articulation of the continuous displacement of meaning in the field of vision and the visible.

This insistence on the contingent, the subjective and the constantly reproduced state of meanings in the visual field is equally significant for the institutional or disciplinary location of this work. If we do not revert to ascribing meaning exclusively to an author, nor to the conditions and historical specificities of its making, nor to the politics of an authorizing community, then we simultaneously evacuate the object of study from the disciplinary and other forms of knowledge territorialization. Perhaps then we are at long last approaching Roland Barthes's description of interdisciplinarity not as surrounding a chosen object with numerous modes of scientific inquiry, but rather as the constitution of a new object of knowledge. The following brief attempt to engage with the arena of visual culture will touch on some of these themes as well as on the thorny politics of historical specificity: its advantages, its limitations, and the dangers and freedoms inherent in attempting to move out of a traditional and internally coherent and unexamined model of what it means to be historically specific.

### Vision as critique

In today's world meanings circulate visually, in addition to orally and textually. Images convey information, afford pleasure and displeasure, influence style, determine consumption and mediate power relations. Who we see and who we do not see; who is privileged within the regime of specularly; which aspects of the historical past actually have circulating visual representations and which do not; whose fantasies of what are fed by which visual images? Those are some of the questions which we pose regarding images and their circulation. Much of the practice of intellectual work within the framework of cultural problematics has to do with being able to ask new and alternative questions, rather than reproducing old knowledge by asking the old questions. (*Often in class the students complain that the language of theoretical inquiry is difficult, that 'it is not English.'* They need considerable persuasion that one cannot ask the new questions in the old language, that language is meaning. In the end almost always their inherent excitement at any notion of 'the new' wins the day and by the end of the trimester someone invariably produces a perfectly formulated remark about discourse, representation and meaning usually followed by a wonder-filled pause at the recognition that they have just uttered something entirely 'different'.)

By focusing on a field of vision and of visual culture operating within it, we create the space for the articulation of (but not necessarily the response to) such questions as: What are the visual codes by which some are allowed to look, others to hazard a peek, and still others are forbidden to look altogether? In what political discourses can we understand looking and returning the gaze as an act of political resistance? Can we actually participate in the pleasure and identify with the images produced by culturally specific groups to which we do not belong? These are the questions which we must address to the vast body of images that surrounds us daily. Furthermore we need to understand how we actively interact with images from all arenas to remake the world in the shape of our fantasies and desires or to narrate the stories which we carry within us. In the arena of visual culture the scrap of an image connects with a sequence of a film and with the corner of a billboard or the window display of a shop we have passed by, to produce a new narrative formed out of both our experienced journey and our unconscious. Images do not stay within discrete disciplinary fields such as 'documentary film' or 'Renaissance painting,' since neither the eye nor the psyche operates along or recognizes such divisions. Instead they provide the opportunity for a mode of new cultural writing existing at the intersections of both objectivities and subjectivities. In a critical culture in which we have been trying to wrest representation away from the dominance of patriarchal, Eurocentric and heterosexist normativization, visual culture provides immense opportunities for rewriting culture through our concerns and our journeys.

The emergence of visual culture as a transdisciplinary and cross-methodological field of inquiry means nothing less and nothing more than an opportunity to reconsider some of the present culture's thorniest problems from yet another angle. In its formulation of both the objects of its inquiry and of its methodological processes, it reflects the present moment in the arena of cultural studies in all of its complexities. How would I categorize this present moment? From the perspective I inhabit it seems to reflect a shift from a phase of intensely analytical activity we went through during the late 1970s and the 1980s, when we gathered a wide assortment of tools of analysis to a moment in which new cultural objects are actually being produced. While deeply rooted in an understanding of the epistemological denaturalization of inherited categories and subjects revealed through the analytical models of structuralist and poststructuralist thought and the specific introduction of theories of sexual and cultural difference, these new objects of inquiry go beyond analysis towards figuring out new and alternative languages which reflect the contemporary awareness by which we live out our lives. All around us fictions such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, autobiographies such as Sara Suleri's *Meatless Days*, films such as Terry Zwigoff's *Crumb* and complex multimedia art installations such as Vera Frenkel's *Transit Bar*, live out precarious and immensely creative relations between analysis, fiction and the uneasy conditions of our critically informed lives.

One of the most important issues cultural studies has taken on is to provide a 'hands-on' application of the epistemological shift which Gayatri Spivak has characterized thus: 'It is the questions that we ask that produce the field of inquiry and not some body of materials which determines what questions need to be posed to it.' In doing so we have affected a shift from the old logical-positivist world of cognition to a more contemporary arena of representation and of situated

knowledges. The emergence of a relatively new arena such as visual culture provides the possibility of unframing some of the discussions we have been engaged in regarding presences and absences, invisibility and stereotypes, desires, reifications and objectifications from the disciplinary fields – art history, film studies, mass media and communications, theoretical articulations of vision, spectatorship and the power relations that animate the arena we call the field of vision – which first articulated their status as texts and objects. Thereby unframing them from a set of conventional values as *either* highly valued *or* highly marginalized *or* outside of the scope of sanctioned vision altogether. Equally they are unframed from the specific histories of their making and the methodological models of analyses which have more recently served for their unmaking. The field that I work in, which labors heavy-handedly under the title of the critical theorization of visual culture (or visual culture for short) does not function as a form of art history or film studies or mass media, but is clearly informed by all of them and intersects with all of them. It does not historicize the art object or any other visual image, nor does it provide for it either a narrow history within art nor a broader genealogy within the world of social and cultural developments. It does not assume that if we overpopulate the field of vision with ever more complementary information, we shall actually gain any greater insight into it.

*(When I was training as an art historian, we were instructed in staring at pictures. The assumption was that the harder we looked, the more would be revealed to us; that a rigorous, precise and historically informed looking would reveal a wealth of hidden meanings. This belief produced a new anatomical formation called 'the good eye.' Later, in teaching in art history departments, whenever I would complain about some student's lack of intellectual curiosity, about their overly literal perception of the field of study or of their narrow understanding of culture as a series of radiant objects, someone else on the faculty would always respond by saying 'Oh, but they have a good eye.')*

Nor does this field function as a form of art (or any other visual artefact) criticism. It does not serve the purpose of evaluating a project, of complementing or condemning it, of assuming some notion of universal quality that can be applied to all and sundry. Furthermore it does not aim at cataloguing the offenses and redressing the balances, nor of enumerating who is in and who is out, of what was chosen and what was discarded. These were an important part of an earlier project in which the glaring exclusions, erasures and distortions of every form of otherness – women, homosexuals and non-European peoples to mention a few categories – had to be located and named and a judgment had to be passed on the conditions of their initial exclusion. All of this, however, would constitute a 'speaking about': an objectification of a moment in culture such as an exhibition or a film or a literary text, into a solid and immutable entity which does not afford us as the viewing audience, the possibilities of play, the possibilities of rewriting the exhibition (or the site of any other artefact) as an arena for our many and different concerns. It would assume that the moment in culture known as the exhibition should ideally dictate a set of fixed meanings rather than serve as the site for the continuous (re)production of meanings.

In fact the perspectives that I would like to try and represent, the critical analysis of visual culture, would want to do everything to avoid a discourse which perceives

of itself as 'speaking about' and shift towards one of 'speaking to'. In the words of Trinh T. Min-ha, 'Tale, told, to be told/Are you truthful?', acknowledging the complexities inherent in any speech act does not necessarily mean taking away or compromising the qualities of a fine story.

Who speaks? What speaks? The question is implied and the function named, but the individual never reigns, and the subject slips away without naturalizing its voice. S/he who speaks, speaks to the tale as S/he begins telling and retelling it. S/he does not speak about it. For without a certain work of displacement, 'speaking about' only partakes in the conservation of systems of binary opposition (subject/object, I/it, we/they) on which territorialized knowledge depends.

Trinh suggests here not merely that in reading/looking we rewrite ('speak about') the text. More importantly, she recognizes that in claiming and retelling the narratives ('speaking to'), we alter the very structures by which we organize and inhabit culture.

It is this questioning of the ways in which we inhabit and thereby constantly make and remake our own culture that informs the arena of visual culture. It is an understanding that the field is made up of at least three different components. First, there are the images that come into being and are claimed by various, and often contested histories. Second, there are the viewing apparatuses that we have at our disposal that are guided by cultural models such as narrative or technology. Third, there are the subjectivities of identification or desire or abjection from which we view and by which we inform what we view. While I am obviously focusing here on the reception rather than the production of images and objects or environments, it is clearly one of the most interesting aspects of visual culture that the boundary lines between making, theorizing and historicizing have been greatly eroded and no longer exist in exclusive distinction from one another.

For some years I have been wondering about the formation of a counter viewing position to that old art historical chestnut '*the good eye*.' Are we developing 'the mean eye, the jaundiced, skeptical eye?' Is the critical eye one that guards jealously against pleasure? Hardly so, if we are to engage with the fantasy formations that inform viewing subjectivities. For the moment, and following some of Laura Mulvey's later work within feminist film theory, I have settled on the notion of '*the curious eye*' to counter the 'good eye' of connoisseurship. Curiosity implies a certain unsettling; a notion of things outside the realm of the known, of things not yet quite understood or articulated; the pleasures of the forbidden or the hidden or the unthought; the optimism of finding out something one had not known or been able to conceive of before. It is in the spirit of such a 'curious eye' that I want to open up some dimension of this field of activity.

Perhaps one of the best indications of just how destabilizing this form of 'curiosity' for the not-yet-known can be, is the alarm which seems to be caused by the clearly emerging institutional formations of this new field of 'visual culture.' A recent issue of the journal *October* contained a questionnaire on the subject of this emergent arena of inquiry. All of the statements to which correspondents

were asked to reply indicated some profound sense of loss – the loss of historical specificities and of material groundings and of fixed notions of quality and excellence, etc., which the editors who had set them seem to view as the loss of the grounding navigational principles for their activities. Apparently the most alarming of all has been the infiltration of the field of art history by something termed the ‘anthropological model.’ I puzzled long and hard over both this analysis and the dread it seemed to provoke. I spoke to all my sophisticated cultural anthropologist acquaintances to try and understand what they may have foisted on us unawares. I read all the predictable responses to the questionnaire set by the *October* editors, and still not the slightest glimmer of comprehension emerged. Finally, reading through Tom Conley’s very refreshing and extremely well-judged response ‘Laughter and Alarm,’ it seemed that all this fuss was being provoked by the growing presence or preference for a ‘relativist’ model of cultural analysis. As far as I could make out, the so-called ‘relativism’ of this assumed anthropological model involves a nontransferable specificity for the context of any cultural production. Thus the ability to establish a set of inherent values or criteria of excellence for images or cultural objects which would transcend the conditions of their making and constitute a metacultural relationality (as for example in the traditional modernist model for the historical avant-garde of Europe and the United States as a set of international, interlinked, innovative art movements sharing a particular confrontational spirit and a commitment to formal experimentation) is seemingly negated or sacrificed through this more current relational model.

Now, the editors of *October* who have articulated all of these anxieties about the erosion of good old art history through the encroaching dangers of so-called anthropological relativism are hardly an intellectually naïve lot; indeed they were in part responsible for acquainting my generation of art historians and critics with important analytical models and with important cultural criticism from both France and Germany as well as debates carried on in the US. Nor are they in any way provincial intellectuals, locked up within the confining frameworks of one single, national, cultural discussion. They are clearly more than aware that the notion of ‘relativist’ carries within it all kinds of intimations of cultural conservatism. One of the most publicized cases of polemics for and against historical relativism was the case of the 1980s German *Historikerstreit*, in which a group of conservative German historians such as Nolte and Broszat began making claims for a study of German fascism in the 1930s and 1940s as relational to all the other fascisms and totalitarian regimes around at that same historical moment. The German neo-conservative historians’ project was underpinned by a politics that aimed at lessening guilt through undermining historical specificity both at the level of cause and of effect. The accusations of ‘relativism’ with which this writing project was greeted by more left-liberal historians in the West were due largely to the fact that much of this writing was aimed at a *re-evaluation*, in moralizing terms, of the events and policies of the period. Thus nationalist-socialist fascism was graded in relation to other Western fascisms and to Soviet totalitarian regimes and was found either to have been a response to them or to have similarities with them, or to compare not quite so horrifically with these other models. What it did not attempt was to reframe understandings of a very notion of fascism or to think it away from a national history, or to understand

it in relation to certain values and aesthetics within the modern period, or any of the other possibilities available for unframing a discussion of fascism and gaining an alternative set of understandings into it, of actually questioning the certainty that we *know* what fascism, the object of inquiry, is. Cultural specificity in this particular historical discussion takes the form of two fixities: (a) a discrete, stable and clearly known object of study and (b) discrete, stable and fixed contexts (in this case of national cultures with clear lines of division between them) which contain and separate their histories. It presumes to know, in no uncertain terms, what a political movement is, where a national culture begins and ends, and it assumes that endlessly complex social, cultural, racial and sexual differences might actually coalesce around such a dramatic articulation of a subject known as 'fascism.' In contrast the cultural studies project which *October* characterizes as having been infiltrated by a so-called 'anthropological model' aims at establishing internal cultural specificities which can in turn attempt intercultural conversations while maintaining the necessary regard for the value and serious significance of *anyone's* cultural production. There is a world of acute political difference between the politics of these two cultural/analytical projects which seem to be conflated here. So how to explain what is clearly a most confusing political slippage?

I could adopt a mean-spirited and pragmatic attitude and say that all this is simply about the loss of territories of knowledge and reputations established in given disciplinary fields which are being called into question (the fields, not the reputations) by the emergence of other, newer fields. But that would be disrespectful to a publication that contributed much to my own intellectual development and it would only serve the purpose of personalizing a serious political issue and thereby devaluing its importance. To address the argument as presented in *October* both in its stated terms and with attention to the alarm underlying it is to take issue with the cautioning against undifferentiated relativism and unsituated knowledges being put forward by its editors. Clearly, notions of 'relativism' cannot be dragged around from one discussion to another with complete disregard to the politics that inform each of these. To unframe hierarchies of excellence and of universal value that privilege one strand of cultural production while committing every other mode to cultural oblivion, as claims the not fully articulated accusation in *October*, does not mean that one is launching an undifferentiated universalism in which everything is equal to everything else. Rather it opens up the possibilities for analyzing the politics that stand behind each particular relativist model and of differentiating between those rather than between the supposed value of objects and images. The history whose loss the editors of *October* seem to be lamenting has not disappeared, it has simply shifted ground. In visual culture the history becomes that of the viewer or that of the authorizing discourse rather than that of the object. By necessity this shift in turn determines a change in the very subject of the discussion or analysis, a shift in which the necessity for having the discussion in the first place and for having it in a particular methodological mode and at a particular time become part of this very discussion. This conjunction of situated knowledge and self-reflexive discourse analysis accompanied by a conscious history for the viewing subject hardly seems grounds for such a pessimistic lament, simply an opportunity for a bit of self-consciousness and a serious examination of the politics inherent in each project of

cultural assessment. (*The whole discussion reminds me of a dreadful sociology conference I attended a few years ago at Berkeley in which a very authoritative and very senior woman sociologist complained that without standards of excellence how would she be able to hire and fire people or accept or dismiss students? A fellow attendee at the conference who happened to be sitting next to me kept muttering under his breath in a very heavy Swedish accent 'Why don't you already stop hiring and firing?' Enough said.*)

### Spectatorship in the field of vision

The space this investigation inhabits is the field of vision, which is a much wider arena than a sphere for the circulation of images or questions regarding the nature of representation. This space, the field of vision, is to begin with a vastly overdetermined one. In the West, it bears the heavy burden of post-Enlightenment scientific and philosophical discourses regarding the centrality of vision for an empirical determination of the world as perceivable. In these analyses we find the gaze described as an apparatus of investigation, verification, surveillance and cognition, which has served to sustain the traditions of Western post-Enlightenment scientificity and early modern technologies. The limitations of such historical accounts of the field of vision as central to the continuing Western Enlightenment project (such as Martin Jay's exceptionally scholarly and informative recent book *Downcast Eyes*) is that it is vacated of any political dynamics or models of subjectivity. It becomes a neutral field in which some innocent objective 'eye' is deployed by an unsituated viewer. Therefore the kind of looking that was sanctioned and legitimated by scientific imperatives or the kind of surveillance which claimed its necessity through the establishment of civility through a rooting out of criminality, can now be understood through questions about who is allowed to look, to what purposes, and by what academic and state discourses it is legitimated. The recent spate of literature regarding 'vision' as it appears in numerous learned discourses does precisely the opposite of what 'visual culture' sets out to do. It reproduces a tedious and traditional corpus of knowledge and tells us how each great philosopher and thinker saw the concept of vision within an undisputed philosophical or other paradigm. Most ignominiously, feminist theorists such as Luce Irigaray (who in their writing undid territorialities of hierarchized, linear knowledge), get written into this trajectory in some misguided form of tribute to feminism via its inclusion within the annals of Western thought. By contrast, a parallel discussion in visual culture might venture to ask how bodies of thought produced a notion of vision in the service of a particular politics or ideology and populated it with a select set of images, viewed through specific apparatuses and serving the needs of distinct subjectivities.

The discussion of spectatorship *in* (rather than *and*) sexual and cultural difference, begun within feminist film theory and continued by the critical discourses of minority and emergent cultures, concerns itself with the gaze as desire, which splits spectatorship into the arena of desiring subjects and desired objects. Currently such binary separations have been increasingly tempered by the slippages between the ever-eroding boundaries of exclusive objecthood or coherent subjecthood.



At present we have arrived at an understanding that much of initial sexual and racial identity in the field of vision is formed through processes of negative differentiation: that whiteness needs blackness to constitute itself as whiteness; that masculinity needs femininity or feminized masculinity to constitute its masculinity in agreed upon normative modes; that civility and bourgeois respectability need the stereotypical unruly 'others' – be they drunks or cultural minorities or anyone else positioned outside phantasmatic norms – to define the nonexistent codes of what constitutes 'acceptable' behavior. However, at the same time we have understood that all of these are socially constructed, 'performative' rather than essentially attributed, and therefore highly unstable entities. Thus the field of vision becomes a ground for contestation in which unstable normativity constantly and vehemently attempts to shore itself up. Films such as *The Crying Game* or *The Last Seduction* played precisely with the erosion of assumptions that something – gender identity in both cases – 'looks like' that which names it and the cataclysmic results which such processes of destabilization produce. Spectatorship as an investigative field understands that what the eye purportedly 'sees' is dictated to it by an entire set of beliefs and desires and by a set of coded languages and generic apparatuses.

Finally the field of vision is sustained through an illusion of transparent space. This is the illusion of transparency which is claimed in the quote from Newt Gingrich with which I began this essay: 'I raise my eyes and I see America.' In this scenario, he has the ability to see. America – in all its supposed unity and homogeneity – is there available to his vision; it can be seen by him and the space between them is a transparent entity in which no obstacles obscure the directness and clarity of (his) vision. Politically and philosophically this condition has been best theorized by Henri Lefebvre in *The Production of Space* (1991) when he says:

Here space appears as luminous, as intelligible, as giving action free rein. What happens in space lends a miraculous quality to thought, which becomes incarnate by means of a *design* (in both senses of the word). The design serves as a mediator – itself of great fidelity – between mental activity (invention) and social activity (realization); and it is deployed in space. The illusion of transparency goes hand in hand with a view of space as innocent, as free of traps or secret places. Anything hidden or dissimulated – and hence dangerous – is antagonistic to transparency, under whose reign everything can be taken in by a single glance from the mental eye which illuminates whatever it contemplates.

To some extent the project of visual culture has been to try and repopulate space with all the obstacles and all the unknown images, which the illusion of transparency evacuated from it. Space, as we have understood, is always differentiated: it is always sexual or racial; it is always constituted out of circulating capital; and it is always subject to the invisible boundary lines that determine inclusions and exclusions. Most importantly it is always populated with the unrecognized obstacles which never allow us to actually 'see' what is out there beyond what we expect to find. To repopulate space with all of its constitutive obstacles as we learn to recognize them and name them, is to understand how hard we have to strain to see, and how complex is the work of visual culture.

## The visual conditions of historicizing

I have attempted to map out some constitutive components of the arena of visual culture. Most importantly I need to try to articulate the importance of its operations as a field of knowledge. In the first instance I would argue that the unframing operations I have described above might lead towards a new object of study which would be determined around issues. Those issues in turn are determined by the various urgent cultural conditions and cultural problematics with which we are faced every day. To be able to assemble a group of materials and a variety of methodological analyses around an issue that is determined out of cultural and political realities rather than out of traditions of learned arguments, seems an important step forward in the project of reformulating knowledge to deal responsibly with the lived conditions of highly contested realities, such as we face at the turn of this century in the West.

This is however also a cautionary moment: as we divest ourselves of historical periods, schools of stylistic or aesthetic affiliation, national cultural locations, or the limitations of reading objects through modes and conditions of production, we run the danger of divesting ourselves of self location. It is at this point that we enter perhaps the thorniest and most contentious aspect of this entire project, for it has become clear to each and every one of us – though we may belong to radically different collectives and cultural mobilizations within the arena of contemporary feminist, multicultural and critically/theoretically informed culture – that historic specificity is a critically important part of coming into cultural recognition and articulation. Every movement that has attempted to liberate marginalized groups from the oppressions of elision and invisibility has, to all intents and purposes, insisted on having something to say, on having a language to say it in, and on having a position from which to speak.

My own coming into critical consciousness took place within the feminist theory of the 1980s in Europe and the United States. Without doubt, the historical uncovering and location of earlier female subjects and their numerous histories and the insistence on speaking as women were a very important part of feminist critique, just as emergent cultural minority discourses are presently important in the rewriting of culture by previously colonized peoples. Having established these as both intellectually important and institutionally legitimate, the next phase moved to using gender as a category for the analysis of such categories as style or periodicity or such overall categories as 'modernism,' which enfold both. (*And this was not at all simple – I will never forget the comments of a Vassar art history professor after a lecture I gave there on the visual construction of masculinity and masculine artistic privilege through self-portraiture. He announced uncategorically that my few comments on the subsidiary female figures within these paintings were far more interesting than my efforts at theorizing the visual constructions of masculinity and that as a feminist art historian I should stick with those.*)

At stake therefore are political questions concerning who is allowed to speak about what. These can set up limitations to our intellectual capacity to engage with all the texts, images and other stimuli and frameworks we encounter; to break down the barriers of permissible and territorialized knowledge rather than simply redraw them along another formalized set of lines. The answer lies, to my mind at

least, in substituting the historical specificity of that being studied with the historical specificity of him/her/them doing the studying. In order to effect such a shift without falling prey to endless anecdotal and autobiographical ruminating which stipulates experience as a basis for knowledge, we attempt to read each culture through other, often hostile and competitive, cultural narratives. This process of continuous translation and negotiation is often exhausting in its denial of a fixed and firm position, but it does allow us to shift the burden of specificity from the material to the reader and protects us from the dangers of complete dislocation. Perhaps it might even help us to understand that at the very moment in which historical specificity can provide liberation and political strength to some of the dispossessed, it also imprisons others within an old binary structure that no longer reflects the conditions and realities of their current existence.

I should like to demonstrate this process by presenting a condensed version of a long project in which I have been involved over the past three years. The project is in several parts and involves different types of activity, both historical and critical, often involving a certain amount of fiction writing. The starting point for me has been my need to think through some issues regarding projects of public commemoration and the political uses they serve in different cultures at different times. My need to think through these problems, in relation to one another and against their official articulation by the commemorating culture, has to do with my location as a native of Israel, as someone who has for many years spent long periods of time in Germany and has been very involved with political culture on the German left, and most recently as a teacher and cultural organizer in the US where I have become acquainted with, and shaped by, discussions of multiculturalism and cultural difference. As a native of Israel I grew up in the shadow of a trauma, the genocide of European Jews during the Second World War and of its consequences in the establishment of the modern state of Israel. Simultaneously this history served in covert and unacknowledged ways to legitimate numerous acts of violence; against the indigenous population of Palestine and for the marginalization of Arab Jews, who were not perceived as part of this European horror, which perversely came to define rights of inclusion and participation within the Jewish state of Israel. Perhaps even more importantly, the plethora of commemoration practices of this horror within Israel became extremely important in maintaining a culture of constant and high anxiety within the population of the country, a kind of manifest haunting which could not be shaken despite all evidence of military and technological supremacy in the eastern Mediterranean. No matter how many battles were won and how many enemies vanquished, no matter how often the US assured the population of its undying support and loyalty, not to mention huge and constant influxes of cash and privileged markets, people in Israel have continued to live out their days driven by a fear of annihilation which the ever-present Holocaust monuments have sustained and maintained. So that has been one part of the political urgency of my project, to question the contemporary political uses of commemoration practices.

At the same time I have had to face the recent spate of commemoration activities in Germany and to contend with German discourses of guilt and of compulsory public memory. Operating in this other context, I understood that discourses of guilt and monumental public commemoration affect a form of historical closure. To begin with they assume that one can replace an absence (many millions of murdered

subjects) with a presence (a column or a statue or a complex conceptual set of public space interrogations). Second, the protagonists are frozen into binary, occupying positions of victim and perpetrator, both of whom have seemingly come to a miserable end. The newly hybridized and continuing cultural development of not only Jewish and German but also many other lives affected by the cataclysmic events of fascism and war, elsewhere around the globe and in relation to other geographies and cultures, is denied in its entirety. Finally the historic trauma of the Holocaust linked to the specter of European fascism becomes the index of all political horror and its consequence, imposing once again a Eurocentric index of measure and political identity on the very concept of political horror.

Viewed from the perspective of the US I have watched with dismay the emergence of more and more Holocaust museums across the country over the past four years. Situated within the contexts of the current culture wars exemplified by the multicultural contestation of the traditional and ongoing supremacy of European American cultural legacies, these museums have begun to take on an extremely disturbing dimension: a form of rewriting of the recent past in which a European account of horror would vie with the locally generated horror of slavery and the annihilation of native peoples. It also assumes the form of a 're-whitening' of the migrant heritage of the United States at a moment in which immigration is constantly discussed through non-European and racially marked bodies. This is disturbing in more ways that I can recount in this quick summary of a problematic, but primarily I have been thinking of the ways in which this account writes all of the Jewish world as European, which of course it never has been, and the ways in which it sets up contestations of horror within US histories, between Jewish, African-American and Native American populations.

As a culturally displaced person I move between all of these cultures and languages and inhabit positions within all of their political discourses. My displacement being neither tragic nor disadvantaged but rather the product of restless curiosity, I have an obligation to write all these problematics across one another and to see whether they yield insights beyond their specific cultural and political location. As anyone who inhabits an intercultural or cross-cultural position (which increasingly, with ever-growing self-consciousness, is most of us) knows, this constant translation and mediation process is a deeply exhausting business and one would like to put it to some productive use so that the permanent unease might unravel some other possible perspective on problems viewed almost exclusively from within each of the cultures involved. While I have had the opportunity to write each one within its own context, that was merely the reproduction of an analysis situated within a culture. What then are the possibilities of unframing these problematics and seeing how they interlink and inform one another? Perhaps even more importantly I would like to see if I can find a model of opening up a uniquely European horror to a relationality with all the political horror experienced by migrating populations elsewhere around the globe around the same time. I think that the loss of historical specificity in this instance will be compensated for by the undoing of an indexical hierarchy of horrors, in which one is culturally privileged over others. I hope that in the process some understanding of the degree to which 'Trauma' informs all of our originary myths, means that some patterns and symptoms are shared by the culture at large, even if its populations have radically

different specific histories. It might even help me to think through the constant state of cultural haunting, the underlying conditions of unease emanating from shared but denied histories between the West and non-West, that silently ruffle the surfaces of our daily lives.

That, in a nutshell, constitutes the political urgency of the specific project I am describing, and in writing projects published elsewhere, I hope to demonstrate a possible model for its exploration within the arena of visual culture. These have taken the form of long-term collaborations with conceptual artist Jochen Gerz, with video and multimedia artist Vera Frenkel, and with computer and electronic artist George Legrady. These are collaborations in which I approach the work with my specific issues at hand and invariably find in it a set of thoughts and images that allow me to formulate the next stage of my investigation. In turn my theoretical articulations locate the artists' work within a set of cultural debates in which the visual arts rarely find representation. It assumes the form of a practice, of a 'writing with' an artist's work rather than about it, a dehierarchization of the question of whether the artist, the critic or the historian, the advertising copywriter or the commercial sponsor, the studio or the director, has the final word in determining the meaning of a work in visual culture. (*Oddly this lesson was learned far from the field of dealing with contemporary objects, through Derek Jarman's extraordinary film Caravaggio which, more than anything I had encountered in the early 1980s, produced a model for 'contemporizing history' and reading historical artefacts through current preoccupations such as the instability of the sexual nature of gender categories. After seeing this film I experienced the very necessary delights of uncertainty, of never being quite sure of what I was looking at.*)

One of the many advantages of encountering and analyzing issues of commemoration across a broad range of visual representations that function in public and in private spaces, that tease the viewer with their reluctant visible presence or with their entire physical absence, that broadcast on monitors or lie within the bowels of the computer waiting to be unfolded in real time, is that they straddle the spatial trajectory between memory and commemoration: a trajectory that seems parallel to our dilemma within the intellectual work of the academy. In the unframed field of vision there exist possibilities for simultaneously remembering as we structure solid commemorative arguments, amass facts and juggle analytical models.