

Original Article



Images and Power in the Digital Age: The political role of digital visuality

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Matteo Stocchetti

Arcada University of Applied Sciences, Department of Culture and Communication, Finland

Abstract: The idea that digitalization, in general, and digital visuality, in particular, can have, alone, subversive or otherwise, emancipative effects on politics is based on the belief that the ideological apparatus supporting hegemonic relations consists of false ideas that the “power of images” can effectively challenge once larger parts of society are given access to this “power”. This idea misinterprets the role of digital visuality by misconstruing the role of ideology, and by positioning visual communication and associated technology in a sort of socio-political vacuum: beyond the reach of ideology and the relations of power supported by it. Based on the insights provided by the classical works of Walter Benjamin and Jean Baudrillard on the visual construction of reality, I argue that an authoritative discussion of the cultural, social and political implications of digital visuality in Western societies invites the intellectual positioning of this process within the broader framework of hegemonic capitalism and the problems of control associated with it. My main point is that in Western societies, the actualization of the subversive potential of digital visuality, as well as that of other forms of communication, requires material conditions that depend on ideology rather than technology. These ideological conditions explain why, for example, digital visuality may be effective in the cultural and socio-political subversion of non-capitalist societies. In Western societies, however, despite the extensive subcultural uses of digital visuality, the subversive potential is fatally reduced (if not nullified) by mechanisms that can be subsumed in what Frederic Jameson called “the cultural logic of late capitalism”. In support of my main argument, I offer some preliminary reflections on the media coverage of the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the uses of organized violence in the “Arab Spring” of 2011.

Keywords: visual communication, ideology, politics, Walter Benjamin, Jean Baudrillard

Address for Correspondence: Matteo Stocchetti, email: [matteo.stocchetti\[at\]arcada.fi](mailto:matteo.stocchetti[at]arcada.fi)

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is part of a larger study on the power of visual communication. Here I would like to address the issue of digital visuality, a specific but nowadays seemingly dominant form of visual communication, and the nature or direction of the power allegedly associated to it. The question then is: what is the “power” of digital visuality; and what are its effects on politics (the competition for the control over the distribution on power in society)? I believe this question is core in any attempt to assess the socio-cultural implications of innovation and technological development in communication.

In order to locate my discussion within broader conceptual coordinates, I should mention that my approach rejects technological determinism and what, in lack of a better term, I would describe as the contemplative tradition in visual analysis.

Perspectives inspired by technological determinism usually consider communication or media technology as the source of change or the cause of social phenomena that catch the attention of the analysts. The problem with these perspectives is that by explaining social change with technological development, they induce the naïve student to believe that technological development itself is not part of the social world. Far from being a neutral force, technological development is a core process that contains and reflects ideological assumptions concerning the distribution of power in society. In my view, technological development and social change are interconnected and the evolution of both is fueled by politics: the competition for the control over the distribution of values in society.

The contemplative tradition to visual communication constructs the power of visual communication in terms of a relationship between the image and the viewer, to study how and why this relationship changes in society. In the formulation of W. J. T. Mitchell, “double consciousness” is a key concept in this approach. It expresses the idea that, although very few of us would believe that images are living things, still many more of us relate to images *as if* they were indeed alive (Mitchell, 2005, p. 11). From the “philosophical argument” that “images are like living organisms”, this approach sets to ask:

If the living image has always been the subject of a double consciousness, of simultaneous belief and disavowal, what conditions are making the disavowal more difficult to maintain today? Why, in other words, do various forms of “iconoclasm” – the war of images – seem so conspicuously a part of the pictorial turn in our time? (Mitchell, 2005, p. 11)

This approach points to an important question (why are images seemingly more important today than in the past?) but, as I argued elsewhere, it does so in the wrong way. By adopting the metaphor of “live images” and inciting the viewer to pay attention to “what do pictures want?” it falls prey to a fundamental attribution error: it looks for causes, reasons, motives etc. in the tools rather than in their users; in the objects rather than in the agent; and in things rather than in humans. As technological determinism, but in a more sophisticated way, this approach seems unsuitable for the analysis of relations of power because in the “visual construction of the social” (Mitchell, 2005, p. 356), human agency remains hidden and the ideological origins of social change ultimately out of intellectual reach.

In my approach, the emancipative potential of visual forms of expression does not reside in technology or in photography, and therefore not in digital visuality. Rather it depends on the material and immaterial conditions that assist, support or hinder the effective usage of visual

communication by human agents in the competition for the control over the distribution of values in society.

First, I will discuss the limits of three main arguments that can be made in support of the emancipative potential of digital visibility. Second, with the help of a few insights from the works of Walter Benjamin and Jean Baudrillard, among others, I will give a closer look at the role of ideology and ideological apparatus in resolving the indeterminacy of visual communication. Finally, I will describe this role at work in the coverage of the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and of the “Arab Spring” in 2011.

2. THE EMANCIPATIVE ARGUMENT

The belief that digital visibility may indeed have important emancipative potentialities can presumably be based on at least three types of arguments concerning political dissent, information and the formation of visual communities.

2.1. Supporting voices of dissent and the circulation of “visual evidence”

A generic but widespread argument in support of digital visibility is the belief that this form of communication distinctively supports, incites, facilitates or otherwise helps the expression of societal “voices” of individuals and groups which are marginalized by mainstream media. A more specific argument along these lines is that digital visibility facilitates the production and circulation of visual evidence concerning abuses committed by oppressive regimes that can exert an effective control on institutional media. In this idea, the power of visual communication (based on something I would like to call “reality principle” and digital visibility), creates the conditions for simultaneity and ubiquity: we can know what is happening everywhere in the world at the same time it is happening. I am sure that few of us would disagree that it would be nice if oppressive regimes could be subverted by the mere circulation of visual evidence of their dark deeds. The widespread possibility of showing and watching abuses committed every minute in every corner of the world does not translate automatically or necessarily into the possibility to do something about it. The political mobilization against systematic abusive behavior requires not only knowledge about these abuses and will to oppose them, but also political resources (e.g. force) and a political organization able to make effective use of that knowledge and those resources. More commonly, this type of visual evidence is used by other regimes, including democracy, to mobilize consensus against the perpetrator. In this respect, rather than promoting awareness and dissidence, digital visibility simply facilitates the usage of visual communication for political propaganda. Its efficacy does not reflect the “power of images” or their relation to truth, but the political strength of the political organization using it. More precisely, while the efficacy of visual communication depends on its effective usage by a political organization, the emancipative potential of this form of communication depends on the goals or interests of the same political organizations. From this perspective, it would seem that (digital) visual communication is able to perform equally well to subvert oppressive as well as democratic regimes, to tell or to hide the truth, to support or to manipulate political “voice”. For good or bad, visual evidence becomes politically relevant if and when it is effectively used by an influential political organization. We will see in a moment how this perspective may indeed provide some useful insights if applied to the visual coverage of the so called “Arab Spring”.

If emancipation is discussed as a political process or phenomenon (and not for example a psychological one) digital visibility appears to be neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition. The belief in its emancipative power seems rather to reflect a rather naïve idea of what politics is all about and a dramatic underestimation of political pragmatics: the complex interplay of material and immaterial conditions affecting the capacity of individuals and groups to participate to the competition for the control over the distribution of values in society. At best, and discounting political propaganda, digital visibility can be a form of political communication that, as communication in general, is indeed a fundamental dimension of democratic participation.

Finally, I would also like to add that the mobilizing effect of images of abuses should not be taken for granted. Like all images, these have ambivalent meanings and, therefore, roles. Images of victims of a car accident, for example, may be used to invite caution in driving. They also feature prominently in websites that offer those for the visual pleasure of a morbid audience. The same happened with the images of Abu Ghraib.

2.2. Creating the “imagined” community as a political actor

A more interesting belief concerning the emancipative potential of digital visibility reflects the idea that images are a form of text with a distinctive emotional capacity. In the right conditions, images can create feelings of belonging and identification that ultimately result in forms of collective behavior that are politically relevant – e.g. transforming a more or less loose group of separate individuals in a political organization. While in the previous argument the power of visual communication resided in what I called the “reality principle” (the belief that images can give access to a hidden aspect of reality and hidden truth) in this argument I think what we are dealing with is something I would call the “pleasure principle”. The idea here is that digital visibility facilitates the circulation of images that for a variety of reasons fulfill desires of belonging, participation, identification etc. that alternative forms of communication leave somehow frustrated. Furthermore, digitalization enables and accelerates the circulation of images across material and immaterial obstacles (such as borders, cultures, language, status, gender, etc.) to more conventional forms of communication. This argument seems convincing, on political grounds, because the idea of a community of (visual) meaning is compatible with the theorization of collective identity famously formulated by Benedict Anderson and, perhaps less famously, with the “puissance” of the “tribes” as described by Michel Maffesoli (Maffesoli, 1996). These groups are then supposed to be politically influential, bringing to the fore issues (e.g. gay rights) which are neglected by conventional political actors (e.g. political parties based on class identity) hence contributing to increase the inclusiveness of the political system.

In this argument, the political role of digital visibility is more indirect, but also possibly more influential. Implicit in the recognition of the emotional appeal of visual communication, however, is also the ambivalence of this appeal. It is supportive of emancipation as well as of oppression. If the advantage of visibility as a form of political communication - compared to e.g. written communication - consists in its greater emotional appeal, the problem here is to see if and to what extent the politics of emotions can foster or undermine emancipative potentialities – or simply democratic politics. In fact, since digital visibility can support minority rights as well as neo-Nazi and other forms of fundamentalism, this line of argument

is convincing about the political relevance of digital visibility but cannot dissolve the ambivalence of its emancipative potential.

From a different perspective, the political relevance of these communities of meaning and, therefore, of “digital” visibility can be criticized arguing that the imagined communities described by Benedict Anderson were “creatures” that could still prosper in the political condition of modernity. Today, in the digital age, the postmodern condition had profoundly altered not only the nature of politics but, more radically, the very saliency of meaning and the nature of the real.

With Jean-François Lyotard, for example, it can be argued that the condition of disenchantment undermines the very possibility of institutionalization of a set of common meanings/beliefs into a ‘grand narrative’ capable of generating organized collective action. As Maffesoli notes:

The major characteristics attributed to these emotional communities are their ephemeral aspect; ‘changeable composition’; ‘ill-defined nature’; local flavour; their ‘lack of organization’ and routinization (Veralltäglicung). (Maffesoli, 1996, p. 12)

Even if digital visibility can create a community of meaning, there are legitimate reasons of doubt concerning the actual capacity of these communities to support emancipation. In fact, in postmodernism, there are reasons to doubt that not only digital visibility but even its meaning itself could be politically relevant, if one has to believe Frederic Jameson when he writes that:

Now reference and reality disappear altogether, and even meaning – the signified – is problematized. We are left with that pure and random play of signifiers that we call postmodernism, which no longer produces monumental works of the modernist type but ceaselessly reshuffles the fragments of pre-existent text, the building blocks of older cultural and social production, in some new and heightened bricolage: metabooks which cannibalize other books, metatexts which collate bits of other texts – such is the logic of postmodernism in general, which find one of its strongest and most original, authentic forms in the new art of experimental video. (Jameson, 1991, p. 96)

In sum, the problem with this indirect political role of digital visibility can be called “indeterminacy”. The enactment of emancipative potential is far from granted because digital visibility happens to perform community building functions in times when conventional political communication and identities have lost their currency, and, more radically, even the notion of meaning itself becomes problematic. It should be clear that this situation does not, *per se*, rule out the possibility of emancipative usage of digital visibility. It just requires, by those who want to give it a try, a more accurate assessment of the current state of affairs.

2.3. Changing the social construction of reality (and of the political within it)

A third argument in favor of the emancipative potential of digital visibility may suggest that this form of visual communication can indeed foster political emancipation by introducing fundamental changes in the process of the social construction of reality - a process famously described by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman. The question here is then to see what is the nature of these changes, and what are the foreseeable political implications associated to them.

If digital visuality cannot credibly reduce the indeterminacy of visual communication in its conventional functions of political propaganda and community building, one may still claim that, compared to conventional photography, digital visuality affects the social construction of reality in at least three ways. First, it opens up the practice of visual communication to large parts of the population, blurring the distinction between producer, distributor and consumer of visual objects (the apparent “democratization” of visual communication, a process that Benjamins discussed about film and one I will discuss further in the next section). Second, it enhances the productive capacity of visual technology beyond reality itself, into the hyper-real by enabling the production of images that transcend the human perspective (like viewing the war with the “eyes” of a missile, a point discussed by Jean Baudrillard that I will revisit in a moment). Third, it performs as a logic for the representation of reality that has pedagogical implications, and enhances the social value of visual communication in the social construction of reality (a message must be visual if it has to be relevant at all!) independently from reality itself.

The combined effects of these three changes introduced by digital visuality, one may suggest, are ‘emancipative’ on political grounds to the extent that their role is ‘subversive’ of the social construction of reality. Political emancipation, in other words, is associated to the dissolution of the relations of power legitimized by notions of truth and reality that are effectively challenged by the logic of digital visuality, the hyperrealism of its representations, and the widespread access to both. To change the world, one should first change the way we look at it. Digital visuality can help in looking at the world not as it is, but as it could be (utopia/dystopia).

This argument is presumably the most sophisticated of the three discussed here. In this perspective, the power of visual communication goes beyond information to stretch into knowledge, and, in particular, into the process of knowledge construction about the social world. Additionally, in this argument, the emancipative claim of digital visuality does not address the political directly but indirectly, blending socio-constructivism and media ecology in what appears a promising step towards a political theory of visual politics. The core conceptual move here is the idea that reality is constructed by social communication (socio-constructivism), and that if communication is relevant, the ways we communicate must make a difference in the way reality is constructed and, maybe, in the nature of it (media ecology). Finally, this argument introduces the themes of the crisis of truth, and the substitution of reality by its representations, which are two core aspects of Postmodernism, but it also invites a critical reflection on the political shortcomings of this form of criticism, and on the intellectual possibility to overcome them.

My claim, in relation to the emancipative potential of digital visuality as described in this argument, can be summarized as follows. If digital visuality supports the dissolution of the real, the impact on the relations of power depends on the way we construe the conceptual linkage between reality and politics. If politics is constructed as a result of, and dependent upon, reality, then the subversion of reality is the subversion of the political. Conventional processes and identities lose their meanings e.g. election, class struggle, etc. This “subversion” however, rather than opening up opportunities for emancipation, seems to be what Jean Baudrillard described as a regime of simulation: a situation in which relations of power are beyond the reach of change. Visual communication with all its ambivalence, and

because of it, is a most effective tool to manage relations of power through –rather than despite - the subversion of the real.

But if politics is seen as a process that construes reality, and the social construction of reality as a fundamental dimension of the competition over the control for the distribution of values in the society (as I am inclined to believe), then the subversion of the real is not ‘outside’ the domain of politics, but an important part of it, a more or less deliberate move to affect this competition.

Michel Foucault already pointed out the productive capacity of power/knowledge to create the meanings or “discursive formations” necessary for the reproduction of control. Where the cultural logic of late capitalism applies, if the incessant production of new meanings is constitutive of relations of power, as Frederic Jameson suggests, these relations may not dissolve because the symbols and rituals expressing them are deprived of meaning (e.g. through the autonomy of the signifier). Rather, in these conditions, the possibility of emancipative changes is disconnected from the social construction of meaning: it is beyond the reach of change through communication – and this is “the violence of the system” that Baudrillard believed generated terrorism as a form of antagonistic violence. [Baudrillard 2003 (2002), p. 58]

If digital visibility contributes to shatter the myth of truth in visual communication to the advantage of the “pleasure principle” political emancipation becomes as illusionary as the beauty of a computer generated landscape we may enjoy while we sit in a room without windows, or a digital fireplace burning on our TV screen.

If we believe that reality is socially constructed, we should also give some currency to at least other two ideas. First, that the control on the social construction of reality is unequally distributed in society and therefore, that some groups are more influential than others. Second, that technological evolution is also part of this reality and also influenced by, rather than merely having influence upon, the unequal distribution of power in society. What this means for our discussion is that the emancipative claim of digital visibility can indeed be seen in a broader perspective, as a form of communication that affects the social construction of reality, rather than directly the relation of power within it. But it also means that the social effects of digital visibility are mediated by other circumstances and conditions that presumably, to a certain extent, reflect relations of power. It is this mediation, one may suggest, that ultimately produces the elements of ambivalence in the emancipative promise of digital visibility: the indeterminacy in the role of images, visual community and representation of the political that I have discussed here.

In my view, this line of argument invites reflection on the role of ideology or, more precisely, on the role of institutionalized hierarchies of values on the social uses of available technologies for visual communication.

3. DIGITAL VISUALITY AND IDEOLOGY

In the previous section I challenged the ideas that images or visual technology can bring about emancipation. In the discussion of three arguments in support of the emancipative claim of digital visibility I tried to argue that indeterminacy is the key feature of this role,

referring to a set of possibilities the implementation of which seems to rely upon, much more than bring about, change in established relations of power.

In discussing the role of ideology, I want to suggest that the emancipative potential of digital visuality (as other communication technologies) depends on effective usage, and that effective usage depends on the capacity of the user to come to terms with (or acknowledge) the conditions affecting its usage. Most relevant, among these conditions, are the institutionalized hierarchies of values that more or less latently affect the uses of digital visuality, like other forms of expression.

Therefore, I define ideology as an *institutionalized hierarchy of value performing descriptive and prescriptive functions in the competition over the distribution of values in society*.

Looking at this concept of ideology is important, in my opinion, to defamiliarize our experience of media and communication, to become aware of the risks associated to unreflective ways of engaging with technology in general, and visual technology in particular. This is an exercise with a pedagogical connotation that I believe is necessary to resist the pervasiveness of the “promotional cultural” and the fact that this culture “has become, today, virtually co-extensive with our produced symbolic world” (Wernick, 1991, p. 182) – a process that in political perspective goes dangerously close to the saturation of the symbolic imaginary by corporate interests¹.

To address the emancipative potential of digital visuality I therefore suggest another line of argument – digital visuality is a (political) form of communication that participates (reflects, affects, etc.) with the ideological conditions of a given society.

Within the limits of this paper I will briefly recall some ideas expressed in the works of Walter Benjamin and Jean Baudrillard that are useful for identifying the ideological elements embedded in digital visuality. After this, I will use these ideas for a preliminary interpretation of the visual coverage of the Iraq invasion and “Arab Spring”.

3.1. Walter Benjamin and the role of technological reproducibility

I believe we are all familiar with the celebrated work of Walter Benjamin on the mechanical reproducibility of the work of art. My main point here is that mechanical reproducibility is not a process that can be considered ideologically neutral. While I believe that Benjamin is fundamentally right concerning the cultural and socio-political implications of this feature, I think he is however wrong when he suggests the possibility of using the potential of film in support of revolutionary culture, to subvert property relations, and ultimately satisfy the human “reproductive” need. Past history simply shows that this has not happened, and I cannot see, in contemporary history, any reason why we should expect to experience this subversive turn anytime soon. In fact, the filmic power of the “apparatus” seems stronger than ever, spreading from the large to the small screen of TV, and to the even smaller screen of personal computers, in form of online movies, video on demand and videogames. Digital visuality may facilitate the diversification of delivery platforms, but not the pluralism of

¹ An example is the use of images in mobile communication, a form of technology that, as I argued with Mikko Villi is far from ‘connecting people’ but makes absence productive in the management of social space. (Villi & Stocchetti, 2011)

ideological functions. These functions are those that Benjamin described in his article and it may be useful recall them today.

First, mechanical reproducibility effaces the role of tradition, destroys the aura of the work of art, its “cult value”, but enhances its “exhibition value”. Hence it creates the conditions for the politics of art: the use of aesthetics in the competition for the control over the distribution of values in society. (Benjamin, 2008, p. 25)

Second, in the politics of art, mechanical reproducibility allows for the possibility to establish a distinctive relationship between difference and similarity, in which perception “extracts sameness even from what is unique”. In the process of social construction of reality discussed earlier, mechanical reproducibility makes it possible to enforce “the alignment of reality with the masses and of the masses with reality ... a process of immeasurable importance for both thinking and perception”. (Benjamin, 2008, pp. 23-24).

Third, the relevance of mechanical reproducibility is not primarily in the kind of (visual) products it creates, but rather in the social functions that are attributed to these products. In this perspective, the training functions that Benjamin sees for film applies equally well, in my view, to videogames and digital photography:

The function of film is to train human beings in the apperceptions and reactions needed to deal with a vast apparatus whose role in their lives is expanding almost daily... The representation of human beings by means of an apparatus has made possible a highly productive use of the human being's self-alienation. (Benjamin, 2008, p. 26 and 32)

Fourth, even before digitalization (and the idea of “simulation” in Baudrillard), Benjamin describes the ideological function of film in term of “adaptation” between the people's perception of themselves, and the world around them, and the needs of the apparatus (in Baudrillard, “the system”) achieved through the blurring of the difference between reality and its representations:

The most important social function of film is to establish equilibrium between human beings and the apparatus. Film achieves this goal not only in terms of man's presentation of himself to the camera but also in terms of his representation of his environment by means of this apparatus. (...) This is where the camera comes into play, with all its resources for swooping and rising, disrupting and isolating, stretching or compressing a sequence, enlarging or reducing an object. It is through the camera that we first discover the optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis. (Benjamin, 2008, p. 37) (Italics in the original)

Fifth, mechanical reproducibility (of which digital visuality is just the latest expression) is a form of control over the representation of reality. This control, however, is not ideologically neutral but rather selective. While Benjamin notes that the functioning of the (ideological) apparatus effectively nullified the emancipative or “revolutionary” opportunities in film, I claim that the same apparatus performs in a similar way in the other domains, where digital visuality has been put to work (namely videogames, advertisement and the practices associated to private photography).

Film capital uses the revolutionary opportunities implied by this control for counterrevolutionary purposes. Not only does the cult of the movie star which it fosters preserve that magic of the personality which has long been no more than the putrid magic of its own commodity character, but its counterpart, the cult of the audience, reinforces the corruption by which fascism is seeking to supplant the class consciousness of the masses. (Benjamin, 2008, p. 33)

Sixth, intrinsic in this control is the possibility of bringing about a perception of reality, and to naturalize representations of the world that, albeit psychotic *per se*, are enforced as authoritative representations of reality:

Many of the deformations and stereotypes, transformations and catastrophes which can assail the optical world in films afflict the actual world in psychoses, hallucinations, and dreams. Thanks to the camera, therefore, the individual perceptions of the psychotic or the dreamer can be appropriated by collective perception. The ancient truth expressed by Heraclitus, that those who are awake have a world in common while each sleeper has a world of his own, has been invalidated by film – and less by depicting the dream world itself than by creating figures of collective dream, such as the globe-encircling Mickey Mouse. (Benjamin, 2008, pp. 37-38)

Seventh, for Benjamin, in capitalist and fascist societies, film is the masses' "true training ground" for "reception in distraction" as the form of apperception which leads to the aesthetization of politics and, ultimately, to war as strategies to preserve property relations.

The logical outcome of fascism is an aestheticizing of political life (...) All efforts to aestheticize politics culminate in one point. That one point is war. War and only war, makes it possible to set a goal for mass movements on the grandest scale while preserving traditional property relations. That is how the situation presents itself in political terms. In technological terms it can be formulated as follows: only war makes it possible to mobilize all of today's technological resources while maintaining property relations. (Benjamin, 2008, p. 41) (Italics in the original)

We will see in a moment that Benjamin's insight about aestheticization and war sound especially actual in relation to the visual coverage of the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and in the "Arab Spring" in 2011.

What makes Benjamin's analysis on the socio-political effects of technological reproducibility of the work of art a bit obsolete, in my view, is his faith on the possibility for communist ideology to re-appropriate the revolutionary potential of film and the idea, closely associated to this, that the ideological effects of film could be reversed and even put to good use for the emancipation of the masses. As we know, Soviet Communism relied on film for "stimulating the involvement of the masses through illusionary displays" (Benjamin, 2008, p. 34) very much like "film capital" does, exposing the masses to the same aesthetization of politics that Benjamin discusses in capitalist society. If Benjamin would write today, he would perhaps acknowledge that capitalism is an ideology more resilient and ultimately effective than he thought – and maybe that visual communication is a less effective emancipative tool than he hoped.

3.2. Jean Baudrillard and the regime of simulation

There are at least two ideas that are relevant here: simulacra and simulation. Like Benjamin, Baudrillard believes that a crucial moment consists in the disappearance of difference (e.g. between the 'map' and the 'territory') (Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, [1985] 1994, p. 2). If the emancipative potential of digital visibility is assessed in relation to the social construction of reality, the mechanical reproducibility of images that have "no relation to any reality whatsoever" (Baudrillard, [1985] 1994, p. 6) should raise some concern. While in Benjamin the manipulative potential of film (and I argue of digital visibility too) is bent to the need of the reproduction of reality along ideological lines, with Baudrillard the process gets out of control. Media is not a tool to control reality but to substitute it. The substitution itself

is not part of an ideological program, such as that of the capitalist or the fascist, but a result of the representational logic of the media itself.

Baudrillard suggests that this state of affairs, the effective substitution of the real with its mediated representation, implies the end of the political since the possibility of change, in a “regime” of simulation is simply ruled out. My suggestion here is rather that this “regime” has itself ideological connotations, and, independently from the (im)possibility of change, this state of affairs is indeed the result of politics: the practical effect of an hegemonic ideology on the social construction of the world.

The value of Baudrillard’s ideas lies, in my opinion, in the insight it may offer when identifying the deep effects of mechanical reproducibility on the cultures of perception. The limit, however, is its incapacity to see the effects he describes as a state of affairs belonging to the social world, and therefore, associated to identifiable interests and agents.

To the extent that the use of images as simulacra and the “regime” of simulation associated to it are constitutive of the postmodern condition, this very “condition” is not politically neutral and assuredly far from emancipative. As Jameson put it rather unambiguously:

Yet this is the point at which I must remind the reader of the obvious: namely, that this whole global, yet American, postmodern culture is the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world: in this sense, as throughout class history, the underside of culture is blood, torture, death, and terror. (Jameson, 1991, p. 5)

I can therefore suggest that the visual strategy of hegemonic capitalism is presumably the following: the control of the social construction of reality by blurring the difference between reality and simulation, by making images simulacra and therefore destroying the possibility of effective usage of visual communication for subversion.

4. THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY AND THE EMANCIPATIVE POTENTIAL OF VISUAL COMMUNICATION

4.1. Iraq 1991-2003

There is little doubt that, in the US-led invasion of Iraq, digital visuality was the weapon of choice in psychological warfare. The point was even made explicit by one of the many “analysts” involved in the war reporting exercise². The targets of this warfare, however, were not only the Iraqi people and their army, but also the Western people. Domestic audiences were involved in that war in the role of spectators and funders, but also masses in the process of being trained to conform to the needs of the ruling class (if we follow Benjamin) and ultimately persuaded to buy into the myth of the monopoly of legitimate force by the US, if we follow Baudrillard (Baudrillard, 1991, p. 96).

² During the early hours of the US led invasion of Iraq in 2003, commenting for th CNN International the computer generated images of the invasion plans, retired US General Dan Christian quite candidly observed that “the coalition forces would not allow this kind of broadcasting were it not to be used for psychological influencing as well”. (CNN World, 21 March 2003 at 06:16 GMT)

That war, possibly more than any other in the past, was construed as a visual “work of art” whose main goal was to bring the viewers to enjoy what they saw. It was a huge, costly and successful experiment in institutional control over the social construction of a specific reality (war). The cognitive strategy used to achieve this control consisted in blurring the distinction between reality and the communicative representation of it. The role of visual communication was to provide visual evidence in support of institutional claims. Colin Powell’s presentation of the “evidence” in support of the US administration’s claim that Saddam Hussein was indeed in possession of weapons of mass destruction was not a diplomatic farce, but rather a public rehearsal of this communicative strategy³. The visual coverage of the actual war was performed as a theatrical show in which live broadcast, computer generated simulations, and images compilations had the main communicative function of transforming the war into a visual product for leisure consumption.

As Mirzoeff observed:

For all the deconstructive, feminist, anti-racist, visual culture theory that I have at my disposal, there was no way to counter the sweating, exulting triumph of the war watcher. To call attention to the deaths of Iraqi civilians or to mention that this attack lacked the authority of the United Nations would simply have added to his delight. (Mirzoeff, 2005, pp. 1-2)

The political implications of constructing war as an object of visual pleasure (or as “war porn, (Baudrillard, 2006)) are huge, if one thinks about it. It is this form of enjoyment, for example, that produces the emotional conditions for the transformation of a democratic regime in a “garrison state” – a transformation described by Harold D. Lasswell already in the 1940s.

The war coverage of the invasion of Iraq in BBC World and CNN International produced the aesthetization of war on a global scale, for a global audience, across cultures and irrespective of the diversities among “visual cultures”. It is trivial to say that this would not have been possible without digital technology. Less trivial may be to discuss the non-material conditions that made it possible. My suggestion, in this respect, is that an exercise in the aesthetization of war of that magnitude is both a sign and a tool: a sign (indicator) of the ideological strength of global capitalism; and a tool to enforce intellectual and cognitive deterrence against competing ideologies. A visual coverage of that sort was possible and intelligible because global audiences had already been trained – so to say – in that type of spectacle by the flood of mainstream war movies and video games that shared the same digital technology. Furthermore, and to the extent that war coverage was effectively experienced and consumed by a great number of people as a work of art for mass visual enjoyment, the aesthetization of war succeed in creating the cognitive basis for the legitimization of the same ideology. This is a good example, in my opinion, of how ideology determines the usage of available technology, and how the ideological usage of available technology supports ideology itself.

The ultimate piece of evidence for an argument against the emancipative role of digital technology based on the “reality principle” comes from the publication of the images of the abuse committed by US personnel on war prisoners at Abu-Ghraib.

Once established (by the symbolic authority of transnational TV networks), the idea that violence can be experienced as a form of visual pleasure cannot be disposed of so easily. The ideological effects of war coverage spread to the post-war, and affected the socio-political

³ Available on line at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nt5RZ6ukbNc>

impact of those images. For a public trained in enjoying the spectacle of large scale violence, the images of the abuses at Abu Ghraib were not construed as visual evidence of the war crimes committed by the US military and political leaders, but rather as just another piece of visual enjoyment. In that instance, digital technology failed to express the emancipative potentialities, because the “reality value” of those images was eroded by their “pleasure value”. It should therefore come as no surprise that the actual consequences of the publication of those images on the perpetrators of those abuses were rather mild and inspired by “scapegoating” rather than emancipative justice, while the same images are still available on the web for the visual pleasure of their consumers.

As a note, one may also notice that today the web is still crowded with images of people re-enacting the abuses shown in the images of Abu Ghraib. The potential of digital technology, in this case, seems to go toward the naturalization of abuses and the blurring of distinctions (e.g. between our pleasure and the “pain of others”⁴) rather than toward emancipation.⁵

4.2. Arab Spring 2011: camera as weapons

A commonly held belief is that digital visibility, and digital technology more broadly, are decisive tools in the democratization of the Arab countries in the southern side the Mediterranean. “European Commissioner calls for ‘digital champion’ (BBC, European commissioner calls for 'digital champions', 2011) and “Syria: ‘Our Weapon is the camera’” (BBC, Syria: 'Our weapons is the camera', 2011) offer the best examples I could find of this belief expressed in available media.

My inclination, however, is to think that digital visibility/technology only facilitates the use of images, enhancing the political and military value of visual propaganda. The social meaning of these images, and the political effectiveness of their usage, depends on the nature of ideology and the quality of the organization involved in the struggle respectively.

In the visual imagery of the Arab Spring, the interesting aspect is the similarities between these and the “revolutions” of 1989. Someone who is even vaguely familiar with the socio-cultural features of the populations involved may have the impression that the Arab masses have been visually socialized into the basic model of French Revolution - as to say that when people rebel for democracy they all look the same.⁶

⁴ “Regarding the Pain of Others” is the title of a critical essay by Susan Sontag on this topic (Sontag, 2004 (2003)).

⁵ see, for example discussion on:

http://www.prostitutionresearch.com/blog/2007/02/kinkcom_in_san_francisco_women.html

For cultural appropriation and subversion see:

<http://www.mccullagh.org/photo/1ds-18/abu-ghraib-prisoner-uncle-sam>

http://www.likecool.com/Abu_Ghraib_Coffee_Table--Furniture--Home.html

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/legofesto/317378240/>

<http://www.intomobile.com/2010/08/26/verizon-droid-ad-bears-striking-resemblance-to-abu-ghraib-torture-images/>

<http://therecshow.com/richard-simmons-may-be-gay/>

<http://www.wearemongoloid.com/>

⁶ See e.g. the cartoon by Chappatte for Makingitmagazine, available at <http://www.makingitmagazine.net/?p=3563>



Figure 1: “Les Temps”, by political cartoonist “Chappatte”.

We see women carrying guns or participating in street demonstrations, and we construe those images as signs of gender equality and women emancipation i.e. visual evidence of the spread of democracy. We see children and adults with the colors of their national flags painted on their faces, and we understand that, as supporters of some football team going to an important match, these people have a strong emotional involvement in their “cause”. Finally, we see the pictures of the villain – Gadhafi – slayed and humiliated and, besides the emotional “reward”, we understand that, at least in Libya, the revolution is over and democracy has won.

When Benjamins observes that film performs training functions for the masses, it means that masses adopt the visual form of expression to which they have been socialized – in our case by films, videogames, internet, etc. When Baudrillard discusses the role of simulacra in the “regimes of simulation”, it suggests that in these “regimes” visibility is used to hide rather than show reality. And while we see “them” finally becoming like “us”, we are “shown” the fulfillment of Francis Fukuyama’s prophecy that “the institutions embodying the West’s underlying principles of freedom and equality will continue to spread around the world” (Fukuyama, 2002, pp. 27-28).

Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, however, suggests a different possibility:

Unfortunately, the Egyptian summer of 2011 will be remembered as marking the end of revolution, a time when its emancipatory potential was suffocated. Its gravediggers are the army and the Islamists. ... the Islamists will tolerate the army’s material privileges and in exchange will secure ideological hegemony. The losers will be the pro-Western liberals, too weak – in spite of the CIA funding they are getting – to ‘promote democracy’, as well as the true agents of the spring events, the emerging secular left that has been trying to set up a network of civil society organisations, from trade unions to feminists. The rapidly worsening economic situation will sooner or later bring the poor, who were largely absent from the spring protests, onto the streets. There is likely to be a new explosion, and the difficult question for Egypt’s political subjects is who will succeed in directing the rage of the poor? Who will translate it into a political programme: the new secular left or the Islamists? (Žižek, 2011)⁷

While the mainstream visual representation of the Arab Spring reflects ideological canons of appropriateness and intelligibility, since the beginning, analysts have observed that these rebellions may support transitions not towards more democratic regimes but rather toward fundamentalist Islamic regimes.

⁷ For a vehemently critical comment on Žižek’s article see Hamid Dabashi “Zizek and Gaddafi: Living in the old world” available at <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2011/08/201183113418599933.html>

Is it possible that the same images have different meanings, different political strengths and ultimately different social roles if interpreted through different hierarchies of values? My tentative answer to all these questions is ‘yes’. Circulating images of the Arab Spring shows the progress of democracy for some and the fall of non-islamic Arab regimes for others. To “us” they show “their” effort to become like “us”. But to “them”, the same images show “their” sacrifices made for “their” cause. And while those images enter “our” media culture in forms, timing and shapes crafted to suit the commercial needs of (“our”) media companies, the same images are metabolized in “their” visual culture as the narrative elements of a new rebirth for the Arab Nation. Images of death and sacrifice can destabilize conventional authoritarian regimes to the advantage of the Islamist, because the death and sacrifice are construed as proof of the values of their cause.

The use of digital technology may work for the subversion of “conventional” authoritarian regimes (which are also among the most secular ones in that region) because first, the ideological background of these regimes could not “digest” organized opposition, and second, because the potentialities of this technology were exploited by political organizations equipped with enough material and immaterial (e.g. a recognizable ideological identity) resources to make effective use of them. The same technologies cannot subvert the inequalities of power in our regimes, because the ideological background of our regimes can effectively transform “sacrifice” into “entertainment”, the symbolic expression of dissidence and resistance into cultural commodity and commercial gadgets – just think about the T-shirt with the face of “Che”! – and therefore neutralize the opposition by taking advantage of it.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper I could not address the idea that digital visibility is influential in supporting postmodernism as the cultural logic of late capitalism. What I did, however, is offer the reader speculative evidence of another idea: that the effective emancipative use of material or immaterial resources depends on the availability of an emancipative ideology. To this purpose, I have defined ideology as an institutionalized hierarchy of values performing descriptive and prescriptive functions. I have argued that the emancipative potential of digital visibility depends on the development of an ideology antagonistic to that of late capitalism. Short of this, the role of digital visibility and other forms of communication will remain ambivalent or, more commonly, supportive of the hegemonic ideology.

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