The Visual Culture Reader

Second edition

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LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 1998
by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

Reprinted 1998, 2001, 2004

Second edition first published 2002

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group

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Typeset in Perpetua by
Florence Production Ltd, Stoodleigh, Devon
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
TJ International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN 0-415-25221-0 (Hbk)
0-415-25222-9 (Pbk)

27 Mahmood Mamdani, *Imperialism and Fascism in Uganda* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1984); and Isaac Shivji, *Class Struggles in Tanzania* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1976).
28 Bruce Thomas, *Bruce Lee, Fighting Spirit* (Berkeley, Cal.: North Atlantic Books, 1994).
29 Hsiung-Ping Chiao, 'Bruce Lee: His Influence on the Evolution of the Kung Fu Genre,' *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 9, no. 1 (Spring 1981): 37–8.
30 Nyerere, 'Frugality,' in *Freedom and Unity*, 332–33.
31 The term *state-saturated societies* is borrowed from Samir Amin, who uses it to describe states in which ideologies permeate every aspect of everyday life, and whose institutional pervasiveness determines the lives of their citizens. Former communist and socialist societies are obvious examples. See Samir Amin, 'The System in Crisis: A Critique of Sovietism, 1960–1990,' in *Re-Reading the Postwar Period* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1994).
32 Michel Foucault, *Technologies of Self* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 19.
33 Ibid., 20.
34 Ibid., 20–21.
35 Ibid., 35.
36 Ibid., 37.
37 Chiao, 'Bruce Lee,' 33.
38 I use the term *new historic subjects* to imply both the new political subjects and the historically new conditions that create new subjectivities, as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe have elaborated on in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London: Verso, 1985).
39 See Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993); Manthia Diawara, ed., *Black American Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 1993); and Mark Reid, *Redefining Black Film* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993).
40 Ishumi and Maliyamkono, 'Education for Self-Reliance,' 53.

Chapter 40

David Joselit

THE VIDEO PUBLIC SPHERE

THE PERSONAL IS POLITICAL. Since the 1960s this phrase has been a rallying cry for social movements founded in identity. It is a creed in which progressive demands emerge from the specific social (and sometimes biological) experiences of a particular class of citizens. Identitarian activism thus posits a causal relationship between individual experience and political orientation. In the United States this convergence of the personal and the political is largely associated with various sorts of counter- or subcultures typically including people of color, women, lesbians, gay men, and other gender outlaws. But minoritized publics are not the only ones to link the personal with the political. Indeed, such articulations are among the fundamental modalities of mainstream power under late capitalism in which corporate and political bodies are rendered intimate and subjective. If sixties radicals and their progeny made the personal political, it is certainly true that since the mid-twentieth century the political has been made personal along a much broader social spectrum. One need only consider the escalation of sexual ethics (and sexual scandal) as a means of evaluating political candidates from the period of the philandering-but-tolerated John F. Kennedy to that of the philandering-but-excoriated William Jefferson Clinton. It is my belief that the emergence of broadcast television in the 1950s and its ubiquitous dissemination in the 1960s has greatly abetted this bilateral embrace of the personal and the political by producing a public sphere in which social questions are understood in terms of individual (and often fictionalized) dramas. It will be my assertion that television fosters a particular form of spectatorship: it creates a split or multiple identification, in which there is an approximate reflection of the viewer's experience, but also simultaneously, a re-channeling of this experience into a limited number of conventional and highly moralized narratives. This gap opened up between a spectator and his or her reflection provides a space for ideological formations to take root. The mechanisms of these identifications are typically veiled in broadcast television, but they are made explicit in certain

forms of video art. In this essay, I will take my cue from Fredric Jameson's insight that television and video art are dialectically linked: 'Commercial television is not an autonomous object of study; it can only be grasped for what it is by positioning it dialectically over against that other signifying system which we have called experimental video or video art.'[1]

The political dimension of fictional television narratives was made manifest recently in a fascinating struggle over minority representation on television dramas and sitcoms. Led by the NAACP (whose leadership was not without controversy),[2] a coalition of minority media activists demanded that the major networks include a greater number of people of color in television programming both on the screen and behind the camera. What is striking about this action is that the NAACP, one of the oldest and most venerable civil rights organizations in the United States, recognized that not only representation, but *representation in the entertainment industry* is integral to politics. Prime-time programming, perhaps even more than the constant stream of journalistic reporting on news networks such as CNN, was recognized as constituting an important site of political activism. In his 1995 book, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for 'Blackness,'* Herman Gray explores the cultural shifts which underlie the recent NAACP action.[3] He demonstrates how the changing demographics of television viewership in the 1980s led to an expansion of television dramas and sitcoms featuring black characters. In order to engage what they considered the rising proportion of African American viewers of network television – resulting in part from the migration of affluent audiences to cable programming – network executives and producers sought to develop programs that would appeal to black experience while not alienating white audiences. This reflexivity of programming and audience is itself an important lesson about the business of television. Alongside the proliferation of identity-based politics in the 1980s, there developed an analogous strategy in the mass media of 'narrowcasting,' in which programs were consciously addressed to specifically defined ethnic and socio-economic audiences. Network executives recognized that profits could be enhanced by more aggressively exploiting television's capacity to solicit idealized identifications between viewers and fictional characters. *The Cosby Show* was probably the most successful of this genre of programming, but its promotion of a split or hybrid form of identification attracted criticism from some African American intellectuals. If, on the one hand, it presented a positive image of an affluent black family, it also channeled black experience almost totally into standard middle- and upper-middle-class models of success. This is not to say that African Americans do not and should not be represented as embracing the American dream, but rather that *The Cosby Show* formulated a hybrid, and to many minds a conservative, identification in which blackness is reflected, but also re-narrativized, in a domesticated form profoundly reassuring to white viewers. The program consequently made little or no reference to the conditions of institutionalized racism and economic repression which is part of the experience of many African Americans. Its success nonetheless left the door open for activists to demand different and more diverse representations of black experience on television.

Instances of split-identification in television programming are legion, and are obviously not limited to representations of any particular racial or ethnic group. One of the most theoretically interesting models for re-narrativizing everyday experience in television is the participatory talk show pioneered by Phil Donahue, who invented the format in 1967, as well as impresarios such as Oprah, Sally Jessy Raphael, Jerry Springer, and a multitude of others. In these programs, featured guests tend to be both 'ordinary' in their resemblance to other middle-class Americans and 'exceptional' in that their function is to narrate some form of transgressive or unconventional behavior. But despite the trappings of spontaneous discussion, the effect of these talk shows is to redirect subversive characteristics or activities into culturally acceptable forms. This occurs through the extraordinarily formulaic and repetitive comments of audience members, who tend to relentlessly censure unconventional lifestyles, as well as the anodyne and remarkably unimaginative pronouncements of psychologist-experts who inevitably serve up the same pablum for every type of supposed disorder. The genius of this participatory format – and perhaps the source of its enormous popularity – is the perfect self-reflexivity of its ideological labor. Ordinary people are being policed by other ordinary people. If one of the messages of this most banal form of voyeurism is that perversion exists everywhere under the tranquil surfaces of the middle class, by far the more important lesson is that we must domesticate these pervasive impulses and urges, and shape them into the narratives of normalcy which are blandly touted by resident experts. Like the chorus in a Greek tragedy, the audience laments and cajoles the actors, who are 'ordinary people' like themselves. And this split between the subversive and the hegemonic is exemplified in the person of the host him- or herself, who as the avatar of the 'regular guy' or 'woman just like me' literally and metaphorically adjudicates between the opposing selves of a split middle-class subject.

It is this process of identification with a 'perfected' and altered version of *oneself* which characterizes the televisual public sphere in the United States. Within the ostensible abundance of television programming there are a few core narratives which are repeated over and over again. This ideological work is all the more effective because it is experienced as profoundly apolitical – as belonging to the realm of consumer desire and entertainment. Herein lies the significance of closed-circuit video installations of the 1970s such as those of Peter Campus, Bruce Nauman, and Dan Graham. They make explicit – and disturbing – the cultural imperatives to occupy, or attain to, one's own externalized images. They demonstrate that the work of ideology has migrated into the ostensibly private and psychic realm of identification, but unlike network television, which seamlessly redirects these identifications toward conventional types, Campus's installations, for instance, reintroduce the experience of coercion and anxiety at the heart of televisual forms of interpellation. Campus, like Andy Warhol, worked extensively in the medium he would later take up as an artist. He was born in 1937, but first produced art in 1971 at the age of thirty-four. During most of the 1960s, he worked in film and television production, ultimately as a free-lance film editor. But like Warhol, Campus's entry into an art context involved a near-total reversal of formal strategies: instead of building on his skills as an editor to make works characterized by fast-paced montage, Campus's important early art projects deployed closed-circuit video feedback systems in which images of gallery viewers were immediately projected back to themselves in modified form. According to Roberta Smith, Campus was drawn to this technology in part because of its extraordinary capacity to bridge the distance between spectator and spectacle. In a 1979 catalogue, she wrote, 'The

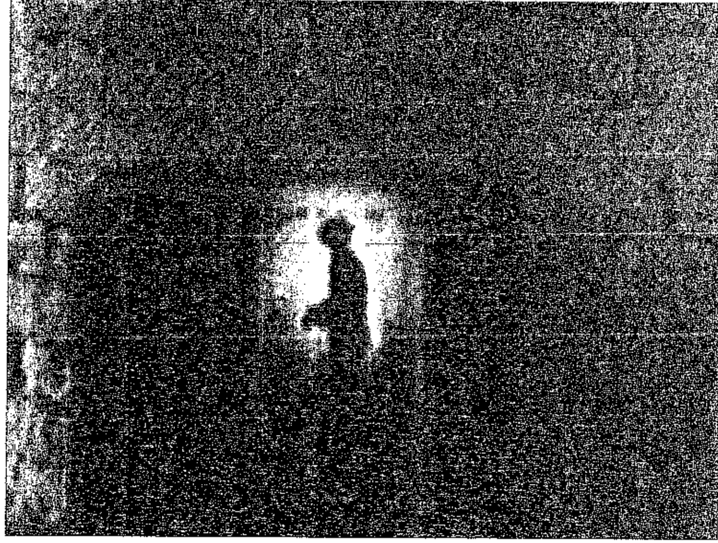

Figure 40.1 Peter Campus, *Double Vision*, 1971
Photo courtesy of the artist.

potentialities of video hit Campus with particular force while watching NASA broadcasts on television, where events like moon walks and rocket firings were recorded by live, unmanned video cameras.'[4] Campus's fascination with the capacity of video to bridge such incomprehensible distances – to provide live information from as far away as the moon – might suggest a preoccupation with instantaneity, and a McLuhanesque celebration of not just a global, but an *interplanetary* village. However, it was rather the effects of *distanciation* which this apparent instantaneity masks that became one of Campus's central themes.

To this purpose, his closed-circuit video installations of the early 1970s confront the viewer with a proliferation of nonidentical images of him- or herself. The supposedly instantaneous moment of reflection – through the camera, as well as in mirrors and by shadows – is expanded in time and space in order to admit a battalion of others onto the ground of the self. In *Shadow Projection* (1974), for instance, a spectator enters into a space where two alternate images or projections of her- or himself are put into play: a shadow and a video image. A translucent screen is installed in the center of the gallery. At one end opposite this screen is a bright light and camera. Directly on axis with the camera and light, but on the other end of the gallery is a video projector. When a spectator enters into the arena defined by the recording and projection components of video equipment, the dyadic apparatus of light and camera simultaneously throws a shadow onto the central screen and produces a video image which is projected onto it from the other side of the gallery. The viewer is keenly aware that she or he can increase the size and clarity of both shadow

and video image by moving closer or further away from the camera eye. The 'work' which is required of the spectator is therefore to superimpose one image perfectly upon the other in order to resolve their difference in size. The 'play' which the installation simultaneously enables is to widen this disparity, in what might be a pleasurable experience of an attenuated or asymmetrical self. What, then, is the place of the subject of representation in *Shadow Projection*? As we have already seen, the subject – or spectator – moves throughout the interior of the apparatus; within its defined circuit of representation she or he is given the option of reconciling shadow with image on the central screen, or of causing these alternate identifications to diverge. Campus thus finds a place for the individual's agency within representation. This is even more apparent in other installations of the same moment. In *Interface* (1972), for instance, the superimposition of shadow and video image which was deployed in *Shadow Projection* is conceived as an opposition between a mirror image and a video projection. As David Ross suggested in a 1974 catalogue, the proliferation of images of the same self functioned as an incitement of the viewer's own activity:

> Besides the ghostly evocations of the video image (made even less familiar by its lack of normal mirror flip-flop) which is superimposed over the reflection, the nature of the difference between images becomes increasingly the result of the viewer's active investigation. Physical explorations of the images and space defined by the light and the camera angle tend to lead the viewer into an improvisational choreography.[5]

These works dramatize the paradoxical position of the subject of representation – both within Campus's installations, and as I would argue, within media culture at large. For, if on the one hand, Campus allows for a degree of freedom and play on the part of the spectator caught within an apparatus of representation; on the other, he establishes a powerful imperative for the viewer/participant to resolve the differences between two or more alternate representations of his or her self. Campus thus resituates the performative opposition between spectator and spectacle within the identificatory drama of a single subject located in a *media* environment. In Campus's installations the spectator is the spectacle; visitors are submitted to a two-step process: first, they are caught by surprise by their own multiplied image – a confrontation which forces them to recognize their identity *as an image*. This leads to the second step – an effort to unify and claim these various images of the self in what David Ross calls an 'improvisational choreography.'

From the mid-1970s until he gave up the human figure altogether in the 1980s, Campus focused almost exclusively on the face. In a series of 10 × 10 foot (3 × 3 meter) slide projections from 1978 he likewise dispensed with video projection altogether. Instead of staging the drama of identification in a public gallery, in these works the interchange between camera and human subject took place in the ostensibly private realm of the artist's studio. For each projection Campus undertook a series of intense photo sessions, sometimes spanning several weeks. According to Smith, his instructions to the models were simply to 'project toward a point in the camera.'[6] If the drama of identification takes place offstage in these works – in the

artist's workshop – it nevertheless remains central to their significance. The social contradictions of identification are no longer spatialized as they were in Campus's closed-circuit video installations, but rather encoded in an extraordinarily unstable photographic surface. It is an obvious, but important fact that slide projections are composed not of solid matter, but entirely of light. Campus heightens this fundamental evanescence of the image through a dramatic play of rich shadow across the monumental projected faces. If light makes these images possible, it is shadow which threatens to dissolve them into near unintelligibility: the coherence of each face is on the verge of collapsing into abstract patterns of black, white, and grey. The aporia of identification which motivated earlier works like *Shadow Projection* and *Interface* is thus transposed into the dematerialized topography of a surface composed of light. The viewer encounters a monumental human image which grotesquely decomposes: recognition is grossly interrupted, and identification is imagined as a labor of reconstruction.

In this essay I have argued that the televisual public sphere disseminates and normalizes a model of split identification in which the self confronts its nonidentical representations. Within commercial television such splitting remains veiled in order to facilitate the viewer's assimilation of the consumerist, 'family-oriented' values which are axiomatic under late capitalism. On the other hand, in video art like Peter Campus's the contradiction between a spectator and his or her mechanical and cultural mediation is provocatively heightened. On one register, such a juxtaposition of television and video art is a relatively conventional avant-gardist critical move in which Campus's work (which also stands in for that of Nauman, Graham, and others) is shown to identify and represent social contradictions which would otherwise remain invisible. But on another register, my argument is less conventional in its methodology. For contrary to normal practice in the discipline of art history, I have attempted to challenge the stability of a *medium* as both the locus for historical genealogies and the privileged category for formal analysis.[7] I want to bring commercial television and video art – which share a technological apparatus but circulate in distinctly different institutional and discursive networks – into productive association. My aim is not simply to note that several artists have absorbed aspects of television and film through the appropriation of commercial footage or narrative conventions into their art, though such strategies are clearly relevant to my interests and crucial to a comprehensive history of video art in relationship to television. But simply acknowledging that the discourse of television 'enters' into video art falls short of what I wish to claim: such an argument retains a dichotomous high/low division even as it pretends to render it irrelevant. Instead, I want to put pressure on an obvious but significant fact: that several different image-making practices can and do cohabit the same technology. In the case of video, such 'cohabitation' would encompass home movies, digital film, commercial television, Internet broadcasts, and video art. I am proposing – and this essay only partially and inadequately sketches such a project – that rather than assuming the stability of artistic media as objects of study, that we undertake a genealogy of particular image technologies, without artificially dividing them into a priori categories such as 'television' and 'video' art.[8] The way I have attempted to do this is to take as my object a social condition – the status of identification in a media public sphere – and to trace its manifestations across two sets of practices which cohabit the same medium. This is one of many possible approaches in which visual hierarchies are reordered so that terms like high and low – whether used in a spirit which is celebratory or damning – are replaced by a new type of critical analysis calibrated for a more complex array of visual modalities. Collectively we might call such approaches Visual Studies.

Notes

1 Fredric Jameson, 'Video,' in *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 76–7.

2 In brokering a deal with NBC to hire greater numbers of actors and writers of color, the NAACP was accused by Latino, Asian American, and Native American coalition partners of failing to represent their interests. For a description of the deal as well as the controversy (later resolved) which attended it, see Elizabeth Jensen, Greg Baxton, and Dana Calvo, 'NBC, NAACP in pact to boost minorities in television,' *Los Angeles Times*, January 1, 2000, A1, A11.

3 Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for 'Blackness'* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

4 Roberta Smith, 'Dark light,' in *Peter Campus: Video-installationen, Foto-Installationen, Fotos, Videobander*, exhibition catalog (Cologne: Kölnischer Kunstverein; Berlin: Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, 1979), 32.

5 David A. Ross, 'Peter Campus: closed circuit video,' in *Peter Campus*, exhibition catalog (Syracuse: Everson Museum of Art, 1974), n.p.

6 Ibid., 28.

7 As I stated at the outset of this text, Fredric Jameson is an exception. In his efforts to analyze the relationship between broadcast television and video art Jameson proposes a critical move similar to the one I am advocating, but his argument tends toward what I've called an 'avant-gardist' direction by suggesting that video art is the dialectical negation (or complement) of commercial television.

8 Jonathan Crary has undertaken such a project regarding nineteenth-century vision. See his *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990) and *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999).