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The Disobedience of Seeing. Steyerl, Foucault, Butler.

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Abstract: This paper addresses the subject's relationship to visual culture and its norms. I start from the fact that contemporary visual culture presents itself as a constant circulation of images that always bring with them a certain 'politics of truth', which includes a normative framing of what is and is not considered human. I propose the possibility of an ethico-political resistance to this framing on the part of the perceiving subject, who is simultaneously shaped by this framing. First, I focus on the problem of the disobedience of seeing as an ethico-political stance towards the 'politics of truth' in the framework of Foucault's thought as it applies to several of Hito Steyerl's artworks ('Politics of Truth' and 'The Courage of Truth'). I next discuss the tension between the circulation of images and the agency of the seeing subject with reference to Judith Butler's ethical and political approach to visual culture, arguing for an ethics of photography that transcends the Foucauldian framework.

Documentarism, the 'authenticating' practice of recording events and facts of everyday life, as an artistic practice raises once again the question of the relationship between the work of art and truth. However, at least for visual artist and theorist Hito Steyerl, it is not a matter of the truth of a work in the sense of classical mimesis or coherence with reality, but of the 'politics of truth'. The way in which Steyerl uses the Foucauldian concept of the politics

of truth opens the door to two very different interpretations of the relationship in question, of art and truth.

According to the first interpretation, works of art participate in a certain politics of truth insofar as they reveal dominant power relations. According to the second interpretation, works of art in themselves occasion political action when they inspire resistance to those power relations. The political approach towards the work of art is characterised, in its very essence, precisely by this ambivalence, by this tension between these two interpretations. In Steyerl's famous essay 'In the Defense of the Poor Image', she describes this ambivalence in the distribution and circulation of what she calls poor images, i.e. low resolution images based on cellphone cameras, home computers and unconventional forms of distribution: 'this circulation of poor images feeds both capitalist media assembly lines and alternative audiovisual economies'.[1] In a later essay, she summarises this ambivalence in these terms:

> The art field is a space of wild contradiction and phenomenal exploitation. It is a place of power mongering, speculation, financial engineering and massive and crooked manipulation. But it is also a site of commonality, movement, energy and desire.[2]

In this paper, I offer an interpretation of this tension underlining the artistic subject's relationship to visual culture and its norms. I start from the fact that contemporary visual culture presents itself as a constant circulation of images that always brings with it a presumed 'politics of truth', which includes a normative framing of what is and is not considered human. I propose an ethico-political resistance to this framing on the part of the perceiving subject, who is simultaneously shaped by this framing. I term this possibility of resistance the 'disobedience of seeing'.

To arrive at my ethico-political stance, I analyse several of Steyerl's artworks and finally Alexander Gardner's iconic photograph of the handsome criminal immortalised in Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*.[3] The disobedience of seeing is discussed here mainly as an artistic strategy. First, I focus on the problem of disobedience of seeing as an ethico-political stance towards the 'politics of truth' in the framework of Foucault's thought as it is present in the works by Steyerl, as discussed below in the sections 'Politics of Truth' and 'The Courage of Truth'. I then discuss the tension between the circulation of images and the agency of the seeing subject with reference to Judith Butler's ethical and political approach to visual culture, arguing for an ethics of photography that transcends that of a Foucauldian framework.

I. THE POLITICS OF TRUTH

Steyerl refers mostly to the second phase of Foucault's work. She subscribes to what Foucault calls the genealogical approach to truth, which presupposes a departure from traditional approaches to truth – wherein truth is a statement

congruent with some previously given reality. Such statements are true if they correctly reflect the factual state of things. Foucault, however, says that a genealogical relationship overturns this congruence. He claims that the techniques of truth *produce* reality, rather than merely reflect it. Truth, propped up by systems of power, produces the reality of what does not exist and forces material existences to be similar to this reality.[4]

Here we come across the fundamental difference between Foucault and Marx: the difference between 'the politics of truth' and 'the economy of non-truth, or ideology'. In Foucault, the production of reality is also tied to the production of the subject. However, someone who does not want to be controlled in this or that way can oppose the ruling knowledge-power by means of various games of truth and power, and, thus, oppose different forms of subjectivisation. The very expression 'politics of truth' is used by Foucault in his lecture 'What is critique?'[5] The concept of 'critique' that Foucault develops in this lecture is a key reference-point for understanding what Steyerl means when she stresses that documentarism is an ethico-political stance. According to Foucault, *critique* is not a way of understanding how knowledge can create a correct idea. He views critique rather as an ethico-political attitude, both individual and collective, which consists in objecting to be governed quite so much.[6] In my opinion, this form of resistance is also what Steyerl has in mind when she says:

> Just as documentary procedures can act as the nodes of knowledge-power, it is also possible to see them as the moments of a turn, in which this knowledge-power begins to shake in the foundations. ... They are not depictions of politics, but they represent political acts in themselves.[7]

What Foucault calls the art of not being governed quite so much, or not being governed in such a way, does not mean not being governed at all. He distinguishes *critique* from what he calls 'fundamental anarchism': *critique* is not, then, 'something that would be a fundamental anarchism, that would be like an originary freedom, absolutely and wholeheartedly resistant to any governmentalization.'[8] The concept of *critique* is very close to Foucault's concept of *counter-conduct*, which he introduced in his course 'Sécurité, territoire, population' at the Collège de France, whereby he analysed pastoral power. Here he defined a counter-conduct as an attitude through which a 'decision-making will' has been manifested 'to be conducted differently [*autrement*], by other leaders [*conducteurs*] and other shepherds, towards other objectives and other forms of salvation, and through other procedures and other methods'.[9] Similarly, he defines a critical attitude as 'the art of not being governed like that and at that cost'.[10] At the political level, this discursive exclusion of 'original freedom' in both forms of resistance shows that they always have both a local and strategic dimension.[11] In the field of art, Steyerl would call this untenable fundamental anarchism a 'position of innocence':

radical art is nowadays very often sponsored by the most predatory banks or arms traders and completely embedded in rhetorics of city marketing, branding and social engineering. For very obvious reasons, this condition is rarely explored within political art, which is in many cases content to offer exotic self-ethnicisation, pithy gestures and militant nostalgia. I am certainly not arguing for a position of innocence. It is at best illusory, at worst just another selling point.[12]

The Courage of Truth

Since Foucault considered the pastoral 'counter-conduct' a step in the 'genealogy of critical attitude', this passage has an ethical dimension in addition to its political and historical dimensions. Judith Butler, whose work offers a fitting example of the critical attitude, views Foucault's discursive exclusion of a fundamental anarchism as having imparted an ethical dimension (the virtue of courage). In her article 'What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault's Virtue', she quotes Foucault's distinction between fundamental anarchism and originary freedom, but her quotation includes Foucault's rather ambiguous follow-up sentence, 'I did not say it, but this does not mean that I absolutely exclude it', just before abruptly stopping his lecture.[13] In her reading, 'it' refers to the possibility of an originary freedom (however ambiguous this might be) for a subject who knows that his own subject-formation is dependent upon coercive effects of knowledge. Given our recognition of knowledge's coercive powers, Butler concludes that to act at all is an act of courage since it represents a major risk to our own formation as a subject:

Foucault's gesture is oddly brave, I would suggest, for it knows that it cannot ground the claim of original freedom. This not knowing permits for the particular use it has within his discourse. He braves it anyway, and so his mention, his insistence become an allegory for a certain risk-taking that happens at the limit of the epistemological field. And this becomes a practice of virtue, perhaps, and not, as his critics profess, a sign of moral despair, precisely to the extent that the practice of this kind of speaking posits a value which it does not know how to ground or to secure for itself, posits it anyway, and thereby shows that a certain intelligibility exceeds the limits on intelligibility that power-knowledge has already set. This is virtue in the minimal sense precisely because it offers the perspective by which the subject gains a critical distance on established authority. But it is also an act of courage, acting without guarantees, risking the subject at the limits of its ordering. Who would Foucault be if he were to utter such words? What desubjugation does he perform for us with this utterance? To gain a critical distance from authority means for Foucault not only to

> recognise the ways in which the coercive effects of knowledge are at work in the subject formation itself, but to risk one's very formation as a subject.[14]

In the field of contemporary art, Steyerl performs a gesture that is comparable in many ways to Foucault's verbal gesture. She performs this critical role of an artist accentuating herself as the subject existing inside the power/economic relations in her performative lectures – an iconic lecture in this respect entitled *Is the Museum a Battlefield* was presented, together with a video of the same name, at the 13th Istanbul Biennial in 2013.[15] In it, she examined the relationship between her presence at the event, the sponsor of the Biennial (a Turkish armaments company) and a bullet that had killed her friend Andrea Wolf in Kurdistan. Her video raises the question of how a museum and a battlefield might be related. The question emerges when Steyerl traces the path of an empty bullet casing, which she found in the area of the mass grave where Andrea Wolf and her friends were located in Van, Turkey. Her performative lecture is a courageous act of resistance, of not willing to be governed by powerful armaments' corporations. The video is also a good example of what Steyerl calls the politics of art, to be distinguished from political art:

> Even though political art manages to represent so-called local situations from all over the globe, and routinely packages injustice and destitution, the conditions of its own production and display remain pretty much unexplored. One could even say that the politics of art are the blind spot of much contemporary political art.[16]

II. THE ETHICAL ATTITUDE

Now let us move from the politics of truth to the second fundamental axis of Foucault's thought, that of the ethical attitude. Both Foucault and Steyerl demonstrate that the politics of truth has an inherent ethical dimension. Hence, a deep continuity can be observed between Foucault's first and third axes, between the 'politics of truth' and the 'ethics of the care of the self'. In Foucault's last course at the Collège de France, he recapitulated his previous work, yet insisted that the three dimensions introduced above – Knowledge (analysis of the modes of veridiction), Power (study of the techniques of governmentality) and Subjectification (identification of the forms of practising the self) – are complementary yet are necessarily in correlation, as well. Having examined the irreducibility and inevitable interconnectedness of these three key ideas, Foucault remarks that

> to depict this kind of research as an attempt to reduce knowledge (savoir) to power, to make it the mask of power in structures, where there is no place for a subject, is purely and simply a caricature.[17]

In other words, Foucault's analysis of *critique* and the Enlightenment is not only archaeological and genealogical, but is also strategic. And this strategic position of an individual and collective attitude is possible only if power is not considered to be a fundamental given and the unique principle of explanation, but rather a relation in a field of interactions, and associated with a domain of possibility and therefore of reversibility and possible reversal.[18] The strategy inherent in Steyer's performative lecture consists precisely in trying to reverse the direction of the bullet, to interrupt the deadly loop of the trajectory of the bullet from battlefield to museum and from museum to battlefield.

Foucault's threefold effort to analyse the complex relationships between three different elements in his late work, especially his very last course at the Collège de France entitled 'The Courage of Truth', which he taught from the beginning of February to the end of March 1984, led him to examine the Ancient Greek problem of *parrhésia*, particularly in its Socratic and Cynic form. *Parrhésia* is first and foremost one of the classical Greek techniques of caring for oneself. It is, also, the courage to speak the truth. Foucault pays special attention to the Cynics, for whom personal asceticism is indissoluble from public provocation: philosophical care of the self needs to be publicly dramatised in order to confront citizens with their contradictory lifestyles. By living on the street, or at the entrance to a temple, eating, and satisfying one's needs and desires in public spaces; one questions the distinction between the domestic and the public sphere. Cynicism is a way of life that strives to manifest truth in the materiality of the body itself. In other words, the life of a Cynic is shaped by truth in the depth of its materiality. Such a way of life opens the way to the possibility of achieving parrhésia.

Foucault notices a certain continuity with ancient Cynicism in modern and contemporary art. Modern art carries a cynical function in as far as it connects a way of life with the manifestation of truth. More explicitly, the way of life of a modern artist (Baudelaire or Manet) is the scandal of truth:

> art itself, whether it is literature, painting, or music, must establish a relation to reality which is no longer one of ornamentation, or imitation, but one of laying bare, exposure, stripping, excavation, and violent reduction of existence to its basics.[19]

A substantial trend in modern art from Manet to Francis Bacon and from Baudelaire to Beckett, this undercurrent which art takes as the revelation of existence, Foucault calls the anti-Platonism of modern art. In art, just as with the Cynics, we are able to find 'the most intense forms of a truth-telling with the courage to take the risk of offending'.[20] The life of an artist is viewed in its bare, violent form. An artist's life 'scandalously manifests the truth'.[21] I argue that Steyerl's documentarism has an ethical dimension in this Foucauldian manner. That this ethical dimension is not overly accentuated in Steyerl's writings does not mean that it is not present in her artworks.

For example, Steyerl's video *Lovely Andrea* (2007) documents the artist searching Japan for a photograph shot of her around 1987 in Tokyo. This missing photograph depicted her as a bondage girl, half-naked, bound with ropes, suspended in the air, which is characteristic of the nawa-shibari style. Today, Japanese bondage imagery is primarily a subgenre of pornography, but its origins refer to a specific martial arts called *hojojutsu*. In this martial art, ropes were used for three purposes: to capture, transport and torture criminals. However, what was originally part of the martial arts took on a sensual and erotic dimension in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. *Lovely Andrea* puts the practice and depiction of bondage in a new ethical-political context. In a voice over, one character says 'But in a broader context, bondage is everywhere', while the visual component shows three very different uses of rope: Japanese bondage girls' haircuts, the American superhero Spider-Man and bound prisoners in the US detention camp at Guantanamo.

Knowledge and power link Steyerl's video to her original bondage photographs. That she had herself shot as a model some twenty years earlier illustrates how the subject, however bound by knots of knowledge and power, can relate to these knots in new ways by making her own life a work of art (one of the late Foucault's favourite themes familiar to his ethics of care of the self). It should be added immediately, however, that this illustrative ethical moment of documentarism is inextricably linked to the political dimension in at least two ways. First, in contrast to classical bondage, in which a woman is bound by a master dressed in a suit and tie, 'self-suspension' dispenses with both man and master and thus represents the emancipation of female corporeality. The staging of her own bondage photographs within the documentarist work also challenges one of the fundamental dividing lines of Western political thought: that Steyerl brings the shame associated with her own corporeality into a public space from which the body is banished, fits in a political tradition that runs from ancient Greece to Hannah Arendt, and is associated exclusively with honour.

III. THE DISOBEDIENCE OF SEEING

In both *Is the Museum a Battlefield?* and *Lovely Andrea*, Steyerl presents herself as a video artist who recognises her own role in the circulation of images that are lying in wait, ready to catch us in their movement. In fact, she 'coined the term "circulationism" in order to describe a state that is "not about the making of an image, but about post-producing, launching and accelerating it".[22] In this last section, I ground my disobedience of seeing in Butler's ethical and political approach to visual culture and photography. That Steyerl situates the artist's agency within the circulation of extant images exemplifies why Butler singles-out photography. Butler, in her recent publication, *Senses of the Subject* (2015), avows:

> I do not arrive in the world separate from a set of norms that are lying in wait for me, even as a pure potential, prior to my first wail. So norms, conventions, institutional forms of power, are already acting prior to any action I may undertake, prior to being an 'I' who thinks of itself from time to time as the seat or source of its own action.[23]

One of the main sets of norms Butler analyses is exactly this social organisation of images and the subsequent ethical problem for the relationship between visual representation and humanisation.

In performing a cultural and political transposition of Levinas's 'ethics of the face', Butler demonstrates that the ethical demand is always mediated by our senses. It is, however, only on the condition that the social organisation of senses (operating through different media and frames) does not exclude the particular face of the Other from the sphere of appearing:

> If, as the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas claims, it is the face of the Other that demands from us an ethical response, then it would seem that the norms that would allocate who is and is not human arrive in visual form. These norms work to *give face* and to *efface*. Accordingly, our capacity to respond with outrage, opposition and critique will depend in part on how the differential norm of the human is communicated through visual and discursive frames.[24]

The norms that determine which life is grievable and which is not, also operate through photography. Photographs are part of the frames that assign recognition to certain figures of humanity and conversely, non-recognition to others. In this way, the state uses photographs to regulate the sphere of appearance of what has a face and what is, on the contrary, faceless, what is still human and what is no longer. In the chapter 'Torture and the Ethics of Photography' from *Frames of War*, Butler analyses on one hand photographs taken by 'embedded' journalists to foreclose their responsiveness before and during the Iraq War. On the other hand, she insists that even though 'the photograph can only be conducted within certain kinds of lines and so within certain kinds of frames', critical photography is possible to the extent that it has the capacity to frame the frame itself.[25] The political dimension of this reframing is very close to what Foucault called *critique*, or counter-conduct. It necessitates a disobedient act of seeing:

> the photograph that yields its frame to interpretation thereby opens up to critical scrutiny the restrictions on interpreting reality. It exposes and thematises the mechanism of restriction, and constitutes a disobedient act of seeing. The point is not to engage in hyper-reflexivity, but to consider what forms of social and state power are 'embedded' in the frame, including state and military regulatory regimes.[26]

Strike (2010), Steyerl's short video installation (and subsequent video posted on various streaming platforms), demonstrates how this new, critical 'framing of the very frame' defines the area of what is visible to us and through which images flow to us. In this video, we first see a large television screen stretching across the entire image. The image is black at first. After a few seconds, the word STRIKE appears on the screen in large white letters. The video then cuts to a shot of the TV screen turned off from a distance. We notice that it is hanging on a wall with a white background, probably in a gallery or museum somewhere. A moment later, we notice Steyerl entering the camera frame. We first see her face on, looking focusedly at somewhere in front of her. Then there is a cut, and we discover that she has been looking at a television screen. From behind we watch her walking towards the screen. As she comes up to it, we see her using a hammer and a mace to strike the black screen. We hear a loud thud and the sound of the screen shattering. The screen shatters as a result of the violent impact and a colourful pattern appears on its surface, reminiscent of stained glass windows in a church, or abstract paintings. Apart from the obvious fact that the artist in this video is demonstrating one possible way of resisting the one-sided distribution of images that are thrown at us from the television screen, and how other images can be transmitted through other uses of the same frames - in this case, images of resistance (the strike in the video's title and the breaking of the screen) and images of accidental beauty (the image accidentally created after the screen has been broken) - it is important to emphasise that this reframing would not have been possible had the television not been moved from its normal location in the private sphere of the home to the public space of the gallery.

In her text on the ethics of photography, Butler also points out that without a certain wandering of the original photographs outside the context of their taking, these photographs would never have acquired the ethical transitive function we now attribute to them. She describes in detail the distribution of the torture photographs from the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq and shows how their accidental publication, originally taken by people participating in the torturing, communicated suffering that led to an alteration of our political assessment of the current war.

> In this case, the circulation of the image outside the scene of its production has broken up the mechanism of disavowal, scattering grief and outrage in its wake.[27]

Yet this critical practice of post-producing, launching or accelerating photographic images would not have been possible had the photography not had an ethical transitive function. Butler defines this ethical transitive function as a capacity to make us susceptible to ethical responsiveness.

The last work I will comment on is the famous photograph of Lewis Payne, taken by Alexander Gardner soon after the sitter was convicted of murder.

This image exemplifies the ethical transitive function, which enables its political function (the disobedience of seeing). Included in *Camera Lucida*, its analysis holds a special place, partly because in interpreting it Barthes redefines his famous distinction between the *studium* and *punctum* of photography. Besides the studium – the overt theme of the photograph that we can imagine the photographer seeking and which he tried to embody in his photograph – Barthes had hitherto defined the punctum as a detail that deeply affects the viewer, wounding or painfully 'pricking' him/her on a subjective, more precisely a subjectifying level. In the case of the photograph of Lewis Payne, however, the punctum is no longer a detail but the very ability of the photograph to show life and death in the future anterior tense.

> In 1865, young Lewis Payne tried to assassinate Secretary of State W.H. Seward. Alexander Gardner photographed him in his cell. The photograph is handsome, as is the boy: that is the *studium*. But the *punctum* is: *he is going to die*. I read at the same time: *This will be and this has been*; I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake. By giving me the absolute past of the pose (aorist), the photograph tells me death in the future.[28]

This property of a photograph is not, however, confined only to those who have been condemned to death, or even to those who are already dead, but 'every photograph is this catastrophe' in that it offers a view of the absolute past of life.[29]

In her chapter on the ethics of photography, Butler returns to this photograph and Barthes' analysis of it. At the end of the chapter, she refers to *Camera Lucida* and Barthes' thesis that a photographic picture has a special ability to show life in the future anterior tense. Butler reworks Barthes' analysis from a distinctly ethical perspective. She shows how photography is one of the media whose frames present life in its absolute past, though as something that is still possible to grieve:

> Under what conditions does this quality of 'absolute pastness' counter the forces of melancholy and open up a more explicit form of grieving? Is this quality of 'absolute pastness' that is conferred on a living being, one whose life is not past, precisely the quality of grievability? To confirm that a life was, even within the life itself, is to underscore that a life is a grievable life. In this sense the photograph, through its relation to the future anterior, instates grievability.[30]

The photograph is also one of the frames that produces and erases faces. It is possible to grieve for the life of Lewis Payne because the discourse on his future death has become part of the history of photography. From the Butlerian perspective, a photograph may be taken only as part of a wider frame that delineates in advance the intelligibility of some lives and the non-intelligibility of others. Intelligibility in Butler's work generally refers to the

ability to be seen, heard or otherwise interpreted as a valid social subject. Even this singular photograph of an individual life, which is now grievable, has therefore critical potential, thanks to its ability to frame anew the very framework of visibility. In the case of this concrete photograph, we as viewers may perform a 'disobedient act of seeing' and be moved to protest against the death penalty. Indeed, this photograph is often used in various campaigns against the death penalty.

Using the example of the artistic strategy of the disobedience of seeing, which I have presented primarily as an ethico-political stance that frames in a new way what we perceive as a life worth mourning in the framework of contemporary visual culture, I have tried to point to a more general relationship of the subject to visual culture and its norms. Even if we are being directed to see in a certain way, there are always ways to see things differently. Outlined in this article are some of the ways artists have resisted norms to show us both new things to be seen and new ways of seeing familiar things. I have attempted to recapture the Foucauldian inseparability of the ethical and political stance within the artistic strategy of the politics of truth and the courage of truth through a disobedience of seeing grounded in Butler's approach to photography. In contrast to the ethics of the care of the self present in Foucault and in Steyerl's work, the disobedience of seeing brings back into play the Levinasian ethics of responsiveness, albeit culturally and politically transposed.[31]

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NOTES

[1]Steyerl 2009, 43.
[2]Steyerl 2010, 99.
[3]Barthes 1981, 95.
[4]On Foucault's philosophy as a philosophy of truth, see Gros 2004, 11–25.
[5]Presented in 1978 at the Société française de Philosophie, five years before his famous essay 'What is Enlightenment?' was published in English in 1984.
[6]Foucault 1997.
[7]Steyerl 2003.
[8]Foucault 1997, 72.
[9]Foucault 2007, 194-195.
[10]Foucault 1997, 29.
[11]Foucault 1997, 72.
[12]Steyerl 2010, 99.
[13]Butler 2002.
[14]Butler 2002, 9-10.
[15]Available online at https://vimeo.com/76011774
[16]Steyerl 2010, 98.
[17]Foucault 2011, 8-9.
[18]see Foucault 1997.
[19]Foucault 2011, 188.
[20]Foucault 2011, 189.
[21]Foucault 2011, 187.
[22]MacQueen 2015.
[23]Butler 2015, 15.
[24]Butler 2009, 77.
[25]Butler 2009, 71-72.
[26]Butler 2009, 71-72.
[27]Butler 2009, 100.
[28]Barthes 1981, 96.
[29]Barthes 1981, 96.
[30]Butler 2009, 53.
[31]The main thesis of this paper was developed in my recent Czech monograph Bierhanzl 2021.

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