Visual Aesthetics of Transgression

Branka Vujanovic

Abstract:
The edited volume Maßlose Bilder. Visuelle Ästhetik der Transgression (Immoderate Images. Visual Aesthetics of Transgression) introduces a concept of transgression as a critical device in order to question the aesthetic, ethical, and epistemological predicaments assigned to visual media. The attempt to transgress the confines of the visible and the ostensible is not only a major feature of modern art, but also a decisive constituent of an ethics of perception and a self-reflective image production, which also challenges a presupposition of scientific reliability. The contributors to this volume come from the fields of art theory, philosophy, theory of media, theatre, film, and architecture, as well as from the fields of astrophysics, mathematics, and physiology. The editors Ingeborg Reichle and Steffen Siegel are members of the interdisciplinary group Bildkulturen (Visual Cultures) at the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Science.

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When dealing with the explosion of visual media and their intrusion into the most intimate areas of life, it seems that the contemporary discourse on visuality cannot but invoke the concept of transgression understood as the violation of any proper scale. Maßlose Bilder. Visuelle Ästhetik der Transgression (Immoderate Images. Visual Aesthetics of Transgression) provides a theoretical perspective that goes beyond the question of such a visual exorbitance. This perspective calls for the reconsideration of the norms and the expectations with which we approach the visual media. It is not only the abundance or the blatancy of visual media that takes them 'beyond limits'; the concept of transgression points primarily to the latency of the invisible and the infinite that they are able to conjure, including the elicitation of the hidden agendas behind our will to see (Section 1), to confine (Section 2), to be precise (Section 3), to stipulate (Section 4), and to categorise (Section 5).

The starting question reads: If images are artefacts defined by their frame and their anthropological function of moderating the complexities of the world, how can we consider them to be immoderate? The answer lies in their relation to the viewer, in the 'eye contact'. This 'eye contact' is a point of transgression discussed in Section 1: Sichtbar/Unsichtbar (Visible/Invisible).

In her text "Gibt es 'maßlose Bilder'?" (Do 'Immoderate Images' Exist?) Sybille Krämer concludes that an affirmative answer to this question can only be given from an anthropomorphic perspective, which is common among the key theoreticians of images such as W.J.T. Mitchell, Hans Belting, and George Didi-Hubermann. From this perspective, the immoderation is understood in ethical terms, and is analogous to the human behaviour. Deriving from Sartre's differentiation between the look and the gaze, Krämer starts from the hypothesis that the human eye contact is a model for our contact with images. When it deprives us of our secure distance while preserving its own inaccessibility, the image ceases to be an artefact and becomes the live presence able to "look back at us" (Didi Huberman).

Mark A. Halawa defines the result of such an 'eye contact' in his text "Vom Freiheitsverlust des Betrachters" (On the Loss of Viewer's Freedom). It is not the image itself, however, that triggers this loss of freedom, but the human 'will to see', which nowadays seems to spiral out

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of control. The message that the iconic criticism tries to impose is that this 'will to see' has to be accompanied by the awareness of an ethical and political responsibility.

W.J.T. Mitchell's text "Der Schleier um Abu Ghraib: Errol Morris und die 'bad apples'" (The Fog of Abu Ghraib: Errol Morris and the 'bad apples') provides a thorough analysis of the visual strategy conducted in the groundbreaking documentary Standard Operating Procedure. While the statements of the perpetrators themselves are left without any critique or even interpretation, they are paralleled by an extremely powerful visual deposition. However powerful, images themselves are not able to "end the war." As 'catalysts of the human consciousness', they can only serve to break down the imaginary tower of a 'free' viewer.

The world of an image is structured by the measure of its frame, which is more than just a material border between an image and its surroundings. It is a set of elements that codifies its relation to the observer and the level of commensurability with the reality. A paradigm of this codification is Leon Battista Alberti's principle of the costruzione legittima (perspectival construction) that defines the frame as a window through which the immobile eye of the observer has a straightforward view of the world as it is. Modern aesthetics of fragmentation and collage has worked upon the annihilation of such a frame in order to destabilise the supposedly neutral position of the observer. Section 2: Begrenzt/Unbegrenzt (Limited/Unlimited) pushes this problem further by invoking the frame itself as a main agent of visual transgression.

Analyzing the works of David Hockney, Jan Wenzel and Patrick Handricks in the text "Das potenzielle photographische Bild" (The Potential Photographic Image), Steffen Siegel makes a clear case for a transgressive function of the frame to bring the invisible into action. What comes to the fore in this analysis is a potential of the photography to visually reflect upon its own logic and incongruities.

The aspects of visual meta-reflexivity, especially in relation to the presuppositions of photographic referentiality, are investigated in depth in Jasmin Mersmann's text "Minimalistischer Überschwang. Zur Verselbstständingung der Form im Werk von Jan Dibbets" (Minimalistic Exuberance: On the Self-Actualisation of Form in Jan Dibbet's Work). Apart from being a means of codification and limitation, the frame can thus be turned into a tool of medial self-reflection.

In the domain of film, this aspect has been a subject of engaged theoretical deliberations, such as Stanley Cavel's theory of cinematographic construction of reality. Deriving from Cavel's analysis of the movie Gertrud by Carl Theodor Dreyer, Ulrike Hanstein investigates "Die Maßgabe der Einstellung, die Grenze des Films" (The Principles of Setting, the Limits of Film). On the basis of a theoretical concept of disposition (Foucault, Deleuze, Agamben), Michael Fürst analyses one of the most striking presentations of medial self-reflection: "Emersive Bilder. Zum Zuschauer-Bild-Verhältnis in David Cronenbergs Videodrome" (Emmersive Images: On the Viewer-Image Relation in David Cronenberg's Videodrome).

Section 3: Präzise/Unpräzise (Precise/Nonprecise) puts the main focus on the question of visual evidence, especially with regard to the concept of precision as a grounding argument of scientific proficiency. In their texts, Daniel Bürkner, Rainer Gruber, and Boris Goesl use astrophysical images and images of nuclear disasters as case studies to tackle the problem of visual reliability. For Ingeborg Reichle, the main point is to draw attention to the manipulability of visual facts in the process of producing the scientific conclusions. The artistic strategy of Herwig Turk makes such a process transparent in order to transgress the confines of the ostensible. Reichle's text "Taube Bilder und sehende Hände. Strategien visueller Transgression im Werk von Herwig Turk" (Deaf Images and Sighted Hands: Strategies of Visual Transgression in Herwig Turk's Work) provides a thorough analysis of his projects, from the cycles Superorgans (1993) and referenceless photography (1998-2003) to the video-installation uncertainty (2007) and the series of photographs agglomeration (2003) and labscapes (2007). These projects point to the fallibility of scientific procedures, and visualise the scientific instruments as always-already materialised theories, and not just as neutral means of conducting an experiment.

The possibilities of digital visuality, such as those explored in the projects of deconstructivist architect Zaha Hadid, provide the important arguments for an aesthetic of transgression. These arguments can be found in the text "Architektur ohne Maßstab. Digitale Visualisierungen im Entwurfsprozess" (Architecture outside the Canon: Digital Visualisation in the Design Process), in which Nicole E. Stöcklmayr analyses Zaha Hadid's architectural design for the Phaeno Science Centre in Wolfsburg. Digital imagery presents an iconic processuality, which goes beyond the concept of visuality limited by the properties of the human eye. Section 4: Endlich/Unendlich (Finite/Infinite) deals with these limitations, the norms that arise from them, and the potential of disrupting them.

These norms can be subsumed under the postulate Ne quid nimis (nothing in excess), which defines the appropriateness of human behaviour as well as the ideal measure of beauty. The institution of art history has been built upon this postulate that Johann Joachim Winckelmann, the inaugurator of this institution, found central to the Classical art of the Greeks. In the text "Maß und Umriss" (Scale and Shape) Philipp Ekardt brings into connection Winckelmann's project and that of Aby Warburg, despite all the irreconcilable differences between them. The point of connection is the focus on the human shape. For Winckelmann, the image of the human shape serves to achieve the ideal beauty, while for Aby Warburg it is an 'energy condenser' that helps to overcome the basic affect of fear.

Introducing a concept of oversaturation as opposed to the ideal of classical aesthetics, Markus Rautzenberg defines digital cinematography as "Exzessive Bildlichkeit. Das digitale Bild als Vomitiv" (Excessive Visuality: Digital Image as Vomitive). A 'vomitive' indicates the overwhelming vertigo effect of the multitude and hyperreality of details, which transgress the expectations of the human eye and the limitations of the human scale. The expectations of the human eye are also transgressed in new astrophysical imaging, such as Hubble Deep Field (HDF), that Ja-

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mes Elkins considers in his text "An den Grenzen des Darstellbaren. Bilder in der neueren astrophysikalischen Bildgebung" (On the Borders of the Presentable: Images in the Newer Astrophysical Imaging).

Section 5: Geordnet/Ungeordnet (Ordered/Unordered) discusses the role of visual representations in the process of categorising people that has been a major constituent of the Western colonisation and of National Socialism. This belongs to the context of making order according to the constructed norms of behaviour and visual ideals that still form a hidden background of public visualisations. The concluding Section 6: Innen/Außen (Inside/Outside) consists of only one text: "InsideOut: Inversionen des Sehens" (InsideOut: Inversions of Seeing) by Karin Leonhard. The author's conclusion about the relation between the anatomy of visual media and the physiology of the human eye corresponds with the premises postulated in the first chapter: in confrontation with visual media, we are struck most deeply by that which goes beyond the visible. It is the uncanniness of our own subjectivity that is laid before us in this encounter.

To map and to decode the consequences of such an encounter belongs to the tasks of a deep iconic criticism. Based on the number of case studies discussed in the problem-oriented sections, the volume Maßlose Bilder presents a model for this kind of mapping. It also provides important theoretical guidelines for further efforts in this field of investigation.