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# Images of/and the Postmodern. Review of Spectacular Allegories: Postmodern American Writing and the Politics of Seeing by Josh Cohen

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Josh Cohen

Spectacular Allegories: Postmodern American Writing and the Politics of Seeing

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Among the most persistent criticisms leveled at contemporary American culture by writers ranging from the popular (Neil Postman, Allan Bloom) to the academic (Theodor Adorno, Fredric Jameson), from the fictional (Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo) to the theoretical (Guy Debord, Jean Baudrillard), is the overwhelmingly visual character of postmodernity. As Postman frames it, our culture has moved in the course of the last century from an epistemology based on typography (a notion about the locus of truth that resounds in 'all the news that's fit to print') to an epistemology based upon that dubious signifier, the image, leaving us with nothing more than 'seeing is believing'. [1] Many of these critics, moreover, see implied in this epistemological shift a failure of political nerve, a turn away from history and toward illusion, an uneven trade-off of discourse for entertainment, a forsaking of the possibilities of any viable cultural criticism.

Josh Cohen, in his new book Spectacular Allegories: Postmodern American Writing and the Politics of Seeing, argues that postmodern American novelists ranging from Norman Mailer to Joan Didion, Robert Coover to James Ellroy, do not merely fall into accord with this critique -- \*text good; image bad\* -- but are in fact using the allegorical nature of their encounters with and representations of visual culture as a means of reintroducing the image to history, an attempt to construct a new critical politics of

visuality. The possibility of a critical visual agency is raised for Cohen in these writers' gendered representations of the reversible and dialogic nature of specularity -- that the watcher may, at any moment, become the watched -- a mutable relationship that is made possible by a perceived crisis in masculine narrative and visual authority, and may undermine the domination imposed by that traditional authority.

In constructing and defining the terms of his argument, Cohen begins with Baudrillard's notion of 'America' as simulation, a 'hyperreality' constructed out of images. Cohen argues, however, that 'Baudrillard's central error, repeated by much subsequent postmodern cultural theory, is to conceive of the spectacle as somehow \*opposed\* to, rather than implicated in, historical experience' (1). In undoing this error, Cohen posits that visual America, rather than being a depthless culture characterized only by its surfaces -- again, 'seeing is believing' -- is rather 'characterized by an opacity and an indeterminacy which manifests itself in what I call an allegorical impulse' (5) -- better framed as 'seeing is interpreting'. Cohen draws his notion of allegory from Walter Benjamin's theory which suggests that contemporary allegory, rather than presenting a one-to-one correspondence of objects and ideas, is instead 'that which \*resists\* being rendered readable in terms of any privileged interpretive code such as the economic' (17).

Cohen connects this sense of the inscrutability of the visual to a convergence he notes between the writings on visual perception of both Benjamin and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in which 'visual perception opens up a new subject-object relation, in which domination yields to dialogue, spatial distance to the interplay between the eye and its object' (15). Thus, while allegory here presents a narrative means of coping with postmodern dissolution and disenfranchisement, the allegorical representation of visuality captures the indeterminacy of that 'subject-object relation', particularly in its tendency to invert. The image, Cohen claims, is precisely 'that which resists narrative resolution and which interrupts its explanatory logic' (14), leaving the postmodern novel in a position in which its linear, typographical logic of domination is complicated by the changing relationships of subject and object.

In chapter two, 'Cold War Visions', Cohen explores the arc of Norman Mailer's writing, from *Barbary Shore* to *Harlot's Ghost*, revealing what the 'crisis of seeing' he posits in the postmodern era might look like, a crisis that is clearly linked to the growing crisis of masculinity sensed in Mailer's novelistic and non-fiction railings about the 'womanization' of America. For Mailer, the proliferation of the visual, the technological, and the mass-cultural in post-war American society is part and parcel of the shifting gender relations produced by the women's movement. As Cohen saliently demonstrates in Mailer's writings, 'the diffusion of the feminine into the space of consumer capital is an assault on the masculine eye', while mass culture, for Mailer, 'can only be conceived of conspiratorially, as the demonic, feminised other of the authentic self' (39).

In chapter three, 'In Camera: The Allegorical Impulse of Cinematographic Fiction', Cohen turns to a group of writers -- Jerzy Kosinski, Robert Coover, and Stephen Dixon - - whose work reveals the 'destabilising force of the filmic' (74) in American fiction,

revealing some interesting parallels between film theory and fictional representations of the filmic. Cohen relates an abbreviated history of film theory, tracing it from Andre Bazin's first encounters with the issue of spectatorial agency, through the shift to 'apparatus theory' in the work of Christian Metz and Jean-Louis Baudry, to Paul Virilio's postmodern cultural theory. All of these theories of film, in Cohen's view, share a 'characterisation of cinema as a 'bad object' that objectifies and structurally paralyzes visual agency', returning again and again to 'the paranoiac trope of the spectator-as-victim' (77). Cohen reveals the inversion in the traditional subject-object relations of spectator and spectacle in these conceptions of the spectator's own exploitation by mobilizing Constance Penley's evaluation of such theories of cinema as 'bachelor machines', pointing out that by 'characterising the eye as structurally impotent, these theorists reproduce the very effect they claim to unmask, namely visual domination' (77). By further engaging Benjamin's famous notion of film's destruction of the 'aura', and thus the domination of traditional concepts of authenticity, Cohen is able to return the discussion of film to a more critical political position, insisting that 'film is an augury of a new form of narrativity, one which divests the narrator of absolute visual authority' (79).

And again, this perceived crisis in narrative authority is linked, in the writers Cohen discusses, to a crisis in masculine authority. In the fiction of Jerzy Kosinski, Cohen explores the manner in which the female object of vision is repeatedly 'locked into an optic of domination' (108) driven by the male narrator's desire to protect his spectatorial authority. In Robert Coover's work we see the failure of this 'transcendent spectatorial subjectivity' (108) in the refusal of the object of vision to fully submit to the control of the gaze. Finally, in Stephen Dixon's writing, Cohen reads a full reversibility of the visual relationship between subject and object, shattering the overtly masculine optic of domination. In examining all three of these writers, however, Cohen is 'concerned less with the thematics of cinema \*per se\*, than with the ways in which filmic visualities inflect the narrativity of postmodern American fiction' (82), thus exploring the bleed between the narrative and the cinematographic that has increasingly opened the novel to new explorations of both visual and typographic perception.

In the final chapter of the text, 'Allegorical City: Los Angeles in Postmodern American Writing', Cohen encounters two writers -- Joan Didion and James Ellroy -- who carry this development of a new politics of seeing over to explorations of that most simulation-driven of cities. By employing Paul Virilio's conception of the cinematic 'sight machine', Cohen claims that the filmic is not reducible to the actual site of film, arguing instead for the pervasiveness of cinematic ways of seeing, particularly in the organization of the contemporary city. Los Angeles in particular, he claims, 'functions within the postmodern imaginary as a kind of paradigm allegorical space' (110), extending Benjamin's notion of the 'porosity' of the cityscape to create a new, dialogical relationship between the postmodern city and the narrating eye. In that regard, Didion and Ellroy 'share an explicit consciousness of the city's resistance to the authoritative gaze, of its 'allegorical' transformation of the urban eye from observer to interpreter of its proliferating signs' (115).

Cohen's analysis is fascinating throughout, particularly as he marshals materials from across the spectrum of discourses about the image, from phenomenological philosophies of vision, to postmodern cultural theory, to the novelists at the heart of this study. However, in places this vast scope creates some drawbacks: in the second chapter, for instance, as Cohen attempts to cover such a wide field as Norman Mailer's career, he is forced to paint with broad strokes. One wishes he were able to further unpack certain pertinent moments in Mailer's work. For example, in his discussion of *The Deer Park*, Cohen quotes a Mailer description of a particular bar, which includes 'a smoky yellow false ceiling [that] reflected into the mirror behind the bar and colored the etching of a half-nude girl which had been cut into the glass' (33). Cohen's comment on this etching reads as follows:

'Moreover, at the heart of this simulationary microcosm of Hollywood itself is 'the etching of a half-nude girl', evoking the conflation, identified in the previous chapter, of mass culture and the feminine, Woman and artifice' (34).

While this reading is to the point, it does not quite do the passage justice. The etching is indeed the conflation of the mass-cultural, the visual, and the feminine, but it's also -- and quite pointedly -- the \*inscription\* of a particular notion of the eternal feminine into both the Hollywood simulacrum and the novel itself. If, as Cohen so rightly insists, the visual is not the effacement of the political but rather the continuation of the political by other means, one might do well to consider further both the literal inscribing of Woman in this scene, as well as what this image reveals -- not the woman herself, or even a representation of Woman, but rather the reflection of a false ceiling.

For Cohen, Mailer's attempt to imagine a political 'third way' in the face of the Cold War is doomed due to the writer's failure to conceive of a new visual politics not based on domination but rather on indeterminacy. Surprisingly, however, Cohen never fully makes the link between this failure of visual politics and Mailer's more obvious failure in the realm of gender politics. While he quite rightly points out that Mailer throughout his work envisions the 'mass media's proliferation . . . as a process of feminisation' (43), he seems repeatedly to forgive this misogyny: 'If Mailer polemicises against the 'vision-blinding' ambiguities of Cold War American culture, then, he does so not in the name of some unproblematic 'transparency' of vision, but rather in order to reclaim for the eye that complex interpretative capacity eroded by modernity's spectacular logic' (46). But that 'complex interpretative capacity' is, for Mailer, only possessed by the unremittingly masculine eye of the existential hero, an eye that, in interpreting, dominates and objectifies.

In fact, while Cohen's theoretical model reveals in this crisis of visibility the possibility for a re-energized cultural politics, the fictional readings he presents by and large see only crisis and catastrophe, with little hope for redemption. Moreover, Cohen's reliance upon philosophies of the phenomenology of perception for his theorization of the image itself ignores the image's material existence. For instance, 'visibility' and 'legibility' are never fully distinguished, as Cohen pays scant attention to the nature of the image, including its complex relationship with text, itself undeniably a visual form. (Thus the

'inscription' of the half-nude woman in *The Deer Park* takes place both on the surface of the mirror and on the surface of the text.) This elision produces a number of uncomfortable passages, such as the following:

'Postmodern narrative, I suggest, is grounded by just this visual ontology. Its images, shot through with a surfeit of meanings, produce an unstable relation between reader and text, whereby straightforward communication gives way to perceptual interpretation . . .' (18).

While Cohen's larger point -- the image is polyvalent and demands \*reading\*, changing the nature of reading itself -- is incisive and astute, it remains unclear from this passage's context whether the 'images' of the postmodern narrative to which Cohen refers are forms of textual imagery (metaphor and other figurative uses of language), or the narrative manipulation of the general experience of the visual, or more particularly a type of ekphrasis, which W. J. T. Mitchell has termed the 'verbal representation of visual representation'. [2] At certain novelistic moments that Cohen unpacks, the image is filmic, or televisual, or otherwise the product of mediated forms of visual representation. At other moments the image is any object of sight. The quibble here is not with Cohen's exploration of this broad spectrum of visuality, but rather with the fact that the phenomenology of perception cannot account for the differences among these images, transforming them all into roughly equivalent objects.

The strength of *Spectacular Allegories*, however, lies precisely in the conjunction implied in the two terms of the title, the recognition that the image demands and simultaneously resists interpretation. The crisis provoked by the inscrutability of the image resonates in the postmodern novel, prompting a turn to allegory and demanding the construction of a new politics of seeing.

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#### Footnotes

1. See Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York: Penguin, 1986).

2. See W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 152.

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