

Decoloniality and Aesthetics

I am concerned here with the ethics of the gaze...

– Ivan Illich

This essay has the form of a booklet of images. They are not rare images. They are not images of racial classification or other forms of colonial violence. It echoes the postcard booklets made for tourists from the end of the nineteenth century to mid-twentieth century. These images were bought and sold as souvenirs. They are not intended as works of art; instead they are early expressions of the reproduction and mass circulation of images. Our invitation is to see, in the most habitual, and sometimes iconic, the morphology of the white gaze, its formation, celebration and its underlying violence.⁴ It is an enquiry into the modern/colonial order of aesthetics.

The fact that these images have been produced for enjoyment, places them at the disjunction between the violence of coloniality and the affirmation of modernity. What interests us is to dwell in the *colonial difference*, in the place of (dis)juncture between modernity and coloniality, and ask how the formation of the modern worldview is complicit with coloniality. How the interaction between modernity and coloniality is not reducible to the separation between the visible and the invisible, in that it implies the entwinement and disjuncture between the

4 This essay has affinities with a genre of books that has been concerned with the social and political dimension of images from Susan Sontag's *On Photography* (1977), Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* (1980), Ariella Azoulay's *Civil Imagination* (2012), Nicholas Mirzoeff's *How to See the World* (2015), and Tina M. Camp's *Listening to Images* (2017), among others.

enjoyment of the sovereign self and the suffering of others. These vistas are tokens and metaphors of modernity's worldview, the affirmation of its worldmaking power, its power of turning world-historical reality into an object, into the object of its own artifice.⁵ They help us illustrate how coloniality has been the condition that sustains the artifice of modernity.

These postcards now function as souvenirs of the spectacle of modernity. They stand as a reminder of how we *have been made to see*. They are fragments for an archaeology of the modern gaze.⁶ We recognize them today, configuring a historical constellation with our screens. How has our gaze been constituted? Whose eyes stand before the Eiffel Tower and the statue of the 'Eléphant pris au piège', between the celebration of the iron construction and the captured elephant? Between the metropolis and the colony? Is it not the gaze of the Human that asserts *his*⁷ very Humanity in the attainment of progress through the subjugation of Earth's life?

We are not looking at exceptional images of modernity, we are beholding its most common vistas – the material of souvenirs – in order to see how we have been made to imagine the world. These images make obvious that there

- 5 The term 'artifice' is used to refer to modernity's way of producing an enclosed 'artificial' historical reality. The reality principle of the artifice is that of self-referentiality. In broad terms it replaces relations with instrumental mediations.
- 6 See also Ovidiu Țichindeleanu, 'The Coloniality of the Senses, from the Voice to the Gaze', Middelburg Decolonial Summer School Lectures 2013-2019.
- 7 We use 'his' to speak of the dominant subject of modernity who is a predominantly male subject.

is no metropolis without the colony, there is no whiteness without racialization, no patriarchy without gender oppression, no modernity without coloniality. The gaze of mastery, the sovereign gaze, enjoys the modern/colonial order as spectacle. The act of seeing itself becomes the enactment of the colonial difference as aesthetics. Aesthetics designates modernity's control over representation and over the field of experience of world-historical reality. The utopia of progress and Humanity is sustained on an unacknowledged backdrop of subjugation and erasure.

In these postcards, souvenirs of the hubris of progress, universality and Humanity, we find a thread to explore how the worldmaking power of modernity is implicated in the unmaking of other worlds, in the classification of others, in the silencing of voices, in the erasure of worlds of sensing and meaning, in the wasting away of Earth. The colonial difference is not only to be found in rare or forgotten archives of the colonial era; in these postcards the colonial difference appears in its most ubiquitous and naturalized form. It shows us that our forms of enjoyment, our forms of perceiving the world, our ways of sensing and understanding ourselves, are implicated in coloniality.

Under the question of the colonial difference, these images become a mirror that asks back. They are not anymore the sight of a fulfilled Humanity, the well-known landscapes of world representation. But in their asking, we find the choreography that animates the modern self. Who are we? Are we historically implicated in the suffering of others? Have we been made to become someone only through the negation of others? Have we been made to enjoy the loss of our relation to other worlds, to Earth, to the time that precedes?

Decolonial thought starts from the awareness that there is no modernity without coloniality;⁸ that the history of progress of western civilization cannot be accounted for without the violence of coloniality; that there is no possession without dispossession; that there is no claim to universality or contemporaneity without erasure.

While modernity/coloniality is often used as a binomial, it is important to distinguish their movements. While modernity names the historical affirmation, the taking place of the western project of civilization, coloniality names the historical negation, the *displacement*, the eviction of other worlds of meaning. Modernity is the taking place of reality through forms of appropriation, realization and representation. Coloniality is the displacement out of historical reality of other worlds of meaning through forms of erasure, subjugation, destitution, disdain, violence... Decoloniality seeks to overcome the modern/colonial order by undoing the historical displacement, the erasure of coloniality, while at the same time delinking from the conditions of historical existence, of representation and experience set by modernity. Decoloniality is the movement for the *emplacement* of the worlds of sensing and meaning that have been evicted, uprooted, expunged, by coloniality and that cannot take place under the conditions of modernity. They cannot take place under modernity, because the conditions for becoming world-historical reality under modernity are already conditions of becoming null, of unbecoming, of alienation, of denial, of aphasia, of amnesia.

8 Anibal Quijano, 'Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America', in: *Nepantla: Views from South* 1:3 (2000), pp. 533-580.

Through the modern/colonial history of the arts and more generally the history of aesthetics, we begin seeing the formation of the modern/colonial order, as the control of experience, of the ways in which we inhabit Earth and produce our world-historical reality. The history of modern aesthetics is not reducible to the history of the state or capitalism. We refer to aesthetics not solely as the field of artistic practices, nor just as the thinking about the arts. We understand aesthetics as a domain of social life equivalent to epistemology.

While the question of epistemology is concerned with the modern/colonial control of knowledge and representation, the question of aesthetics brings to the fore the control of perception and representation. The one leans towards our understanding of the real, the other towards our experience of the real. Of course, aesthetics and epistemology are inextricably linked; they are both fundamental for the constitution of our world-historical reality. Knowledge enframes our perception, and our perception becomes and is already knowledge. Throughout this essay we are concerned with understanding the particular movement between representation and experience within modernity. In other words, how the logic of the artifice is one in which representation becomes itself historical experience.

While it is misleading to think epistemology and aesthetics as discrete fields, it would be equally misleading to conceive of the two without distinction. By putting the emphasis on aesthetics, decolonial critique takes a different inflection in this essay; it orients itself to the way in which our experience of Earth, worlds and ourselves has been constituted under the modern/colonial order. The focus on the modern/colonial order of aesthetics allows us to see the

formation of modernity as world-image, and the way it has ruled over the possibilities for perceiving, experiencing and the taking place of world-historical reality.

The coloniality of aesthetics points towards the erasure or devaluing of other worlds of sensing and meaning, towards the displacement, the exclusion and denial of other forms of representation and experience. Coloniality appears as the eviction of forms of living, of experiencing, of realizing other worlds of sensing and meaning. The denial of other forms of representation, the devaluing of the other epistemologies and aesthesis brings about the erasure of worlds. The awareness of the coloniality of aesthetics reveals the loss of relational worlds. Decoloniality orients itself towards those worlds to listen to their ways of worlding and earthing, of healing and mourning, of receiving and offering.

The last decade has witnessed a growing conversation between the arts and decoloniality. Decolonial artistic practices are mobilizing non-eurocentric cultural archives, embodied experiences and memories that have been under erasure. For us, decolonial aesthesis has become a place for thinking with the arts. Decoloniality is bringing into question the normativity of the modern notion of time, of contemporaneity, the prevalence of enunciation over reception, of owning over owing, of forming over dwelling, of abstraction over rooting, of advancing over offering. Decolonial aesthesis is about exploring ways of contesting the impoverishment of experience, ways of delinking from and exiting modernity. It is about reaching ways of earthing, of we-ing, of re-membling, in order to recover the freedom of joy, of mourning, of being in relation.



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La Tour: the Modern Gaze

Starting a decolonial reflection with La Tour Eiffel might seem contradictory. But for us, 'La Tour' is an ideal place to investigate the workings of the modern gaze.¹⁵ Our path towards a decolonial aesthetics starts with the task of understanding how modern aesthetics became a tool for the control of representation and experience. As we will see, modernity is characterized by the dominance of vision, and more generally the dominance of representation over experience. With La Tour we will investigate how through the gaze modern aesthetics turns the *representation* of the real into the *experience* of the real. Modern aesthetics appears as a field in which the understanding and representation of world-historical reality, the modern episteme, is turned into a field of experience, into a reality for the senses, into a phenomenal universe. Modern aesthetics appears then, not just as a concern with the beautiful and the sublime, but as the domain that shapes the life experience of the subject and comes to constitute his horizon of experience, his historical reality. The control of experience, next to the control of representation and appropriation, is what determines the formation and unfolding of the modern subject. Aesthetics is for us that field in which the formation and enclosure of the modern self becomes concrete. Aesthetics is also the field in which coloniality comes to light as the power to exclude from experience. If the modernity of modern aesthetics is the control of representation and experience of world-historical

15 For a broader discussion on the history of the gaze and scopic regimes see: Ivan Illich, *Guarding the Eye in the Age of Show*, manuscript, Bremen, 2001, pp. 1-23. Accessed through: http://www.davidtinapple.com/illich/2001_guarding_the_eye:PDF.

reality, then the coloniality of modern aesthetics is the exclusion of other worlds of sensing and meaning from world-historical reality. Here, modern aesthetics functions as erasure and exclusion. It sustains the colonial difference. Thus, for decoloniality, aesthetics is not understood as a criterion of taste and beauty, but rather as a geo-historical field for the control of representation and experience, for the control of subjectivity and more broadly life experience.

This postcard shows La Tour Eiffel illuminated with Philips lamps. La Tour is one of the foremost icons of modernity. It's a place of touristic pilgrimage; people living in the consumer world go in a ritualistic way to La Tour Eiffel. Following the pattern of religious stamps, La Tour Eiffel is reproduced ad-infinitum in miniatures, on refrigerator magnets and keyrings, on T-shirts and cars. It is endowed with the fetish religiosity of consumerism. But where does this magnetism come from? Where does the peculiar power of this iron structure emanate from?

La Tour Eiffel was constructed for the 1889 Paris World Exhibition. It was the time of popularization of optical spectacles as entertainment. The city and the exhibition itself had several panoramas where people went to experience visual representation as reality. Panoramas, as later will be the case with cinema, belong to the history of artifice – the history of turning representation into the reality of experience.¹⁶

16 See: Walter Benjamin, 'Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century: Exposé <of 1939>', in: Walter Benjamin (Rolf Tiedemann ed.), *The Arcades Project (1927-1940)*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999, pp. 14-26.

Can we think of La Tour as an optical device? Can we think of it as a concrete expression of modernity's dominion over experience? Can we understand it as a place in which the power to see, the mastering gaze, gets technologically manifested and becomes monument? The history of the modern gaze is, significantly, the history of technologies of representation: from the birth of perspective in the renaissance that achieved the geometrical abstraction of the real into representation, capturing the real on the two-dimensional surface of a screen,¹⁷ to the production of representation as reality, as the field of experience. The *dominance of the gaze* in western aesthetics has to do with a history of the possibility of abstracting reality into an object of representation, and in turn exercising the power of representation to produce a world as artifice.

La Tour becomes a site to investigate how modernity's power of representing the real becomes the power of producing a world as representation. Representation unfolds historically, consolidating its power of incorporation and reification to become itself a reality principle. Modernity *worlds the world* as representation. We aim to understand the unfolding of this power and the expression of modernity as world-historical reality. We seek to understand how modernity's epistemology became an aesthetics, how its rational and anthropocentric way of apprehending the real became world, and in turn came to determine the very field of experience. In other words, not only did the experience of historical reality become mediated by the metaphysics of modernity, but modernity

17 See: Hubert Damisch, *L'origine de la perspective*, Paris: Flammarion, 1987; Ovidiu Tichindeleanu, 'The Coloniality of the Senses, from the Voice to the Gaze', Middelburg Decolonial Summer School Lectures 2013-2019.

itself became a universe of experience, installing its own world as artifice. "World view, properly understood... means, not a view of the world, but the world understood as view."¹⁸ The representation of the real was transformed into a historical reality principle of making the world as representation.

As an unsuspected optical instrument, La Tour performs the reduction of the world to an image, and brings it into the hold of representation. The visitor can experience the objectification of reality. The gaze of western metaphysics, the gaze of science and technology, becomes experienced through this scopic architectural apparatus. In offering the experience of the world as representation, La Tour is a site for the becoming spectator. The becoming spectator realizes that condition in which "Man [sic] becomes the center to which the existent as such is related."¹⁹ This subject is produced in its constitution as the center, as the gaze that owns world-historical reality. Such is the experience of La Tour, the quintessential experience of modernity.

"The basic process of modern times," says Heidegger, "is the conquest of the world as picture."²⁰ This is the power of the gaze in modernity. The modern gaze indicates the turning of representation into perception. Modernity's way of knowing, its subject-object epistemology becomes its principle of experience, its aesthetics. Experience ceases to be an exposure towards the unexpected and becomes

18 Martin Heidegger, 'The Age of the World View', in: *Winter* 4:2 (1976), pp. 340-355, (350).

19 Ibid., p. 350.

20 Ibid., p. 353.

subject to a design that binds perception to representation. There is nothing else to perceive other than what is being represented, other than what is being produced as reality, as world view. Modernity's world view becomes the choreography of the life experience of the subject qua spectator.

La Tour is an instrument for the elevation of the gaze and the turning of the city into a panorama. It can be understood as an optical apparatus where one could experience the reduction of the world to representation and the becoming spectator of the subject. It shows how the metaphysics of modernity becomes itself a reality principle.