

Preface: What Is Visual Citizenship?

Conventional understandings suggest that citizenship is an effect of a managed identity and a means to exercise sovereignty.¹ Undoubtedly, citizenship is vital to the way people affiliate in democratic political organizations and to aspirations for the good life, however defined. Over the last decade or so, scholars from a variety of disciplines have given texture to the particularities of contemporary forms, expressions, and experiences of citizenship by ascribing to them a variety of descriptors: flexible citizenship, cultural citizenship, intimate citizenship, and biological citizenship, to name but a few.²

Taking inspiration from this family of terms, this dossier invites reflection on the following question: what would an emphasis on the audiovisual field add to our understanding of citizenship? *Humanity's* collection of essays and online video commentaries on visual citizenship aims to open up and encourage analysis about the ways in which audiovisual practices condition, exacerbate, impede, or render (in)consequential the rights, privileges, duties, and entitlements among people who are included and excluded, seen and unseen, heard and silenced in journalistic practices, in direct action campaigns, in commercial advertisements, in the built environment, and so on. The contributors herein presume that citizenship imagined audiovisually is an active force in political life, an important civic skill, a way that people are represented by and to government. The photos of prisoners at Abu Ghraib, of earthquake survivors in Haiti and Japan, of lynched bodies from the American South; a graphic video of an Iranian woman killed in protest in 2009; a documentary film highlighting indigenous peoples' claims to compensation for alleged damage done to the Ecuadorian Amazon by Chevron-Texaco; a string of tents lining a dusty expanse of Chad—these are just some of the more extraordinary and seemingly exceptional cases in which visual citizenship may be conceptually deployed. Equally ripe for analysis are the vernacular and the mundane—from nightly broadcast news to the covers of print newsmagazines, from gated communities to shantytowns—which capture inequities so rudimentary they may slip off our radar.

This dossier aims to rethink the ways in which audiovisual practices mediate political action and vice versa, so that in their co-construction we fine-tune our analyses of the conditions that organize and shape our categories of understanding about ourselves and others as a citizenry. At issue is the need to elaborate an idea of citizenship as something operating and experienced beyond legal properties or pre-given juridical frames. After all, much of what we know about the relations between citizens—and between citizens and noncitizens—happens from a distance, among common strangers, audiovisually. What we see and hear, how we see and hear,

according to whom and where condition the possibilities for the way people in crisis debate meaningfully about how they are governed.

To date, scholars have been very good at underscoring the extent to which representations of the disenfranchised render them agentless in the discourses of human rights, humanitarianism, and development. Victims appear depoliticized, dehistoricized, infantilized, racialized, gendered, pictured en masse, without names, opinions, relatives, party affiliations, or pasts.³ Building on these rich descriptions, visual citizenship as an organizing concept asks what is at stake in these representations. It proposes one way to mark, trace, capture, and embody the assumptions, the logics, and the curious idiosyncrasies about the fact that people are situated differently as participants and observers in political struggles, seen and heard, or not. It also raises questions about how to assign roles, rules, and modes of participation in political life that correspond with various forms of perception, or what is apprehended by the senses.

It remains an open empirical question whether or to what extent visual citizenship expresses something fresh about the modern. That political struggles are today in some form or another mediated audiovisually is linked—sometimes powerfully, sometimes tangentially—to the global connections forged by trade, empire, technology, and capitalism over the last few centuries. As the historians Michael Geyer and Charles Bright write, “We confront a startling new condition: *humanity*, which has been the subject of world history for many centuries and civilizations, *has now come into the purview of all human beings*. This humanity is extremely polarized into rich and poor, powerful and powerless, vociferous and speechless, believers and non-believers.”⁴ Such remarks draw attention to the extraordinary range and depth with which the audiovisual field saturates everyday human experience today. Although the capacity to view and hear about spectacular inequities is not entirely new—people have been the subjects of and have been subjected to signs and speech that have differentiated them for millennia—the circuits, the scales, and the speeds that characterize the connections between common strangers certainly are.⁵ Nonetheless, the capacity to recognize others and oneself publicly may offer opportunities for crises to be deliberated as much as it may foreclose them. As a matter of common sense, crises must be made public for political action to unfold, but the actual work of making the audiovisual public is not easy, self-evident, predictable, or technologically determined. Rather, the work of representation is tied up in complex social, political, and economic processes that are highly variable, historically contingent, and culturally circumscribed. The materials in this dossier explore this complexity as a matter of political necessity.

This collection begins with a thought experiment by Ariella Azoulay: what happens when we transport a core text of twentieth-century political philosophy—Hannah Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism*—to the realm of the visual? In her essay, Azoulay invents a space that allows the audience to observe anew the horrors we see on a regular basis—not as disasters taking place out there, somewhere, among victimized others, but as ones produced by and at the heart of democratic regimes. To move beyond empathy and the common frames often represented to us of the dispossessed, to acknowledge that those frames are porous and capture only partial truths about the violation, to understand that violations are organized within and not outside

of democratic processes requires of the viewer a depth of field that extends to seeing the regime that made the disaster (and its imagery) in the first place.⁶ The suggestion here and in her online video commentary (see below) is to elaborate a new notion of citizenship, not as a product or property distributed by the state, but as one that takes into account the entire population, both the possessed and the dispossessed alike, forged as a relation of governance among various protagonists.

While Azoulay explores visual citizenship on a two-dimensional plane through the production and circulation of imagery, the architect Manuel Herz looks at three-dimensional visual spaces. In his essay, Herz takes us to a place most image-makers do not go: the Sahrawi camps in one of the world's last remaining colonies, located on the border of the Western Sahara and Algeria. Drawing from onsite field research, Herz illuminates the history of and the everyday life in the camps, which in turn shape how the camps are spatially imagined and organized. At the core of his essay is the following question: to what extent do the Sahrawi camps create the potential for an emancipatory or self-determining project? Challenging common assumptions about camps as spaces of exception, Herz suggests that we see these spaces not as technical problems to be managed by elites, but as environments with "qualities of the urban(e)." The visual carries political urgency, for it helps to mediate and filter perceptions of the possible, here among the Sahrawi.

The last piece of the dossier is an interview with Fred Ritchin by Nandi Dill, in which the reader learns that the practice of documenting human rights and humanitarian emergencies is not just about the photographer capturing images in the field or about the architect drawing them up. It is also about editors in the newsroom filtering what to show (or what not to show) their audience, about curators offering alternative media perspectives to their publics, and about educators teaching future generations of image-makers about how to ethically engage with such problems as climate change and poverty. Based on his experience as the picture editor of the *New York Times Magazine*, Ritchin offers a fascinating discussion about the role of technology in the uptake of images of suffering by those in the position to distribute and publish them. The interview captures a seasoned perspective from the field in ways that illuminate—and at the same time complicate—visual citizenship as a civic practice.

In addition to the essays and the interview herein, we also invite the reader to watch short online video commentaries by Craig Calhoun, Sam Gregory, Robert Hariman, and W. J. T. Mitchell, among other scholars, image-makers, and field practitioners, posted on the *Humanity* website.⁷ These analyses offer on-the-fly points of departure about visual citizenship's meaning and practice. After all, what may be most productive about visual citizenship is not that any one of these analyses is right. Rather than reduce the significance of visual citizenship to any one interpretation, perhaps it is generative across multiple registers in ways that spark meaningful debate. What does it mean to be a visual citizen—for those who are seen, for those who witness what is seen, and for those who capture what is seen in public? Visual citizenship means what, to whom? To the photographer, to the architect, to those witnessing from a distance the photographed and the spatially organized, or to those whose life is perpetually photographed and spatially organized by others? Under what circumstances are people in crisis seen—but not heard—in public? In what ways do visual practices condition

who belongs and who does not belong to a political community? How is membership in a political community accomplished audiovisually or through social media?

Beyond Victimhood

One way to think through what these questions have in common is to acknowledge an important underlying theme: the need for rights talk to move beyond mere expressions of victimhood. That is, visual citizenship is an invitation for scholars and practitioners to question the discursive limits of the category “victim.” In the main, victims are figures of misfortune, of heart-rending descriptions, the ones whose suffering is authored—and objectified—not as autobiographies, but by the photojournalist, the publicist, the philanthropist, the aid worker, the lawyer, the government official, the everyday consumer of news.⁸ Victims too often conform to certain categorical pressures, which may themselves be constraining: innocent of all wrongdoing, noncombative, subject to evil of some kind, a victim is affected by politics but is perceived to have no real politics of her own. The victim’s nonparticipation in her own description provokes questions about how suffering is selected, justified, represented, put into words and imaged. Why this unfortunate and not the other? Who discriminates “deserving” subjects from “undeserving” ones? Why do victims so commonly appear in the vocabularies of both the ideological left and right? Interesting here is not which side makes a rightful claim using the language of victimhood, but why the category is so resilient and easily available.

There are more radical questions one can ask of the conceptual work visual citizenship might do. Is it possible to imagine an effective human rights campaign without recourse to the short causal chain that pits victim against victimizer, violated against violator? To what extent is the making of the short causal chain part of the very lifeblood of human rights debate, as much as it is its curse? Is visual citizenship only a means to signal when human rights are denied to individuals or entire groups, or is it also productive to think of it in ways that critique the very assumptions embedded in human rights discourse and practice?

The suggestion I am making here is that visual citizenship may offer a way out of the tyranny of victimhood as a political strategy. To be clear, the label “victim” is not just a social construction or a matter of representation. It bears materially on how resources are allocated and how justice is served. The reporter, the judge, and the Red Cross administrator derive much of their authority from their ability to determine who is worthy of attention, compensation, and aid. But a victim as a category of person is made intersubjectively, audiovisually, in social contexts—not in isolation—and that status is contingent upon and legitimated by more powerful others. A curious paradox emerges: though the image of the victim suffering may elicit calls for action, at the same time its rhetorical use may maintain the status quo.

The invitation to seriously engage with the analytic of visual citizenship requires that we acknowledge that representational practices about human rights, humanitarian action, and development are embedded in long and complicated histories—of charity, philanthropy, colonialism, empire, civilizing missions, capitalist expansion, and so on—which tend to mask the political, social, and economic connections that link

spectators' own history with the lamentable ones from somewhere else.⁹ Visual citizenship requires that we enter into conversation with one another, for we all share in the fate of this world and are implicated by the mediating force of media itself. As visual citizens, we must work to not sacrifice history, politics, and agency to the reductive forms of representation. Otherwise, in the words of Rony Brauman, founding member of Médecins sans frontières, we are stuck with the same old conundrum: "If the guilty cannot be punished, at least the victims can be recognized."¹⁰

NOTES

This dossier evokes the richness of what emerged from two days of discussion in April 2010 at the conference "Visual Citizenship," supported by the Institute for Public Knowledge (IPK) at New York University under the direction of Craig Calhoun.

1. Robert Hariman and Jean Louis Lucaites, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).
2. Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999); Renato Rosaldo, *Cultural Citizenship in Island Southeast Asia: Nation and Belonging in the Hinterlands* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Ken Plummer, *Intimate Citizenship: Private Decisions and Public Dialogues* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003); Nikolas Rose, "Biological Citizenship and Its Form," in *Governance of Life in Chinese Moral Experience: The Quest for an Adequate Life*, ed. Everett Zhang et al. (London: Routledge, 2010), 237–65.
3. Liisa H. Malkki, "Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization," *Cultural Anthropology* 11, no. 3 (1996): 377–404; Barbies Zelizer, "Gender and Atrocity: Women in Holocaust Photographs," in *Visual Culture and the Holocaust*, ed. Zelizer (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 247–71. See also Michael Barnett and Thomas G. Weiss, "Humanitarianism: A Brief History of the Present," in *Humanitarianism in Question: Power, Politics, Ethics*, ed. Barnett and Weiss (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2008), 1–48; Craig Calhoun, "A World of Emergencies: Fear, Intervention, and the Limits of Cosmopolitan Order: The 35th Sorokin Lecture," *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 41, no. 4 (2004): 373–95; Lilie Chouliaraki, *The Spectatorship of Suffering* (London: Sage, 2006).
4. Michael Geyer and Charles Bright, "World History in a Global Age," *American Historical Review* 100, no. 4 (1995): 1059 (emphasis added).
5. Arjun Appadurai, *The Future as Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition* (London: Verso, 2013).
6. Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone, 2008).
7. See <http://www.humanityjournal.org> or <http://www.vimeo.com/ipk>.
8. Luc Boltanski, *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
9. Malkki, "Speechless Emissaries," 389.
10. Rony Brauman, "When Suffering Makes a Good Story," in *Life, Death, and Aid: The Médecins Sans Frontières Report on World Crisis Intervention*, ed. François Jean (London: Routledge, 1993), 150.