watching babylon

the war in iraq and global visual culture

nicholas mirzoeff

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Most of us experienced the war against Iraq as spectators, watching the conflict on TV, the Internet or in print media. In this urgent and compelling book, Nicholas Mirzoeff examines what it was like to watch the war, and how the visualized nature of the conflict signalled a consolidation of a new kind of globalized power, of which we are all subjects.

Mirzoeff traces connections between the doctrine of pre-emptive attack that justified "the war on terror" and the campaign against Iraq and what he calls "the empire of camps", pre-figured in the network of punitive internment centres, such as those at Guantánamo Bay, Woomera and Belmarsh, where presumed "others" – migrants, refugees and suspected "enemy combatants" – are imprisoned indefinitely, rendered invisible.

Linking three figurations of Babylon – ancient Babylon, in present-day Iraq, the metaphorical Babylon of Western modernity, and everyday life in the modern suburb of Babylon, New York, Mirzoeff shows how the past and its metaphors overlap with and inform the present. Arguing passionately against a neatly divided world and the stark choice of "with us" or "against us" – whether "us" is the United States or al-Qa'ida – he suggests instead alternative ways of living, outside "Babylon" and the empire of camps.

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Prologue: Babylonian modernity

When the "shock and awe" stage of the invasion of Iraq began, I was watching TV from an exercise bike in a Long Island gym. Like most American gyms, it is arranged so that those performing the mind-numbing tasks of cardio-vascular exercise can distract themselves by staring at televisions. Usually these are tuned to a variety of stations giving the viewer a stroll through the endlessly varied yet endlessly similar world of cable television in America. On this day, all the images were simply the same. Above station identification logos and text descriptors highlighted on brightly colored backgrounds, intense white flashes tinged with orange filled the screens. The high-quality pictures provided by Abu Dhabi television removed the usual sense of distance offered by grainy night-vision shots and the images were truly shocking. Ahead of me was a middle-aged white man pumping an elliptical trainer, wearing what I can only call a Military Metal T-shirt and a brand-new army baseball cap worn backwards. As the exercise soldier cheered each explosion, I realized that his clothes had been bought for watching the war. As I watched him watching, I became aware that I had nothing to say back to him that might deflate his bombast. This was literally the exercise of power. Apart from short comments from the man on the next machine, whom he directly addressed, the TV soldier had the floor to himself. For all the deconstructive, feminist, anti-racist, visual culture theory that I have at my disposal, there was no way to counter the sweating, exulting triumph of the

war watcher. To call attention to the deaths of Iraqi civilians or to mention that this attack lacked the authority of the United Nations would simply have added to his delight.

Yet the war was not a new beginning. Like hanging, war concentrates the mind. In this light, the war marks the end of a certain moment in the development of the current form of globalization in which a new visual Tower of Babel fell. This new Babel wanted to make a place for the visual above the plains of the text from which a new view of the world might be had. Like the first tower, it was built from below to challenge the place of High Culture. This spiraling ziggurat was hailed in 1994 by W.J.T. Mitchell as the "pictorial turn," presenting a new challenge to the humanities in general.[1] As digital culture interfaced with globalization, the visual turn promised to be the key location for its interpretation. It seemed that the new hybridity of globalization could be represented in what Sarat Maharaj called "the new international visual Esperanto."[2] Certain possibilities seemed at hand from the displacement of the text as the prime locus of intellectual work to the creation of new post-disciplinary forms of

Figure I.1 Night-time bombing of Baghdad
(Courtesy of REUTERS/Goran Tomasevic)

university teaching, a democratization of visual media and a move towards the emancipation from menial work that cybernetic automation has been promising since the 1950s. It is not my intention to disavow those hopes but rather to suggest that while the visual may be the locus of globalization, it now resists the viewer, rather than being a place where the viewer might resist or refuse that globalization.

This book does not, however, perform that ritual "exposure" of media images of the war as unrepresentative. It is rather concerned with the consolidation of power as a visualized model of reactionary globalization and the place of people as visual subjects within that system. For visual culture concerns itself with what I call visual subjects: people defined as the agents of sight (regardless of their biological capacity to see) and as the objects of certain discourses of visuality. In short, I seek to establish the possibilities for visual subjectivity in everyday life under the conditions of the permanent state of exception established by the war on terror and exemplified by the war in Iraq. This book examines what it means to watch images of the exercise of power on a global scale from specific localities. It takes as its frame the war in Iraq from the beginning of hostilities to the capture of Saddam Hussein, which is used not as marking an end to the fighting, but as a similarly powerful visual symbol as that of the first explosions. Whether the insurgency continues apace or is now to be contained to sporadic incidents, it has become clear that the United States intends to withdraw from the country as soon as possible, beginning in 2004. No doubt surprises are ahead but it is now both possible and necessary to begin the task of rethinking the global imaginary in the light of the Iraq war. This book concentrates on the related questions of watching, the status of the visual event, and the visualized model of power in global culture, without pretending to exhaust all that needs to be said about the war. Its concentration is the visual media, my area of expertise, rather than political or military policy. It has certainly become hard to separate these areas in neat disciplinary fashion but my source material is drawn from the media rather than from government documents or archives, most of which are as yet classified

in any event. Rather than try and go "behind" the war image, as exemplified by the political engagement of Noam Chomsky, I examine what it means to watch images of the exercise of power on a global scale from specific localities.

As a citizen of the European Union, who watched the war in the United States, there is no point in denying that mine is a Western viewpoint, as much as I try and disidentify with it. At the same time, this excuse should not be used to contain the analysis of the effects of the war. I approach this problem of framing through the figure of Babylon, which plays the role for me that the Arcades of nineteenth-century Paris performed for the critic Walter Benjamin in his 1930s study of modernity – that is to say, a physical and historical space that is nonetheless profoundly disjunctured and ambiguous, interspersing the contemporary and the future it is trying to dream with the primal past. Situated in the Euphrates river valley, in what is now Iraq, Babylon represents the historical and mythical city that was the site of the Tower of Babel and a key metropolis and sometime capital of the Assyro-Babylonian empire from the twenty-fourth century BCE to the sixth century CE. However, I will use "Babylon" here to refer to the complex cultural resonances implied by the mythic and historical experience that the name implies, rather than in the specific manner of the historian. Babylon is a metaphor for complexity, exile, decadence that has resonated throughout Western modernity as well as the site of a series of historical and mythical experiences. It was the place of exile for the Jews and the imaginary locus of similar displacement for Africans in slavery. The Babylonian captivity of the Jews began with the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem in 597 BCE, reinforced by a second wave of exiles after the destruction of the Temple by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BCE, and ended with the capture of the city by Cyrus of Persia in 579. For later writers trying to place Judaism and Christianity in tension as opposites, Babylon was an irritating complication. Most, like Hegel, mentioned it and then ignored the ensuing consequences. For a writer like Matthew Arnold trying to define a tension between the Hebrew and the Greek view of

the world, Babylon was an annoying complication that could be forgotten.[3] But it is exactly that sense that Babylon has always been there but refuses to fall into the grand binary schemes that interests me about it. It should be added that al-Hillah, the city nearest to the site of Babylon, was the scene of serious fighting in the First World War, during the brief but violent anti-colonial revolt against the British in 1920 and again in the 2003 invasion.

From this dynamic mixture of myth, history and dream, I have taken several key ideas. In Rastafari, the syncretic popular religion of the Caribbean that has had widespread influence in popular culture through reggae music, Babylon is the figure for global capitalism and its police. So in thinking about the war in Babylon, I have naturally been drawn to reflections on the current state of globalization. As is so often said, the global is known via the local and there is a township called Babylon on Long Island, near where I watched the war. This Babylon is the site of a specific local vernacular watching that addresses the peculiarity of American visual subjectivity. And finally, according to family legend, I am of Babylonian descent, in the sense that my Sephardic Jewish ancestors claimed to have been exiled to Babylon and to have moved from there to Central Asia in more recent times. My investment is everywhere in the book, for better or worse, and is that of a person who was not only passionately against the war but also felt that it marked a transition even as compared with the other wars of emergent globalization in Kosovo, Somalia, Sierra Leone, Indonesia, Chechnya and so on. Babylon is, then, what Walter Benjamin called a "dream image" that makes it possible to think through the tensions and ambiguities it embodies. These include the sense that Babylon is at once the pre-history of the present and a descriptor of the utterly contemporary; that it represents the popular but also autocratic empire; it is the place of exile and the place where the Babylonian Talmud was written that engenders a profound sense of belonging and modernity for writers as distinct as the British novelist of multiculturalism Zadie Smith and Leon Wieseltier, the sage of neo-Judaism.[4] These embodied contradictions form what I call Babylonian modernity, the ruins of

the present lying amid pasts that are not yet past and paths to a future that is yet to come.

After the flood

Let's begin at the oldest place to begin again: after the flood. Babel was the city built after the flood that cannot be recuperated into the West's narrative of itself without complicating it. In Genesis, the figure of Nimrod the hunter inexplicably appears after the flood, building Babylon with the help of giants. In fact, the legends of ancient Mesopotamia celebrated this secret knowledge, so that one of Gilgamesh's attributes is that "He brought back a tale of times before the Flood."[5] In a sense, Babylon and its Tower of Babel was the moment of original complication in which the first language gave way to the mutually unintelligible languages of historical time. The hubris of Babel was not just its unification of language but its aspiration to the divine viewpoint, what cultural theorist Donna Haraway calls the "god trick." In this case, God wasn't having it. The Biblical account, early in Genesis, suggests a different relationship of the divine and the human than the omniscience and omnipotence promoted by today's fundamentalisms of all stripes. The builders of Babel wanted to "make ourselves a name" independently of God. God therefore has to "come down" to Babel to discover what the Babylonians are doing and then he disperses them "over the face of all the earth." In that sense, we are all Babylonians. But the brief Biblical account leaves more questions open than it answers. Why did God not know what they were doing? And if Hebrew was the originary language spoken in the Garden of Eden, as Jewish tradition insists, what forbidden language were the Babylonians speaking? It is this indeterminacy that the returning legend of Babylon inserts into the overweening narratives of power and the powerful, even as it is a metaphor for the inevitable decline of empires. Jacques Derrida, the philosopher of deconstruction, has argued that Babel "exhibits an incompletion, the impossibility of finishing, of totalizing, of saturating."[6] That is to say, Babel represents both the first

Figure I.2 Nimrod building Babylon
            (Courtesy of The British Museum)

deconstruction and the inevitability of deconstruction, however dominant that which is to be deconstructed may appear.

If the 1990s claimed to see a visual Tower of Babel being built, however optimistically, it was not, like the original tower, destroyed by God but rather by the converging forces of the military-visual complex and the globalized economy. The obverse of its

destruction was the 9-11 attack on the World Trade Center, another jealous protest against secular globalization. In Derrida's discussion of what he calls "the jealousy of God," evidenced in the deconstruction of Babel, he finds himself reminded of James Joyce's aphorism in his novel *Finnegan's Wake*: "And he war." And so we war over Babel again. The "he war" has reinstated war as the proper affect of an aggressive heterosexuality that displaced the Babylonian excesses of what queer theorist Judith Halberstam has called the transgender moment of the 1990s. It situated the nation state as the proper arbiter of globalization, especially over the global work-force. "He war" tears down the panopticon as being dangerously close to the Tower of Babel and puts in its stead the invisible camp for refugees or so-called "enemy combatants," such as the appropriately named Camp X-Ray at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. Flesh is invisible to the he war. The films for these times are those in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001–2003), in which a Christianized replay of the Second World War sets out to destroy the tower. The exercise soldier I met in Long Island felt himself empowered as visual subject by the sight of Baghdad being bombed, recognizing a "he war" when he saw one. His screen was filled with what Walter Benjamin called the "empty, homogeneous now" of capital in which he felt trapped between the world wars. I see the spectacle created by the war in a different form. This new fall of Babel was an inter-section of past, present and future created by the collisions and dis-ruptions of global capital. For in German, as Joyce knew very well, "war" means "was." In the war, what was is, and will be again. This spectral spectacle is rife with the implications of Babylon.

When rebuilt by Nebuchadnezzar in the sixth century BCE, Babylon declared its own "behold in awe" policy with its magnif-icent decorations, including the dramatic Ishtar Gate to the city now preserved in the Pergamon Museum, Berlin. The gate was sacred to the goddess Ishtar and led to the processional way used on ceremonial occasions. All were decorated with glazed tiles forming intricate floral patterns on a deep blue background and bas-relief animal sculptures of lions, dragons and donkeys. Alongside the gate Nebuchadnezzar placed a cuneiform inscription

declaring his role in creating the gates that reads in part: "I magnif-
icently adorned them with luxurious grandeur for all mankind to
behold in awe." It seems that imperialism has learned no new tricks
in the intervening 2500 years, with the only twist being that the
Babylonians are now the object of "behold in awe" from outside
rather than from within. Babylon is the legend of the fallen city
of grandeur that haunts and inspires modernity at once. Babylon,
in this view, is that part of the ancient that is insistently present
in the modern but refuses to be accommodated into the usual
binary distinctions, like past and present. Let's call this in-between
time Babylonian modernity, for short. So now I find myself imag-
ining a complex identification with historic and legendary Babylon
(not that of Saddam Hussein) and a disidentification with the
Babylon of the West. Negotiating Babylon now calls for an ethical,
decentered politics and poetics of everyday life in which the visual
is as good a means to think as any other, without claiming to tower
over other media, or adopting a false modesty in fallen times.

   Thinking through Babylon as a metaphor and as a location might
enable certain modes of theoretical practice that often seem radi-
cally different to work together. That is to say, the epistemic and
discursive practices analyzed by the philosopher Michel Foucault
seem to hinge around certain profound shifts such as the change
between 1750 and 1830 from the public practice of spectacular
punishment by torture to the disciplinary prison in which corporal
punishment was reduced and conducted out of sight. Edward Said
acknowledged Foucault's influence in forming his notion of
Orientalism, a (Western) binary distinction between the West and
its presumed Others in the mythical "Orient," formed from an
imaginary fusion of the Middle East, North Africa and indeed any
part of the world with the requisite degree of exoticism from the
European point of view. However, Orientalism can at times seem
to be a relatively unchanging aspect of Western thought from the
late Middle Ages to the present. Unsettling all such binary distinc-
tions is Jacques Derrida's theory of *différance* that he understands
as being intrinsic to all Western metaphysics. By *différance*, Derrida
refers to that which is in difference and deferral at once, terms that

are expressed by the same verb *différer* in French. By changing the participle *différence* into the neologism *différance*, Derrida means to suggest that meaning oscillates between difference and its postponement or deferral. In Stuart Hall's view, this is to suggest that "without relations of difference, no representation could occur. But what is then constituted within representation is always open to being deferred, staggered, serialized."[7] One can think of "Babylon" as that part of the "West" that forms a serial mode for the representation of difference that is always deferred. Babylon is, as Derrida writes, the original complication of Western religion and a key player in ancient history. It has been a component of Orientalism in all times but it was rediscovered by Western archaeology in the resonant year 1789, the beginning of the French Revolution. Babylon was in this sense also a product of modern industrial society. In short, medium and long-term views, Babylon is, then, a frame within which differing methodologies and histories can be productively thought alongside each other to generate knowledges that might be in that way different to the received, disciplinary information that surrounds us. I suggest that it offers an epistemology of the visual. That is to say, what we can learn from this intersection of pasts, present and future is the current status of visual knowledge and its possibilities. What results is then a politics, rather than a universal theorization, like the master-slave dialectic. To get to that point, I need to outline how Babylon is to be watched in more detail.

Watching Babylon

As Edward Said writes, reflecting on the twenty-fifth anniversary of his classic publication *Orientalism*, on which the present work is very much dependent:

> Perhaps you will say that I am making too many abrupt transitions between humanistic interpretation on the one hand and foreign policy on the other, and that a modern technological

society, which along with unprecedented power possesses the Internet and F-16 fighter jets, must in the end be commanded by formidable technical policy experts, like Donald Rumsfeld and Richard Perle. But what has really been lost is a sense of the density and interdependence of human life, which can neither be reduced to a formula nor brushed aside as irrelevant.[8]

I take that to mean that the renewed emphasis on disciplinarity and formal skills in the academy leads us to forget what the goal of our scholarship properly is. At the same time, it points to the argument of Hardt and Negri that there is no available "outside" in the present moment of globalization.[9] Every locality is also a part of the global. Yet, as *Orientalism* reminds us, all localities are by no means equal. Your view of Babylon depends very much on the media you might have been able or willing to watch, which are no longer limited by national boundaries. Rather than provide some lofty and probably unattainable overview of the war, my goal is to provoke debate and discussion on the intersected place of the viewer and the image in the visual event. Image seems an inadequate word to deal with the density of the visual in the state of exception. I have therefore adopted Foucault's concept of the event. The event is the effect of a network in which subjects operate and which in turn conditions their freedom of action. What took place in the gym during the American attack on Baghdad was a small example, and September 11 was the apogee of all such events. But as Foucault argued, "the problem is at once to distinguish among events, to differentiate the networks and levels to which they belong, and to reconstitute the lines along which they are connected and engender one another."[10] He further suggested that the study of events "works by constructing around the singular event, analyzed as process, a 'polygon' or, rather, 'polyhedron' of intelligibility, the number of whose faces is not given in advance and never properly be taken as finite" (227). That is to say, any given event can be approached from a potentially infinite number of viewpoints and must be framed within a series to be intelligible, as I am doing here by watching the war from Babylon.

There are, one might say, three intersected layers to be prised apart in visual events, as if one were working backwards in a digital imaging program like Adobe Photoshop. These are the locality of the viewer, the contents and contexts of the image, and the global imaginary within which the viewer attempts to makes sense of the screen-images. In this book, each layer is considered in its own section, beginning with my Long Island location as a means of thinking about the circulation anxiety of the American suburbs to which the pictures of the war were most crucially addressed. This viewing location has intense peculiarities that are rarely reflected in external critiques of America. While such critique is certainly politically justified, the hegemonic American dreamworld of Sports Utility Vehicles, superstores and hyperhouses is not the suburbs of *Dallas*, *American Beauty* (1999) or *The Ice Storm* (1997), still less that of the novels of Philip Roth or John Updike. Unlike in Vietnam, extensive coverage of the war in Iraq sustained the level of public consent in the United States, despite vociferous mass opposition. During the invasion of Iraq from March to May 2003, it seems likely that there were more images produced – whether on television, as photography or on the Internet – than in any other comparable period of history. There is a need to engage in some extended visual thinking about what all that watching meant.

Following the precedent of feminist media studies, I mean by watching all the things we do when we watch television: looking, not looking, listening, not listening, eating, making a phone call, working, doing laundry, child care, reading and so on. In short this is a vernacular watching, taking everyday life as its domain. While everyday life has been the focus for feminist and cultural studies for decades, I will suggest that the Iraq war marked a specific moment in the consolidation of globalization as entailing the greatest possible freedom of movement for capital, while restricting the movement of individuals to the circulation of domestic consumption. The resulting circulation anxiety has created a new form of visual subjectivity. Understanding this sensibility will entail a politics and poetics of implication and intersection, moving beyond

single media analysis to map a vernacular watching. I borrow the term vernacular from recent calls for studies of vernacular photography, meaning photographs taken by ordinary people and used in everyday situations. If this project has certainly been ventured before – for example, in Situationism, feminist film studies and soap opera analysis – it now needs to be rethought in the context of a digital and global culture of hegemonic capitalism. Watching needs to be thought of as an activity that is necessarily intersected and implicates both other forms of watching and other activities altogether. Watching is a less structured mode of analysis than gaze theory but it has the advantage of being more grounded. At the same time, that watching is haunted by its ancient (and not so ancient) pasts that refuse to simply go to ground. In the Pergamon Museum, there is a Babylonian bowl dating from 2000 BCE. The Hebrew lettering around the inside of the bowl spells out the *Shema Yisroel* (Hear, O Israel), one of the fundamental tenets of Judaism. The bowl is guarded against evil spirits by an anthropomorphic figure drawn on the bottom in a startlingly free fashion, compared with the hierarchic formalities of Assyro-Babylonian art of the period. Vernacular watching is at least as old as this bowl.

Section 1 of this book ("Babylon, Long Island") is devoted to analyzing the mass of television, video, photographic and film images of the war as constituting a network of events. It is not my intent to unmask these images for their deceitful intent, as is so ritualistically done in each case of international conflict in the age of mass media, but to think about the ways in which images have become weapons in the military-visual complex. The opacity of the image in war refused a response: it was a smart weapon in its own right. War images seem to be, like the stealth bombers, hard, sharp-edged and opaque, designed to evade all forms of radar, physical and cultural. Their immunity to criticism is in part a function of their sheer proliferation, especially in times of political crisis. As the media abandon the goal of broadcasting for ever more specific forms of narrow-casting – a pitch to a specific group with shared beliefs, identity or interests – there is always another image available. At the same time, audiences have become both aware

of the possibility of manipulating images by technical means and of the wide range of possible interpretations of any given image. The result is a banality of images, to borrow a phrase from philosopher Hannah Arendt, in which the very awareness of the input of the viewer in creating meaning has paradoxically weakened that response. For if all meanings are personal response, the argument goes, then no one meaning has higher priority. It is however important to stress that this banality of images is no accident, but the result of a deliberate effort by those fighting the war to reduce its visual impact by saturating our senses with non-stop indistinguishable and undistinguished images. This policy has had the unintended consequence of making it very hard to create an image of victory. Even the video of the captured Saddam Hussein being subjected to the biopower of America in his medical examination seemed to fade from the memory very quickly. Benjamin responded to the crisis of meaning produced by an excess of information in the First World War by turning to the epic, a form of interactive story-telling that involved "hand, eye, and soul." One present location of such interactivity that has become increasingly significant in recent years is the graphic novel and I contrast examples from the United States, Iran and Israel as means of what Benjamin called preparing to survive civilization.

In Section 3 ("The empire of camps"), I then locate this practice of watching within a new model of globalized power in action. Rather than being based on the disciplinary model of the prison, or the open-ended possibilities of a networked society, the new empire of camps, as I call it, takes the camp for refugees or migrants as its preferred model of social organization. The empire of camps makes its others invisible in a closed-circuit society, seeking to create a reactionary mode of global power in which capital is entirely without restraints but the global workforce is vigorously policed by a detain-and-deport national government. Critic Susan Buck-Morss rightly claims these kinds of interconnections demand the formation of a "global public sphere."[11] Our access to that global public comes from local situated viewing points like Babylon, Long Island, via the non-stop stream of images

generated by globalization. Attempts to constitute such a global public should not therefore begin by rejecting questions of difference in favor of a renewed universal.[12] Whatever globalization presently is, it is certainly an imaginary community fissured, like all communities, by gender, sexual and ethnic difference that cannot be wished away. But that is not to call for a simple return to the politics of identity, which have been found wanting in the present crisis. What Said used to call humanism, I will consider as ethics and the relationship to the other, the "ethics of hospitality,"[13] not in the abstract but as applied to a refugee, an asylum seeker or a prisoner. This practice extends and develops the cosmopolitanism of the Enlightenment with reference to the past of the Talmudic tradition, the present crisis and the hope for an ethical future. If there is a certain universality to this concept, it is always encountered and enacted in specific circumstances that inevitably put difference into play.

The visual subject

So let's return to my inability to address the exercise soldier. At the moment of viewing, neither of us really knew what we were seeing, or what its consequences might be. At the same time, this failure of address recalls the now hegemonic theory of the "interpellation" of the subject, developed by the French philosopher Louis Althusser in the 1960s. Althusser described interpellation, or hailing, as something "which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing 'Hey, you there!'"[14] When we respond to that call by looking round or asking "Do you mean me?" we recognize our interpellation. Derived from Hegel's theory of the dialectic, Althusser's theory of ideology was designed to help us understand how subjects are produced and reproduced. This recognition is the means by which an individual locates itself in time and space. Yet inherent in that little moment is also a visual surveillance that leads to a sense of detection or recognition. The actions of the subject are suspicious but their actions clearly exist. Rather than an exchange between

individuals on foot, as presumed in Althusser's theory of inter-pellation, his former colleague Jacques Rancière has recently argued that the modern anti-spectacle now dictates that there is nothing to see and that instead one must keep moving, keep circulating and keep consuming: "The police are above all a certitude about what is there, or rather, about what is not there: 'Move along, there's nothing to see.'"[15] The police interpellate us not as individuals but as part of traffic, which must move on by that which is not to be seen. One of the new camps for migrants or refugees concealed in a remote area of the countryside is a good example of this object of visuality, which is there and not there at once.

Here we find ourselves at that crux of time, space and visuality which is at the heart of this project. For, as Rancière continues:

> The police say there is nothing to see, nothing happening, nothing to be done, but to keep moving, circulating; they say that the space of circulation is nothing but the space of circulation. Politics consists in transforming that space of circulation into the space of the manifestation of a subject: be it the people, workers, citizens. It consists in reconfiguring that space, what there is to do there, what there is to see or name. It is a dispute about the division of what is perceptible to the senses.

That is to say, it is an epistemology of the subject, defined by its knowledge rather than its Being. Insofar as that dispute concerns the visual, necessarily interfaced with the other senses, this politics of bringing the subject into presence in space is visual culture. Placing the visual subject in the zone of circulation described by Rancière suggests that the contemporary visual subject is not quite Benjamin's nineteenth-century flâneur, or dandy, observing while unobserved. And while visual agency might interestingly be explored by psychoanalysis, this is not a properly psychoanalytic gaze theory because it deals with individuals in relation to specific discursive practices. On the other side of the equation, while Foucault's theory of panopticism clearly deals with people as the

object of visuality, my revision of his vital work (see Section 3) allows a measure of visual agency to the visual subject, although that possibility is a form of "weak" power, to use Michel de Certeau's distinction. The opponent of the war, like myself, watching the non-stop stream of images from Iraq is a good example of the visual subject, a person all but overwhelmed by visual materials that they cannot control but cannot refuse to watch. For when the police say there is nothing to see, they are not telling the truth; nor are we supposed to infer that they are. Rather they mean, "while there is something to see, you have no authority or need to look at it." By being simply a citizen, one does not necessarily attain the full authority of the visual subject, the person who is allowed and required to look in all circumstances.

There is a noticeable global divide according to degrees of visual subjectivity that requires its own activism and engagement. To even be able to watch, as I watched the exercise soldier watching, implies a certain position within the hierarchies of globalization that can in one way be measured by relationships to visual media. The global population is divided into roughly two halves, one of which has access to television in some way and one that does not. Needless to say the section that is not watching television is quite closely matched with that half of the world population that has yet to make a telephone call, exists on three dollars a day or less, and does not have regular access to clean drinking water. The television-watching group is by no means homogeneous. Someone watching al-Jazeera is going to have had a very different experience of the war in Iraq than the habitué of Rupert Murdoch's Fox News. This group can further be arranged into three sectors according to their overall wealth and power. Within it are the 500 million people with access to the Internet, the global middle class. A somewhat smaller but hard to quantify sector is constituted by those people making and using digital or moving image themselves, using camcorders and digital cameras. Analog cameras are now relegated to the back of American technology stores, although they are still the basic democratic tool of visual imagery on a global basis. Dominating the visual sector of globalization are a very small

number of people and corporations who own the visual means of production, such as Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, the ABC/Disney empire, Microsoft and AOL TimeWarner. With such former heavyweights as Ted Turner having been eliminated from this elite sector, it can safely be said that for all the proliferation of visual images, films and television programming, the ownership of these media is more concentrated than it has ever been.

But not so fast.[16] To think of watching the war against Iraq in only these terms would be to think from the point of view of the police. Seen from the ground in Baghdad, the "shock and awe" campaign was no shock, and whatever awe was inspired dissipated quickly. Even after the end of the first Gulf War in 1991, there had been almost constant warfare in the "no-fly" zones created in northern and southern Iraq, while the economic blockade had caused great hardship. As the fighting progressed and it became clear that initial claims to have eliminated the Iraqi leadership were exaggerated, the Western audience also became adjusted to the sight of explosions. As I write with the war officially over but with more Iraqi and Occupation casualties by the day, and with the search for weapons of mass destruction thoroughly discredited, it's hard to feel awe. Instead of moral and visual clarity, all is confusion. The most striking example of this visual revisionism has come in the new version of the carefully choreographed announcement by President George W. Bush of the end of major hostilities on May 1, 2003. Standing on the USS *Abraham Lincoln*, the president spoke under a large banner reading "Mission Accomplished." However, by late October the number of American personnel killed in action after the declared end of the war had come to exceed those lost during the official war period. At this point, the president disavowed his own banner, claiming that it was created at the instigation of the aircraft carrier's crew. In this short space of time, one of the most striking visual images of the war has now come to convey at least two very different meanings, even within the American pro-war audience. In order to place another image in the public attention, Bush flew to Baghdad at Thanksgiving to celebrate the holiday with the American troops, during which time

he presented them with a turkey. The inevitable photograph was seen across the United States. It later emerged that this turkey was a fake, created by the military kitchen staff to generate a sense of holiday atmosphere. By now, one began to sense that faking it was in fact official policy, as Naomi Klein has argued: "This was the year [2003] when fakeness ruled: fake rationales for war, a fake President dressed as a fake soldier declaring a fake end to combat and then holding up a fake turkey."[17] In short, any attempt to think critically about watching the war will have to roam much further than the official images of war and their counterparts in the alternative media if it is to produce anything more than the visual equivalent of an echo.

Babylonian modernity II

So this book is the product of an interplay between the dream image of Babylon and the visual subject in the current emergency. This dynamic is given urgency by the important, if constantly unsettling, place of Babylon in and as the visual image of modernity that contains and evokes the ancient past. The complexities of space and time experienced in modern visuality that generate the image of Babylon do so in a conscious and unconscious echo of ancient traditions. At the same time, modernity's visual character has consistently seemed to recall Babylon since the beginnings of industrial capitalism. The nineteenth-century American writer Ralph Waldo Emerson was struck by the new style adopted by his friend Thomas Carlyle in the latter's history of the French Revolution. Writing in 1837, Emerson told Carlyle: "I think you see in pictures." Musing on the effect, he added that "it has the aroma of Babylon," by which he meant the complexity of the modern metropolis.[18] Modernity, as epitomized by the French Revolution, was in this view at once visualized and Babylonian.

One man who linked the two realms of urban culture was William Henry Fox Talbot, the British inventor of photography. Talbot became sufficiently expert in cuneiform writing that he was

the adjudicator of a debate over the deciphering of the ancient language for the Royal Academy in 1857.[19] Emerson's sense that the world-picture of modernity was Babylonian can be traced throughout modern Western art history from William Blake's prophetic evocations of the *Whore of Babylon* to Edgar Degas' early fascination with the Babylonian queen Semiramis (1861) and the popular nineteenth-century genre of Orientalist painting that was filled with images of Babylon. One central example is the British artist Edwin Long's notorious painting *The Babylonian Marriage Market* (1875), at that time the most expensive painting ever sold. Long's painting depicted a slave market for women, with one woman being unveiled on the block as the others wait for their turn. The conceit of the piece depends on the invisibility of the unrobed woman whose back faces the viewer. Her beauty has to be judged from the pleased reactions of the watching Babylonian men. The anthropological visualization continued with the row of waiting women, who formed a racialized color scale, from the "low" point of a dark skin, via the Asian, to the "high" of the white woman. This mix of race, gender and sexuality in a historicized frame was perhaps the perfect expression of high Victorian establishment sensibility.

This fascination was given life by the invention of Assyria, Babylon and Mesopotamia in the archaeology of the nineteenth century, during which the historical sites of Nineveh and Babylon were first excavated (see Section 3).[20] These discoveries were themselves influenced by the depiction of Babylon in Western art, such as the monumental canvases of the British artist John Martin and his *Fall of Babylon* (1819). This painting was so realistic in its perspectival effects that a barrier had to be placed in front of it to stop people from trying to walk into it. The painting served as the archetype both for the architectural reconstruction of the site itself and its depiction in even quite recent historical accounts. Its intense realism was adopted for the mise-en-scène of the classic silent film *Intolerance* (1916), directed by D.W. Griffith.[21] The Babylonian sense of modernity that Martin had visualized thus influenced the material remains of Assyro-Babylonian culture, the

definitive modern medium of cinema and the historical represen-
tation of Babylon. Griffith also used Long's *Babylonian Marriage
Market* to create the mise-en-scène for the attempted sale of his
heroine The Mountain Girl, a character whose rural innocence and
fortitude contrasts strongly with the decadent Babylonians. She is
rescued from the block by the intervention of Belshazzar, who
gives her a cuneiform tablet indicating her freedom. In turn, the
scenes of Babylonian decadence in *Intolerance* have become a cine-
matic archetype, evoked most recently in *The Matrix Reloaded*
(2003), when the rebel city Zion has a rave in defiance of the
approaching war machines. This image makes sense because Zion
is not Israel but the site of exile from the devastated "real world"
dominated by the machines. In this insistent interplay of "image"
and "reality," Babylon is persistently recreated as a visual event
that is neither simply fictitious nor wholly real in the common-
sense meaning of the term but evokes the fractured and layered
sense of the experience of modernity.

It is in this sense that Babylon has also played an important role
in religion and other theories of anti-modernity. It has been a pow-
erful figure in modern Christianity, whose spectre has haunted
modernity just as much as that of communism. In the writer
Edmund Gosse's memoir of growing up in evangelical Victorian
England, his own sense of scientific rationality was strongly
contrasted with the evangelical beliefs of his parents who were
members of the Plymouth Brethren. The one amusement his par-
ents permitted themselves was to read the Book of Revelations as
a history of the then present. Gosse recalled how, aided by popular
published guides to the text,

> They were helped by these guides to recognise in wild Oriental
> visions direct statements regarding Napoleon III and Pope Pius
> IX and the King of Piedmont, historic figures which they
> conceived of as foreshadowed, in language which admitted of
> plain interpretation, under the names of denizens of Babylon
> and companions of the Wild Beast.[22]

This sense that the wilder passages of the Bible predicted the upheavals of modernity and the triumph of the elect has dominated American evangelical Christianity in the past thirty years. During the war in Iraq, Tim LaHaye, a self-proclaimed scholar of Biblical prophecy, published *Babylon Rising*, the latest in his series of Christian novels that have sold over 50 million copies. *Babylon Rising* is a new departure for LaHaye, written in conjunction with Greg Dinallo, a secular thriller writer. It tells the story of Michael Murphy, a Christian (male) Lara Croft, whose expert knowledge of Biblical archaeology leads him into a conflict with the evil Talon over a magical figure created at the time of Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon. Its evangelical, eschatological view of history is radically different from that of the secular mainstream. It is shared by Christian historians like Forrest Watson and James Draper, who write on US history from an evangelical perspective:

> For a historian who does not believe in God, the facts in this [book] will have been put together in a most unscientific manner. But if you accept the fact of a God who controls history, the conclusion is obvious. The providence of God was at work.[23]

It is this sense of divinely determined history that guided the second invasion of Iraq, signalled to the faithful by George W. Bush when he cited the anti-Babylonian prophet Isaiah in his notorious victory speech of May 1, 2003. In Isaiah, we read that "Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the beauty of the Chaldee's excellency, shall be as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah . . . her time is near to come and her days shall not be prolonged" (Isaiah, Chapter 13, verse 19). This association of Babylon with the legendary deviants of Sodom is a resonance that echoes through the recent war (see Section 3, "The empire of camps"). Even those working in the secular media adopted this prophetic approach. CNN journalist Sandra Mackey opined in a short account of Saddam Hussein's career that:

the kings of Assyria never accepted the reality that empires, like modern states, survive only through a measure of consent by the governed. Like a series of ancient Saddam Husseins, each failed to lay the basis of a durable state.[24]

The implication of the passage is that the rulers of the region have been and remain terminally incapable of creating an effective nation state, due to their inability to achieve "consent," thus requiring the assistance of outsiders.

Babylon as an image of exile has also been a metaphor for the site of resistance and recuperation. To support his argument that it was in America that the Irish had learned "what indomitable forces nationality possesses," the playwright, novelist and wit Oscar Wilde put Irishness in play both with Jewish and African diasporas, the former directly, the latter by implication. In a review of W.B. Yeats' collection of Irish fairy tales, Wilde opined in 1889 that "what captivity was to the Jews, exile has been to the Irish."[25] This comparison was more often made between African exile in the Americas than with the Irish so Wilde achieved a measure of surprise with his figure, while continuing his fascination with reading the modern as a return of the ancient. The currency of the metaphor of Jewish exile was attested in a pamphlet written in Sierra Leone for publication in Liverpool in 1898 by the pan-Africanist Edward Wilmot Blyden, who again posed the relationship as an analogy: "The Hebrews could not see or serve God in the land of the Egyptians; no more can the Negro under the Anglo-Saxon." While preferring to cite the Egyptian captivity rather than the Babylonian exile, Blyden asserted that his metaphor indicated that Africans should return to Africa. Furthermore, as both Liberia's sometime ambassador to Britain, and a former British official in her West African colonies, he declared: "Africa appeals to the Jew . . . to come with his scientific and other culture, gathered by his exile in many lands, and with his special spiritual endowments, to the assistance of Africa."[26] Blyden's text was not, then, simply a metaphor. He expressed the experience of African and Jewish passage as directly comparable in their need

for emancipation and their experience of exile, couched in religious terms. At precisely this time the British government was actively considering resettling the Jews in Uganda, a proposal that was endorsed by the founder of Zionism, Theodore Herzl, in 1903. Nonetheless, it was rejected at the Seventh Zionist Congress of 1905, causing a split in the Zionist movement. As postcolonial theorist Dipesh Chakrabarty argues, such literal and metaphorical translations "appeal to models of cross-cultural and cross-categorical translations that do not take a universal middle term for granted."[27] In this case, it would mean that Africans and Jews imagined themselves as translatable figures of Babylonian exile that did not need to be mediated through the white colonizer.

Consequently, Babylon is a key image in the syncretic religion Rastafari that developed in Jamaica during the 1930s and 40s and now has influence throughout the African diaspora. Rastafari appropriated symbols and legends from the Old Testament into its message of a return to Africa and African empowerment that was embodied by the monarchy of Haile Selassie in Ethiopia (1892–1975), which gave substance to the idea of a black sovereign. Rastafari uses Babylon as a figure for Western capitalism, derived from the Jewish exile in Babylon. With their 1971 hit "By the Rivers of Babylon" and its subsequent cover versions, the reggae band The Melodians exported this intersected metaphor from Jamaican Rastafari culture to the contemporary Western world. Again, the comparisons are not exact but implied and intersected. The street disturbances and riots in Notting Hill, Brixton, Toxteth and other black neighborhoods in British cities from 1976 to 1983 were what Max Romeo in a hit song of the period called "War in Babylon" (1976). The idea was adopted by many punk bands, like The Ruts with their independent hit "Babylon's Burning" (1978). As I grew up in London at this time, it's striking to recall how segregated British society was at a time when the appalling *Black and White Minstrel Show*, an unabashed blackface minstrel show of the Dixie kind, was still on BBC television as primetime entertainment. Paul Gilroy has described the Rastafarian movement in Britain of the 1970s as a mixed formation in

which "overt resistance is tied to strategic negotiation and other more subtle and refined forms of political antagonism."[28] In this sense, "Babylon" was at once the police, capitalism, colonialism, slavery, anti-cannabis laws and so on. To this extent, "Babylon" was a significant means of expressing and contesting a relationship to economic and political power in everyday life. This layered sense of culture was made palpable in the sound systems of the period. A hit like "War in Babylon" would be played at appropriately "trouser shaking" volume – loud enough that your trousers shook against your leg – engineered in such a way that the vocals seemed to float high above the fundamentals of the rhythm, drums and bass that interplayed at your feet. You could literally dance on the sound.

What do we make of these interstices, implications and intersections? Not that the legend and history of Babylon in some sense caused the war or can neatly explain it. But this recurring sense of apocalypse in Babylon expresses the eternal return that Benjamin, himself following Nietzsche, highlighted as modernity's spectre. The politics and poetics of implication, intersection and interstices that are my subject here offer no exit from the labyrinth. My project is to refuse the designation of a neatly divided world where peoples and nations are offered stark choices to be with "us" or against "us," whether that we is the United States, al-Qa'ida, or the Taliban. Modernity's network cannot be reverse-engineered into a feudal hierarchy, despite the global reaction against the emergent "network society" of the 1990s.[29] As Foucault emphasized, power always creates resistance. So the goal is not to find the place of resistance, for that necessarily exists already. A resistance that succeeds simply becomes power. Borrowing Benjamin's sense of utopia, I suggest at the end of each section one means in which a way of living without the police might be imagined. Such utopian imagining is a necessary cultural response to the gloom-laden chorus that there is no alternative to the current doctrine of pre-emptive war and the politics of fear. It pays homage to Edward Said's belief that a university ought to be a utopian space, without losing sight for an instant of the politics of knowledge.

One name for such a politics opposed to the all-encompassing ambitions of the police might be anarchism. It is the anarchy of the dream world and dream image, rather than actually existing anarchic politics. In this regard, I imply by anarchism what Walter Benjamin meant by "messianism": the chance to imagine that the world might suddenly become a strikingly different and better place. But, as he liked to recall, it was said in the Talmud that the messiah would come and make one small but vital change. Consequently, his friend Gerschom Scholem described their youthful position as "theocratic anarchism."[30] Something of that tension between the universal and the local, so relevant to today's crises, survived into Benjamin's contradictory and dynamic version of Marxism. It might be said that sustaining these contradictions in dialogue is the difference of anarchism. It is that which allowed the American Jewish feminist Emma Goldman to cite Oscar Wilde's theory of the necessity of freedom to choose one's work in her classic 1917 essay on anarchism.[31] It later enabled Constant, the Dutch Situationist, to imagine his utopian society as New Babylon. What time is the time of this contradictory dream image that I am calling Babylonian modernity? It is not the time of the "end," whether of history, the human, or that of the "post," as in post-colonial, or post-structuralism. Nor is this the future perfect of the spectre in which all issues will have been resolved and all ghosts finally laid to rest.[32] This is a time that looks to the future but with a sense of a transient present haunted by the past. It is twilight. In this "twilight of the digerati"[33] that is also a twilight of capitalism, it is too early to see Minerva's owls flying: we must wait for a dusk that is eternally postponed. In the failing light, we need to find our way around a network in which the links are broken, the sites not maintained, the fiber dark and the power out. Don't be afraid: they have no idea where you want to go today.