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# What Do Pictures Do? (Montpellier, 11–12 Jun 20)

Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3 (France)
Deadline: Jun 30, 2019

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What Do Pictures Do? (IN)VISIBILIZING THE SUBALTERN
International conference organized by EMMA and CLIMAS Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3
June 11-12, 2020
Keynote speakers
Cheryl FINLEY (Cornell University), Art historian, Curator and contemporary art critic
André GUNTHERT (EHESS, École des hautes études en sciences sociales), Historian of visual cultures

Organizers
Mathilde ARRIVÉ (Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3, EMMA) Nicolas LABARRE (Université Bordeaux Montaigne, CLIMAS) Helena LAMOULIATTE-SCHMITT (Université de Bordeaux, CLIMAS) Hervé MAYER (Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3, EMMA) Monica MICHLIN (Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3, EMMA)

Call for Papers

"I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. [...] When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination [...]. That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their inner eyes [...]."
Ralph ELLISON, Invisible Man, New York : Random House, Vintage Books, (1952) 1980, p. 3.

The broadening scope of the socially visible world, along with the shift from voice to image, is seen by many (Benjamin, Crary) as a hallmark of modernity. In the wake of the pictorial turn, as individuation processes increasingly involve visual identifications, visibility has become a central paradigm of today's social imagination. Whether desired, imposed, refused or denied, chosen or endured, visibility is now both an individual injunction and an institutional rationale (Zawadzki), regarded as the vehicle and guardian of social existence (Honneth).
Based on these premises, social invisibility characterizes individuals who are excluded from authorized visualities and majority visual discourses, and thus denied access to the social gaze. Invisible women and men are people "without"—without a face, without a voice. They include the youth, the poor, the disabled, ethnic and sexual minorities, outsiders, rebels, refugees and strangers, but also people living precarious lives or simply anonymous existences, whose images and words are relegated to the sidelines of public expression. As philosopher Axel Honneth argues, social invisibility has to be understood metaphorically, as "a denial of recognition" sealing "social non-exis-

tence" and causing feelings of disaffiliation. In fact, what is commonly called social invisibility (and its corollary, inaudibility) is an intersectional phenomenon that encompasses and intersects other forms of invisibility—historical, political, and legal (Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach).

Not only has "the gaze" long been an area of investigation among philosophers (Lévinas, Sartre), psychoanalysts (Freud, Lacan) and sociologists (Mauss, Elias), but the critique of visibility constitutes, in itself, a major theoretical tradition, initiated by the Frankfurt School, continued by Foucault, Debord and Barthes, but also Morin and Baudrillard, as well as Sontag, Mitchell and Mirzoeff in the US. Research on social invisibility, on the other hand, has mainly been the focus of sociology, political science, political philosophy, moral philosophy and history.

However rich and diverse the array of theoretical and critical thought on invisibility may be, invisibility has too rarely been approached from the perspective of invisible individuals and through the prism of visual mediations. The conference therefore proposes to fill these two gaps in order to expand and enrich the nascent field of invisibility studies, but also to shed light on the dual agency of images—as the vectors of both visibility and opacity, alienation and emancipation.

Avenues of inquiry

Social invisibility is a not an ontological condition, an essential attribute, characteristic or disposition, but a constructed social situation and process, underpinned by discourses and images. This symposium seeks to explore invisibility in three main areas: institutions, media and art.

1) Invisibilizing:Strategies,Apparatuses,Institutions

Invisibilization is frequently equated with an absence of image, a denial of representation; as a result, it is primarily approached through phenomena of censorship, relegation, erasure or oblivion, involving previously hidden, forgotten or invisible archival material.

Yet invisibilization is not necessarily the opposite of visibility. In fact, more often than not, invisibilization is visible and can be objectified. The goal will then be to analyze the various invisibilizing strategies at work in, around and via pictures—effacing, spectralizing, derealizing, obscuring agencies, naturalizing stereotypes, establishing scopic hierarchies, abolishing the boundaries between public and private—as well as the different types of invisibilizing gazes— defamatory, criminalizing, miserabilist, voyeuristic, racializing or minorizing. Also deserving attention are the ways apparatuses like biopolitical discipline, ubiquitous surveillance, advertising, medical or police profiling may invisibilize subjects by way of exposure or overexposure. Papers may also focus on how "subalterns" tend to internalize and perpetuate their own social invisibility through invisibilizing mechanisms such as social camouflage, racial passing, or masquerade. Understanding the contexts in which images lose their function and value as mediations, which leads them to mask social relations as well as the invisible operations of the social gaze, is thus paramount.

There are many instances of hypervisible invisibilization. Perhaps one of the most paradigmatic examples in contemporary media culture is the photograph gone viral of a tortured Abu Ghraib inmate with his face covered by a bag—"the Hooded Man", "the Bagman", "the Invisible Man of Abu Ghraib" (Mitchell 2011, 140-141). Long before that, the myth of the Vanishing Race granted Native Americans abundant visibility at the turn of the 20th century, but along the spectralizing and thanatographic lines of an already dead people. Such examples show that, in the end, invisibility is not an absence of image, but rather an iconic pattern as much as a configuration of the gaze—a way of seeing, a visuality—socialized by images and the media, both old and new.

## 2) Counter-visuality, Visual Sovereignty and the "Right to Appear"

Why make oneself visible? And using what visual language, visual tools or media circuits? While the digital turn has made visibility more fluid, less centralized and more horizontal, "the right to appear" (Butler 2004) and to represent oneself is, first of all, a right to look back and (re)appropriate the dominant imagery critically, through parody, performance, plays on codes and identifications, in baroque or creolized aesthetics. Attention should thus be paid to what these critical (usually decolonial or feminist) pictures do—to the social gaze, to interpretive communities, to public opinion. But (re)appropriation is only one visibilizing tactic among many others, like automediation, the contemporary avatar of autoethnography in the 19th century (Pratt), which makes it possible to use agency both inside and in front of pictures, to determine the visual scenario according to one's own singular representational desire or need, especially in the context of digital visibility and its increased democratization of self-images (Gunthert). Equally of interest is the way becoming visible often means becoming socially sighted, allowing invisible people not only to look and be looked at in their own terms, but also "to be seen seeing", to see themselves as seers, and to see how they are seen.

Besides, in today's context of "image wars" (Latour), our attention will focus on the fights for visibility, which are also fights for and of representation(s), in the political and theatrical acceptations of the word. How can visual tactics derived from the world of the spectacle and entertainment be used for counter-hegemonic purposes? What can be said of the carnivalesque dimension that characterizes many interventions (gay pride, Guerrilla Girls, etc.)? Papers could explore the meaning and stakes of notions like "visual resistance" or "visual activism", especially through forms of urban creativity (graffiti, murals, stickers, etc.). Worthy of attention are also the new, collective practices of visibility based on participation (marches, assemblies, occupations and other forms of appropriation of the public space) and the way they reorganize communal or political bodies, and reshuffle the distribution of visibility in the urban geography and the public sphere—and how they may turn visibility itself into a new agora (Gunthert).

Finally, an important issue will be to determine whether these visibilizing strategies reinforce "the tyranny of visibility" (Aubert et Haroche) and its normative practices, or if instead they use the social vocabulary of visibility to undermine, derail or reroute it (Boidy). Ultimately, the goal will be to know if these counter-images allow the emergence of counter-visualities, i.e., according to N. Mirzoeff, "dissensus with visuality, [...] dispute[s] over what is visible'", likely to delineate another visual order, another visual configuration of the social world, a new "distribution of the sensible" (Rancière):

a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience. Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak. (Rancière 13)

## 3) Towards Post-visuality: Invisibility as Tactic?

While some individuals are over-exposed and others unseeable, visuality tends to oscillate between two scopic regimes, the spectacular and the spectral—resulting sometimes in their deadly association, as in acts of terror, which combine images of destruction and the destruction of images (Mitchell 2011, 64). This split signals a crisis of visibility (Boidy)— simultaneously regarded as value and anti-value (Heinich 2011), trap and privilege, source of emancipation and subjuga-

tion—which also indicates a crisis in institutions (Zawadzki 294) and a crisis of subjectivities. These observations, in turn, invite a radical critique of the primacy of visibility and make room for the premise that invisibility itself may, in fact, be a source of visual agency and a form of visual sovereignty. What kind of presence, action, expression and creativity, if any, does invisibility enable or foster?

Invisibility is commonly construed as transgressive because it has long been associated with crime, violence, but also with all things sacred (transcendence is invisible because it is incommensurable). Yet paradoxically, by designating what is outside the social world and by preventing mediations, invisibility excites the imagination and amplifies the production of images. Papers may therefore interrogate the social gaze on chosen invisibility (hoods, scarves). More broadly, we invite participants to analyze the way invisibility has gradually shifted from a transgressive to a protective strategy, as exemplified, for example, in the editorial blurring or masking of faces in the media and social networks, in the name of "image rights", resulting in paradoxical forms of visibility combining ostentation and dissimulation (Gunthert "Destinataire inconnu").

In the contemporary era of "post-visuality" (Mirzoeff 277), is chosen invisibility becoming a positive value? Invisibility seems to be less and less experienced as a form of loss, self- censorship, radical iconoclasm or giving up of representations, but rather as a way to revitalize mediations, which, once freed from identifications, may be able to activate the social gaze in other ways and by other means. Considered from the perspective of Agamben's notion of "ordinary singularity", could chosen invisibility manifest a form of "post-identity"—an identity without identification and without image, detached from communities that could recognize, represent, and apprehend it?

In the art world, some artists refuse monumental, spectacular and theatrical self- dramatizations, developing instead "tactics based on subtraction, lack, uncertainty or invisibility"2. How and why do artists use pictures to claim discretion? How can pictures endorse and enact the choice of the minor, the infra-ordinary and the infra-political? Along these lines, participants are encouraged to delve into the various artistic strategies that run counter to the traditional visual codes of self-exposition: paradoxical portraits, back views, faces concealed or out of frame (Lorna Simpson, Francesca Woodman), deliberate opacity (Carrie Mae Weems, Nancy Spero) and silhouettes (Kara Walker), crossed-out or erased words and motifs (Basquiat), etc. All these creative endeavors foreground vulnerability and challenge viewers to see, but, more importantly, they critique images in, with and by way of images. In that sense, we would like to determine whether alternative representational paradigms are likely to induce new identity paradigms, but also new ways of relating to oneself, to others, and to images.

Papers may deal with any form of visual art and visual culture.
Papers should be 20 minutes in duration and can be in English or French. They may cover any area of the English-speaking world.
Proposals should include a 300-word abstract, together with a title, a bibliography and a short biography.

Please send your proposal by June 30, 2019 to the following addresses: invisibilization.conference@gmail.com et mathilde.arrive@univ-montp3.fr.
A publication of peer-reviewed texts will be proposed by the organizers.
Registration fees are 40 euros for lecturers, professors or independent scholars, and 20 euros for doctoral students.

Reference:

CFP: What Do Pictures Do? (Montpellier, 11-12 Jun 20). In: ArtHist.net, May 17, 2019 (accessed Jan 20, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/20865>.