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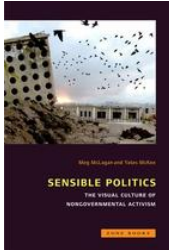
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SOCIAL CHANGE SENSIBILITIES

SANDRA RISTOVSKA

SENSIBLE POLITICS:
THE VISUAL CULTURE OF
NONGOVERNMENTAL
ACTIVISMEdited by Meg
McLagan and Yates
McKee

Zone Books, 2012

BUY

March 6, 2013 — In *Sensible Politics*, Meg McLagan, a cultural anthropologist and independent filmmaker, and Yates McKee, a writer and scholar, provide an intriguing collage of essays and interviews by scholars, activists, artists, filmmakers, and architects that explore the inextricable linkages between visual culture and nongovernmental politics. In the introduction to this edited volume, McLagan and McKee write:

Political acts are encoded in medial forms [and] these forms have force, shaping people as subjects and constituting the contours of what is perceptible, sensible, legible. In doing so, they define the terms of political possibility and create terrain for political acts.

Building on one of the major contributions of visual culture scholarship—that visibility is a social and cultural phenomenon of “looking”—they coin the term “image-complex” as a methodological and theoretical intervention in visual research. In their view, “image-complex” is useful because it enables a comprehensive examination of the tangled relations between aesthetics, mediation, social and political movements, and action. Instead of studying them in isolation, one should look at the nodes of visual production, circulation, display, consumption, and political usage as mutually constitutive. Not surprisingly, then, the underlying question of this volume is: how are political activities by nongovernmental actors influenced, assisted, and organized by practices of looking and engagements with different modes of visibility?

The five articles in the first section, “Persistence of Photography,” address the ways in which photographs continue to be an important tool for political action regardless of whether they are confrontational, convincing, or even subtle. Roger Hallas gives a brief overview of the factors that have contributed to increasing collaborations between photojournalists and nongovernmental organizations. The crisis in photojournalism both in terms of ethics and political economy changes this profession. It is within this context that Hallas situates Gideon Mendel’s work and discusses the use of photojournalism in strategic communication. The essay argues that Mendel’s turn from photojournalism to photography as a form of visual activism enables him to engage with the witnessing potential of images and to play with the limits of representation.

Judith Butler’s chapter, “Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street,” leads the next section of this volume; in it, she asks, how does the effective use of technology implicate the body, and how does technology create new forms of political action? In his chapter, “Envisioning Abolition: Sex, Citizenship, and the Racial Imaginary of the Killing State,” Kendall Thomas reminds us that the field of visibility is a playground for racial representations. His analysis of the execution of Wanda Jean in Oklahoma in January 2001 demonstrates the limits of rationalist discourse against capital punishment, and calls for a cultural analysis of the “irrational rationality” of the death penalty system. Reminiscent of Chantal Mouffe’s well-known argument that what makes people act politically are passions, desires, and fantasies,¹ Thomas calls for a new critical vocabulary to enter popular American discourse on capital punishment, one that would decenter the rational

and situate “the cultural phenomena of racial desire and racial fantasy” at the center of the debate.

AT THE HEART OF THE NEW PARADIGM LIES NOT ONLY AN OLD DEBATE ABOUT THE SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF ART, BUT ALSO AN EMPHASIS ON STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION IN DOCUMENTARY MEDIA PRACTICE.

In the third section, titled “Cinema, Documentary, Political Effects,” Meg McLagan examines the new emerging paradigm in documentary filmmaking based on the expectation that films “should not just represent political conditions, but actually change them.” In this new paradigm, funding agencies are committed

to a “double bottom line”—financial as well as social returns—and as a result they encourage filmmakers to think of themselves as social entrepreneurs. Art for its own sake is not satisfactory, and neither is the fulfillment of epistophilia. At the heart of the new paradigm lies not only an old debate about the social significance of art, but also an emphasis on strategic communication in documentary media practice. Following McLagan’s overview of strategic filmmaking for social change are two chapters that exemplify this new paradigm: an interview with Pamela Yates, an award-winning filmmaker, and a detailed analysis of the strategic circulation of *State of Fear: The Truth about Terrorism*, a documentary from 2005 that speaks about two decades of repression and resistance in Peru.

The section “Expanded Architecture” provides us with another angle on the nexus between politics and visuality. Andrew Herscher’s chapter relates cultural heritage with political activism in the post-Yugoslavian context. He asks, for example, what do the reconstruction of the Avala Tower in Belgrade (RTS site bombed by NATO), the building of a statue of Bruce Lee in the center of Mostar, or a photograph of an artist standing on a site of a destroyed statue of Tito in Croatia tell us about the transformation of former Yugoslavian countries? In the final section, on “Multiplying Platforms,” anthropologist Faye Ginsberg explores indigenous media activism in Australia and New Zealand, and Sam Gregory, a program director of the NGO Witness, discusses the various strategies his organization uses to effectively implement video in human rights advocacy around the world.

Sensible Politics places visuality at the heart of social activism today. Examining images, videos, maps, bodies, and spaces through the constellation of aesthetics and politics writ large, the volume provokes, surprises, and inspires. As a person whose research interests include transnational visual activism and media witnessing, and as a documentary filmmaker who works on projects about social justice, I find this volume useful in my scholarly endeavors and encouraging for my filmmaking undertakings. As the debates about bridging the gap between scholarly practice, media making, and activism continue to gain prominence, the conversations that *Sensible Politics* begins are important food for thought for scholars of visual culture, visual anthropology, media studies, and communication, as well as for social justice media makers.

¹ For a brief overview of Chantal Mouffe’s work, please see her interview conducted by Rosalyn Deutsch, Branden Joseph, and Thomas Keenan in *Grey Room*, no. 2 (2001).

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