

REVIEW ESSAY

Art History in Its Image War

Mikkel Bolt: *En anden verden: Små kritiske epistler om de seneste årtiers antikapitalistiske satsninger i kunst og politik og forsøgene på at udradere dem*. Copenhagen: Forlaget Nebula, 2011. 263 pp. ISBN 978-87-993651-4-2

Mikkel Bolt: *Krise til Opstand: Noter om det igangværende sammenbrud*. Aarhus: Antipyrine, 2013. 192 pp. ISBN 978-87-93108-01-1

Jonathan Crary: *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*. London and New York: Verso, 2013. 144 pp. ISBN 978-1-78168-093-3

Stephen F. Eisenman: *The Abu Ghraib Effect*. London: Reaktion Books, 2007. 142 pp. ISBN 978-1-86189-309-3

Stephen F. Eisenman: *The Cry of Nature: Art and the Making of Animal Rights*. London: Reaktion Books, 2013. 309 pp. ISBN 978-1-78023-195-2

Nicholas Mirzoeff: *The Right to Look: A Counter History of Visuality*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011. 408 pp. ISBN 978-0-8223-4918-1

W. J. T. Mitchell: *Cloning Terror: The War of Images, 9/11 to the Present*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. 209 pp. ISBN 978-0-226-53260-8

W. J. T. Mitchell, Bernard E. Harcourt and Michael Taussig: *Occupy: Three Inquiries in Disobedience*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013. 168 pp. ISBN 978-0-226-04274-9

Iain A. Boal, T. J. Clark, Joseph Matthews, and Michael Watts: *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War*. London and New York: Verso, 2005. 217 pp. ISBN 978-1-84467-031-4

O. K. Werckmeister: *Der Medusa-Effekt: Politische Bildstrategien seit dem 11. September 2001*. Berlin: Form + Zweck, 2005. 120 pp. ISBN 978-3-935053-04-4

The analysis presented here does not lack for sophistication. It would, however, be hard to tell what one was supposed to do after examining it.

–Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look* (305)

Nicholas Mirzoeff introduces his ‘critical genealogy for the resistance to the society of the spectacle and the image wars of recent decades’ with Stephan Dedalus walking along Sandymount Strand in James Joyce’s great novel *Ulysses*, and Joyce might easily be seen as an answer to an age of immediately available images, at least in the Western image culture that Mirzoeff is working within.¹ *The Right to Look* is rich with examples of the power of images in ordering the world (from the plantations up to today’s counter-insurgency), which counter-images have resisted. Picture making has been applied with different degrees of intensity throughout history, with the general effect of depriving people of the ability to shape their world. Plantation owners, colonial powers and the spin-doctors of today’s empire have harnessed images to naturalise separation and oppression. Colonising visuality has developed from the punishment of ‘reckless eyeballing’ in North America, in which blacks were forbidden to so much as look at their white masters, to the orders ‘Don’t eyeball me!’ yelled in the torture chambers at Abu Ghraib. In an article published in 2011 (the year the *Right to Look* was published too), Mirzoeff suggests that a clash of visualization and counter-insurgency has replaced the image wars of the Global War on Terror. Be this as it may – and recent transmissions from ISIS point to greater continuity in the war of images, as might pictures coming from Tahrir Square during the Arab Spring (the Moriseen collective come to mind), or pictures and videos posted online during the on-going civil war in Syria – picture making can be said to be an integral part of an authoritarian division of what may and may not be seen.² If this history of visuality is ‘magisterial’ (this is how W. J. T. Mitchell describes *The Right to Look* on its blurb, and the description seems right enough, though double-edged given the book’s strong emphasis on decolonial argument), Mirzoeff’s vision of counterhistory is less persuasive, too much in step with this ruling order’s tune. Of course this is too cursory a dismissal of a rightly acclaimed study, and as we’ll see *The Right to Look* is helpful when developing an understanding of the possibility for art historical intervention that works counter to the repressive visuality that Mirzoeff describes so well. Despite this qualification the criticism stands that *The Right to Look* takes its seat as a spectator in the war of images it describes, watching on expertly, but in the end only

watching. Although it is decolonising in theory, the worry is that it's too bound up in colonial forms of knowledge production to offer very effective resistance to the on-going neo-colonisation of what's often called the developing world. This is unfortunate given the apparent urgency of such a counterhistory in asserting the right to look 'in this moment of paradoxical emergency for authoritarian visibility'.³

Questions of image war and spectacle have proliferated since the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington D.C., with several art historians and cultural critics concerning themselves with the broader political use and abuse of images in the Global War on Terror and in recent, widespread civil unrest, especially uprisings, riots, strikes and occupations following the 2008 financial collapse. Language and picture making are seen as embroiled within image war, suggesting perhaps that the weapons of criticism are bent back upon themselves. (The use of the likes of Deleuze and Guattari by the Israeli Defense Forces would be just one instance of this highly complex problem in a battle over the means by which critique is produced and consumed.)⁴ The covering over of the tapestry reproduction of Picasso's *Guernica* at the request of US officials in 2003 (though weirdly Mirzoeff has it as 2002) has become emblematic of American power's bungling attempts at image control. However much Jean Baudrillard might be wrong about the attacks on the World Trade Centre being all about globalization battling itself, his observation that: 'The whole play of history and power is disrupted by this event, but so, too, are the conditions of analysis' seems worthy of more attention, especially so if criticism is still believed to be able to do harm to spectacle – and theories of image war suggest that it is, though not in its current form.⁵

Art historians and historians of visual culture seem well placed to intervene within image war, given their complex understanding of the evolution of image and power throughout modernity. The entanglement of the art world with its outside takes on more than an academic importance within image war, because images are seen as matters of life and death, or lifelessness. Artwork that tries to document the interrelationship between different visual technology and the military-industrial complex suggests just this crossover between images and global conflict. One of Lisa Barnard's photographs from her *Virtual Iraq* project shows a series of scents used during the treatment of veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress. The scents are displayed in small, labelled jars with a logo, telephone number and web address and names like IRAQ: Rubber Burning. The apparent closeness between sweet-scented cosmetics and

hellish war are tied up in this image, and treatment for post-traumatic stress is conjoined with the wish fulfilment work asked of the commodity. Photography's role here is dubious, trapped between critical observation and the shop window. Of course the commodity form is not all explanatory for the interlacing of warfare, primitive accumulation and pacification; in the photograph it is its alienating allure entwined with virtual life in military training and medical recovery that holds attention. A different conjunction can be seen in the PowerPoint slide Mirzoeff reproduces in *The Right to Look*, with the uniform, dark heads of 'insurgents' holding the smaller, irregular and lighter heads of the 'good Iraqis'. Here the 'dumb down' effect of this kind of bullet point presentation shows the incorporation of technology designed to simplify a sales pitch in the visual economy of the American military imagination.⁶ When Jonathan Crary points to the contradictions in the use of sleep deprivation as a means of torture by the US military in parallel with their research into ways of reducing the need to sleep for soldiers, and then for workers too, he points to 'some of the paradoxes of the expanding, non-stop life-world of twenty-first-century capitalism'.⁷ As art becomes on the one hand more and more separated from daily, lived experience and on the other fully incorporated into industries of culture and entertainment it also makes more sense to think about how, if at all, it's able to resist the society it takes part in.

The art world then can be seen as an insulated environment in which different forms of critique can be tried out in false isolation from the circumstances of its production and display. (It therefore often enlarges the compass of spectacle, instead of contributing to its overturning through the creation of counter-images.) Much artwork is carried out with an acute consciousness of its limitations however, and despite these promises some breathing space, as well as inspiration for future struggle. Several exhibitions have reflected upon and tested themselves against what are now well-recognised limits, while others present important work that might not otherwise get seen and thereby speaks back to power.⁸ Artists have reflected upon the often-unfavourable conditions in which they work far more consistently than art historians, who rely for the most part on rather staid forms of critique despite their intricate understanding of avant-garde work that has, at times, troubled the colonial image world. Not that an art historical avant-garde should be seen as answering this image world alone, rather that a generalised art history might be able to make use of some of the artistic breakthroughs it has identified as responding to the advance of modernity. Indeed, art historians can



Lisa Barnard, Olfactory Controller, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder PTSD, Virtual Iraq, 2008. © Lisa Barnard.

be seen pushing out from the shores of the art world, broadening their horizon of inquiry to include such pressing issues as climate change, economic collapse, terrorism and counter-insurgency, and animal rights, in some instances largely leaving the fine arts out of their analysis. Partly this is in step with the concerns of contemporary artists, more and more interested in their involvement in global warming, processes of gentrification or the general flattening of social life, and so on, though there's also an apparent willingness on the part of art historians to step outside of familiar disciplinary fields in order to make more general arguments, which more resemble the work of critical intellectuals than specialised academics.

Afflicted Powers, written by four members of RETORT, is the foremost example of a collective intellectual effort to get to grips with the contemporary image world and its fit within what the group identify as a new phase of militarised primitive accumulation by advanced capitalist states, and of course the United States is preeminent here.⁹ Beginning as a broadsheet distributed during anti-war marches in San Francisco, the book has been widely discussed since its publication in 2005.¹⁰ In the first chapter – and importantly, as they remind us, it's only the first and sixth chapters that have primarily to do with images – the writers press their case for the persisting relevance of Guy Debord's theory of spectacle in coming to terms with the current world order, despite decades of its banal abuse by academics. (RETORT 'shudder' at the enthusiastic accommodation of Debord achieved by much cultural criticism, which often overlooks *The Society of the Spectacle's* revolutionary ambitions and historical context, such as the Watts riots and the Proletarian Cultural Revolution.)¹¹ Coming to terms seems like an accurate turn of phrase in explaining the task of intellectuals within image war, as it describes both a traumatic meeting with contemporary circumstances and the need to carve out a literary form adequate to them, one capable of resisting the incorporation of critical theory into a brightly packaged, easily digested and examined world. Debord's theory of spectacle might well be stretched pretty thin today, but it roughly describes a battle over a culture grounded in lived experience and one pre-prepared for consumption, in which capital is now accumulated up to the point at which it becomes an image, this 'submission of more and more facets of human sociability' to 'the deadly solicitations (the lifeless bright sameness) of the market' as RETORT have it, and which is, following them further, an 'exertion of social power', tied often inscrutably together with the plundering of the earth for natural resources, violent control of human movement and crippling work.¹² Breaks in the image world then are properly

combined with revolutionary insurrection, and it's partly this privileging of the image world over root and branch opposition to capitalism that has diluted the theory of spectacle within so much art historical and cultural criticism. The Paris Commune was one of the moments of breakage within spectacle for Nicholas Mirzoeff, 'characterized as a sense of being in history as an actor, rather than, as visuality would have it, as a simple follower'.¹³ ('Actor' might not be the best word here, though the point is that during the Commune people took matters into their own hands and no longer had anything to live up to.) Image war then would be the battle over the means by which differing worldviews are given shape and so makes up an important part of attempts to overturn the society of the spectacle.

O.K. Werckmeister's attention to the use of digital cameras by people fleeing from the area around the World Trade Centre in the wake of 9/11 situates the impulse to capture the moment in the middle of disaster – to get close enough to it, following Robert Capa – in a general image culture, ranging from James Nachtwey to Mamoru Oshii.¹⁴ One of Werckmeister's illustrations was taken by a press photographer escaping over Manhattan Bridge, who has turned against the stream to photograph people against the background cloud of smoke and dust. At the edge of this picture another man has raised his camera above his head – in a pose more often seen at pop concerts – and is also photographing the flight from Lower Manhattan. Many people reacted just as might be expected by taking pictures around ground zero, taking part in a flow of apocalyptic images that helped justify the declaration of the Global War on Terror which resulted in the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. One of the commonplaces in theories of image war is that it was as much the symbolic clout of al-Qaeda's attack on the twin towers of the World Trade Centre – that they were seemingly made-for-tv – that shook the whole structure of American empire, as it was the loss of skilled workers and the collapse of several buildings and the disruption this caused to the infrastructure of Lower Manhattan. Retinal scanning and biometric passports, x-ray whole-body scans at airport security and mass surveillance form an operative picture sphere made up of closed circuits that keep the public out of the loop on one hand, and on the other is the contrast between the image of democracy and its enforced reality, which Werckmeister illustrates with Antoine Serra's picture of the police's reflective shields in front of the mortally wounded body of Carlo Giuliani in Genoa in July 2001.

Werckmeister calls this combination of the operative image sphere – in which the gaze is largely hidden – and the informative sphere – in which it's forbidden to look at the terrifying reality – the Medusa effect, a

deadly-menacing lived virtual reality. His choice of Steve McCurry's photograph of anti-Soviet fighters displaying a decapitated head to the camera to illustrate the Medusa effect now seems all the more timely given the beheadings of American, English and French citizens by ISIS (then the forces fighting against the USSR in Afghanistan were backed by the United States). What Nicholas Mirzoeff also calls the 'Medusa effect of visibility' (though oddly without reference to Werckmeister), petrifies 'the transformations of modernity into recognizable social relations' and has now too found its 'technological analogy' in the 'Gorgon Stare' of unmanned aerial vehicles.¹⁵

Most of all though in a globalised economy, image war is a battle over worldview and possibilities for shaping the world – something often denied to people by the privatisation of cityscapes, or the enclosure of land and natural resources, and more generally what Joost de Bloois calls a 'planetary Potemkin village' in a brilliant turn of phrase – which RETORT also talk to when suggesting that Mohammed Atta was radicalised in part by the transformation of Islamic Cairo according to the logic of Disney World.¹⁶ These are obvious forms of neo-colonisation and they are related to the colonisation of everyday life at 'home', from the inner-city ghetto to the couch potato. According to RETORT the Global War on Terror relies upon a weak citizenry, one largely without a stake in their societies. Although 9/11 was an image defeat it was quickly recovered in expressions of renewed patriotism and the heroization of firemen and the police, something grotesquely expressed in the production of George W. Bush action figures. The series of protests, riots and occupations that have taken place across the world in the last few years seem like a far greater threat to the image world of Empire.

In the West we live in thrall to our bright gadgets, without social contact, with the integration of work and life made possible by computer technology only increasing separation.¹⁷ As Jonathan Crary writes following Debord, this has resulted in widespread social autism characterised by one-way communication within a virtual world inhabited by lonely bloggers and Facebook bullies, passive and impassive responding to the latest tweets, FaceTimes or updates of other kinds.¹⁸ These downs far outweigh the ups, in which digital media or mobile phone technology is turned against its purpose, as it was during the insurrection in Egypt or the riots in London, where encrypted messages and social networking technology was used to outwit the police. (It's possible to exaggerate the part mobile phones and social networking sites played in either uprising of course.) Far from liberating people though the digital world has, gener-

ally speaking, enmeshed us more tightly in its web. It's hard to see how 24/7 works against this sleepless world though and as Matthew Fuller puts it in his review, 'There is a sense in which a certain kind of critical theory is left simply watching and describing the immensity and effectiveness of contemporary forms of power'.¹⁹ (The picture of the cat sitting on a desk scattered with paints, a cup and bottle, a plant in a glass and a MacBook copied in as the frontispiece of a pirated copy available online is one of the few instances of détournement in 24/7.) In a much earlier article Crary encourages academics to work against digital culture and its 'productivist injunctions'.²⁰ Towards the end of 'Spectacle, Attention, Counter-Memory' Crary memorably quotes Fernand Léger watching workmen carrying gigantic letters down the street as an example of the modern spectacle.²¹ (Léger is not necessarily denouncing this spectacle, though within the context of Crary's essay the quote seems to emphasize the importance of language within Debord's theorisation of spectacle.) In practice this might involve the breaking of technology or writerly convention – night language comes to mind in the context of sleep and sleeplessness – which might effectively challenge the qwerty keyboard, auto-correct spell-check and general standardisation of language described perfectly by the name 'word processing programme'.

Much like Nicholas Mirzoeff, W. J. T. Mitchell has been publishing variously on image war after 9/11. In *Cloning Terror* Mitchell draws our attention to the overlap of concerns around stem cell research and cloning technology with the attacks on the World Trade Centre and the subsequent war on terror, with its biological language in which terror cells are seen to be self-reproducing.²² Mitchell's focus is too narrowly concerned with images however to say much about how they make or miss contact with broader political struggles. As such his work on the image culture surrounding Abu Ghraib or The World Trade Centre seems only to go skin deep. In Stephen F. Eisenman's more thoroughgoing reassessment of Western art history following what he calls *The Abu Ghraib Effect*, most artistic production in Europe and America serves as 'a handmaiden to arrogance, power and violence'.²³ As Eisenman argues art historical work is essential in condemning torture, imprisonment and fascism, and the image world of Abu Ghraib together with the apparatus capable of turning it around into a victory for civilisation over the malpractice of a few bad apples. His recent book *The Cry of Nature* draws on chapter five of *The Abu Ghraib Effect* to argue very persuasively for the importance of art historical intervention in tackling the mistreatment of animals. It continues his criticism of Aby

Warburg's pathos formula in which 'humans and animals ... are represented as striving toward their own annihilation', and furthermore its humanism, which is then 'exposed as a version of barbarism'.²⁴ Inspired by Adorno and Horkheimer, Eisenman suggests that a far-reaching reassessment of the enlightenment project is required. In *The Abu Ghraib Effect* though Eisenman's counter-canon, which includes Hogarth, Goya, and Picasso, is somewhat predictable (by now these three are nothing if not canonical artists) and the argument that a rational, enlightened response to the advancing reaction, or non-progress, will be able to turn this panoply of catastrophe around does not quite fit with it. It's far from clear that paintings like *Guernica* shine much light onto all this darkness. The woman on the left of the painting's extended neck and screaming mouth mirrors the hen squawking in agony, as her dagger-tongue does that of the horse with its mouth flecked with spit in terror; the palms of hands are crossed with lines suggesting trauma; the spike-nipples of the woman at the window turn back inward on themselves and the woman running into the centre-ground from the right has her knee pinned to the floor by one of the shards of light or dark. Surely the picture is as much an extraordinary getting to grips with the end of enlightened illusion, which recognises the entrance of terror into everyday life, brought about via the new capabilities of advanced aerial technology, as it is an outcry against abomination.²⁵

Mitchell's recent essay on the Occupy movement intensifies this dilemma of closeted criticism, as rarely can a study largely supportive of civil disobedience have been more obedient itself. Mitchell often turns to somewhat conservative forms of art making such as figurative painting and sculpture in his analysis. In 'Image, Space, Revolution – The Arts of Occupation' he perseveres with his long running interest in Antony Gormley's sculpture. (Mitchell published on Gormley in the Phaidon book on the artist in 1995 and this essay was then reprinted as part of the collection of essays *What Do Pictures Want?* in 2005, and much of the commentary on works like *Brick Man* and *Quantum Cloud* in the essay on Occupy is quite familiar.)²⁶ A successful sculptor with several high profile public commissions, Gormley seems like an odd artist to turn to in a study of illegal occupation, blockades and civil disobedience. Perhaps the Gormley work most closely touched by social strife is his *One & Other* commission for the Fourth Plinth on Trafalgar Square, and in particular then recent graduate Alex Kearns' performance advertising his services to prospective employers. (Kearns' staging of a protest/job application cannot of course stand in for the kind of variety show actu-

ally staged on the pedestal, which bears comparison with contemporaneous TV shows like Britain's Got Talent.) Sunglasses on, mobile phone to ear, protest banner in hand, bag over shoulder and cut off at the waist beneath a cloudy sky, Kearns manages to look like a tourist, business man, protester and student all at the same time in photos published in the press.²⁷ For Gormley *One & Other* is 'about people coming together to do something extraordinary and unpredictable'. The transition from 'male valedictory monuments' to 'diversity, vulnerability and individuality' might be seen to celebrate the current weak citizenship and false promise of pick-and-mix identity on offer in mainstream British politics today. *One & Other* does little more than dramatize disenfranchisement, allotting one hour after the approval of application to, in Kearns' case, mount a protest on a pedestal in Trafalgar Square. Sue Malvern suggests that similar works 'function as memorials to dissent because political dissent no longer takes place' in her history of the Fourth Plinth, though of course she doesn't mention *One & Other* as the chapter was published in 2007.²⁸ The conjunction of the image of participation in either artwork or society, and the defensive nature of Kearns' protest – most of all it was about securing a middle class income on the back of a university education during hard times following the 2008 financial crisis – suggests comparison with the 2010 student protests. Then enraged students protesting against the proposed raising of the cap of tuition fees in England and Wales from £3,290 to £9,000 were kettled by police in Trafalgar Square (among other places), leading to violent clashes. Here the terms and conditions of 'participation' were made somewhat clearer than in *One & Other*, and up to a point their concerns were similar with those expressed by Kearns, though there was also a more radical edge to these protests which at times suggested the overturning of the current neoliberal order and its pushing of debt – with its 'colonisation of the future' – on the majority of its citizens.²⁹

The Arab Spring, mass strikes in China, the M15 movement and resistance to austerity politics in Greece, Occupy and even an age of riots amount to a new wave of protests after the 2008 financial collapse and promise radical change according to Mikkel Bolt in his short book *Krise til Opstand* (Crisis to Insurrection). (These different uprisings are well differentiated, and Bolt like Mitchell points out the largely defensive character of Occupy, compared with the more revolutionary ambitions of the Arab Spring. Nicholas Mirzoeff's chapter on the Algerian War of Independence – written as the Arab Spring was getting underway – is helpful in seeing the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa in

an historical perspective. Another difficult question would be to see where the Islamist insurgency and the policing of migration or control of natural resources in Nigeria, Mali, the Sudan and so on fits in to this picture, something Michael Watts' articles on Nigeria – see chapter 2, 'Blood for Oil?', in *Afflicted Powers* – begins to answer.) There are reasons for guarded optimism for Left politics then, something Watts' response to Perry Anderson's grim commentary on its prospects at the turn of the millennium also suggested in 2005, an enthusiasm then built up by the alter-globalization movement. (Already the glimmer of this optimism seems dulled as civil war continues in Syria, Ukraine smoulders between Russia and the EU, the sharpness has worn off of uprisings in Greece and Spain, and struggle continues in North Africa.) In *Krise til Opstand* the 2008 financial collapse is rightly seen as part of a slow motion crash landing which started roughly with the oil crisis in 1973 and has seen forty years of defeat for workers. All across the globe living conditions have worsened for the lowest classes, from outright exclusion in gigantic slum areas in megacities to lower wages and longer working hours combined with the dismantling of the welfare state in Europe. During this time revolution has largely dropped off the radar in critical theory. Bolt, though obviously much in sympathy with Stuart Hall, criticizes him for being too moderate; Hardt and Negri for their optimism; while Slavoj Žižek is rightly taken to task for his authoritarian argument for a revolutionary Thatcher. It's a shame that the knowledge of avant-garde culture which informs much of Bolt's analysis is not used to greater effect, and that there is no discussion of art work. (Though this is also what makes *Krise til Opstand* one of the most interesting examples of recent cultural criticism that seeks to supersede often rather narrow concerns with images and the art world.) Bolt's earlier book *En anden verden* (Another World) might well be read as a companion piece to *Krise til Opstand* and here the role of the art world within the recent economic collapse is discussed much more directly. It's important not to leave art completely out of the account because as Bolt suggests, art making at its best is still able to contribute to the Western Marxist tradition by staking out new forms of antagonism to power, though most of the art made today is seen to be thoroughly incorporated by capital. (The title puns on the utopian projections of some contemporary art and its real separation as a specialised cultural sector within advanced capitalism.) In a world in which 'the traditional forms of intellectual and aesthetic opposition are no longer felt to be available' and 'Pictures just as much as words

and tone have lost their ability to shock and are rarely antagonistic to the ruling order' surely there need to be question marks scribbled over any type of critique which does not try to make 'a real break, which comes from outside and appears incomprehensible for the established order'.³⁰ The crux of the matter then is that while *Krise til Opstand* and *En anden verden* are persuasive about the need for revolution they are not revolutionary themselves. The chapter on 'Art, War and Counter-Images' was recently translated in no. 44–45 of the *NJA* and begins with Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* and its injunction to philosophers – or artists – to take active part in changing the world, rather than just passively contemplating it. As Bolt puts it: 'Interpretation is good, and good interpretations are better than bad ones, but without the leap into action, interpretation amounts to nothing.'³¹ All of the current accounts of image war we have at our disposal remain merely at the level of contemplation. The tight entanglement of images and power – and criticism must be included here too – suggests that art historians might be able to contribute counter-images that threaten power, especially given the discipline's complex understanding of image war. Part of this must involve a reflection upon what writing is capable of today, especially given what Giorgio Agamben calls the 'alienation of linguistic being' in which 'Contemporary politics is precisely this devastating *experimentum linguae* that disarticulates and empties, all over the planet, traditions and beliefs, ideologies and religions, identities and communities' in his preface to Debord's *Commentaries on the Society of the Spectacle*, and quoted in Jacob Lund's contribution to the same number of the *NJA*.³² At the moment most art historical writing is sitting on the wrong side of the fence though, dramatizing its own 'non-intervention'. More exertion towards writing which would actually challenge spectacle – and this would include challenging the institutions in which criticism takes place – is surely one way in which art historians might contribute some counter-images and threaten the image machine itself.

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I pray thee peace! I will be flesh and blood;
 For there was never yet philosopher
 That could endure the toothache patiently,
 However they have writ the style of gods
 And made a push at chance and sufferance.
Leonato, Much Ado About Nothing, Act V, Scene 1.

After all isn't all of this exactly what might be expected of the critical industry? However right RETORT's challenge of cultural depth to the never-ending surface of the present might be, in the end whose feathers does Milton ruffle, how does Lucifer regathering strength in the depths of hell threaten the current paradise? It's telling that a text that was born in an anti-war demo retires in the pages of *October*. (*Afflicted Powers* is perhaps as close as there is to 'real opposing speech' in the literature on image war, and its uptake within academic and broader intellectual discussion suggests that it is something of a litmus test for what writing can achieve.)³³ Part of the challenge is to find forms of writing capable of breaking the image machine and defying the established order. Of course the image is not the be all and end all of resistance to capital and writing promises little alone. (Werckmeister rightly dismisses any such idea as 'the lofty self-delusions of a middle-class literary culture of social dissent'.)³⁴ What theories of image war suggest though is that images or writing are bound up tightly with continued primitive accumulation and the fighting of wars. More thinking about the possibility of art historical analysis given the all over compass of the current collapse is needed. Standardised English and the technology of auto-correct seem just as much targets for renewed Luddite rebellion as GM crops or the machines used in hydraulic fracturing.³⁵ It's important that Debord ends the preface to third edition *The Society of Spectacle* in 1992 by reminding readers that his writing was supposed to do harm to its society, what he later calls the style of negation. In the end too much criticism of the image ends up only as the image of criticism, to lean on this now well-worn hallmark of an 'insurrectionary style'.³⁶ Yes, RETORT might well be right that a new – let's call it modality – is required today, though given the integration of criticism within the image world of spectacle, and the recognition that the control of images is as important as ever, surely the attempt at a writing antagonistic in tone and timbre is all the more urgent. Alberto Toscano's diatribe against what he calls a regime of *poubéllication* is right on the money in its description of the packaging, or swaddling, of supposedly radical criticism.³⁷ Here T. J. Clark's account of the writing of *The Society of the Spectacle* as a process that was meant to be seen and interrupted is highly suggestive for forms of criticism that respond to their surroundings.³⁸ The enclaves of criticism are affected by their false isolation just as much as the art world is, and surely a test of critical writing is whether it is capable of surpassing its institutions and testing itself against what, for want of a better way of putting

it, might be called the totality of its social relations. This last phrase is perhaps unhelpfully abstract – just what after all does a totality of social relations look like today? – though partly it's problems like this that point towards greater writerly experimentation as well. Ultimately though – and this is what current art historical writing on image war suggests – these 'running battles' of the pen against itself need connecting with broader, socialised forms of production which turn their apparatus towards resistance.

JAMES DAY

Notes

1. Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), p. xiv.

2. See Nicholas Mirzoeff, 'The Clash of Visualisations: Counterinsurgency and Climate Change', *Social Research* vol. 78, no. 4 (Winter, 2011), pp. 1185–1210.

3. Mirzoeff, *Right to Look*, p. 308.

4. See Eyal Weizman, *Hollow Land* (London: Verso, 2007).

5. Jean Baudrillard, 'The Spirit of Terrorism', trans. Chris Turner, in *The Spirit of Terrorism and Other Essays* (London and New York: Verso, 2002, new edition 2003), p. 4.

6. See Mirzoeff, *Right to Look*, p. 304.

7. Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London and New York: Verso, 2013), p. 8.

8. The literature surrounding the 2009 Istanbul biennial provides an excellent discussion of the possibilities for activist art, and will have to stand as a microcosm of a far greater universe of exhibitions and writing here. See Gail Day, Steve Edwards, and David Mabb, "'What Keeps Mankind Alive?': The Eleventh International Istanbul Biennial. Once More on Aesthetics and Politics', *Historical Materialism*, no. 18 (2010), pp. 135–71; Angela Harutyunyan, Aras Özgün, and Eric Goodfield 'Event and Counter-Event: The Political Economy of the Istanbul Biennial and its Excesses', *Rethinking Marxism: A Journal of Economics, Culture & Society* 23, no. 4 (2011), pp. 478–95; and T. J. Demos, 'Is Another World Possible?': The Politics of Utopia and the Surpassing of Capitalism in Recent Exhibition Practice', in *On Horizons: A Critical Reader in Contemporary Art*, ed. Maria Hlavajova, Simon Sheikh and Jill Wender (Utrecht and Rotterdam: BAK and post editions, 2011), pp. 52–82. Malene Vest Hansen's recent article on the 2010 conference 'Remembering Istanbul' is likely to be of interest too, see 'Remembering Istanbul: What, How & For Whom? Canons and Archives in Contemporary Art Biennialization', in *Performing Archives/Archives of Performance*,

ed. Gunhild Borggreen and Rune Gade (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2013), pp. 221–37.

The Brighton Photo Biennial in 2008 curated by Julian Stallabrass presented crucial work – including Lisa Barnard’s *Virtual Iraq* – done during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. It’s a brilliant example of an art show used to present work which otherwise would be dispersed or simply not seen by a broad public. For reviews of the exhibition and subsequent book see Steve Edwards, ‘Apocalyptic Sublime: On the Brighton Photo-Biennial’, *Historical Materialism* 17, no. 2 (2009), pp. 84–102; Susie Linfield, ‘Embedded Images’, *Aperture* (July 22, 2013) and the consequent exchange with Stallabrass, <http://www.aperture.org/blog/embedded-images/>; and James Day, ‘Democracy Stalled in Its Arms’, *Art History* 37, no. 3 (June 2014), pp. 591–96.

Other notable exhibitions which have to be mentioned – as some of the writers discussed here were directly involved in them – are the Seville biennial in 2006, at which RETORT exhibited and *Billed Politik* at Overgaden in Copenhagen in 2010, with the following books both published by Nebula, also in 2010, *Billed Politik: At se er at dræbe*, eds. Mikkel Bolt, Jakob Jakobsen and Morten Visby, with translations of RETORT, O.K. Werckmeister and Tiqun and *Billed Politik: Brudstykker af samtidshistorien betragtet som tragedie*, ed. Jakob Jakobsen.

9. Iain A. Boal, T. J. Clark, Joseph Matthews, and Michael Watts, *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War* (London and New York: Verso, 2005, new edition 2006). All pages references here are to the new edition.

10. For some of the best of this discussion see Gopal Balakrishnan, ‘States of War’, *New Left Review*, no. 36 (November–December 2005), pp. 5–32 and Julian Stallabrass, ‘Spectacle and Terror’ also in *New Left Review*, no. 37 (January–February 2006), pp. 87–106. *Public Culture* ran a special issue on *Afflicted Powers*, see vol. 20, no. 3 (Fall 2008). Hal Foster’s exchange with the group was published in *October*, no. 115 (March 2006), pp. 3–12 and a slightly different version then appended to a new edition of *Afflicted Powers* as an afterword in 2006. The *Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* issue on ‘Aesthetics and Politics’ in no. 44–45 (2012–13) is discussed below. Sue Malvern’s review article ‘Art History after 9/11’ in *Art History* 32, no. 2 (April 2009), pp. 387–99 discusses RETORT together with Nicholas Mirzoeff and O. K. Werckmeister along with Stephen F. Eisenman on Abu Ghraib and the edited collection *Beautiful Suffering: Photography and the Traffic in Pain* is also likely to be of interest. See also O. K. Werckmeister’s review, ‘Spektakel, Revolution und Demokratie: Über *Afflicted Powers*, ein Buch des Autorenkollektivs “Retort”’ in *Texte Zur Kunst*, vol. 60 (December 2005), pp. 164–68, thanks to Mikkel Bolt for pointing me to this review.

11. Boal et al., *Afflicted Powers*, p. 17. See T. J. Clark and Donald Nicholson Smith, ‘Why Art Can’t Kill the Situationist International’, *October*, vol. 79 (Winter, 1997)

pp.15–31 for a fuller assessment of the uptake of Debord by the art world and academy.

12. Boal et al., *Afflicted Powers*, pp. 19 and 15.

13. Mirzoeff, *Right to Look*, p. 186.

14. O.K. Werckmeister, *Der Medusa-Effekt: Politische Bildstrategien seit dem 11. September 2001* (Berlin: Form + Zweck, 2005).

15. Mirzoeff, *Right to Look*, pp. 142, 211 and 279.

16. See Joost de Bloois, 'Tiqqun, *The Coming Insurrection* and the Idiosyncrasies of an Epoch', *Historical Materialism* 22, no. 1 (2014), p. 136 and Boal et al., *Afflicted Powers*, p. 33.

17. One of the writers of *Afflicted Powers* published against this just before the dot-com bubble in *Resisting the Virtual Life*, ed. Iain Boal and James Brooks (San Francisco: City Lights, 1996).

18. Crary, 24/7, p. 120.

19. Matthew Fuller, 'Night Terrors', *Mute Magazine* (July 10, 2013) <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/reviews/night-terrors>

20. Jonathan Crary, 'Eclipse of the Spectacle', in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis and Marcia Tucker (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), p. 294.

21. Jonathan Crary, 'Spectacle, Attention, Counter-Memory', in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents*, ed. Tom McDonough (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), p. 463.

22. W.J.T. Mitchell, *Cloning Terror: The War of Images, 9/11 to the Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

23. Stephen F. Eisenman, *The Abu Ghraib Effect* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007), p. 122.

24. Stephen F. Eisenman, *The Cry of Nature: Art and the Making of Animal Rights* (London: Reaktion Books, 2013), p. 223.

25. See the last chapter of T. J. Clark's *Picasso and Truth* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013) for a recent reading of *Guernica* from a counter-enlightenment perspective.

26. W.J.T. Mitchell, 'What Sculpture Wants: Placing Antony Gormley', in *Antony Gormley* (Phaidon, London, 1995) and W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), pp. 245–71. Mitchell's essay on Occupy appears in W.J.T. Mitchell, Bernard E. Harcourt and Michael Taussig, *Occupy, Three Inquiries in Disobedience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

27. See Tamara Cohen's story, 'The art of finding work: Unemployed graduate bags top job by unfurling giant CV on Trafalgar Square's fourth plinth' published in the *Daily Mail* online on September 3rd, 2009, <http://www.dailymail>.

co.uk/news/article-1210698/Square-deal-Unemployed-graduate-offered-job-displaying-giant-CV-4th-plinth.html and Kerry Grove, 'Former Grey Court School pupil lands job after stint of fourth plinth' [sic], in the *Richmond and Twickenham Times*, published online on September 4th, 2009, http://www.richmondandtwickenhamtimes.co.uk/news/richmondnews/4580181.Graduate_lands_job_after_stint_on_fourth_plinth/?FORM=ZZNR2.

28. Sue Malvern, 'The Fourth Plinth', in *Display and Displacement: Sculpture and the Pedestal from Renaissance to Post-Modern*, ed. Alexandra Gerstein (London: Courtauld Institute of Art Research Forum and Paul Hoberton publishing, 2007), p. 146.

29. See Mikkel Bolt's excellent discussion of Maurizio Lazzarato, *The Making of the Indebted Man: Essay on the Neoliberal Condition*, trans. Joshua David Jordan (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2012) in *Krise til Opstand* (Aarhus: Antipyrene, 2013), p. 46.

30. Mikkel Bolt, *En anden verden* (Copenhagen: Forlaget Nebula, 2011), pp. 164 and 184, my translation.

31. Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen, 'Art, War and Counter Images', *Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, no. 44–45 (2012–2013), p. 91.

32. Jacob Lund, 'Artistic Re-Appropriation and Reconfiguration of the Medium's Milieu', *Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, no. 44–45 (2012–2013), p. 144.

33. Boal et al., *Afflicted Powers*, p. 9.

34. O.K. Werckmeister, 'A Critique of T. J. Clark's *Farewell to an Idea*', *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 4 (Summer 2002), p. 862.

35. See Iain Boal, 'Damaging Crops: Sabotage, Social Memory, and the New Genetic Enclosures', in *Violent Environments*, ed. Nancy Lee Pelsuo and Michael Watts (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), pp. 146–54 and Peter Linebaugh, *Ned Ludd & Queen Mab: Machine-Breaking, Romanticism, and the Several Commons of 1811–12* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2012), especially pp. 11 and 42.

36. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995), pp. 10 and 144.

37. Alberto Toscano, 'Preface: The Coloured Thickness of a Problem', in Eric Alliez, *The Signature of the World, Or, What is Deleuze and Guattari's Philosophy?*, trans. Eric Ross Albert and Alberto Toscano (New York: Continuum, 2004), pp. ix–x.

38. T. J. Clark, 'Foreword' to Anselme Jappe, *Guy Debord*, trans. Donald Nicholson Smith (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), pp. vii–x.