

[Back to Issue 5](#)

Invisible Culture

An Electronic Journal for Visual Culture

Introduction: Visual Culture and National Identity

by Lucy Curzon
© 2003

Increasingly, within the domains of film studies, art history, and cultural and communication studies, the role of national identity as a component of visual analysis has become paramount. The work of Timothy Barringer, Robert Burgoyne, David Peters Corbett, Darrell William Davis, Nicholas Mirzoeff, Sarah Street, and Janet Wolff, amongst others, has demonstrated the importance of including, for example, ideas of "Americanness" or "Englishness" in the discussion of painting, photography, and cinema. ¹ The purpose of this issue of *Invisible Culture*, therefore, is to investigate how visual culture can be analyzed as an expression of national identity, including how questions of national identity are negotiated through different forms of visual culture. Visual culture, in this context, is understood not as a mirror that reflects national identity, but rather a complex venue for its interpretation—a site through which populations come into consciousness as members of a particular community.

J.T.H. Connor and Michael G. Rhode explore the complicated relationship between medical photography and national identity, in both high art culture and the broader realm of visual studies. In their essay, *Shooting Soldiers: Civil War Medical Images, Memory, and Identity in America*, the authors analyze paintings and photographs of amputees, wounded soldiers, and victims of disease, all of which served to construct notions of "history" and "war," and ultimately, "Americanness" during and after the Civil War. These images, whether used as forms of medical evidence or accumulated as collectables play a fundamental role, as Connor and Rhode attest, in our understanding of how visual culture has informed American notions of national self.

Daniel Humphrey's analysis of Mikhail Kalatozov's film *Sol Svanetii* (*Salt for Svanetia*) investigates notions of the "primitive" as they relate to early Russian ethnographic filmmaking. In *Saving the Other/Rescuing the Self: Promethean*

Aspirations in Mikhail Kalatozov's *Sol Svanetii*, Humphrey demonstrates the colonialist intentions of the Soviet Union by highlighting the ways in which Kalatozov worked to visually construct the people of Svanetia as primitive or uncivilized, and hence present them as ripe for colonization by Stalin's series of five year plans. Humphrey then extends his analysis by dissecting the more latent intentions of ethnographic filmmaking --that is, beyond the construction of a one-dimensional "other." He describes the colonization project as both homosocial and misogynist, thereby offering a new perspective on *Sol Svanetii*, in particular, and ethnographic film in general.

In her essay *A Case Study in the Construction of Place: Boundary Management as Theme and Strategy in Canadian Art and Life*, Gaile McGregor explores how the Canadian sense of being-in-the-world is represented by notions of enclosure. McGregor argues that a "garrison mentality" exists amongst Canadians, one which manifests itself through the constant reproduction of boundaries in painting, television, and film. In their history, Canadians have a very different relationship to the wilderness in comparison to their American neighbors, and as such, represent themselves as a people who take comfort in the imposition of limits. As McGregor suggests, this idea exists in direct contrast to optimistic American notions of "the frontier" -- its endless attraction and adventure. Instead, Canadians maintain fundamental distinctions between "here" and "there" or "society" and "wilderness." This way of thinking, in turn, allows them to negotiate a distinct form of visual culture.

Daniela Sandler's article, *Incarnate Politics: the Rhetorics of German Reunification in the Architecture of Berlin*, investigates the 1990s renovation of Potsdamer Platz as a way of discussing national identity in newly united Germany. For Sandler, Potsdamer Platz provides a fertile site for examining late twentieth-century capitalist culture, and how this culture has imposed itself upon Germany's sense of national self. Potsdamer Platz -- once a busy, central axis -- was overtaken by the Nazi Party during the Second World War, and was subsequently razed by Allied bombing. The district was further tainted when it was bisected by the Berlin Wall. But now, after the turn of the twenty-first century, the area is densely populated by office buildings, movie theaters, shops, and restaurants. Nothing of its past remains. The mega-corporations that now occupy the area have expunged its history -- good and bad -- and have replaced it, instead, with a façade of simplicity, flatness, in short, superficiality. Sandler connects this act of erasure with the German desire to obliterate the facts of its history, particularly Adolf Hitler and the Holocaust, and in turn, to replace them with the sense of success embodied in capitalist enterprise.

Michele Greet highlights the role of race as a determinant in the career of painter

Wifredo Lam in France in the late 1930s. In *Inventing Wifredo Lam: The Parisian Avant-Garde's Primitivist Fixation*, Greet explores the many ways in which the identity of Lam, who was Afro-Cuban, was constructed using tropes of primitivism." As Greet demonstrates, descriptions of Lam as a tribal or exotic artist, based on the fact that he was partly black and from a colonial society, were largely false, and the Africanizing elements that he employed in his work were no more instinctual or known to him than they were to those who defined him by his subject-matter. They were learned elements, which were part of his engagement with modernism. Nonetheless, during the 1930s, when France was eager to present a unified front against Nazi Germany, Stalinist Russia, and Fascist Italy, the need for fixed identities was paramount. Hence, as Greet argues, Lam became a conduit for those desiring to maintain the boundaries between Frenchness and otherness.

1. See Timothy Barringer, "Fabricating Africa: Livingstone and the Visual Image" in J. MacKenzie, ed., *David Livingstone and the Victorian Encounter with Africa* (National Portrait Gallery, 1996) and "Imperial Visions: Responses to India and Africa in British Art and Design" in John M. Mackenzie, ed., *The Victorians: A Centenary Exhibition* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 2001); Robert Burgoyne, *Film Nation: Hollywood Looks at US History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); David Peters Corbett, *The Modernity of English Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997) and his edited volume (with Ysanne Holt and Fiona Russell) *The Geographies of Englishness: Landscape and the National Past in English Art, 1880-1940* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002); Darrell William Davis, *Picturing Japaneseness: Monumental Style, National Identity, Japanese Film...* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Nicholas Mirzoeff, *Diaspora and National Culture: Representing Africans and Jews* (New York: Routledge, 1999) and *Silent Poetry: Deafness, Sign and Visual Culture in Modern France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); and Janet Wolff, *Resident Alien: Feminist Cultural Criticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995) and *AngloModern: Painting and Modernity in England and the U.S.* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003 [forthcoming])

[Back to Issue 5](#)

[Home](#)

[Book Reviews](#)

[People](#)

[Facts](#)

[Submissions](#)