The Aesthetics of Global Protest

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At the moment of neoliberalism’s beginning, Stuart Hall (2017) declared: ‘When a conjuncture unrolls, there is no “going back.” History shifts gears. The terrain changes. You are in a new moment.’ And here we are, once again in such a moment. For Hall, the method was ‘Marx plus Fanon’, which I will invert for this moment to read ‘Fanon plus Marx.’ Fanon here stands for the politics of decolonization, from the territorial acknowledgement of Indigenous claims to Palestine and South Africa’s Fall-ism: all must fall. Patriarchy must fall, white supremacy must fall, all forms of hierarchical relation must fall (Bofelo 2017). Marx stands for the circulation of socially mediated capital in the era of biopolitical production, which Michael Hardt (2012) calls ‘[t]he production of ideas, images, languages, code, affects, and social relationship’. Unlike Hall’s ‘conjuncture’ in which all aspects of the social were connected via the economic, the present is a moment of disjuncture in which it seems that things fall apart. The rupture with neoliberalism’s ‘common sense’ was felt first in the megacities of the global South and their regions but can be felt everywhere now. For the real conditions of existence have changed. Since 2008, more people live in cities than in the countryside for the first time in history. Since 2011, the global majority is aged under 30. In 2014, half the world’s population gained access to the Internet. And in May 2014, carbon dioxide crossed 400 part per million for the first time in millions of years. Add to this the post-2008 disaster capitalism that has foisted precarity on the 99% to make spectacular inequality structural.

There is, then, a rupture with and within the society of control. It has spread from beginnings in the global South to Europe, North America and East Asia. The rupture remains active. Rupture is a break in space and time, a break, actual or imaginary, with previous ways of being, seeing and relating change. Once in the rupture, we find, in the manner of Jacques Rancière, that ‘the rupture is not defeating the enemy. It’s ceasing to live in the world the enemy has built for you’ (Loret 2011). Neoliberalism created a public-private urban space where only ‘passive recreation’ was allowed, to
quote the rubrics now applied in Zuccotti Park, New York, where Occupy Wall Street once camped. If the paradigm spaces of neoliberalism were non-places, like airports, malls and amusement parks, the space of disjuncture is the concrete park where sitting is not allowed, the side of the road where there is nowhere for people to walk, the subway station with no elevator and all those other notionally public spaces that are no one’s land. Neither common or corporate, public or private, these are the zones where the non-person may die. These conditions are in flow from global South to North, just as the new authoritarianism in the global North is the reflux of neocolonial formations to their places of origin.

Rupture is a place of density and proximity, a stepping outside the boundaries proposed by the society of control. In a moment of rupture, even such non-space can take on new meanings and temporalities become uneven. People claim that space to invent the commons of the future. Neoliberalism asserted that, in the words of Margaret Thatcher, ‘there is no alternative.’ But now there is, whether it is the radical right and revived authoritarian nationalism or social movements like South Africa’s successful student movement Fees Must Fall, which placed education as a common good above government finances. And in this rupture we are looking to see what’s happening – in 2017, 1.2 trillion photographs were taken. Four hundred hours of YouTube are uploaded every minute; 3.5 billion Snaps are posted to Snapchat every day. This is not global narcissism but a symptomatic response to the experience of rupture and the crisis of the representation principle, from politics, to mental health and the possibilities of appearance. What people are trying to create are not just images but a just image of their own situation.

I want to appropriate Hannah Arendt’s (1998: 199) evocative phrase ‘the space of appearance’ to describe both the segregated space delineated by white supremacy as ‘public’ and counterclaims to appearance. But I use it in a very different way. Arendt described this space as that which occurs ‘wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action’, in the democracy of the ancient Greek city state, or polis, founded (as she herself attests) on the exclusion of women, children, non-Greeks and enslaved human beings (ibid.). By the time everyone is left out, only 3% or 4% of the population were part of this so-called democracy. It was more exactly a space of representation because all those admitted represented the title of free, male citizens. Understood this way, Arendt’s space of appearance was as the infrastructure of white supremacy (see Bernasconi 2000; Allen 2004; Gines 2014). There is another appearance that is not representation, either in the political or cultural sense. It is the very possibility of appearing directly. In the non-enclosed encounter, prefiguring an outside to coloniality, I see
you and you see me and the look that passes between us is not singular and cannot be owned, it is common. It is an apprehension of the claim of the other to the right to look. That look that is exchanged in friendship, solidarity and love. I do not speak in that moment; I wait, I listen, even and especially if you do not talk. We do not and cannot enter the space equally because history and ancestry cannot be abolished. To appear here is not optical. It is the combination of the embodied mediation of appearance; an awareness of time that respects the ancestors and remembers the future; an engagement with the land on which the appearance takes place; and a commitment to the reciprocity and consent of that appearance.

In this space, as Judith Butler (2015: 110) put it when speaking of ethical action, ‘I am undone as a bounded being.’ Just as we are in love – another space of rupture between two or more persons. The space of appearance is, then, unbounded, before and after enclosure. In its oscillation between networked digital spaces and refunctioned urban space, the space of appearance breaks the frame, exceeds and extends representation, even as it is the object of depiction. What appears is a glimpse of the society that is (potentially) to come. It is a space of and in abolition, creating the possibility of abolition democracy. And in so doing the past is also seen differently, both in the ways that it shapes and determines the present, and in pasts that have not been fully recognized or allowed to be. The space of appearance is not universal and it is not unchanging. Unlike the modern (according to Bruno Latour), however, we have often been able to appear to one another. Those in protest have nonetheless failed to make it sustainable.

Aesthetics is exactly why that hasn’t happened. As Frantz Fanon (2005: 3) identified long ago, coloniality is sustained by the ‘aesthetic forms of respect for the established order’, from flags and parades to monuments and museums. This process was central to the formation of visuality as a colonial technology. The space of appearance today is the workshop for the production of devisuality, meaning the undoing of visuality by decolonization. Devisualizing means undoing the processes of classification, separation and aestheticization formed under settler colonialism as what I would now call the coloniality complex. It had variants from the plantation complex to that of imperialism and counterinsurgency, even as the fundamental techniques remained constant. Today, the oversight of the plantation has been intensified and technologized into the carceral state, CCTV or the missile-carrying video-enabled drone. Like the two-headed creatures of so many mythologies, devisualizing will require decolonizing past and present formations. From the past comes an understanding of ‘the’ state and its relation to a supposed ‘state of nature’ that needs to be undone. If colonial
reason proposes the Leviathan as its agent, devisualizing Leviathan means becoming ungovernable, then and now. The deep classifications of colonizer and so-called ‘savage’ (because let’s not euphemize what coloniality does) create divides of space and time that cleave the understanding of life. To leave it here, if the history of racial capitalism has been the history of racialized exploitation, another history is (still) possible, despite everything. Or more exactly, herstory, transtory and/or ourstories. And that is the beginning.

References


About the Author

Nicholas Mirzoeff is a Professor of Media, Culture, and Communication at New York University. He is visual activist, working at the intersection of politics and global/digital visual culture. His most recent book *How to See the World* was published by Pelican in the UK (2015) and by Basic Books in the US (2016).