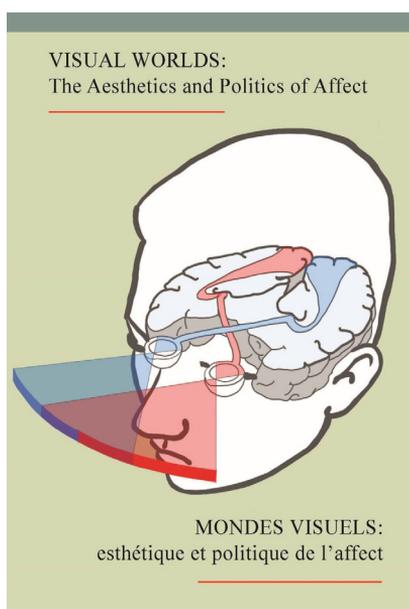


THE EMOTIONAL SELF AND THE VISUAL EXPERIENCE

Review of *Visual Worlds: The Aesthetics and Politics of Affect. Mondes visuels: esthétique et politique de l'affect*. Ed. Kornelia Slavova, Isabelle Boof-Vermesse and Elena Dineva

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before the appearance of photography and the motion pictures, fiction played a major role in producing passages of affect, especially by the late 18th and 19th century novelists in a much more receptive reading public. Some remarkable early examples, already classics, are Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796) and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). If people wanted to go for cheap Victorian horror

From obsessively repetitive TV commercials triggering corporeal sensations and unlocking consumerist urges to persistent images of devastation and destruction engendered by ongoing wars amply regurgitated by the mass and social media, we are being constantly bombarded with visuals that put us in a state of affect and that require a certain (re)action on our part. However, more often than not and for various reasons, we are unable to act upon these urges, which leaves us with a bitter taste of underperformance, frustration and ultimately, a cultivation of an unnerving schizoid effect of being alternatively the last human in a posthuman world and of being that unfeeling monster who is like all the others. Of course, the exacerbation of the sense of alienation has been largely due to the global effect of the COVID-19 pandemic which has resulted in imposed restrictions of movement of people worldwide. Historically,

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thrills, there were the *Penny dreadfuls*. A major novelist – Charles Dickens offered lots of genuine gothic scares in several of his novels – *Great Expectations* (1861), *Little Dorrit* (1857), *Our Mutual Friend* (1865), etc. As for appealing to the empathy of the sentimental touch, a good example can be Dickens's Little Nell from his *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841), a novel which is known to have produced such a public concern for the fate of the poor girl that on his arrival in the USA Dickens was welcomed by crowds of Americans all eager to know what the next installment held in store for the heroine. Even then, a late Victorian such as Oscar Wilde was able to say on the subject, with a pre-modernist sensibility, that “one must have a heart of stone to read the death of Little Nell without dissolving into tears... of laughter”². It was Wilde again that later was to claim from his *De Profundis* (1905), preparing us for the remarkable literary reenactment of his moments on the pillory, that “where there is sorrow, there is holy ground” (Wilde, 2010, p. 58). To return to the effects of the press on readers, Sylvia Plath wrote poignantly in her *Journals* (2007) from the 1950s that she felt “sick” and that “[she]’d sooner be a citizen of Africa than see America mashed and bloody and making a fool of herself” (Plath, 2007, p. 46-7), referring to the shocking presentation by a newspaper of badly burned survivors of the atomic blast in Nagasaki. These are only a few examples of the effects of *affect* and of our dealing with it from the point of view of the privileged observer (reader), detached critical commentator and denigrated victimized reporter. The complexity of the issue has been aptly and timely addressed in *Visual Worlds: The Aesthetics and Politics of Affect* (2018), a book published by POLIS Publishers in Sofia, Bulgaria, with an ambitious agenda behind it.

As the book's editors themselves claim:

The present book on visual affect builds upon many of the theoretical discussions over the years but at the same time it is the result of the presentations during the conference *Visual Worlds: The Politics and Aesthetics of Affect*, held at St. Kliment Ohridski University of Sofia (3-4 June 2017). It contains twenty papers by scholars from Europe and North America who work in diverse fields such as literature and cultural studies, film and television studies, performance and media studies. We are interested in understanding what images represent but also what they do and how they work, how they are perceived by various audiences, what visual affects they trigger – i.e., the affective capacities of visual culture to mobilize and modulate recipients' desires, imagination, and thinking. The articles that follow examine how the visual intersects with affect, raising multiple and important questions: How has the nature of visual experience changed at the beginning of the 21st century? Why is contemporary society investing so much money and effort to produce hyper images, which are impossible to distinguish from actual reality? How are images' affective intensities related or not to their representational meanings? How do we watch and respond to YouTube videos, TV series, telenovelas, commercials, video games and various performances? By putting together diverse cultural texts and practices as well as concepts and methodologies from different disciplines, we hope to stimulate reflection on visual culture in affective terms (pp. 5-6).

² See Hristo Boev's article “De-territorialization and Re-territorialization in Little Nell's Death-bed Scene: Deconstructing Little Nell”. – a. n.

To be able to address the proposed aspects of *affect* in different cultural contexts and from different perspectives with an emphasis on the most recent developments from our 21st century, the editors have divided the book into five parts: Part I, *Visual Affect and Politics*; Part II, *Moving Images: Affect in Film and TV*; Part III, *Visual Expression and Affect*; Part IV, *Visual Persuasion and Literature*; Part V, *Affect on Page and Stage*.

In Part I Sneja Gunew, in her article “Visual Affect: Distant and Proximate Empathy” begins her exploration of the manifestations of empathy by discussing the effects of *affect* in a photo that went viral on the social and mass media in 2015 and to a big extent shaped our perception of the sufferings of Syrian refugees, and namely, the lifeless body of two-year-old Alan Kurdi lying face down on a Turkish beach close to Bodrum. The child’s body, partially hidden in the wet sand with the waves breaking over his little head, became a symbol of butchered innocence and a slap in the face of all who were complacently looking on. Unsurprisingly, soon a sand inscription appeared near the drowned body: “humanity washed ashore”. Similar to Plath’s indignant comment on the aftermath of the atomic bomb explosion, Gunew registers her own initial reaction to the photo reflecting the perception of nonchalance in some Canadian observers: “So it was horrifying for me to see the familiar intransigence towards and callous rejection of those who were fleeing the carnage in Syria” (p. 11). She is quick to render, in a dramatic fashion, the reenactments of the toddler’s death – by artists’ installations, correctly noting their grotesqueness by way of juxtaposition to the original (p. 12). Undoubtedly, as Gunew also points out, the universal outrage which automatically qualified the unsympathetic ones as sociopathic, lies in the archetypal trope (conceit) of the *dead child* exploited so masterfully by Dickens. But just as Wilde’s dismissive reaction suggests, there is a darker side to empathy, which Gunew promptly notes, referring to Luc Boltanski who advocates denouncing media-induced empathy “for giving everyone the opportunity to cultivate themselves through absorption in their own pity at the spectacle of someone else’s suffering (Boltanski 1993: xiv)” (p. 13). To further illustrate the duality of Muslim victimhood in occidental perceptions, Gunew insightfully invokes *Charlie Hebdo*’s caricature from 2016 of the prospective Alan – as an Islamic terrorist chasing Europeans who are running for their lives (p. 14). Gunew finishes on a meditative note alluding to the Deleuzian theory of *deterritorialization* and *reterritorialization*, in this case, of the *human* in our perception of media portrayed suffering through a process of identity-searching on part of the viewer who ultimately should distinguish himself or herself from the perpetrators (p. 20).

Of particular significance in the discourse on the formation of *affect* in Part I is Betty Kaklamanidou’s article on political narratives mixing real and imagined figures and events, entitled “Political Television Narratives in the 2010s: Fact and Fiction”. Her short list of awarded political TV shows features series such as *Homeland*, *House of Cards* and *Veep* which, due to their strong content, memorable scenes and perhaps successful mixture of fact and fiction

cemented the reputation of actors such as Damian Lewis, Claire Danes, Mandy Patinkin, Kevin Spacey, Kate Mara, Gary Cole and others. Kaklamanidou aims by “drawing upon the tools of New Film History, [to] outline television’s affect in politics and its role in framing the public’s changing perception of politics and politicians” (p. 33). This critic examines the background of the appearance of the shows in question, shedding light on the production process and linking them to famous politicians, e. g. former president Obama’s favorite – *Homeland* (p. 34). By establishing the relationship between the real events on which the fictionalized narrative of *Homeland* is made in Season 4, for instance, she makes important comments on the verisimilitude of the events portrayed in the show and the truths it tells to the audience, one of them being the revelation expressed “by Sophie Gilbert in *The Atlantic*, when she writes that *Homeland* is ‘offering a remarkably insightful take on the compromised morality of everyone involved in the war on terror, regardless of the allegiance’ (2015: 89)” (p. 34). A particular strength of the show, indicated by Kaklamanidou, is the dual role all play in a game where not only there is no black and white (p. 34), but the roles are mixed to the point of blending and the actions of the CIA officers at times become identical to those of the terrorists. As with *Homeland*, Kaklamanidou draws similarities between *House of Cards* and the actual presidential race in the USA in 2016 (p. 36), thus establishing the power of such shows to tell truths under the guise of fiction and not only describe, but also predict future trends. This critic affirms the recognized truism that the most difficult thing is to capture the contemporary and explains how the TV shows she examines manage to do just that by drawing on a multitude of factors and responsible persons.

A continuation of the examination of movies and their capacity to produce *affect* is Gérard Imbert’s article from Part II entitled “Hypervisibilité et horreur glacée dans le cinéma d’auteur actuel”³ (Hypervisibility and Frozen Horror in the Modern Movies). This critic explores movies by famous modern creators of horror such as Lars von Trier, Paul Verhoeven, Gaspar Noé and Kim Ki-duk (p. 51). The title of the article begs an explanation in English and should be understood as horror that leaves the viewer speechless or frozen, very much in the way the characters themselves from the movies in question act or remain when unspeakable horror strikes. This critic starts his comments by referring to a well-known name – Michael Haneke who is one of the first to explore “la glaciation émotionnelle” (emotional freezing) (p. 51) and who made the actress Isabelle Huppert a world star in movies such as *The Piano Teacher* (2001) and *Amour* (2012). As the examined movies prove, among which *The Pillow Book* (1996), *Irreversible* (2002), and the recent Korean movies, one could include here the smash hit TV series *Squid Game* (2021-), “le monstre n’est plus figuratif, extérieur, étranger au genre humain, qu’il soit extraterrestre ou *alien*, il est en nous, quelquefois invisible” (the monster is no longer figurative, exterior, foreign to the human kind, as would be an extraterrestrial or an alien, it is within us, sometimes invisible) (p. 52). Imbert

3 The translations from French are mine. – a. n.

makes it clear that the goal of these film directors is to show us horror as part of our lives, “d’une certaine façon acceptable, comme fait et comme représentation” (in a way acceptable, as a fact and representation) (p. 52). The author also makes a categorization of this type of inherent horror, referring to several other well-known movies such as *Melancholia* (2011), *Le Mariage à trois* (2010), *The Lobster* (2015) and *Elle* (2016) (p. 53). The tendency to introduce horror as something that belongs to us, and our lives has to do with “la banalisation du mal diagnostiquée par Hanna Arendt” (the banalization of evil diagnosed by Hanna Arendt) (p. 54). To illustrate his point and explore the possibility of horror to produce *affect*, Imbert gives an example with *Elle* (2016) which opens with a rape scene and which, according to him, has produced a controversy by its objective brutality, but also by reason of the coldness with which the victim, Michèle (Isabelle Huppert) experiences it, strongly suggesting a mixture of pleasure and pain (p. 56). Imbert concludes that modern movies with horror elements project a mode of visibility “qui ne cherche pas tant à rompre les tabous – se situant au-delà – qu’à dialoguer avec eux” (which does not seek so much to break the taboos – which are beyond the visible – as to converse with them) (p. 58). An earlier example of this frank portrayal of *l’horreur quotidienne* (everyday horror) could be Hervé Guibert’s autofictive *La Pudeur ou l’impudeur* (1992) where the director filmed himself in the last stage of full-blown AIDS for 62 minutes. The healthiest thing we can do, as Imbert suggests, would be not to embrace this horror, but to accept it as part of us, and thus be less affected by its *affect*, to humanize it by dialoguing with the taboos and possibly negotiating with our own selves their conditional acceptance. A film based on a true story, *The Abduction of Lisa McVey* (2018), which presents a rape and kidnapping case, has the police officers in complete disbelief when Lisa (Katie Douglas) calmly relates details of her harrowing experience where she says she cooperated to save her life – she is the only victim of the serial killer (Robert Joe Long) who has survived after being kidnapped by him. By drawing our attention to elements of horror present in controversial postmodernist movies, Imbert is asking us to rethink our perceptions of common taboos and learn more about our bodies and psyche.

In Part III, a very interesting take on melodrama as capable of producing *affect* is presented by Isabelle Boof-Vermeesse in her article “Jaime Hernandez’ *Love and Rockets* as Graphic Melodrama”. Its place in affect theory is guaranteed by being considered “one of the three embodied genres according to Linda Williams (the other two being horror and pornography)” (p. 101). Boof-Vermeesse claims that “it is meant for the spectator to enjoy the passive aspects of life” since “emotion is not matched by action” (p. 101). One could evoke here arguably the first soap opera ever written – *Pamela* (1740) by Samuel Richardson which offers a detailed examination of closed spaces where Pamela Andrews is held captive in her role of a live-in housemaid and where she has to resist the attempts on her chastity by Mr. B. Just like modern melodrama, it explores the incapacity of the victim to escape, but she is usually capable of defending herself, albeit at a high cost (Clarissa, another character of Richardson’s is not). Being adored by some and

detested by others, melodrama will always affect with what can be perceived as its blunt stupidity or with what could be taken as role models by the audience. The author of the article explores the effect of “amplification through simplification (McCloud 1994: 30” (p. 103), analyzing comics. The author then concludes that “by drawing on this kind of domestic melodrama, *Love and Rockets* creates a blatant aesthetic of formal vision that embraces a mode of representation that runs counter to the promise of referential illusion encapsulated in the documentary barrio plot and setting” (p. 105).

In Part IV Alexandra Glavanakova explores how the printed book has been affected by digital technologies in her article “S is for Seduction: From Electronic Literature to the Printed Book”. The article examines certain visual experiments in printed books which have drawn on specific layout and typography to achieve certain effects (p. 136). The author reviews very recent events as would be the illustration with Google Maps of a geographical novel (p. 136). Since the production of the printed book is connected to its pre-print computerized existence, Glavanakova sees the digital “imprint on print” (p. 137) in many books. The author then proceeds by providing examples of numerous books where digital technologies have played a role in visualizing the content of the printed book, a well-known example being Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) where, by leafing forward and backward and by looking at the pages one would see people alternatively falling from the burning towers of the WTC or flying upwards in an additional effect of visual symbolism. Glavanakova sees these digital borrowings as positives for the printed book which thus becomes “a conscious work of art” (p. 138). Also, she hopes the print book will thus be saved from “its much-feared death” (p. 138). The kind of a possible cooperation of the digital and the printed promoted by this critic seems a possibility not recognized by a writer such as Jonathan Franzen who in an early essay collection *How to Be Alone* (2002) sees himself as part of a fast-dwindling generation of readers (Franzen, 2002, p. 145). To prove her point, Glavanakova refers to the ritualistic unboxing of a book, *The Ship of Theseus* by an obscure writer V. M. Straka, requiring the reader “to break a seal with the same letter S” (p. 139). Further mysterious details enshroud the book – it is a translation from an unknown language by an unidentifiable translator. The book also looks artificially antique (p. 139). The physical packaging seems to be part of the book content since the letter S stands for yet another mysterious persona – “the unnamed protagonist narrator” (p. 139). On reading the book one discovers that there are further intricacies which combine the packaging, visuals on the pages, and the story, with Glavanakova herself acknowledging that the very promotion of the book in this manner clearly reflects fears shared, as I have said, by writers such as Franzen. On a positive note, the book thus presented to the reader, according to the critic, has a potential, “it [the new medium] paradoxically helps to release the unsuspected potential of the old medium with a renewed complexity and richness” (p. 142). Certainly, I can see young readers being attracted to a book which stands out from the others in the

bookstore, and which offers lots of memorable visuals and tangible physicality in the reading experience, no doubt, additional food for the readers' imagination.

In Part V, yet another interesting take on *affect* is offered by Kornelia Slavova with her article "Visual Histrionics: Suzan-Lori Parks's Theatre of Witnessing in the Flesh", this time around by discussing the work of an experimental American playwright who "pays special attention to the connection between history and theatre: by simultaneously theatricalizing history and historicizing theatre" (p. 158). The critic focuses "on her play *Venus* (1997) to explore how Parks employs the affective capacities of the theatre – especially the power to affect and be affected through physical and emotional movement on and off stage" (p. 158). What makes Parks's drama special is its being grounded on "physicality and visuality of the theatrical spectacle, on the bodily performance and the spatial implications of the state, on props and costume, on movement as a sensorial element – i. e., capturing visually what cannot be stated with words" (p. 158). In her analysis Slavova draws on affect theory as realized in the works of Brian Massumi, also known as the author of later books, such as *Politics of Affect* (2015) and *Ontopower: War, Powers and the State of Perception* (2015), as well as *What Animals Teach Us about Politics* (2014). Massumi's work is propitious for theater studies since "as Massumi explains, 'Emotion is contextual. Affect is situational' (2002: 2017)" (p. 159). *Venus* seems to illustrate "the showmanship of watching. *Venus*'s black body is literally on display on stage all the time: abject, naked, smelly, filthy, and bleeding, being kicked, measured, dissected, and caged like an animal. It is constantly subject to the gazes of several groups of spectators" (p. 160). Just like other authors of this book, Slavova is discussing a controversial work since it directly challenges the concept of media-induced empathy, here through the medium of the performance on the stage and, as a result, in a much more dramatic and immediate fashion. Unsurprisingly, as Slavova points out, "some claim that [...] Baartman 'has been twice victimized': first by 19th century Victorian society and then by the play *Venus* itself (Young 1997: 700). Others defend the playwright, insisting that the character has no choice as 'she is caught up in the weighty momentum of colonialism and sexism' (Basting 1997: 225)" (p. 161). In defense of the play, Slavova views the audience as "secondary witnesses and [Parks] forces them to (re)consider their position as passive observers of historical injustice" (p. 162). Slavova provides a riveting truly Foucauldian description as to all the trials and tribulations that *Venus* goes through on stage, leading to her utter humiliation at which point the spectators are asked by the playwright to kindly leave the theater (p. 163). Slavova's conclusion seems to summarize the best that Parks achieves with her neo-Dadaistic approach:

The working of affect is a problematic of structure, form, aesthetics, and politics prevents spectators from becoming passive witnesses and accomplices in the manipulation of representational politics. Parks deliberately destroys the pleasure of the spectacle: she opens up ample possibilities of acting against amnesia and apathy, of subverting the official narrative of colonial slavery, and mobilizing of affects to produce a political engagement (p. 165).

As shown above, the editors more than deliver on their ambitious promise to explore *affect* from various angles, which makes the book under scrutiny worthy of anyone's recommendation. It falls in line with what has been called the "decolonization project" in seeking an "epistemic disobedience" (Walsh, 2018, p. 20). With their bold takes on an assortment of topics, detailed investigations, and modern approaches, the authors have certainly contributed to affect theory. Since the other articles are just as worthy of attention as the ones I have discussed briefly, I will mention them as they also have contributed to this excellent book: from Part I: Antoine Rodriguez, "Nation enchantée, Nation désenchantée: construction et fonction des affects dans quelques productions visuelles mexicaines"; from Part II: Jonathan McCreedy, "A Crazy Handful of Signs": *Breaking Bad*, Peirce and Deleuze's Cinema 1"; Thomas Dutoit, "*Oscillations; or, the Display of Affect in Mad Max. Fury Road*"; Sarah Jonckheere, "From Ability to Respond to Passionate Responsibility: Telepathy and Organic Reversals in David Cronenberg's *Videodrome*"; from Part III: Guillaume Baychelier, "Visualité vidéoludique: le jeu des affects"; Christina Dokou, "Ungrateful Dead: Grave(n) Images of Ethnicity in Two Balkan Themed Graphic Novels"; from Part IV: Lubomir Terziev, "William Blake's and Elon Musk's Versions of Augmentation: Poetic Vision and the Neural Lace"; Biljana Dojcinovic, "Visual Wor(l)ds in the early Writing by John Updike"; Alexandra Jeleva, "Représenter l'irreprésentable: le corps fantastique dans *La Découverte Australe* (1781) et *Fragoletta* (1829)"; from Part V: Vessela Guenova, "Mécanismes et fonctions de la visualisation graphique de la théâtralité dans le textes dramatique de Molière: les frontispices dans le premières éditions"; Antoaneta Robova, "Modulations affectives des images photographiques et variations sur le motif de l'oel mecanique dans l'oeuvre de Milan Kundera" and Elena Dineva, "(De)compositions du regard dans le roman *Bruges-la-Morte* de Georges Rodenbach".

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