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Artistic Fabulation: Novel Forms of Heroes in the Visual Arts

Abstract

It is significant how the concept of Carlyle's "heroic clear visuality" was challenged by late 19th-century Black Americans. Nicholas Mirzoeff points out two cases: Sojourner Truth's tactic, "inverse visuality", and W.E.B. Du Bois' "veiled visuality". My paper examines divergent art works or projects exhibited in 2021-22 to track how a shift from "heroic clear visuality" is present in new visual narratives which demand new ways of "looking". In my view, new works are radical in their claim for a special form of opacity (Glissant): on the one hand, they recommend a more emphatic counter-visual narrative by Indigenous groups (the former anti-heroes). On the other hand, they demand a mode of bodily seeing – or rather sensing – with the represented (of new non-human heroes). (Haraway).

Keywords: counter visuality; opacity; seeing-with; biopolitics; Indigenous culture

Résumé

Fabulation artistique : Nouvelles formes de héros dans les arts visuels

Il est significatif comment le concept de "visualité héroïquement claire" du Carlyle a été remis en question par les Noirs américains de la fin du XIXe siècle. Nicholas Mirzoeff fait remarquer deux cas: La tactique de Sojourner Truth, la "visualité inverse", et la "visualité voilée" de W.E.B. Du Bois. Mon article examine des œuvres et des divers projets artistiques exposés en 2021-22 afin de déterminer comment un changement de la "visualité héroïquement claire" est présent dans les nouveaux récits visuels qui exigent de nouvelles façons de "regarder". D'après moi, les nouvelles œuvres sont radicales à cause de leur revendication d'une forme particulière d'opacité (Glissant): d'une part, elles recommandent une narration contre-visuelle plus empathique de la part des groupes indigènes (les anciens anti-héros). D'autre part, ils exigent un mode de voir corporelle – ou plutôt de détection – avec les représentés (des nouveaux héros non-humains). (Haraway).

Mots-clés : contrevisibilité ; opacité ; voir-avec ; biopolitique ; culture indigène

“O wonder!
How many goodly creatures are there here!”²
(William Shakespeare)

Thomas Carlyle, a rarely cited 19th-century essayist, has a special significance related to the question of heroism. Not only had he issued a book length lecture series on heroes, but he had written

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² How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world, That has such people in't. Shakespeare, William. *The Tempest, Act V, Scene I, ll. 203–206*

excessively in several essays on the question of heroism and the role of heroes in world history.³ What gives him special significance in 21st-century Visual Studies is that he also coined the term “visuality” related to his concept of heroes. To be precise he “imagined a moral imperialism led by great men in a visual narrative”.⁴

Great Men, as Carlyle notes, were the leaders of men, these great ones; the modellers, patterns, and in a wide sense creators, of whatsoever the general mass of men contrived to do or to attain; all things that we see standing accomplished in the world are properly the outer material result, the practical realization and embodiment, of Thoughts that dwelt in the Great Men sent into the world: the soul of the whole world's history, it may justly be considered, were the history of these.⁵

In recent theoretical literature it is emphasised that Carlyle's writings project a mode of visualised heroism. As Mirzoeff notes, the hero is capable of grasping the wholeness of history as well as forming this history in his inner vision due to his outstanding capacities that elevate him above the chaotic world of ordinary people.

It is also of importance that according to Alexa Sand, Carlyle's idea of visuality roots in medieval tradition, in as much as he posits this visuality as an inner spiritual perception as well as an “insistently bodily, material, and physical true image of the world”.⁶ For both Mirzoeff and Sand, Carlyle's idea of “vision” is the bridge between the unspeakable, invisible, and sublime inner vision and the physical bodily life of the seer.

According to Carlyle the hero is:

the living light-fountain, which it is good and pleasant to be near. The light which enlightens, which has enlightened the darkness of the world; and this not as a kindled lamp only, but rather as a natural luminary shining by the gift of Heaven; a flowing light-fountain, as I say, of native original insight, of manhood and heroic nobleness;—in whose radiance all souls feel that it is well with them.⁷

The hero is simultaneously the agent of sight and the object of the visual narrative since there is no space for ordinary people in the narrative of the noble hero. Carlyle pictures this as the *camera obscura* model of history in which the hero is present in the enclosed space of the historical image of the camera: “some gleam as of a small real light shining in the centre of that enormous camera-obscure image”.⁸

³ Carlyle, Thomas. *On Heroes and Hero Worship and the Heroic of History*. London, J. M. Dent & Sons, [1841] 1908.

⁴ Mirzoeff, Nicholas. On Visuality. – *Journal of Visual Culture*, 5/1, 2006, 53–79, 57.

⁵ Carlyle, *Op. cit.*, 5.

⁶ Sand, Alexa. Visuality. – *Studies in Iconography* 33, 2012, 89–95, 93.

⁷ Carlyle, *Op. cit.*, 6.

⁸ As Carlyle writes „What a camera obscura magnifier is Tradition”. *Op. cit.*, 33.

Tradition, heroism, leadership of extraordinary men, authoritarian vision of history are all necessary for the nation's future. This is opposed to his contemporary's Jeremy Bentham's panopticon model, which grants possible social improvement. For Carlyle, the Benthamite social emancipation leads to chaos. It is antithetical to the *camera obscura* model of the heroic visual narrative of history visualised by great men. As Mirzoeff notes, "for a world dominated by heroes required that its anti-heroes be treated with severity".⁹

Whereas the Benthamite panopticism assumed the possibility to interiorise and improve behaviour despite its equally oppressive nature—as Foucault analysed it—¹⁰, the "biopolitics" of the Carlylian model required to displace the unwanted anti-heroes of the age. Although both models were used for building out supremacy, in Mirzoeff's view, Carlyle's was part of the logic of British imperialism. The penal colonies were the sites to send those unfit for the ideal state dominated by heroes. The penal colonies' task was to correct behaviour of the convicted and, when successful, to grant them emancipation, but without the possibility of returning to the homeland. In short, Carlyle's model was a model of cleansing the nation of its problematic members.

This lack of empathy for the unfit was even harsher on the indigenous people of these colonies. Whereas the hero for Carlyle is the one who sees history and who is seen by the visual narrative of that history (of *camera obscura* model), the ordinary, the unfit, the displaced or those living in the colonies has no right to this visibility. Jaques Rancière calls attention to this disproportionality of power through the *redistribution of the sensible* in his works, which is translated into the power relations of visibility by Mirzoeff.¹¹ In his view, visibility is a demarcation line between those who has the right to look, and those who cannot even be seen. In Carlyle's visual narrative both capability to see (that is to narrate) and to be seen (to be the object of the narrative) is the privilege of the hero. Those who live on the colonies can only be overviewed but not to be seen in any meaningful narrative of humanity. The politics of visibility deprives people who are outside the visual narrative of agency and of power.

In Mirzoeff's analysis this logic of visibility was countered two ways shortly after Carlyle: One was Sojourner Truth's tactics of "inverse visibility". The other was W.E.B. Du Bois's "veiled visibility".

Sojourner Truth, a former slave, was among the most prominent figures of emancipation. She took care that the photos taken of her would counter earlier depiction of abolitionist photography. One of the best-known image shows her knitting in a middle class gender appropriate dress. The image,

⁹ Mirzoeff, Op. cit., 60.

¹⁰ Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. trans. Sheridan, Alan. New York, Pantheon, 1977, 201-2017.

¹¹ Ranciere, Jaques. 'Aesthetics and Politics'. In: *Aesthetics and its Discontents*. trans. Cochran. Steven. Cambridge, Polity Press, 2009.

which was acceptable at the time, made it possible for her to signify by her glasses and an open book her engagement with learning. In Mirzoeff's view Truth consciously used the image to claim, "not just her person but the substance of freedom", stepping out of the clichés of her time.¹²

With the notion of "veiled visibility", Mirzoeff steps further in dismantling the Carlylian idea of visibility. W.E.B. Du Bois, who was also familiar with Carlyle's views, took over the idea of Great Men: "The Negro race like all races is going to be saved by its exceptional men".¹³ In Mirzoeff's view, Du Bois's veiled visibility is a mode of double consciousness: "the Negro born with a veil, and gifted with second sight in this American world, —a world which yields him no true consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world".¹⁴ This veiled vision allows him to see differently, as it forces him to have a second sight, in order to gain a greater insight, a "revelation" which Carlyle connects to the Hero.

A few years later Mirzoeff revisits Carlylian "clear vision" of the hero in his book length analysis of the plantation *The Right to Look*.¹⁵ He claims that the surveillance system of the plantation is structured on Carlylian visibility. For him revisiting such historical moment has its special significance in pinpointing how contemporary hegemonic political power relations work, what he calls post-panoptic visibility.¹⁶

His question remains the same in his book: how to counter the hegemonic visual apparatuses. But just like his two, late 19th-century cultural examples, his present-day examples remain within the confines of a western thought structure. The difficulty of stepping out from this frame is that it requires a radical change, and a re-evaluation what we consider plausible or scientifically acceptable. These borders have already been challenged by Foucault, highlighting taxonomical unreliability with the example of Borges' Chinese Encyclopaedia. However, in the past decade there is a growing body of studies, art works, exhibitions and projects which claim the possibility of a similar but also sensible radical re-evaluation. The heroes of these contemporary, non-Western narratives are the ones who were formerly deprived of visibility. Their claim for visibility however differs from Mirzoeff's examples of reversal. I would claim they require a new emphatic technique: a "seeing-with".

There are two major lines I will note in relation to contemporary artistic practices that counters "clear visibility". Both are connected to the claim for "opacity", which is not only a more democratic

¹² Mirzoeff, *Op. cit.*, 73.

¹³ W.E.B. Du Bois quoted by Mirzoeff, *Ibid.*, 74.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p 75.

¹⁵ Mirzoeff, Nicholas. *The Right to look: A Counterhistory of Visibility*. Durham, NC, London, Duke University Press, 2011.

¹⁶ Mirzoeff's main point in his analysis is contemporary countersurgance as military tactic. However, for the sake of my study's the argument I do not give account of this specific military tactic.

mode of visibility than Mirzoeff's "veiled visibility", but one which, due to its sensual, non-visual density, can force one to "look" differently.

One very transparent argument that gains considerable amount of attention in exhibition spaces is the counter-visual narrative of Indigenous groups. Originally the term "opacity" was used by Edouard Glissant to recommend a de-hierarchized world-vision, instead of the monolithic Western one, in which the unintelligibility of cultural otherness does not need to be deciphered.¹⁷ As Glissant claims, the socio-cultural otherness of Indigenous groups need a "look" that is more emphatic with the culture and therefore does not try to force its representation or claims into a Western interpretative framework.

In 2022 the Nordic pavilions in Venice changed into a Sami pavilion. The Sami or Sapmi people are indigenous reindeer herders living in the northern territories of Sweden, Norway, and Finland, and a small part of Russia. The land belonged to them before the colonising nations arrived. The stories the Sami people's visual artworks narrated in the exhibition space were trauma stories of forced schooling, deprivation of language and culture, forced citizenship, deprivation of human rights, deprivation of land, commodification of the forest. The reindeer however have no sense of states or borders. The cattle migrate from summer to winter back and forth between these countries. They thrive on lichen. If the borders are closed, the cattle cannot migrate to get their natural aliment. Moreover, since the forest is culled for paper industry, the lichen is deprived of its natural protection, so it freezes, therefore the reindeer has no food.

The story the Sami artists started narrating was to counter centuries of trauma in order to heal, and centuries of deprivation in order to regain rights. These rights were not only human, but animal and forest rights. After centuries of invisibility, their stories can finally be narrated in official venues, like Venice partly because they also narrate about a different type of living, from the aspect of the "anti-hero", the one who lives in a sustainable, mutually supportive way with the environment, in a place that for Europeans is only a wilderness. For them this wilderness is a place where they thrive with their animals. Their stories required an empathic way of looking and understanding, a seeing-with the animals, the plants and the landscape.

In 2022 the Tate Modern presented *A Year in Art: Australia 1992*.¹⁸ The starting point of the exhibition was the 1992 ruling of the High Court to overturn the British "terra nullius". The historical narrative of the show was mainly presented from the perspective of aboriginal artists. The opening image was a map of Australia with all Indigenous language groups, justifying their claim for land. It

¹⁷ Glissant, Edouard. *Poetics of Relation*. trans. Betsy Wing and Ann Arbor. Michigan, Michigan University Press, 2006.

¹⁸ website: <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/year-art-australia-1992> (31.01.2023).

is very striking in the context of Carlyle, for whom Australia was only a penal colony. The invisible aboriginal cultures gain a visibility within the walls of a hegemonic artistic institution as a self-critique of political and cultural supremacy. The exhibition presented history, politics, culture, and society through the vision of aboriginal artist, changing the usual western ethnographic approach of representing the Other by Western eyes.

In terms of opaque visuality, however, the Indigenous Karrabing Film Collective is a more apt example.¹⁹ One of the films of the group, *The Family* (2021) was exhibited in the Serpentine Gallery's *Back to Earth* (2022) exhibition.²⁰ Although the group is helped with basic film skills tutorial of a professional anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli, their films are not the least in tune with Western filmmaking requirements. The narrative has no story line, it is metaphoric, visual, sensual, and mythical. The presence of ancient spirits is made palpable in their very low-tech film. As the "narrative" unfolds we can feel the pain of deserted land, slaughtered ancestors, ruined environment, destroyed culture and an almost hopeless future. The images shift perspective from humans to animals, or to spiritual agents of seeing. Myth, personal story, history, environmental reality, are blurred with the staccato movement of the camera, making Glissant's claim for the opacity of cultural signs fathomable. The experimental film tries to catch the lived experience of thoughts, feelings, sensing of the filmmakers. The viewer is forged into a constant return to the images and see or feel-with the representation.

The Barbican's *Our Time on Earth* (2022) presented a short film, *Wild Arrow 7*, from a Brazilian Indigenous-led collective's long-term project, *Selvagem*.²¹ The website the group created consists of seven wild arrows, seven research based films along with downloadable booklets. Each approximately 12-minute film is composed of a series of images from diverse Indigenous, artistic, and scientific archives connecting the dots between knowledge, activism, creativity, and cultural change. The animations narrate divergent topics in a quasi-scientific manner. The films comprise elements of historical data, indigenous mythology, astronomical fact, modern genetics, and art works into a whirling vortex. The dizzying amount of images and data of the films are on the border of what can be called a reasonable argument. For example, the first arrow starts with the myth of origin from the perspective of Amazonian Indians. As they state:

the common thread of this episode weaves together two narratives: that of the snake canoe, a memory originally from the Rio Negra people, and the cosmic serpent, present in myths of origin from different cultures, seen as the double helix of DNA, a memory code present in everything alive.²²

¹⁹ website: <https://karrabing.info/> (31.01.2023).

²⁰ website: <https://www.serpentinegalleries.org/whats-on/karrabing-film-collective/> (31.01.2023).

²¹ website: <https://selvagemiciclo.com.br/flecha/> (31.01.2023).

²² Quoted from website: <https://selvagemiciclo.com.br/flecha/> (31.01.2023).

In the short film the key figure is the snake: in their mythology fish men arrived in a snake canoe. In the video, the claimed scientific argument is that inert matter cannot generate life, and since it has never again happened in the history of the Earth, life had to arrive from the outside.²³ Moreover, the snake as a motif is present in almost all cultures' myths or tales. But the winding snake's shape is also the winding double helix of the DNA, which as we know is a coded language. The language is read by the RNA into living creatures. The snake-like DNA's coded language also contains the story of our origin. For the neighbouring Huni Kuin people the snake is the one who showed the *ayahuesca* to the people, a psychoactive plant-based brew which is respected as a spirit or deity, and which can recall the myth of (our cosmic) origin from the depth of our bodily coded language.²⁴ There are seven such stories narrated ranging from the Sun to healing plant medicines and to colonialization.

The stories are not only opaque in Glissant's sense, but they are also very similar to the narratives of what Donna Haraway claims to tell for earthly survival. For Haraway it is urgent to tell a different story, a multispecies story that is like the strings in a cat's cradle or a cobweb, plays with patterns, and keeps these patterns changing. To quote her: "Playing games of string figures is about giving and receiving patterns, dropping threads and failing, but sometimes finding something that works, something consequential and maybe even beautiful, that wasn't there before".²⁵ The Brazilian indigenous narrative fulfils this requirement of narration. The viewer is required to give in, suspend western rationality and "disbelief" and immerse in the playfield of the visual narrative about human and non-human anti-heroes.

The Amazonian Indigenous narrative is a connection to another line of argument related to opacity. Macarena Gomez-Barris also extends the meaning of opacity beyond the socio-cultural sphere.²⁶ In her view, opacity is a mode of counter visibility which resists the Western based form of looking, since it does not reduce the multiplicity of interrelated things to the object of knowledge. In order to show how opacity works, she analyses Carolina Caycedo's film *Damned Landscape* (2012).²⁷ Caycedo's film presents the ecological destruction of the river Magdalena, Cauca Valley from the perspective of its inhabitants. The river is staged as an opaque substance that interacts with all living

²³ Compare website: https://selvagemciclo.com.br/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/NOTEBOOK_23_SERPENTCANOE.pdf (31.01.2023).

²⁴ The Huni Kuin people and their customs and relation to nature, plants healing were presented by Ernesto Neto at the 2015 Venice Biennale. website: <https://universes.art/en/venice-biennale/2017/viva-arte-viva/photos-arsenale-2/ernesto-neto-huni-kuin> (31.01.2023).

²⁵ Haraway, Donna. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016. 10.

²⁶ Gómez-Barris, Macarena. *Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspective*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2017, 15.

²⁷ website: <http://carolinacaycedo.com/the-headlong-stream-is-termed-violent-but-the-river-bed-hemming-it-in-is-termed-violent-by-no-one-2013>; or <http://carolinacaycedo.com/serpent-river-book> (31.01.2023).

and non-living things. It is not only water, but a substance that exists due to the workings of all interrelated things in and around the water.

In *Damned Landscape* vision is reduced to the fisheye perspective. Carlyle's two key notions "hero" and "visuality" are radically displaced by this mode of thinking, as neither position is clear, uncontested, or self-sufficient here. Caycedo offers a mode of seeing-with the fish, the frogs, the weed. She views all living matter as mutually interrelated; in her narrative the hero itself is non-human, its everywhere and it can only exist in its relation to other living or non-living matter. Seeing-with is thoroughly sensual, it is not only the eye that sees, but all the senses are at work.²⁸ I would claim that just like Glissant's text suggests, opacity requires a multiplicity of empathic anti-heroes, who see, feel, smell, sense what is communicated. This form of counter visuality is not even a traditionally visual one in nature, it is rather a multi-sensorial sense that resides deep in the body with no locatable sensual organ. Probably sensing-with would be a more apt term even than seeing-with.

It is well-known from Bruno Latour's books that agencies are constantly redistributed.²⁹ The agency of the hero thereby evaporates into a more sustainable, less individualistic, nevertheless thoroughly political agency. The agency of the hero in Carlylian vision is that of the politically omnipotent agent of history. In this respect no one else bears importance on historical change, and as it was widely shared belief in the 19th-century, nature was only a backdrop of the course of history overseen and manipulated by great men.³⁰ The recent theoretical literature on ecology in terms of agents or actants (Latour) suggest it differently.³¹ There is a radical change at play in these text: the agents of "historical" change are Indigenous "antiheroes", in mutually supportive coexistence with non-human actants like animals, plants, fungi, bacteria, water, air, and even natural forces.³²

This aspect of cohabitation and the importance to shift attention to non-human actants as important agents of our lives was thoroughly present at the 2021 Architecture biennale in Venice. The Living and David Benjamin's project *Alive: A New Spatial Contract for Multispecies Architecture* examined the possible role of the microbiome in the architecture of the future.³³ In their view the human body itself is a building that houses billions of microbiota. Their aim was to work out a probiotic multispecies form of architecture, which provides micro spaces for humans, and micro spaces for microbes. The material of these spaces is porous like human skin or tissues. For them the project

²⁸ Haraway uses a nice metaphor for this: "tentacular thinking". Op. cit.

²⁹ Latour, Bruno. *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*. trans. Catherine Porter, Cambridge, UK; Medford, MA, Polity Press, 2018. 75-76.

³⁰ Chakrabarty, Dipesh. Climate of History. Four Theses. In: *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 35, No. 2. Winter. 2009, pp. 197-222.

³¹ Latour, Bruno. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007.

³² Compare: Bennet, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2010.

³³ website: <https://www.labiennale.org/en/architecture/2021/among-diverse-beings/living> (31.01.2023).

was an experiment for a prototype of a *new spatial contract* which extends coexistence to the microbiome, necessary for life. The question of the hero of the future thus shifts to the inner realms of the body to non-human actants, which nevertheless are capable of influencing the human host's mood, decisions, actions as recent findings of neurological research shows. Opacity based on a sightless, nevertheless omnipresent sensing, becomes palpable in the inner regions of the body.

Similarly hidden “heroes” of recent artistic practice and literature are fungi. Anna Tsing who was the second most influential person in the art world according to the Artforum art power 100 list in 2021 points out the importance of fungi for life. For her the cooperative workings of fungi entangled with other species are the example for how to coexist on earth.³⁴ The doxiadis+ Greek architect group's *Entangled Kingdom* project in Venice calls attention to the Fungi Kingdom that connects plants and animals. As they say “Fungi are the unsung heroes of the web of life. They are a creator, a facilitator, a decomposer. And they are simply everywhere.”³⁵ As it becomes clear from the exhibition, life is due to the constant exchange of organisms. Fungi are indispensable in this process. They are also the ones who turned the surface of the Earth into soil that made life possible.³⁶

In Anca Benera and Arnold Estefan's video installation *The Visible Manifestations of Invisible Forces* (2020), the fungi tell their way of living in a self-narrative. We learn about these collective actants' life experiences, mode of sensing, behaviour, their contract with the algae that made life possible, and how trees communicate with their help by entangling their roots with mycelium.

Visibility, sensing, hero, bodily reality are all terms used in the self-description of these project, and I would say they describe a “mode of sublime inner vision”, Carlyle was so fond of. However, these heroes are the possible furthest from what Carlyle demanded for a hero to be. These narrative art works and theoretical texts all make a claim for a multispecies sensing from within the depth of the body. It is noteworthy that most of these projects came to life in order to find a way from the present ecological crises. Not only to narrate a different story for Earthly survival, but to change the mindset of humans in order to act differently. The empathy thus needed to understand what is communicated by these distant voices is yet to come. But we can be hopeful in the meantime.

³⁴ Tsing, Anna Lowehaupt. *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princetown, Princetown University Press, 2015.

³⁵ <https://www.archisearch.gr/architecture/entangled-kingdoms-doxiadis-highlights-the-importance-of-the-symbiosis-of-species-at-the-17th-international-architecture-exhibition-of-la-biennale-di-venezia-arsenale-may-22-november-21-2021/> (24.04.2023)

³⁶ Sheldrake, Merlin. *Entangled Life: How Fungi Make Our Worlds, Change Our Minds & Shape Our Futures*. New York, Random House, 2020.

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