

Culture and Visual Forms of Power

Experiencing Contemporary Spaces of Resistance

Edited by

LIDIA K.C. MANZO



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CULTURE AND VISUAL FORMS OF POWER

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Lidia K.C. Manzo, Editor

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“Protest Murals on Milan Chinatown Wall”

by Lidia K. C. Manzo

The Claim ‘Rivolta Ovunque’ means ‘Revolt Everywhere’ in English.

Photo taken on April 2011 in the Chinese neighborhood of Paolo Sarpi street in Milan (Italy).

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“And their struggle becomes visible”: For a Radical Reevaluation of Foucault’s Conception of Resistance to Power

Lidia K.C. Manzo

I would like to suggest another way to go further toward a new economy of power relations, a way which is more empirical, more directly related to our present situation, and which implies more relations between theory and practice. It consists of taking the forms of resistance against different forms of power as a starting point. To use another metaphor, it consists of using this resistance as a chemical catalyst so as to bring to light power relations, locate their position, and find out their point of application and the methods used.

- Michel Foucault, *The Subject and Power* (1983)

Michel Foucault’s construction of power offers a reevaluation of the modern “perpetual battle” (1995, 26) and, in particular, of the biopolitical and neoliberal forms of governance that characterize our present. The Foucauldian idea of power is that it is not a thing, but a relation (1971). Power is not simply repressive (like the use of violent control in the pre-modern era), but is also productive and is an everyday disciplinary practice. “It is not the ‘privilege’, acquired or preserved, of the dominant class, but the overall effect of its strategic positions- an effect that is manifested and sometimes extended by the positions of those who are dominated” (1995, 26-27). In short, Foucault conceives power as “exclusively social, multiple, variable in character” (Sluga 2005, 231) and, more importantly, exercised on a small scale by political acts taken up by the supposedly powerless. In order to understand what power relations are about, rather than analyze distinctive forms of power, perhaps “we should investigate the forms of resistance and attempts made to dissociate these relations” (1983, 211).

Foucault's highly influential analysis focuses on structures - or the mechanisms - of power, “exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations” (1978, 94). And these are not inevitably relations of dominations, but are meant to be manifested through social practices.

This is interpreted as power-over relations, and it is defined in terms of its actual exercise by the formation of the “multilinear ensemble” (Deleuze 1992) of discourses, belief systems and hegemonies that characterize its *dispositiv* (1978). *Similarly, he is not interested in finding out those in power or those who hold its legitimacy (as in the Marxist view), but rather to make clear what are the practices of power, how it functions, and - especially - it concerns the body. Accordingly, is by practice and not by intention that power becomes visible.* Foucault (1995) explicitly speaks of biopolitics or biopower, precisely because power is neither localized nor concentrated; it is rather into the depths of society, down to the finest grain of the social body. It is, indeed, pervasive throughout the physical body, as powerfully disciplining it, that it attempts to produce docility. Therefore, power necessarily passes through the subject and its biological essence, which is why Foucault suggests to analyze it not from the major, dominant social categories, but from the *micro level*, from the particular, from the seemingly hidden forms of discipline and surveillance. *Consequently, a “micro-physics of power, whose field of validity is situated in a sense between these great functionings and the bodies themselves with their materiality and their forces” (1995, 26) can be expressed starting from strategic and tactical forms of discipline and control as well as dynamics of conflict and resistance, through “innumerable points of confrontation” (1995, 27).*

In recent years, scholars have paid considerable attention to how cultural production is understood to be a site of resistance, especially where contestation is publicly expressed with the aim of bringing about change in the practices, values and morals of institutions, collectivities and ordinary people. Such *politics of resistance* occurring at the social level is thus able to render perceptible of that which has been previously insensible (Panagia 2009) within the complex forces that drive people to exercise power over spaces. We can say, in other words, that when attention is drawn to something that was previously neglected or incomprehensible metaphorically what was invisible becomes visible. And when something has been made visible and challenges our comprehension - as it makes an ethical appeal – it calls us to respond and take action. The key to this view seems to be that struggle is the power effects as such. Indeed, for Foucault the exercise of power is not simply a relationship between partners, individual or collective, it is a way in which certain actions modify others. “It is nevertheless always a way of acting upon an acting subject or acting subjects by virtue of their acting or being capable of action. A set of actions upon other actions” (1983, 220). This form of power applies itself to immediate everyday where people criticize instances of ‘immediate’ struggles which are the closest to them, those

which exercise their action on individuals. "They do not look for the 'chief enemy,' but for the immediate enemy" (1983, 221). And what we mean by struggle is either against forms of domination (ethnic, social, and religious); against forms of exploitation; or against subjection and submission. Foucault says that "where there is power, there is resistance" (1978, 95); however, this is possible if one is to engage in a project "of rupture, of discontinuity" (1972, 4). Eventually, the affinity with the philosophy of Nietzsche – the thinker of the will to power – gives Foucault with the impetus and ideas to study some of the most visible crystallization of power, and its relations to resistance.

The book is a collection of essays that look at "the wider semantic fields of our culture" (Hall 1997, 38) as an effective means of power. Culture, in fact, reveals itself as a field of struggle constructed by different points of view. According to recent definitions, culture is a common code of practice by a group of people, including "beliefs, ritual practices, art forms and ceremonies as well as informal cultural practices such as language, gossip, stories, and rituals of daily life" (Swidler 1986, 273). Such symbolic vehicles of meaning constitute the social processes of sharing modes of behavior and outlook within a community (Hannerz 1969). Culture influences strategies of action in various ways, by shaping repertoires of habits, capacities, or trends, and offering the stage for enacting resistance. Nowadays, culture is the specific field in which power is exercised, and spatial representations of identities and belonging symbolize its operations (Zukin 1991, 1995, 2010). Moreover, in order to "see" power at work in culture, it becomes necessary to define it in terms of certain social facts – places, practices, and artefacts – that mark out a more or less stable forms of political and cultural agency. This is not to be understood as a reductive process, indeed, it is one that makes power acquire a legible evidence in relation to place, people and practices.

In this work, we pose a series of questions that brings together researchers working on power relations with visual methods. Referred to here are the forms of power that are not exclusively exercised by government and state apparatuses, but also within individuals. Rather, if power is exercised through the social body, what role could visual sociology play in representing how power operates at the micro level of social relations? We are interested in understanding how power becomes effective. How do we visually build stereotypes? In the process of constructing reality, how can visual methods allow us to understand the social constructions of meaning? Or, again, is spatial semiotics a way to understand different systems working in the construction of meaning? In exploring these questions, we look to the culture as a field of battle, moving forward the analytic

concept of “resistance” to power. The book contributors extend this concern with how people resist a conventional order of space through everyday spatial practices. This is the very ordinary field of culture where visual spatial tactics can alter conventional meanings or ignore official uses of places and practices (Barthes 1997; De Certeau 1984). In particular, the relation of time and space that Foucault stresses in his treatment of modern heterotopias, as “counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia” (1986, 24) opens onto a wider engagement with how existing spaces may be altered, or the ways that these other spaces can be enacted. We trace some of the ways that power/dominant structures are disrupted through practices of resistance, as well as inventive modes of visual expressions and “action research” (Sandercock and Attili 2014) that are worked through different sites of the world. It is many levels of the machinery of power which the five essays in this book bring to our attention.

The first two chapters - by Karen Crinall, Beatriz Nussbaumer and Carlos Cowan Ros – respectively create an interesting dialogue with each other. They approach the multiple, intersecting visual elements and operations of power that contributed to forming a space where in their participants sought transcendence of their social and cultural differences embedded on personal conflicts. In chapter 1, Crinall challenges the basic assumptions that underlie acts of resistance at the micro level of social relations in local activism by exploring what occurred during a united protest¹ against male violence towards women and children in the southeast of the Australian mainland. In asking how forms of power operated in shaping this space of political action, she proposes that it might be fruitful to extend beyond Foucault’s concept of power as disciplinary practice. She considers two lines of inquiry: how does power operate in the interconnections between the visual, the individual and the social, and which concepts of power might be the most useful to inform such analysis. She suggests that useful analytical directions might be found by engaging the Foucauldian school with concepts that consider power in relation to complex systems, sensory engagement, emergence and affect. In the discussion which follows a ‘space of political action’ is understood to be a site of resistance occurring at the social level, where ideological contestation is publicly expressed with the goal of bringing about change in the practices, values and beliefs of states, institutions, collectivities and/or individuals. It is only through and within this contestation - she argues - that ethical values, judgments and actions can be imposed and deployed through spaces of resistance. Interestingly, understanding power as positive and productive, as a system of netlike relations operating through not just

¹ Known as the ‘The Gippsland CommUNITY Walk Against Family Violence’

people and their bodies but the desire for belonging and community, safety and health, allows us to see more clearly how the visual can be also understood as a bodily preparation for action. Rather than documenting, measuring, identifying or proving these interrelationships, Crinall's attention is towards the creative; to explore power as potential acting through sensation and perception. She describes, in fact, how the creation of this space as non-violent, inclusive, celebratory and political was an effective exercise of power for managing possible excesses of emotion and behavior. Significantly, affective sensation is evidence of the operation of power. Indeed, the act of viewing not only evoked strong emotional sensations, but had transformative meanings, the one of rupture. Such demonstration makes "visible" what is no longer simply a tactical reworking of space, "but also a site of protest and resistance – and an enactment in time (the French term, *manifestation*, catches this idea especially well" (Tonkiss 2005, 134).

In a complementary way, Nussbaumer and Cowan Ros in chapter 2 highlight the importance of photography as both a social practice, and a way of (re)constructing and (re)presenting their life. They analyze the perceptions natives from a rural community² in Argentina have of their territory. Framed in an ethnic (re)articulation process, the authors find that the dispute for identity recognition as well as for the land they historically occupied, promotes a (re)signification process local people perform on their past. In that way, the approach to people's glance enlightened by images offered us elements to understand the logics of classification and valuation of their reality. Accordingly to Hall (1996), the conflict in which this people are immersed is part of the discursive constructions associated with their identity, filled with stories, images, symbols, and social practices, which in turn represent the shared experiences, sorrows, triumphs, and disasters that provide meaning to their community, their place of belonging. As Nussbaumer and Cowan Ros observed, the resulting production of photographs might have a resisting or counter-hegemonic nature, acquiring a clear political significance. From this viewpoint, photographs then obtain a voice, they respond and offer a local perspective of the people's reality and acquire a sense of "truth" for the participants in the form of documents that demonstrate it. Such constructed classifications lie symbolic relations of power, like indifference and recognition, that holders of a dominated identity accept, mostly in a tacit way although sometimes explicitly, as well as the principles of identification that produce their identity (Bourdieu 1991). More importantly, this process of re-

² The *Huarpe* community, located in the region of Lavalle Desert in the Argentinian province of Mendoza.

signification underlines how contemporary spaces of resistance are also sites of agency, of spaces “in use” (Thrift 2000, 234).

In chapter 3, Fabiene Gama draws attention to photo activism, to examine how it means not only working on political issues, but also engaging in transforming a troublesome representation that causes political, economic, and social problems for social groups. By making a cross-cultural comparison, Gama analyzes how two groups of photographers located in different places of the so-called Global South³ use feelings of deprivation, injustice, and exclusion to develop new forms of action and protest, around which they organize themselves to counter the negative images others have about their social groups and their position in the world. Along with presenting their views, the work of Gama introduces us to power relations and stereotypes and demonstrate how they challenge them. And precisely their reactions, their troublesome visual representations, “whether of territory, ethnicity, religion or social class”, are the subject of this discussion. Some of the issues addressed are, then, strongly related to the emergence of resistance to power struggle and highlight the potential for social action to make evident practices of disordered “spatial tactics” (De Certau 1984). Such contemporary spaces of resistance offer to the reader a chance to reflect on how the negative (re)presentations of others can produce a unit around issues such as identities, reputation, self-ness, other-ness, and power.

In chapter 4, Verónica Devalle places design in a rich and problematic genealogy, the one of practices meant for the production of material culture linked to the industry – a position certainly seen as dominant. She looks at the effect of the Latin American iconographic repertoire on creating social imaginaries and representations of power in a world where social interaction relies increasingly more and more on visual and virtual links. On that basis, the certainty of an integral relation between design and the modern, industrial world prompted a series of debates and issues that have underpinned the practice of design until today - Devalle argues - such as the production of useful objects, yet the notion of a difference that separates it from craft. In this tension between continuity and rupture in the production of everyday objects, not only the manual production gets separated from the industrial one, but also design is conceived as a central practice for the industrial economic development. Indeed, Devalle

³ As Gama describes in her work, the first is a group of Brazilian photographers from Rio de Janeiro’s favelas that addresses the criminalisation of poverty in Brazilian society, which causes a series of violent police interventions authorized by the State in their neighbourhoods. The second is a Bangladeshi group, based in a middle class neighbourhood in Dhaka, who are concerned with the image the ‘Western world’ has about them, such as being poor, hungry and frequent victims of natural disasters.

challenges us to reflect around these questions: who are the other of design and how to characterize them; are they the public, the consumers, the prosumers, the citizens, the targets, or what other category? Thus, with Devalle, we see how social transformation requires identifying with the other. “That, the other (the one over whom power is exercised)” – discusses Foucault – “be thoroughly recognized and maintained to the very end as a person who acts; and that, faced with a relationship of power, a whole field of responses, reactions, results, and possible inventions may open up” (1983, 220).

Finally, Emiliana Armano and Tamara Bellone offer in chapter 5 another look, through a photo-video documentation perspective, at the relationship between body postures and the wisdom intrinsic in the practices of dance. In the essay, they posed the question of how Romani dance and music constitute an element of their identity, and in what way it actively contributes to strengthening social ties and to maintaining the vitality of Romani culture. The authors examine the implications of Roma music for mirroring the socio-historical events of a dispersed and often oppressed people, who have extraordinarily and carefully preserved their essential cultural identities. As a “technique of the body” (Mauss 1973), Bellone and Armano argue that Roma dance and music represents both form of collective politics and resistance to social assimilation and cultural standardization. Through this affirmative wisdom, the Roma dance serves on the one side to make themselves and their claims politically visible, while on the other to resist dominant representations in a way that bears comparison with Lefebvre’s concept of the “counter-space” (1991, 381–3).

Whether the exercise of resistance over power was good or bad is open for debate. This edited collection detailed that in both cases power was deployed. The contributors visually traced the effects and described its operations. In this process, resistance has been viewed as a profound attempt to not be subjugated by a series of intersecting relations of power, as an object of “moral orthopaedics” (Foucault 1995, 10).

ENVOI

It is worth noting what is the intent of this book. Our concern is with how power is figured in different cultural representations, socio-economic relations, forms of political expression, and how practices of resistance unfold in the construction of spaces for common identity and agency. Calling for a reevaluation of Foucault’s conception of resistance is not an invitation of triggering a mobilization, but rather to break “the appearance of unanimity which is the greater part of the symbolic force of the dominant discourse” (Bourdieu 1998, viii). And examining

such dominance is no less than research “into the inner meaning of specifically modern life and its products, into the soul of the cultural body,” as Georg Simmel (1950, 409) brilliantly suggested us.

I am grateful to Jerry Kruse for first encouraging me to send out the session proposal for the ISA 2012 Forum that resulted in this book. Together with Timothy Shortell, we had many stimulating conversations about it, often happening at lunch in his brownstone on Ninth Street in Brooklyn’s Park Slope. I also had the good fortune of attending a class of Sociology of Culture taught by Enzo Colombo in the fall of 2010. It was there, in a room of the Milan University Graduate School of Sociology in Via Pace, that the concept of “resistance” was inscribed into my mind, inspiring this work later on. I owe a special thanks to Enzo, Jerry, and Timothy, without whose sustained commitment this book would not have been possible.

August 2014. Chienes (BZ), Italy.

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This book is a collection of essays that brings together researchers working on power relations with visual methods. The text is epistemologically radical in attracting authors who look at culture as a field of struggle, constructed by different points of view. Today, culture can be seen as a specific field in which “power” is exercised. In particular, questions about the nature of power are addressed. The editor suggests two points in the discussion: how is reality constructed, and how is it connected with power? What is the real space for subject freedom? Foucault’s idea of “power” is that it is not a thing, but a relation. Power is not merely repressive (like the use of violent control mechanisms in the pre-modern era), but it is productive as well as an everyday disciplinary practice. Starting from this perspective, we ask whether visual methodology can be used to describe and analyze different forms of power.

These diverse contributions demonstrate how in a time of extensive social change, culture is always a space for resistance. By examining cases in which visual sociology is used as action research, the authors show the affect of visual emergence in grass-roots social activism in the southeast Australian mainland. For instance photography is used to analyze the perceptions natives from a rural community have of their own territory, as in the case of the Huarpe in Argentina. Incorporating comparative analysis from different parts of the Global South, such as the performance of two groups of photographers in Brazil and Bangladesh, they discover images are in tension between “the dominant and the residual” in the critique of design in Latin America. Subjectivities and video-based methodology are also used to explore the intercourse between Roma and Italian culture and expressions of resistance in the form of dance.

With the contribution of Emiliana Armano, Tamara Bellone, Enzo Colombo, Carlos Cowan Ros, Karen Crinall, Verónica Devalle, Fabiene Gama, Beatriz Nussbaumer, and Timothy Shortell



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