

Visual Genders, Visual Histories

EDITED BY
PATRICIA HAYES



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A Special Issue of *Gender & History*

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1 Introduction: Visual Genders

Patricia Hayes

I

The photograph on the cover of this book was taken in the early 1960s by Daniel Morolong, at an East London beach in South Africa. Morolong was a press photographer covering popular leisure and social events in the city during the period before apartheid policies led to the forced removal of these residents to Mdantsane, a township later incorporated into the Ciskei bantustan. In the photograph, Morolong's mother and her two sisters are seated on the rocks by the sea. Aesthetically the image slides between two worlds, that of the black and white documentary photograph and that of the family seaside snap. Historically it also slides between a past and present denoting the inclusion and exclusion of African people in urban South Africa. On the right, the indeterminate space of the sea suggests a further slide, opening up another thinking space and rescuing the photograph from a single or dual history and genre. This openness is accentuated by the dispersed gazes of the three women, with the first looking back at the camera and the others at different points of the horizon, their bodies gradually inclining towards the sea. The photograph formed part of Morolong's extensive body of work, which has only recently drawn the attention of historians.¹ Then in 2004, a remarkable thing happened. The photograph was printed on a large conference poster. When numerous copies of it were pasted up around a busy South African university campus, it disappeared. More copies were put up, only to disappear again very quickly. The repeated theft of the image, which happened largely in silence, suggested some kind of connection. It revealed a relationship. It was not vandalism, but appropriation. The image belonged to the category of 'the ones that are wanted'.²

In *'Photos of the Gods'*, Chris Pinney proposes that 'a new kind of history needs to be written' against a backdrop of practices that privilege

precisely what we have outlined above: 'the power of the image and visually intense encounters'.³ In arguing for a visual history, he suggests that pictures have a different story to tell from words. What if we allowed them to do so, at least partly, on their own terms? Is it possible, Pinney asks, to 'envisage history as in part determined by struggles occurring at the level of the visual?'. Not so much a history of the visual, but a history made by visuals?⁴

In a way there is nothing new about this proposal, given that certain disciplines have long dealt with visibility. David Freedberg challenged art history long ago to shift away from a history of art towards something else, namely 'the relations between images and people in history'.⁵ This converges with the push to study audience reception, advocated strongly by race and gender critiques of art history. These critiques questioned art history's construction of an 'emotionally detached, objectively accurate vision' of the (masculinist) connoisseur or trained expert and of the adherence to theories of innate aesthetic value.⁶ New scholarship extends the call for the study of reception to mediation, transmission, circulation, to the inter-textual or inter-ocular receptivities and creativities that are generated in the course of this interaction, and to their effects on viewers and agency. But central to it all is the need, in social, historical and political analysis, to 'reflect on the significance of seeing itself'.⁷ According to W. J. T. Mitchell, this involves the effort to 'overcome the veil of familiarity and self-evidence that surrounds the experience of seeing, and to turn it into a problem for analysis, a mystery to be unraveled'.⁸

Historians and other scholars have been waking up to the unacknowledged visual dimensions of gender.⁹ The phrase 'unacknowledged visibility' comes from Alison Moore's study of the *tondues* images in liberation France, included in this volume, where photographs of women scapegoated for collusion with Germans during the Occupation keep coming back to the surface. She argues that it is precisely within this unacknowledged visibility that gender features, voicelessly and implicitly. Indeed, the processes through which *gender* history is made by visuals is the direct concern of this work.

The explicit visual focus of this volume elicited the record-breaking number of responses from potential contributors to *Gender & History* Special Issue, on which this book is based. In bringing gender, history and visibility together, the range of abstracts submitted to the journal appears to suggest a new readiness to bring gender history within the scope of the recent interdisciplinary field of visual studies. But contributors are not drawn so much by the allure of visual culture *per se*.¹⁰ Rather, we are witnessing a specific urgency about gender in relation to the visual or 'pictorial' turn that the disciplines are taking in a much broader sense.¹¹

In his key article 'Showing Seeing', W. J. T. Mitchell argues that a common core of scholarly interest has emerged with regard to the visual, though methods and reading lists may vary widely across disciplines. It begins with the hypothesis that vision is culturally constructed, that it is 'learned and cultivated, not simply given by nature'. Vision has a history related (in ways yet to be determined) to 'the history of arts, technologies, media, and social practices of display and spectatorship'. It is 'deeply involved with human societies, with the ethics and politics, aesthetics, and epistemology of seeing and being seen'.¹² Moreover, there are different ways of seeing, different histories of vision – again, most of these genealogies are yet to be determined. We shall return to this point later.

In total, we might refer to the above as the social construction of vision. But Mitchell goes further, to propose that we think directly about the visual construction of the social.¹³ In a sense, this volume takes its departure from that point, for the direction we are pushing now is gender. Thus we do not confine ourselves to the social or cultural construction of gender. Instead, if the visual can take us more deeply into the cultural and historical configurations of society, as it seems able to do, then we are beginning to ask new questions – across history – about the visual construction of gender.

II

Acknowledging the visual immediately poses a number of questions. To begin with, the terminology of gender scholarship is loaded with visual metaphors, especially around visibility. Some distinction needs to be made between visibility and visibility. The term visibility often conflates 'seeing' with audibility, which in turn implies a transcription into textuality. The question of power is implicit in these formulations. In older feminist historical discourses of the 'recovery' of lost histories, the oft-stated problem of the invisibility of women begins to take on a different slant when visibility itself becomes the central focus.¹⁴ This helps us to move beyond the positivist mandate to 'make visible' as the panacea for all gender ills, because it questions *how things are made visible* and asks on what terms this takes place. We immediately engage in a problematic zone, for the act of 'making visible' can silence women further. Visibility does not necessarily mean 'voice', or empowerment. For example, how can notions of 'recovery' and 'visibility' work when it comes to the *burqah*? In certain societies, as Alec Balasescu's essay on Iran suggests, women's public visibility has functioned in inverse proportion to social mobility. To push uncritically for all-out visibility is perilous: at its extreme, compulsory visibility comes from a certain historical-cultural

space and could be construed as a repressive and indeed an imperialist practice. There are contexts in which being invisible, unseen and even unknown have been and continue to be preferred options, giving scope and time to negotiate the difficult conditions of social and gendered existence.

In order to highlight the distinction between visibility itself, which is often used in an empirical sense, and *visuality*, which carries more discursive and rhetorical connotations, it is helpful to peel away the self-evidentiary language of seeing. There is something ironic in the fact that engaging with the visual demands a much greater precision with language itself, calling into question the appropriateness of visual metaphors in gender studies. In addition, when putting into language the frequently sensitive and power-laden issues around gender, race and class that emerge from visual material, we need to attend closely to what Michelle Rowley has called the ethics of articulation.¹⁵ These ethics are connected with the more obvious problem of reproducing actual visual materials during research and publication, where great care must be taken to avoid replicating and re-circulating the power relations and gestures that went into their making. Contributors and editors have had to confront this problem directly, especially with regard to difficult photographic and film material of women during World War Two studied by Ulrike Weckel and Alison Moore in this volume, and Elspeth Brown's work on human locomotion. To historicise and problematise each frame is the method we have tried to sustain, acknowledging that neither can foreclose any debate about showing and seeing pictures for the reader-viewer.

In the essay about the Beneficent Society of Argentina in this volume, there is plainly a class politics involved in making visible those poor women selected for its 'Virtue Awards'. The authors depict society ladies poking their noses into working-class homes in Buenos Aires, their photographers making the 'popular classes hand their intimacy over'. In Iran, as Balasescu argues, the historical phase of unveiling under Reza Shah in the 1920s worked comprehensively to exclude working-class women from the public domain. The veil in fact facilitated women's mobility, their access to education and employment, which was disastrously curtailed with the increased forms of bodily visibility and changes in dress code introduced by the ostensibly modernising Shah.

Asking *how* things are made visible (or not) shifts 'gender' as an unmediated category of historical analysis to gender as a vehicle of specific representations. For historians of Africa, the study of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century photographic collections reveals the extent to which women were 'pushed into visibility' by the camera.¹⁶ This is in striking contrast to the frequently stated problem of a lack of women's 'voice' to be found in the archive of texts. The African woman visually fills the frame, unlike the way she subsists on the edges in the official report.

In her very objectification she is constructed as a subject. If photographs are granted the status of 'record' and placed alongside textual documentation, it appears overwhelmingly that African women were seen and not heard. What then is this culture of visual documentation? Does it arise from the brutal simplification of photography? Were their stories too difficult? Or was it too cumbersome to produce the texts through a local male go-between? Were colonial photographers such as Heinz Roth in Namibia, featured in the essay by Lorena Rizzo, producing visual knowledge and therefore taken up with bodily appearances?¹⁷ Photographing the latter – especially if it was 'thievish' as Rizzo suggests – may have required less mediation than a verbal relationship. In some cases the camera was invasive and immediate, effecting a gendered extraction.

As we broach the visual construction of gender, it often seems that sexualisation is the predictable lot of women. Yet Alison Moore's work on France during the Liberation shows it is not a simple matter. Frenchwomen accused of having relations with Occupation forces during World War Two were cast as the passive sexual recipients of 'German penetrative masculinity'. In a convulsive and compulsive sequence repeated in numerous French towns, there was a public spectacle of outing, shaving and shaming of these women in the street. An important ingredient seems to have been the presence of photographers. Significantly, Robert Capa's photograph includes the national flag in the frame. The phenomenon appeared to juxtapose an explosive and cathartic conjuncture of sexualisation (the feminisation of collaborative guilt) and desexualisation (the shearing of hair to remove the source of physical attraction). The symbolic mutilation of femininity offered a fast-track exorcism of the complicit humiliation and ambiguity concerning the German Occupation. But as Moore argues, the cultural and historical recurrence of the image of the *tondues* points to it being a traumatic fixed symptom of the Vichy syndrome which does not go away.

Moore's essay highlights what visibility brings to gender history as opposed to textualities alone. Its pathway is more immediate and affective, even visceral. The ambiguities of becoming or being made visible emerge particularly strongly in relation to sexuality and desire. Many of the essays work with this problem. It is notable for example that in Weimar Germany the dancer Mary Wigman, as interpreted by Susan Funkenstein in her essay, made spirituality visible rather than sexuality; that Argentine women written about by María Fernanda Lorenzo, Ana Lía Rey and Cecilia Tossounian likewise foregrounded respectability. Elizabeth Birdsall explores this troubling question in relation to queer sexuality in the exhibition *Faggots*, and concludes that without the text accompanying the photographed men, 'the simple question of visibility resists an answer'.

This Introduction has already touched on the existence of different histories of vision across the world. Gender is a cross-cultural issue, but so is seeing itself. There is an urgent need to address 'different ways of seeing'. This volume is intended as the first step in a longer and more sustained process,¹⁸ given the importance of interrogating the alleged primacy and naturalisation of models of Western vision. Part of this relates to arguments that the eye tended to become privileged over other human senses;¹⁹ that it became increasingly separated from the rest of the body, especially with the development of Cartesian perspectivalism and nineteenth-century industrial technology. Jonathan Crary for example speaks of the 'increasing abstraction of vision' in Western European history.²⁰ By contrast, a growing scholarship on India poses alternatives to this narrative of the disembodied, secularised eye. Pinney's work on popular Hindi visual production and consumption for example emphasises what he calls 'corporethetics', 'embodied, corporeal aesthetics'. The concept of *darshan*, whereby devotees experience 'seeing and being seen' in relation to the image of the deity, can be understood as the mobilisation of vision 'as part of a unified human sensorium'.²¹ This is quite apart from Islamic visual cultures, which constitute a multitude of challenges to any notional Eurocentric model that historically privileges disembodied vision. We are also a very long way from understanding the histories of different ways of seeing on the African continent. In the making of this work, discussions have highlighted how any putative Eurocentric model should itself be provincialised and vernacularised into a thousand specific practices and histories.²² Europeans may have invented the gun and the camera, but they have had little hope of monopolising the deployment and proliferation of either technology ever since. Nor should dominant Euro-American interpretations dictate what norm global photographic artefacts should be read against, though the tendency remains very strong.

This volume in fact offers a number of peculiar provincialities when it comes to 'Western' visual histories. In a sense these episodes highlight Walter Benjamin's concern with the 'central problematic of the effect of industrial production on traditional cultural forms'.²³ Eadweard Muybridge's photographs of human locomotion in Elspeth Brown's essay show how technology penetrated highly particular recesses of cultural-scientific practice in the United States. This concerted attempt to freeze motion and demonstrate what the eye could not see was all in the cause of a higher form of masculinity. At one level the University of Pennsylvania case is a welcome addition to the vast research on physical and racial typologising that normally focuses on colonial territories (to which Marijke du Toit's essay briefly alludes), for in case we had forgotten about Hillary Rodham Clinton's experience with posture

photographs at Wellesley,²⁴ Brown reminds us that those entering elite universities were also targeted in the USA. The dissemination of photographic methods of racial, gendered and ethnographic research across the globe are therefore not so much evidence of a single dominant source from which everything emanates, but rather signs of dispersed trafficking in the visual technologies of control that were being opened up internally and externally through specific scientific projects and collaborations.

In thinking about cross-cultural ways of seeing, and reiterating Mitchell's point that histories of vision are related to 'arts, technologies, media' and the social practices around these and other forms of display,²⁵ it is striking how many contributions here have honed in on photography, though we do include here film, dance, decorative arts, architecture and more. It has been a criticism of visual studies that it tends to focus on a very small subset, 'popular Western images from the invention of photography, but mostly objects of mass culture of the last 50 or so years',²⁶ the so-called visual media like television, film, video and the Internet. Mitchell calls this the 'fallacy of technical modernity', and rightly disputes the assumption of a Western monopoly of visibility or the pictorial turn, specific to the rise of new media technologies. He argues for a 'study of all the social practices of human visibility, and not confined to modernity or the West'.²⁷ Thus there should also be space for the more embodied, haptic or devotional kinds of seeing rooted in earlier histories of vision in the so-called West, let alone everywhere else.

The essays here do allow for the global flows and local dynamics of the photographic medium, its malleability and slipperiness, its capacity for alleged 'truth-telling' as well as audience 'misrecognition' and recoding.²⁸ They also explore its contagious effects on other visual and textual media, in closely historicised ways. Such bleeding between genres, media and visibilities has already been highlighted elsewhere, for example in Nancy Rose Hunt's work on comics and painting in the Congo, and more generally in the useful collection entitled *Images and Empires*.²⁹ But while this volume (like so many others) concentrates on late nineteenth- and twentieth-century visual cultures and histories, its main contribution lies in making gender the centrepiece of its writing on the visual.

III

In order to allow the media and their gender issues to speak to each other more productively, we have arranged the papers on visual genders under three subheadings: documenting, trafficking and experimenting. These subheadings highlight the ongoing nature and open-endedness of

visual meaning and movement. While they allude to three powerful characteristics in visual representation, namely the positivist, the mobile and the subversive, the sections are by no means self-contained.

Documenting

The idea of documentary with its evidentiary underpinnings is a useful starting point, given the associations with empirical observation, recording of existing phenomena, realist discourses, sobriety, seriousness and truth-telling. Scholars have highlighted its Latin root in the verb *docere*, to teach, which was then transposed to legal settings and took on the persuasiveness of proof. The notion of a documentary genre emerged in the 1920s in the specific context of film,³⁰ where the proliferation and growing complexity of visual fields and specialisations meant it was taken up more broadly.

What does the notion of documentary conceal, and even more so, what does it congeal? In the history of photography and film, modes of empirical documentation can have repressive functions, though they may also 'spring leaks', in part as a result of their 'messy contingencies'.³¹ This section deals mainly with photography, but begins appropriately with film. Bill Nichols speaks of film's ability to 'document pre-existing phenomena' and the 'uncanny capacity of the photographic image (and later of the recorded soundtrack) to generate precise replicas of certain aspects of their source material'. He adds that 'these modes rely heavily on the indexical quality of the photographic image'.³² The 'index' here refers to the physical connection between photograph and subject, what Roland Barthes calls the 'certificate of presence'.³³ In the case of film, this indexicality creates trust in the audience, helping to suspend doubt, 'rendering an *impression* of reality, and hence truthfulness'. This impression does not necessarily 'guarantee full-blown authenticity in every case', though it fulfils the needs of rhetoric.³⁴

In Ulrike Weckel's essay on documentary film, the footage of conditions in concentration camps was framed and shaped explicitly as visual evidence. This was aimed at two audiences: Allied and German. The 'visual confrontation' with evidence of genocide and inhuman treatment of prisoners was intended to justify the losses and sacrifices made by the allied powers, but also to force Germans themselves to look. Weckel reveals that because of the prioritisation given to filmic evidence by the Allies on the Western Front and the chaos surrounding the Western camps as opposed to the eastern camps, a few select places came to symbolise the Nazi genocide, 'which had largely been carried out elsewhere and by other means'. She concludes that certain scenes in the

finished films – such as the arrival of the liberators with ceremonial soundtrack – must have been recreations, thus unsettling their relationship to ‘the real’.

More powerfully, the article reveals the immense difficulties of seeing itself. Margaret Bourke White recalled having to ‘work with a veil over my mind’ as she photographed. Witnesses confronting the human remains and survivors of the extermination and labour camps often expressed the view that what they saw, even on film, defied all understanding. Affect was difficult, cognition even more so. Weckel here touches on the troubling way that well-intentioned documentation might overlap with voyeurism. Her central question is whether gender matters; she charts the processes of stripping down of gender markers in the camps through the ‘radical eradication of individuality and intimacy’, including the execution of pregnant women and mothers with small children, the shaving of women’s heads, the loss of clothing and the general extreme emaciation, so that arriving allied forces often found it difficult to distinguish men and women amidst these seemingly genderless beings. Weckel discusses gestures within the camps towards recovery of femininity, and the problematic, gendered filmic and textual responses by male cameramen.

The chapter by María Fernanda Lorenzo, Ana Lía Rey and Cecilia Tossounian concerns the establishment of the Virtue Prizes for poor women in Argentina at a time of threatening social change in the inter-war years. Part of the visual construction of these working-class women in Argentina was to portray them covered in long dark coats, a presence in which the body itself is diminished, thus making respectability visible, rather than sexuality. At the annual public performance, which was recorded photographically, they were positioned strategically within a hierarchical class panorama, in a setting that was ostensibly secular but figuratively very liturgical, resembling a ‘polyphonic choir’. Close reading of the photographs here suggests how the Virtue prize-winners were usually represented through the ‘long shot’, not featured at centre stage. Even as they were brought into the public view, the positionings and tonalities of their subordination were evident. The ceremony and its photography presented the prize-winners as women who would not challenge the social and gender order. The authors liken the visual arrangement to a female family tree with the elite society ladies posing as the ‘lineage heads’. This value system however was turned on its head by popular theatre in Buenos Aires. The authors conclude the essay with the case of a *sainete* (play) which presented two sisters, one ‘virtuous’ and eligible for an award, the other a prostitute financially supporting her family. The play slyly argues that the latter represents genuine self-denying virtue; she is in fact mistakenly addressed by the ladies as