



# A MATTER OF MIMICRY

## Visual Publics

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Publicize, publicity, publish—the semantic relationship of the word “public” with the world of words and letters is no coincidence. The Western notion of the public—or “audience,” for that matter—is primarily a verbal and acoustic one. Modern institutional concepts like “public law,” “public opinion,” or “public sphere” are not only a legacy of the Enlightenment—they also reflect an exclusive reliance on language. As such, they concede the capacity of constituting a critical rational discourse for the legitimacy of power solely to words and the realm of acoustics, leaving the realm of the visual associated with the age-old stigma of suspicion and mistrust.

The thrust of the articles presented in this issue of *Critical Interventions* challenge this perspective. Based on a variety of case studies, ranging from commercial sign board painting in Cameroon and Côte d’Ivoire, and colonial advertisement and religious billboards in Nigeria, to administrative photography in Gambia and political posters Namibia, the authors focus on the visual fabric of the public. Illuminating the complex scope of what it means to speak of “visual publics,” they remind us that readers and listeners are equally viewers and spectators.

The contributors employ different models to flesh out the specific features and dynamics of this approach. While some of them are referred to openly and discussed explicitly, others remain hidden. Among the figures lurking between the lines is Aby Warburg, the legendary founder of iconology.<sup>1</sup> Given the dual meaning of the German word *Bild*, as both image and picture, Warburg considered himself to be an image historian rather than an art historian. As a student of visual culture *avant la lettre*, his work ranged from the study of paintings and tapestries, to stamps and postcards. Interested in what he called the “afterlife of antiquity,” he developed a model of iconology that focused on the affective role of images. Warburg’s basic question was twofold. The first concerned the way in which certain images literally seize the attention of a given (visual) audience or public, a concern that led to the conception of new analytical tools like *Pathosformel* and *Bilderfahrzeug* (image vehicle).<sup>2</sup> The second question focused on the historical persistence and continuity of these images, an issue he explored by turning to the notion of cultural collective memory and its visual fabric.<sup>3</sup>

In the present context, Giorgio Miescher, Lorena Rizzo, and Jeremy Sylvester’s study of political iconography in Namibia is perhaps the closest to this approach. At stake is the identification of what Warburg called *Schlagbilder* (catch images), a concept Warburg derived from the German word *Schlagwort* (catch phrase).<sup>4</sup> The aggressive and militant character of the concept speaks to Warburg’s own concerns. He conceived his new iconographic tools during the first World War, a period of intense visual propaganda. What mattered for him was the quality of images as *imagines agentes*.<sup>5</sup>

It is no coincidence that the role of advertising also functions prominently in many of the contributions to this issue. Be it the visual competition among signboard painters in Cameroon that Till Förster is focusing on, or Asonzeh Ukah’s analysis of Pentecostal advertising in Lagos, what we are confronted with is the way in which, as Ukah frames it, images form and mold their own individual publics. Yet, while Asonzeh Ukah’s contribution is an impressive example of this

formation, it needs to be pointed out that the elements of shock and fear he describes as a crucial feature of this formation are not recent. In the Nigerian context one just has to think of the early 1960s. Just as people were celebrating the new economic and moral liberties brought about by highlife and urban modernity, they were also grappling with the question of modernity's costs and consequences. Quickly printed dime novels with titles like, *The Disappointed Lover*, or, *Florence in the River of Temptation*, had their visual complements in paintings like *The Story of Chukwumma and Rose*, Middle Art's iconic comic strip-like painting, in which the top scene shows the Archangel Gabriel with his foot on the back of Satan, exclaiming, "I will kill you for you have spoiled the world" (Figure 1).<sup>6</sup>

In the mid 1960s, Ulli Beier celebrated Middle Art's paintings and the novels of the Onitsha writers, as "symptoms" of a new popular sphere.<sup>7</sup> It was a new perspective, derived not least from Jürgen Habermas' seminal work on the history of the public sphere in Europe.<sup>8</sup> Conceived as both a social space of experience and a distinct principle of political order, Habermas linked the institutional rise of the public sphere with three main factors: first, the creation of a territorial (nation) state as a demarcation of public space; second, the existence of generalized literacy as the primary medium by means of which citizens, who are situated in opposition to the state, articulate themselves as private persons within that space; and third, the existence of the ideals of the Enlightenment as a normative prerequisite, upon which the opinions and positions expressed within that space are oriented.

If Beier's 1964 essay on Onitsha signifies the beginning of the debate on the translatability of Habermas' model into the African context, then Ikem Okoye's essay on colonial adverts and architecture marks the debate's most recent version. The angle from which Okoye enters the debate is the issue of aesthetics. Following Hess and Eagleton, he argues that the claim of the autonomy of aesthetics, that Habermas identified as a crucial component of the public sphere, was more a substitute for the lack of actual influence in the realm of politics than a real political achievement. Thus, aesthetic reflections encompassed more than simply writing about aesthetics. What mattered was visual experience. As Okoye points out, despite Habermas' focus on a literate public, his narrative of the emergence of a literate public is also a narrative about the emergence of a distinct visual public. No wonder, then, that the idea of *enlightenment*, as a political agenda mainly achieved through the cultural practice of reading and writing, explicitly points to the importance of light as a metaphor of truth.<sup>9</sup>

While Okoye considers this situation from the perspective of the relationship between political imagination and the realm of colonial advertising, it is useful to complement his analysis by reference to the Yoruba concept of modernity, in terms of *òlájú*. Stemming from two Yoruba words, *là* (to open) and *ojú* (eyes), the literal meaning of *òlájú* is "to open the eyes." In this sense, *òlájú* was deeply associated with the experience of the colonial world.<sup>10</sup> Peel has described it as a specific "syndrome" or "ideology," comprising bureaucratic and administrative as well as economic, educational, and religious ideas.<sup>11</sup> Underlying these conceptions was an adoption of the aesthetic elements of modernity that combined the metaphorical features of light and darkness with a linear, goal-oriented time perspective. Thus the slogan of the *West African Pilot*, the widest-circulating nationalist newspaper (and discussed by Okoye), read, "Show the light, and people will find the way." Similarly, local newspapers like the *West African Vanguard* carried articles that celebrated *òlájú* with phrases like, "The veil is removed and the fetters of darkness and ignorance are broken and must naturally give way to the rays of light and hope, the spirit of understanding and steady progress for all and sundry."<sup>12</sup>

Photography played a prominent role in the *òlájú* complex. With their mastery of the technology of light, the new professional photographers became popular role models for the *òlájú* ideology.<sup>13</sup> But the story does not end there, for photography also became a crucial element in the internal process of colonial nation building.

A case in point is Liam Buckley's study on the photographs produced by the Public Relations Office in the Gambia. Focusing in particular on the presentation and formal composition of the pictures, the relevance of his contribution lies in the way in which he connects the notion of the visual public with questions of materiality and style. As such, he follows a line of thought also taken up by Okoye. While Okoye investigates the ways that the notion of progress is depicted in architectural plans, grids, and layouts, Buckley looks at the albums produced by the local staff of the colonial Civil Service in the Gambia, and reflects upon their specific forms of display. As such, Buckley's understanding of visual publics is informed, not so much by Habermas' idea of the public sphere, but ultimately by Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*.<sup>14</sup>

First published in 1983, Anderson's book can be seen as a kind of follow-up to Habermas' seminal study. While retaining the latter's bias towards print culture and capitalism, Anderson's interest is primarily in the sentiments and affects generated by print culture, and their effect on the collective identity of larger societal groups. From Anderson's perspective, then, "nations" have to be conceived as "imagined communities"—in the sense that the feeling of belonging and togetherness uniting their members does not rest in close physical contact, but in the power of shared imaginations, materialized through language and symbols, and communicated through media. It has often been noted that there is a contradiction in Anderson's writing, between his reliance on the idea of imagination, on the one hand, and the peculiar absence of the role of visual technologies (i.e., photography), on the other.<sup>15</sup> Buckley's focus on the materiality of the photographs and their forms of display can be seen as filling this gap. Rather than concentrating on the well-known role of photography in the "imperial imaginary,"<sup>16</sup> Buckley's sensibility towards style ought to be understood as a kind of "Anderson effect." Against the positivistic reading of "imagined," in terms of fake or fabricated, Anderson has noted that communities should be distinguished, "not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined."<sup>17</sup> It is a remark on which Anderson does not elaborate further. And yet the meaning of it clearly relates to the question of how visual publics are molded.

Perhaps the most explicit comment on this matter is Till Förster's comparative analysis of signboard painters in Bamenda, Cameroon, and Korhogo, Côte d'Ivoire. Though in many ways different, what unites the artists in these two West African cities is the way in which they employ style as a strategy to attract attention in the urban sphere. As Förster probes the content of these strategies, he confronts us with something we might call the *dialogicity of style*. What he wants us to comprehend is the necessity to understand style, not as "grammar" or "language" (to invoke Meyer Schapiro's popular metaphor), but as Bakhtinian "speech" or "dialogue," that is, as a domain of practice rooted in social contacts and interactions. Seen in this way, style is not something given. It is the result of a visual dialogue that is itself subject to three restrictive factors, namely, recognition, identification, and appearance.<sup>18</sup> In order for it to be recognized, style has to appear, and in order to appear it has to be appropriated/animated/embodied by people who identify with it. Framed in such a triangular constellation, style is always a *public style*. It is tied to the public domain (outside of which it cannot exist),<sup>19</sup> and it is necessarily both framed and contested, since the public domain in which style materializes is itself fragmented by the existence of multiple actors seeking recognition.

A note of caution seems appropriate. While the notion of visual publics is driven by the insight into the agency of images, it is important to realize that the issue of agency is one thing, while the actual space in which agency works is something else. That is to say, if the term “public” is associated with ideas of transparency, accessibility, and visibility, then visual publics are just the opposite. In fact, the notion of visual publics seems to rest more in its capacity to conceal than to reveal. Reading the essays in this light, what becomes apparent are the conceptual facades and masks which make the notion work.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Warburg’s work has always enjoyed an ambivalent status. The very reasons invoked to justify his neglect have been used to explain his importance. For two recent examples, see David Freedberg, “Warburg’s Mask: A Study in Idolatry,” in *Anthropologies of Art*, ed. Mariet Westermann (Williamstown: Clark Art Institute, 2005); and Hans Belting, “Image, Medium, Body: A New Approach to Iconology,” in *Critical Inquiry* 31 (Winter 2005): 302–319.
- <sup>2</sup> For a good discussion of these terms in the context of political iconography, see Michael Diers, *Schlagbilder. Zur Politischen Ikonographie der Gegenwart* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1997).
- <sup>3</sup> Aby Warburg, *Der Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*, ed. M. Warnke (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2000).
- <sup>4</sup> See Diers, *Schlagbilder*.
- <sup>5</sup> On Warburg’s hidden iconoclasm, see Ulrich Raulff, *Wilde Energien. Vier Versuche zu Aby Warburg* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2003); and Georges Didi-Huberman, *L’image survivante. Histoire de l’art et temps des fantomes selon Aby Warburg*. (Paris: Editions de minuit, 2002).
- <sup>6</sup> For a discussion of this painting, see Ulli Beier, “Naïve Art from Nigeria,” *Black Orpheus* 19 (1966): 31–39; and Augustin Okoye, *Middle Art* (Bayreuth: Iwalewa Haus Publications, 1999).
- <sup>7</sup> See Ulli Beier, “Public Opinion on Lovers,” *Black Orpheus* 14 (1964): 4–16. Beier’s essay is reprinted in this issue of *Critical Interventions*.
- <sup>8</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989). First published in German in 1962.
- <sup>9</sup> Hans Blumenberg, “Light as a Metaphor for Truth,” in *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, ed. David Michael Levin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); and Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Disenchanted Night: The Industrialization of Light in the 19th Century*, trans. Angela Davies (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 118.
- <sup>10</sup> Similarly, in Akan the word for photography is *anibuye*, literally meaning “the opening of the eyes.” See Tobias Wendl, “Entangled Traditions: Photography and the History of Media in Southern Ghana,” *RES* 39 (2001): 78–101.
- <sup>11</sup> J.D.Y. Peel, “Olaju: A Yoruba Concept of Development,” *Journal of Development Studies* 14, 2 (1978).
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*: 154–155.
- <sup>13</sup> Olu Oguibe, *The Culture Game* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 76.
- <sup>14</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991).
- <sup>15</sup> Except for a small footnote on the “museumizing of the Borobodur” (179, n. 29), photography is curiously absent from Anderson’s analysis.
- <sup>16</sup> See the chapter, “The Imperial Imaginary,” in Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism* (New York: Routledge, 1994).
- <sup>17</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6.
- <sup>18</sup> See Andrew Benjamin’s illuminating treatise on “sites of style,” in *Style and Time: Essays on the Politics of Appearance* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2006). I would like to acknowledge my gratitude to Birgit Meyer for having drawn my attention to this study.
- <sup>19</sup> Serge Maffesoli, *The Contemplation of the World: Figures of Community Style* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).