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Iconology, visual culture and media aestetics[1]

THERE ARE NO VISUAL MEDIA

"Visual media" is a colloquial expression used to designate things like TV, movies, photography, painting, and so on. But it is highly inexact and misleading. All the so-called visual media turn out, on closer inspection, to involve the other senses (especially touch and hearing). All media are, from the standpoint of sensory modality, "mixed media." The obviousness of this raises two questions: (1) Why do we persist in talking about some media as if they were exclusively visual? Is this just a shorthand for talking about visual *predominance*? And if so, what does "predominance" mean? Is it a quantitative issue (*more* visual information than aural or tactile)? Or a question of qualitative perception, the sense of things reported by a beholder, audience, viewer/listener? (2) Why does it matter what we call "visual media"? Why should we care about straightening out this confusion? What is at stake?

First, let me belabor the obvious. Can it really be the case that there are no visual media despite our incorrigible habit of talking

1 We present fragments of three chapters from the book written by W.J.T. Mitchell *Image science. Iconology, visual culture, and media aestetics*, University of Chicago Press, 2015.

as if there were? My claim can, of course, be refuted with just a single counterexample. So let me anticipate this move with roundup of the usual suspects, commonly proposed as examples of purely or exclusively visual media. Let's rule out, first, the whole arena of mass media – television, movies, radio – as well as performance media (dance, theater). From Aristotle's observation that drama combines the three ordres of lexis, melos, and opsis (words, music and spectacle) to Barthes' survey of the "image/music/text" divisions of the semiotic field, the mixed character of media has been a central postulate. Any notion of purity seems out of the question with these ancient and modern media, from the standpoint both of the sensory and semiotic elements internal to them and of what is external in their promiscuous audience composition. And if it is argued that silent film was a "purely visual" medium, we need only remind ourselves of a simple fact of film history – that the silents were always accompanied by music and speech, and the film texts themselves often had written or printed words inscribed on them. Subtitles, intertitles, and spoken and musical accompaniment made "silent" film anything but.

If we are looking for the best case of a purely visual medium, painting seems like the obvious candidate. It is, after all, the central, canonical medium of art history. And after an early history tainted by literary considerations, we do have a canonical story of purification, in which painting emancipates itself from language, narrative, allegory, figuration, and even the representation of nameable objects in order to explore something called "pure painting," characterized by "pure opticality." This argument, most famously circulated by Clement Greenberg, and sometimes echoed by Michael Fried, insist on the purity and specificity of media, rejecting hybrid forms, mixed media, and anything that lies "between the arts" as a form of "theater" or rhetoric, dooming them to inauthenticity and second-rate aesthetic status.[2] It is

2 Greenberg's argument appear in his classic essays "Toward a Newer Laocoon," *Partisan Review* (1940), and "Avant Garde and Kitsch," *Partisan Review* (1939), reprinted in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brian, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986). Fried's anti-theatrical polemic first appeared in "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum* (June 1967),

one of the most familiar and threadbare myths of modernism, and it is time now to lay it to rest. The fact is that even at its purest and most single-mindedly optical, modernist painting was always, to echo Tom's Wolfe's phrase, "painted words."[3] The words were not those of history painting or poetic landscape or myth or religious, but the discourse of theory, of idealist and critical philosophy. This critical discourse was just as crucial to the comprehension of modernist painting as the Bible or history or the classics were to the traditional narrative painting. Without the latter, beholder would be left standing in front of Guido Reni's *Beatrice Cenci the Day before Her Execution*, in the situation of Mark Twain, who noted that an uninstructed viewer who did not know the title and the story would have to conclude that this was a picture of a young girl with a cold, or young girl about to have a nosebleed. Without the former, the uninstructed viewer would (and did) see the paintings of Jackson Polloc as "nothing but wallpaper."

Some will object that the "words" that make it possible to appreciate and understand painting are not *in* the painting in the same way that the words of Ovid are illustrated in a Claude Lorrain. And you might be right; it would be important to distinguish the different ways language enters painting. But that is not my aim here. My present task is only to show that the painting we have habitually called "purely optical," exemplifying a purely visual use of the medium, is anything but. The question of precisely how language enters into the perception of these pure objects will have to wait for another occasion.

Supposed it were the case that language could be absolutely banished from painting? I don't deny that this was a characteristic desire of modernist painting, symptomatized by the ritualistic refusal of titles for pictures, the enigmatic challenge of the "untitled" to the viewer. Suppose for a moment that the viewer could look without verbalizing, could see without (even silently,

reprinted in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

3   Wolfe, *The Painted Word* (New York: Bantam Brooks, 1976).

internally) subvocalizing associations, judgements, and observations. What would be left? Well, one thing that would obviously be left is the observation that a painting is a handmade object, one of the crucial things that differentiates it from, say, the medium of photography, where the look of mechanical production is often foregrounded. (I leave aside for the moment the fact that a painter can do an excellent job of imitating the machinic look of a glossy photo and that a photographer with the right techniques can, similarly, imitate the painterly surface and sfumato of a painter). But what is the perception of the painting as handmade if not a recognition that a nonvisual sense is encoded, manifested, and indicated in every detail of its material existence? (Robert Morris's *Blind Dime Drawings*, drawn by hand with powdered graphite on paper, according to rigorous procedures of temporal and spatial targeting that are duly recorded in hand-inscribed texts on the lower margin, would be powerful cases for reflection on the quite literally nonvisual character of drawing). The nonvisual sense is, of course, the sense of touch, which is foregrounded in some kinds of painting (when "handling," impasto, and the materiality of the paint is emphasized) and backgrounded in others (when a smooth surface and clear, transparent forms produce the miraculous effect of rendering the painter's manual activity invisible). Either way, the beholder who knows nothing about the theory behind the painting, or the story of allegory, need only understand that this is a painting, a handmade object, to understand that it is a trace of manual production, that everything one sees is the trace of brush or a hand touching a canvas. Seeing painting is seeing touching, seeing the hand gestures of the artist, which is why we are so rigorously prohibited from touching the canvas ourselves.

This argument is not, by the way, intended to consign the notion of pure opticality to the dustbin of history. The point is, rather, to assess what its historical role in fact was, and why the purely visual character of modernist painting was elevated to the status of fetish concept, despite abundant evidence that it was a myth. What was the purification of the visual medium all about? What form of contamination was being attacked? In the name of

what form of sensory hygiene and (as Jacques Rancière would put it) "redistribution of the sensible"?[4]

The other media that occupy the attention of art history seem even less likely to sustain a case for pure opticality. Architecture, the impurest medium of all, incorporates all the other arts in a *gesamstkunstwerk*, and it is typically not even "looked at" with any concentrated attention, but rather perceived, as Walter Benjamin noted, in state of distraction.[5] Architecture is not primarily about seeing but about dwelling and inhabiting. Sculpture is so clearly an art of tactile that it seems superfluous to argue about it. This is the one so-called visual medium, in fact, that has a kind of direct accessibility to the blind. Photography, the latecomer to art history's media repertoire, is typically so riddled with language, as theorists from Barthes to Victor Burgin have shown, that it is hard to imagine what it would mean to call it purely visual medium. Its specific role in what Joel Snyder has called "picturing the invisible" – showing us what we do not or cannot see with the "naked eye" (rapid body motions, the behavior of matter, the ordinary and everyday) makes it difficult to think of it as a visual medium in any straightforward sense.[6] Photography of this sort might be better understood as a device for translating the unseen or unseeable into something that looks like a picture of something we could see if we had incredible keen eyesight or different habits of attention.

From the standpoint of art history in the wake of postmodernism, it seems clear that the last half century has decisively undermined any notion of purely visual art. Installations, mixed media performance art, conceptual art, site specific art, minimalism, and the often-remarked return to pictorial representation have rendered the notion of pure opticality a mirage that is retreating in

4   Rancière, "The Distribution of the Sensible," in *The Future of the Image* (New York: Verso, 2009); Caroline Jones, *Eyesight Alone: Clement Greenberg and the Bureaucratization of the Senses* (University of Chicago Press, 2008).

5   "Architecture has always offered the prototype of an artwork that is received in state of distraction." "The Work of Art in the Age of its Reproducibility," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings* (Cambridge, MA: Harward University Press, 2002), 3:119.

6   Snyder, "Picturing Vision," *Critical Inquiry* 6, no. 3 (Spring 1980): 499-526.

rear-view mirror. For art historians today, the safest conclusion would be that the notion of purely visual work of art was a temporary anomaly, a deviation from the much more durable tradition of mixed and hybrid media.

Of course, this argument can go so far that it seems to defeat itself. How, you will object, can there be any mixed media or multimedia productions unless there are elemental, pure, distinct media out there to go into the mix? If all media are always and already mixed media, then the notion of mixed media is emptied of importance, since it would not distinguish any specific mixture from any purely elemental instance. Here, I think, we must take hold of the conundrum from both ends and recognize that one corollary of the claim that "there are no visual media" is that *all media are mixed media*. That is, the very notion of a medium and of meditation already entails some mixture of sensory, perceptual and semiotic elements. There are no purely auditory, tactile, or olfactory media either. This conclusion does not lead, however, to the impossibility of distinguishing one medium from another. What makes it possible is a more precise differentiation of mixtures. If all media are mixed media, they are not all mixed in the same way, with the same proportions of elements. A medium, as Raymond Williams puts it, is a "material social practice," not a specifiable essence dictated by some elemental materiality (paint, stone, metal) or by technique or technology.[7] Materials and technologies go into a medium, but so do skills, habits, social spaces, institutions, and markets. The notion of "medium specificity," then, is never derived from a singular, elemental essence: it is more like the specificity (and plural singularity) associated with recipes in cooking: many ingredients, combined in a specific order in specific proportions, mixed in particular ways, and cooked at specific temperatures for a specific amount of time. One can, in short, affirm that there are no "visual media," that all media are mixed media, without losing concept of medium specificity.[8] […]

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7   Williams, "From Medium to Social Practice," in *Marxism and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 158-64.

8   Rosalind Krauss come close to this account when she describes a medium as a "self-differentiating" entity in "The Post-Medium Condition." Krauss, *Voyage*

BACK TO THE DRAWING BOARD

Walter Benjamin remarks at the conclusion of his classic essay "Kunstwerk" that "architecture has always offered the prototype of a work of art that is received in a state of distraction."[9] Count me among that distracted collectivity that recognizes, with Benjamin, that architecture's history "is more ancient than that of any other art," and that it is a "living force" that has importance in "every attempt to comprehend the relationship of the masses to art," at the same time that I have to confess a fair amount of ignorance about the inner world of professional architectural practice. I write here as a consumer, a spectator and user of architecture, not as an expert.[10]

The fundamental question asked at the 2008 Bauhaus symposium was what the effects of digital imaging have been on the production and reception of architecture. One hears on every side grand, utopian claims about the unlimited possibilities offered by "paperless studios" and direct translation of computer design into the production of materials and modular units for construction. It seems, if one can trust the architecture magazines, that we have entered a brave new world where everything is possible and nothing is out of bounds: if it can be imagined, and "imagineered" on a computer terminal, then it can be built.

I think there are good reasons for being skeptical about the more euphoric claims that surround architecture in the so-called digital age. Although it's clear that the computer has made an enormous difference in certain aspects of architectural design and construction, it may not always be the emancipatory, progressive difference that it is often portrayed to be. Liberation from the material resistance of a medium may lead to a kind of architectural flatu-

lence, a throwing up of ornamental effects and spectacle as nothing more than a manner or automatism of conspicuous consumption. I am reminded of the moment in the evolution of electronic music when the "classic studio" of wave-form generators and manually controlled tape decks was replaced by the Moog Synthesizer, which made all sorts of preprogrammed "special effects" available at the touch of a key, a breakthrough that led to the production of a great many predictable, cliché-ridden sound-effects. Sometimes the resistance of a medium is a good thing, and it may be (as copperplate engraving once showed us) the very condition of certain kinds of hard-won virtuosity and inventiveness.

So: my aim here will be to slow down the discussion a bit, and to urge a more patient analysis of claims that we live in a "digital age," and that certain consequences flow ineluctably from this supposed fact. Since I speak as a nonexpert, and an outsider to the professional concerns of the architectural community, I offer these comments with considerable hesitation, and subject to correction. My own expertise is in the areas of image theory, media, and visual culture. My strategy, therefore, will be to reflect on some notable features of spectacular, attention-getting architecture in our time, especially as it engages with two closely related media, the graphic and sculptural arts. These two media seem necessarily connected to the problem of architecture, if only because, on the one hand, so much contemporary architecture seems to aspire to the condition of sculpture and, on the other, architecture "proper" is primarily a graphic, imaging activity, and not the actual activity of erecting buildings. Even before the onset of the digital image, Thomas Creighton, the editor of *Progressive Architecture*, could argue that a "new sensualism" in architecture was being driven by the model of sculpture, with abandonment of "restraint" and its freedom to produce forms "that can be warped and twisted at will."[11] "This is not the application of sculpture to architecture," argued Creighton, "but rather the handling of architecture as sculpture."

On the other flank of architectural practice is drawing and draftsmanship, now undergoing the technical transformation

11 Quoted in Joseph Rosa, *Folds, Blobs, and Boxes: Architecture in the Digital Era* (Heinz Architectural Center, Pittsburgh, 2001), 9.

summed up by the concept of the digital image and the tech-
niques of computer-aided drawing (CAD). But what is the digi-
tal image? The easiest answer is: an image that can be produced,
manipulated, stored, and retrieved by a computer. But what does
this really mean? How does this affect the quality of the image,
any image? Is it the easy manipulability of the image? The pos-
sibility of morphing and transforming it in innumerable ways?
Or is it the portability of the image, the ease with which it can be
transmitted instantaneously around the globe? Is it the metadata
that accompanies the image, making it a self-archiving bundle of
information that carries with it not only the graphic analog content
but a string of second-order information about its provenance and
modifications?

   All these are undoubtedly momentous changes in the way
images function for us, but it is important to keep in mind one
equally important way in which images have not changed under
the digital regime: they are still images *for us*, for embodied human
beings with standard sensory and perceptual equipment. It doesn't
matter whether they are representational or abstract, artistic or
popular, technoscientific displays or children's drawings. At the
end of the day, they are still dense, iconic signs that acquire their
meaning within the framework of an analogical, not a digital code.
(In a more extended discussion we would have to question in
fact whether the analogical sign is "coded" at all, recalling Roland
Barthes's famous observation that photography produces "images
without a code").[12] No matter how many computational transfor-
mations it goes through inside a computer, the digital image is, at
the beginning and end of the day, an *image*, an analog presentation.
Unless we are programmers, we are not really interested in the
digits in the digital image. We are interested in the analogical input
and output, the image, as a sensuous presentation that employs an
infinitely gradated set of signs, marks, and colors (or, for that mat-
ter, sounds, tones, beats). Digitization betrays the same ineluctable

12   Barthes, *Camera Lucida* trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 1981),
88; see also my discussion of the uncoded "wildness" of the iconic sign in *What
Do Pictures Want? On the Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chi-
cago Press, 2005), 9-10.

tendency toward the "return of the analog" in the realm of both visual and sound images.[13]

So the phrase "digital image" is in a very precise sense a kind of oxymoron: insofar as an image is *perceived* as digital, it is not an image at all but an array of arbitrary symbolic elements, alphanumeric signs that belong to a finite set of rigorously differentiated characters. At the simplest level, the digital is merely a string of ones and zeros that forms a statement or operation in a machine language; this is not an image, but a string of ones and zeros that can be translated into an image. The image is formed by, carried by, translated into digits, but it is not itself digital. One can see this clearly in the climactic scene of the mythic cinematic treatment of the digital age, *The Matrix*. When Neo sees through the veil of illusory virtual images to the underlying digital reality, he understands that all those bodies and buildings were nothing but a flux of numbers and letters. But at the moment of this understanding there is a ghostly return of the displaced illusion in the form of the analog images of the agents, and the spectral traces of their illusory bullets. This is also the return of the image as such, the analog sign, the cinematic sign, that can never go all the way over to the digital without ceasing to be an image.[14]

This is also why we have to admit that, from a phenomenological standpoint that pays attention to the perceptual flutter of digital and analogic representations, digital images existed long before the invention of the computer or binary code. Images have been digitized since Australian Aboriginal painters developed a binary dot and line vocabulary of graphic characters suitable for sand painting. Grains of sand are the predecessors of pixels, with their indefinitely expanded reservoir of finitely differentiated elements. In a similar way, the warp and woof of weaving processes the image-appearance through a grid of binary choices. Digitization of the image is a consistent technical feature from mosaic tile to

13   See Brian Massumi, "On the Superiority of the Analog," in *Parables for the Virtual* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).
14   One could say, however, that this would be an image of the digital as such, a spectacularizing of the look of code.

the mezzotint to the Ben-Day dots of newspaper photographs. But when we look at the graphic image, we do not look—at least for a moment—at the grains of sand, or the threads, tiles, or dots or pixels: we look at the image, the analog sign that magically appears out of the digital matrix. This is the duck-rabbit effect of the digital image in its extended sense.[15]

It is important, then, to exert some pressure on the commonplace notion that we live in a "digital age," as if digitization and binary codes were unknown before the invention of the Turing Machine. Right alongside the Turing Machine is an equally powerful invention/discovery: the architecture of the DNA molecule. The technical impact of the computer is not simply its capacity to reduce everything to ones and zeros, but its equally powerful capacity to *unreduce* or expand those ones and zeros to analog appearances. The computer does not represent a "victory of the digital" but a new mechanism for coordinating the digital and the analog. And it is crucial to stress this point at the level of tactility as well as visuality: a moment's reflection on the role of the human *hand* in relation to the computer should remind us of Bill Brown's tellingly nonredundant aphorism: "the digital age is the *digital age*," the era of carpal tunnel syndrome and ergonomic keyboards. Obsessive text messagers live in the age of the *thumb*, and of a generation that is "all thumbs."[16] We have invented in our time new forms of clumsiness along with new skill sets, automatisms, and habitual subroutines. What Friedrich Kittler has predicted as a "general digitization of channels and information" that will "erase the differences among individual media" has in fact produced just the opposite: a new Tower of Babel populated by machines that cannot communicate with other machines.[17] As is well known, for any two machines, a third is required to translate, adapt, or coordinate them. How many useless adapters and power transformers are cluttering your utility closet? How many remote controls that

15   See the discussion of the digital image in "Image Science" and "Realism and the Digital Image," chapters 3 and 5 above.

16   "All Thumbs," *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (Winter 2004): 452.

17   Kittler, *Gramaphone Film Typewriter* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 1.

are supposed to be programmable to exert control (remotely) over other remote controls? How long does it take before the sense of control gives way to its opposite? How long before the copy and paste functions go mad and generate a virus or autoimmune disorder? […]

FOUNDATIONAL SITES AND OCCUPIED SPACES

[…] The idea of a "foundational site," or *Grundungsorte*, is in a quite literal sense the most fundamental *topos* one could imagine. For a rhetorician, the *topos*, or topic, is itself a place or site, a topographical location or "commonplace" in discourse. But a *foundational* site raises the stakes, or drives them deeper than rhetoric. At the most general level it materializes and locates the long-standing philosophical question of the "grounds" of knowledge and of being, bringing all the questions of origins, beginnings, and births "down to earth." Or perhaps placing them "up in the air" of a transcendental Absolute? Either way, the notion of a *Grundungsorte* raises the question of the *site*, of space, place, and landscape in the most basic terms, linking the commonplaces of location and site specificity to the origins of social space as such. Historical events must, as we say, "take place" somewhere, and those places are almost automatically sacralized and monumentalized as foundational sites: the "taking place," as Native Americans say, requires a totemic "keeping place" to preserve memory and continuity.[18] The three great religions of the Book, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, all converge in the site known as Israel-Palestine, the "Holy Land" that is at the center of so many global conflicts today. The very idea of democracy seems rooted in Athens. American independence and national unity have numerous symbolic founding sites: from Plymouth Rock to Independence Hall in Philadelphia to Washington, DC. The navel of the Australian aboriginal world is located at the magnificent sandstone rock called Uluru in the cen-

18   See Jonathan Bordo, "The Keeping Place, Arising from an Incident on the Land," in *Monuments and Memory, Made and Unmade*, ed. Margaret Olin and Robert Nelson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 157-82.

tral desert. The delivery of the law (and Hebrew writing) occurred on Mt. Sinai. And every building of any significance requires the ritual of "groundbreaking" and the laying of a cornerstone. I was taught in catechism that a specific person is designated as the cornerstone of the Catholic church: "Thou are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church." My seminars on space, place, and landscape always begin with an exercise in personal and private foundational sites, what I call "places in the heart," the places that come to mind when someone is asked, Where do you come from? What place do you revisit in memory and dreams? What location do you regard as crucial to your identity?

Foundational sites, then, are both public and private, sacred and secular, monumental and trivial. My birthplace and the birthplace of a nation are both sites of the basic human experience of what Hannah Arendt calls "*natality*," the appearance of newness in the world. As Arendt puts it:

> What matters in our context is less the profoundly Roman notion that all foundations are re-establishments and reconstructions than the somehow connected but different idea that men are equipped for the logically paradoxical task of making a new beginning because they themselves are new beginnings and hence beginners, that the very capacity for beginning is rooted in natality, in the fact that human beings appear in the world by virtue of birth.[19]

But birth, as we know, is an experience not only of newness, but of *trauma*, of a wounding that leaves often unreadable traces and scars, a forgetting that is sometimes beneficial, sometimes not, of the painful labor of founding. The monuments to founding thus often involve a paradoxical fusion of memory and amnesia. The "foundation," the "cornerstone" of an institution tends to erase the uncertainty and pathos of the founding process. The Wiesenthal Foundation's notorious Museum of Tolerance in Jerusalem, originally to be designed by Frank Gehry (who has now withdrawn

19 Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Viking Press, 1963), 203.

from the project), is being built on one of the oldest Arab ceme-
teries in the Middle East, the burial site of the legendary Saladin,
vanquisher of Richard the Lion-Hearted's Crusade.[20] Founda-
tional sites tend, in general, to be haunted. According to legend,
the six Hawksmoor Churches in London, designed by Nicholas
Hawksmoor, a student of Sir Christopher Wren, were laid out in
a pattern suggestive of a Satanic diagram and had the bodies of
sacrificial victims buried under their foundations.[21] The stability
of the edifice erected on a "stable foundation" belies the quicksand
that lies beneath it, and the struggle to establish footings. One
motive, then, for studying foundational sites is the overcoming of
this amnesia and the demystifying of the foundational moment,
commonly presented as a historical necessity and matter of destiny
or fate, and not of human struggle, sacrifice, and trauma. Every act
of founding is also an act of losing; every foundation is built upon
destruction, the ruins of something prior, the ground beneath
the foundation. As Nietzsche puts it in the *Genealogy of Morals*,
"To enable a sanctuary to be set up, a sanctuary has got to be
destroyed: that is a law…"[22]

Some foundational sites are designed to preserve rather than
erase the violence of their origins, as if the whole point were to
keep the wound fresh, the trauma vividly in view. A case in point
is the Israeli ritual of remembrance at Masada, the fortress over-
looking the Dead Sea at which Jewish Zealots chose to commit
collective suicide rather than surrender to the Roman legions.
This site is commonly understood to be an emblem of modern
Israel's determination to destroy itself and its enemies in a nuclear

20 See Saree Makdisi, "The Architecture of Erasure," *Critical Inquiry* 36, no. 3 (Spring
    2010), the opening statement in a debate on this project that includes responses
    from Gehry, Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, Daniel Monk, and a team of scholars repre-
    senting the Wiesenthal Foundation.
21 Peter Ackroyd's novel *Hawksmoor* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), builds upon
    the legend of the Hawksmoor Churches in London, in which sacrificial victims
    were supposed to have been buried under the foundations. See Susana Onega,
    Metafiction and Myth in the Novels of Peter Ackroyd (Columbia, SC: Camden
    House, 1999), 52f.
22 Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Horace B. Samuel (New York: Dover,
    2003), 95 (II.24).

conflagration rather than surrender its claim to the ethnic and racial nationalism of the Jewish state. The foundational "memories" reproduced at this site are, of course, remarkably selective. They depend, as a young Jewish woman noted in a recent Israeli documentary, on the erasure of a crucial fact: the women and children at Masada did not commit suicide; they were murdered by their men to prevent their becoming Roman slaves.[23] It is hard to imagine a foundational site for a more ominous national mythology, a monument to the victory of melancholia over mourning and working through.

Unless, of course, we consider the foundational site of what is sometimes called the "post-911 era." The memorial at "Ground Zero" in New York City, like Masada, is designed to keep the wound open and to facilitate melancholy rituals of selective remembrance. The event of 9-11 has been generally regarded as both a global trauma and the foundational moment of a new world order. The site itself, starting with the misnomer Ground Zero, originally coined as the term for the location of a nuclear explosion, has been hyperfetishized and sacralized. The "footprints" of the destroyed twin towers are laid bare as inverted fountains cascading into darkness, as if the wounds were to be kept bleeding forever. And below the fountains, a descent into the underworld has been excavated, down to the bedrock, deep below the Hudson River to the original footings of the Twin Towers, as if it were necessary to see their deepest foundations to grasp the depth of the trauma. The 9-11 Memorial, emblazoned with the words "Never Forget," has at the same time been the centerpiece in a narrative of national amnesia that disavows the role of the United States in arming al Qaeda and other Islamic extremists during the Cold War, as a tactic to contain the Soviet Union. The World Trade Center became the foundational site, moreover, for an entire strategic vision of a future, a "global war on terror" that by definition would never end and could never be won, but would

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23   Avi Mograbi, dir., *Avenge but One of My Two Eyes* (2005). Mograbi documents the Masada ritual, reenacted by the numerous tour guides to the site, which explicitly treats the fortress as a symbol of the modern Jewish state.

nonetheless serve as the founding framework for American foreign policy in the twenty-first century.[24]

The foundational sites of birth trauma, of construction and destruction, building and tearing down, are most dramatically evident in that modern foundational event we call "revolution." This was the kind of site that until recently we thought had been "taken off the map," as a poet friend of mine has put it.[25] Only the monuments and empty spaces are left on the sites of revolution, and they are generally images of the failure or betrayal of revolution, its replacement by tyrannical regimes. The statues that dominate public squares in the Arab world—of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, of Khaddafi in Libya, of Assad in Syria, of Mubarak in Egypt—are testimony to the transformation of popular revolutions into despotisms. Tiananmen Square in Beijing, Red Square in Moscow, and the vast spaces of the Hitler's Nuremberg rallies are transformed from places of public gathering into what Siegfried Kracauer called staging grounds for the "mass ornament," enormous, disciplined crowds assembled to celebrate the cult of the founding father.[26]

The foundational sites of revolution are what Robert Smithson called "non-sites," testifying to an absence. But recently, in movements such as the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street, new sites have been found, and acts of founding have occurred. Weddings were celebrated and babies were born in Cairo's Tahrir Square. The imagery and rhetoric of popular insurgency and revolution have been revived. Whether these events will be foundational, serving as cornerstones for new forms of life, is still in doubt. What is certain is that, as Neurath insisted, they will be imperfect rebuildings of a ship on the open sea. […]

24   See Philip Bobbitt, *Terror and Consent: The Wars for the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Anchor Books, 2009). Bobbit gave the Arrow Lectures at Stanford in 2008, arguing that "the war on terror is no metaphor." http://www.law.stanford.edu/event/2008/03/06/stanford-center-on-ethics-arrow-lecture-series-on-ethics-and-leadership-philip-bobbitt-the-war-on-terror-is-no- (accessed December 24, 2014).

25   Janice Misurell-Mitchell, "ScatRap/Counterpoint" (1995), http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZaGm0OvxTss (accessed December 24, 2014).

26   Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

Occupatio

It is not only nature that abhors a vacuum. An absolutely empty space is nearly inconceivable, if only because the most perfect void would still contain a few stray atoms. And in fact, most human spaces, whether potential public spaces of appearance or the private closets and public streets of everyday life, are completely occupied. Filled with things—people, auto-mobiles, plants, animals, stones, air, water, statues, buildings.

But some spaces are set aside, are kept open, designated as "public." They are what Foucault called heterotopias: parks, squares, plazas, the agora or kiva where people gather for commerce, gossip, or entertainment. They are supposed to belong to no one, to be a kind of civic *terra nullius* that anyone may enter. In the American Constitution, the foundational document left behind by the American Revolution, the first amendment implicitly guarantees the empty space of appearance, a law against law that opens a site of freedom: "Congress shall make no law… abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances."

The public square in America generally includes some monument to foundational violence (the war memorial) or construction—the statue of a city father. But it also holds a space open for assembly of the sort envisioned in the first amendment. In practice, however, the first amendment is loaded down with secondary qualifications—asterisks and exceptions, requirements to secure a permit, and strict limitations on the activities that may occur in the public space. No loudspeakers, no camping; hence Mic Chec (in Zucotti Park) and Occupy, everywhere. The figure that appeared against the ground in Cairo, Tel Aviv, and Wall Street was the *tent*, the encampment. And this was a rhetorical figure as well as a performative spectacle, literalizing the trope of *occupatio*, the seizure of the antagonist's position, and the staging of an emptiness to be filled in later.

Occupatio generally stressed the refusal to speak of something, or the confession of an inability to describe or define. The refusal

of the members of the Occupy Movement to state their demands is a precise performance of the trope of *occupatio*, which speaks by refusing to speak, opening a negative space in language itself with a form of "expressive conduct."[27]

It is just the opposite of the performative utterance in speech-act theory, which does something by saying it (blessing, cursing, administering an oath, declaring a verdict). In contrast, Occupy says something by doing it. Its refusal to delegate a sovereign, representative figure, a charismatic leader or "face" of the movement, is a declaration that real sovereignty has been redistributed for the moment in the assembled people in the space of appearance. Its refusal to describe or define the world it wants to create is accompanied by its manifestation of a nascent community, complete with differentiated roles—cooks, doctors, educators, builders, police—all assembled in a democratic, nonhierarchical polis.

Why did the tactics of Occupy go viral, spreading around the world, from Cairo to Madison, Wisconsin, from Damascus to Wall Street? The specific issues of each revolutionary site were quite distinct: authoritarian regimes in the Arab world; economic inequality in the United States. Is it not because it performed a parodic mimesis of a preexisting condition, namely the occupation of the world by a global system that has oppressed and impoverished the vast majority of the world's population and degraded the environment at the same time, threatening spaceship earth with the possibility of foundering or running aground? Occupy performed an uncanny reversal of the word "occupation," which has become a synonym for the imposition of martial law on resistant populations. It also reversed, in the spectacle of the tent city, the meaning of the most iconic and viral image of occupied space we know of today, namely the *camp* or shanty town, the spaces set aside to incarcerate refugees, illegal immigrants, displaced persons, and resident aliens. Small wonder that Zucotti Park in New York became a haven for the homeless.

27 See my essay "Image, Space, Revolution: The Arts of Occupation," in *Occupy: Three Inquiries in Disobedience*, coauthored with Michael Taussig and Bernard Harcourt (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

Monuments and multitudes

When the masses depart from the foundational sites of revolution, what is left behind? Michelet's answer is, empty space. But as he knew very well, a multitude of images, some of them memorable and monumental, remained behind in the archives and in popular memory. The Goddess of Reason, the Festival of the Supreme Being, and the ominous silhouette of the guillotine persist as icons of the Revolution. Delacroix's Liberty *Leading the People* fixes the urban legend of the bare-breasted female revolutionary storming the barricades. Is it merely a coincidence that the spirit of popular, nonviolent revolution seems inevitably to be personified in a female figure? Consider, for instance, the Goddess of Democracy in Tiananmen Square, the Ballerina on the Bull of Occupy Wall Street, and the Woman with the Blue Brassiere in Tahrir Square (which was transformed overnight from an image of victimage to a banner of militant gathering).

Could these images be suggesting a deeper, more radical form of revolution than mere regime change, or even the foundation of a democratic constitution? Political theorist Bernard Harcourt has described the novelty of the Occupy Movement as a strategy of "political disobedience."[28] In contrast to civil disobedience, which deliberately violates laws in the name of freedom, and accepts the consequences of arrest, political disobedience involves the refusal to work within the unwritten laws of the political game—electing representatives, stating a policy agenda, forming a party, and so on. Camping in a public park may be civil disobedience, but what happened within the Occupy camps was *political* disobedience. Instead of attaching to a party, an ism, or even a social movement, it does something simpler and more fundamental: it manifests and performs the foundational site of the political as such, the space of appearance where human beings encounter each other as equals. Prior to politics in the usual sense of parties and defined social movements, Occupy was the clearing or opening before the work

28   In *Occupy: Three Inquiries in Disobedience,* co-authored with Michael Taussig and myself (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

of foundation. It was therefore necessarily transitory and transitional, and was accurately represented by the figure of the Ballerina on the Bull. The Ballerina is not a figure of revolution; she does not seek to kill the Bull but to "take him by the horns" and use him as a support, to transform Wall Street into a foundational site for the performance of actually existing freedom and democracy.

The Egyptian Revolution, by contrast, attempted (unsuccessfully) to move from its rebellious stage to its constitutional moment. As Arendt puts it, "Revolution on the one hand, and constitution and foundation on the other, are like correlative conjunctions" (117). "The end of rebellion is liberation, while the end of revolution is the foundation of freedom" and the making of a new constitution. One could see this already in the moment when the multitude assembled in Tahrir Square attempted to erect a giant wooden obelisk with the names of the martyrs engraved on it. This act, which resonated with memories of Tiananmen Square, on the one hand, and the Washington Monument, on the other, was an uncanny image of return, given the obelisk's original home as an Egyptian monument. Given the long history of removal and dislocation of the obelisk from Egypt to Rome to Napoleonic Paris to Washington, DC, it was as if the figure of constitutional foundation had been returned to its proper site. But instead of serving as a symbol of pharaonic and phallic power, it became, like the Washington Monument (whose individual stones are understood to represent the multitude of citizens), a symbol of the unity of a people.

Conclusions

The only way to conclude an essay of this sort is with the trope of *occupatio*. Since the events I have been describing are happening in the present, and are still unfolding,[29] it would be foolish to predict final outcomes. And in fact, as Otto Neurath foresaw, there are no final outcomes in human history, only temporary and imperfect repairs to that leaky boat called "spaceship earth" in which we find

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29 Something called "Occupy Central" flared up with attempts to occupy multinational banks in Hong Kong as recently as June 2014.

ourselves. If space permitted, and I had a crystal ball, here is what I would have wanted to discuss:

—I would have discussed further the contrast between foundation and founding or grounding, between the base of an architectural structure and the acts of clearing and assembling that must precede it.

—I would have explored more fully the relation of violence and foundation, particularly Walter Benjamin's notion of "law-making violence" and Giorgio Agamben's reflection on the "camp" as the enduring site of the state of exception and its place as a symptom of systemic violence that reduces populations to a condition of "bare life."

—I would have elaborated this contrast further in terms of Edward Said's distinction between "origins" and "beginnings": origin as the mythic, fetishized foundation, the completed structure with all its aura; beginning as the modest but often decisively catalytic events that launch a moment and may produce a foundation. I would have linked this further to Arendt's "space of appearance" (as beginning) and the built public space that remains empty. And of course I would have linked this back to the image of One Vase/ Two Faces.

—I would have reflected on the contrast between the images of founding and foundation in terms of the architectural structure and the ship that can never reach a dry dock for total repair. Inevitably, these metaphors would have led to the language of running aground and foundering.

—I would have expanded on the totemic, fetishistic, and idolatrous character of foundational sites, their links with geomancy, sacrifice, and sacred space – the practice of idolatry of course associated with images of the sovereign as a living god who contains multitudes within his body, and the rituals of mass ornament that reinforce the spectacular character of power. This would necessarily lead to a consideration of "totemic" foundational sites of communal gathering, of which Occupy is clearly an instance. Note that Occupy gatherings are not merely "demonstrations" but mini-communities; Occupy Wall Street provided food, clothing, shelter, and medical aid to visitors.

And I would have raised this questions for further discussion:

—Are "foundational sites" only to be located as physical locations in real space? Could a foundational site be virtual and movable? Is a constitution itself a foundational site, a virtual structure of laws and governmental architecture that can sustain and prolong the space of appearance? The "founding fathers" of the American Constitution regarded themselves as "farmers" of an architectural structure. But was that structure grounded in abstract "bedrock principles," or was it more like the Ark of the Covenant, a ship of state launched on a voyage to a Promised Land?

—Is it possible to create foundational sites without deifying the images of "founding fathers" and initiating the inevitable Oedipal cycle that follows them? Could the spaceship earth be reframed as a *mother ship*, the womb in which a new humanity might be born?

—To what extent will be events of 2011 be remembered as revolutionary? Which of them will turn out to be foundational, and which will be remembered as merely gestural acts, performances of founding and grounding? Have cornerstones been laid for structures that will grow into durable spaces of appearance, nurseries for a rebirth of the political? Or will face-to-face encounters give way to the merely monumental, the vase as the funerary urn of failed revolutions?

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W.J.T. Mitchell
Iconology, visual culture and media aestetics

The article contains fragments of three chapters form the book *Image Science. Iconology, Visual Culture and Media Aesthetics* (Chicago 2015), titled *The are no Visual Media*, *Back to the Drawing Board* and *Foundational Sites and Occupied Spaces*. W.J.T. Mitchell created in his previous works the key concepts which imply an approach to images as true objects of investigation – an "image science". Author, continuing with his influential line of thoughts, amplifies interdisciplinary studies of visual media. The chapters also delve into such topics as conections between new media and architecture or the occupation of space in contemporary popular uprisings. *Image science* is a call for a method of studying images that overcomes the "two-culture split" between the natural and human sciences.

Keywords: visual media; picture; image science; iconology.

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