

South African Visual Culture.

Jeanne van Eeden & Amanda du Preez
(eds.). Pretoria: Van Schaik. 2005. 269 pp.
ISBN 0-627-02598-6.

In the past several years, visual culture studies have emerged as a new interdisciplinary field of inquiry. In fact, over the past five years, several introductory texts on visual culture have been published that address the production of visual imagery and its interpretations. According to Nicholas Mizroeff in his foreword, *South African Visual Culture* marks “the closure of the first moment of visual culture and the phase of globalisation that began with the televised release from prison of Nelson Mandela (v).”

Introductory texts on visual culture typically offer an answer to the questions, “what is visual culture” and “what do we do with it?” Often, it is argued that visual culture is an attempt to talk about the visual components that are imbedded in everyday life. Visual culture studies suggest a shift from a focus on structured viewing settings, such as the art gallery or the cinema, to an investigation into the role of visual experience in everyday life. Mostly, it is argued that “visual culture is concerned with visual events in which information, meaning, or pleasure is sought by the con-



sumer in an interface with visual technology. (...) [V]isual technology, (refers to) any form of apparatus designed either to be looked at or to enhance natural vision, from oil painting to television and the Internet" (Mirzoeff, 2000: 3). As a result, approaches to enhance the understanding of the various forms of visual production became a concern across several fields beyond the art historical. Methodologies from cultural studies, sociology, anthropology, and feminist studies, among other fields, supplement the analytical tools for interpretation and reading of images.

The title and blurb indicate the ambitions of this collection of essays: to examine South African visual culture as a reflection of gender, race and identity politics, while taking into account the effects of globalization on South African cultural production. *South African Visual Culture* is an attempt at providing a critical corrective to the body of scientific knowledge in this field by concentrating on the South African connection. The various authors bring into focus important links between the development of cultural studies, the new art history, popular culture studies and media studies "at the intersections of their interest in the visuality of culture (5). (Visuality designates the complex visual event of seeing and being seen.) The common thread for the editors of this collection is "the notion of identity in South African visual culture and how this is informed by ideological concern" (2). The essays treat a wide selection of visual languages that have been utilized to communicate South African identity, including sculpture, painting, photography, television and cinema.

South African Visual Culture offers an intellectually adventurous and often astute assessment of visual culture's role in constructing South African identity(ies). As such, the essays collected here depend

largely on Mirzoeff's definition of visual culture, and Walter Benjamin's theories concerning power relations, commodification, and the mechanical reproduction of art. The notions of culture and cultural studies as formulated by Stuart Hall and the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (BCCCS) form an important subtext to the majority of essays.

The collection is designed to be an open-ended, suggestive, and stimulating introduction to the visual culture of this country. Instead of presenting the last word on the field as it pertains to the South African canon, the book presents a "purposive sample" (2) of South African visual culture. The twelve chapters, are divided into five inter-related sections, reflecting the editors' desire to treat the issue of identity and identity politics inclusive of both race and gender: the ideological domain of consumer capitalism in everyday life, aspects of gender construction in South African society, the intersection of race and gender in identity construction, digitalization and then finally film, television and photography as media of cultural production.

Michael Herbst and Jeanne van Eeden's essays on South African advertisements and shopping malls respectively, examine the impact of consumer culture on the cultural production of identity. Louise and Stella Viljoen investigate the construction of femininity in *Huisgenoot*, South Africa's most abiding family magazine, while Brenda Schmahmann presents a comparative look at the depiction of women's military uniforms pre- and post-apartheid. She concludes that in both cases the ambivalence regarding gendered depiction of the female remain intact. Liese van der Watt forays into the relatively new arena of "whiteness studies" by critically examining the crisis of white male identity in the new South Africa. Whilst the privileged position of whiteness

usually go unmarked, Van der Watt points out how whiteness and male identity have become accepted as the privileged position in South African visual culture. She illustrates how these constructions are currently manipulated to envision the threat to white male identity. Catherine Zaayman's case study on the Cape Town-based CD-Rom youth publication *Sub_Urban Magazine* is a stimulating examination of the supposed "subversiveness" of so-called alternate spaces of expression. Zaayman questions the publication's alterity and suggests that it rather upholds mainstream cultural ideas as a result of the contributors' middle-class English-speaking backgrounds.

An obvious lacuna in the book is the lack of engagement with the reception/audience scholarship of the last decade. Reception/audience studies opened the door to the distinction between different cultures through the eyes of those engaged in the practice and consumption of culture. It also allows us to see the impact of cultural production and the cultural industries on different communities. On the other hand, one of the best features of the book is the use of visual aids that exemplify the importance of incorporating images into the "text-heavy" academic study of media, and visual culture. The visuals invite readers to attempt their own analyses, shifting them from their role as receivers to that of participants who also experience the book.

It could be argued that *South African Visual Culture* is not designed to provide an introduction to the field of visual cultural studies, but rather to give a taste of how the insights gained in this field applies to the South African situation. As such the book is more descriptive, than prescriptive, which might bother readers looking for a more theoretical introduction to the field. Nonetheless, for teachers and students of visual culture in/on South Africa who con-

stantly have to search through the glut of literature for the South African perspective, this is a valuable contribution. Van Eeden and du Preez's collection of essays will be especially helpful to those teaching aspects of visual culture at an undergraduate level.

Bibliography

Mirzoeff, N. 2000. *An Introduction to Visual Culture*. London: Routledge.

_____. 2005. The visual culture machine: or, deterritorialising Mickey Mouse. In Van Eeden, J. & du Preez, A. (eds.). 2005. *South African Visual Culture*. Pretoria: Van Schaik.

Viola Candice Milton

University of Pretoria, Pretoria

Gender and Sexuality in South African Music.

Chris Walton & Stephanus Muller (eds.). Stellenbosch: SUN ePreSS. 2005. 97 pp. ISBN 1-919980-40-7.

This collection can be partitioned into several themes, ranging from sexual orientation and artistic expression, gender issues, the politics of apartheid, and the suffering of the oppressed. The blurb of *Gender and Sexuality* states: "These and many other questions are addressed, ranging from the straight and narrow to the queer and wide. The result is a book that is invigorating, at times uncomfortable: a frank, scholarly, full-frontal portrait of a hitherto ignored, but vital area of South African Music History."

The two most impressive papers are by Grant Olwage ("Black musicality in colonial South Africa") and Shirli Gilbert ("Popular song, gender equality and the anti-apartheid struggle"). Olwage raises important issues regarding biased perceptions of the "feminising of musicality" and the "musicalising" of blacks. Gender issues feature strongly in this publication. Gilbert's paper