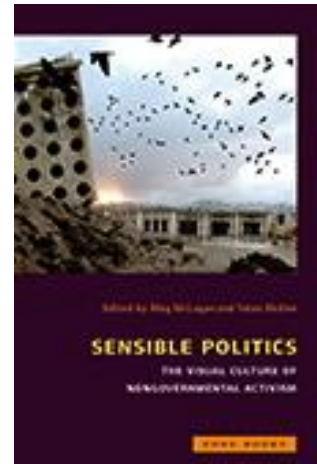


Meg McLagan and Yates McKee (Eds.), **Sensible Politics: The Visual Culture of Nongovernmental Activism**, New York, NY: Zone Books, 2012, 664 pp., \$36.95 (hardcover).

Reviewed by
Pablo Castagno
Universidad Nacional de La Matanza, Argentina

Sensible Politics: The Visual Culture of Nongovernmental Activism, edited by cultural critics Meg McLagan and Yates McKee, is a significant contribution to the discussion of the interplay between media and political practices. The book investigates “how various orderings of social relations become ‘sensible’ as viable sites of contestation by nongovernmental activists” (p. 9) and also examines how nongovernmental politics can at times overlap with states’ efforts in putting into effect modes of social control on populations. At the same time, the book explores visual culture widely. More than 30 distinguished scholars and activists analyze visual politics, the importance of sensory experience in spatial politics, and how media networks shape political actions.



Sensible Politics has more than 30 chapters organized in five sections on photography, the “mode of circulation” (p. 17) of images, cinema, critical architecture, and emergent media platforms of political action. Authors analyze the imbrication of political dispositions, media practices, and aesthetic forms into nongovernmental activism. In this light, the book engages a crucial trend in cultural theory that takes practice (Couldry, 2012) and social experience (Williams, 1977) as key categories to examine culture. McLagan and McKee’s project focuses on what they term, drawing on philosopher Jacques Rancière (2004), the “image complex.” This is a combination of practices, networks, and forms that connect aesthetics, processes of mediation, and politics.

The contributors develop that perspective, combining approaches from media studies, historical research, visual analysis, and architectural studies. They are also interested in asking anthropological questions of self-reflexivity and otherness. In fact, the book serves as a form of intercultural political intervention to expand existing meanings of equality and freedom. The text effectively approaches environmental politics, social protests against global capitalism, human rights politics, struggles against neocolonialism, and the questioning of ideology in various state apparatuses and media fields. Furthermore, it challenges scholars of politics, media, and cultural studies to think beyond bounded academic disciplines, to examine transnational phenomena, and to learn from subjects of study located in the Middle East, North America, Europe, Southern Asia, and Latin America. Especially engaging are numerous interviews with “organic” intellectuals, in the Gramscian sense: activists, educators, and media-makers including Jean Carlomusto and Pamela Yates.

I believe the questioning of humanitarianism as ideology constitutes a major achievement of the book. In her contribution, “Regime-Made Disaster: On the Possibility of Nongovernmental Viewing,” Ariella

Azoulay demonstrates that governmental humanitarianism is an ideological tool of dominant states for transforming "other" human beings into subjects of control. Azoulay researches the visual archives of Israel's Government Press Office and shows that Israel's humanitarian photographs of so-called Palestinian "refugees" mask Israel's expulsion of Palestinians from their land. Roger Hallas' chapter discusses mainstream humanitarianism in photojournalism's representations of HIV/AIDS, and the work of photographers intended, in contrast, to reflect sick persons' agency in order to criticize and alter the social conditions that produce the disease. In turn, Felicity D. Scott reveals that conservative environmental organizations appropriate countercultural protests and espouse discourses on the "human environment" to develop environmental agendas consonant with capitalism. At the same time, however, *Sensible Politics* demonstrates that the reading of signs must be contextual. For instance, Amahl Bishara claims that "humanizing Palestinians" in photographs of peaceful protests against Israel's Separation Barrier in the West Bank is a form of cultural resistance to oppression, while Zeynep Devrim Gürsel addresses Turkish citizens' divergent views on Turkey's integration into the European Union.

Other chapters investigate how invisibility and visibility create political meanings. As Eduardo Cadava argues in a text on mourning in Vrindavan, "what is presently invisible is what needs to be read" (p. 54). In this sense, Jonathan Crary follows Jean-Luc Godard to consider that cinema can be employed to disturb the present visual regime of historical amnesia and political evasion, while Thomas Keenan discusses photographer Trevor Paglen's extreme-distance images of U.S. military installations or spy satellites, which captured the spatial mechanisms of U.S. imperial order. In another subject area, Leshu Torchin's chapter problematizes the reification role of global media events. Torchin claims that the benefit concert Live 8, organized to promote the reduction of poverty according to United Nations Millennium Development Goals, "reenacted plays of First World agency and Third World victimhood" (p. 608). If Torchin looks at globalization from above, so to speak, other texts examine alternative forces of globalization from below. Benjamin J. Young reflects on photographer Allan Sekula's representations of "anti-globalization" demonstrators at the World Trade Organization's Ministerial Conference in Seattle (1999). Sekula showed that demonstrators used mirrors to reflect police forces repressing them and engage media viewers in thinking about state violence, while Young argues that the event of the strike itself removes subjects from their places of work and cultural conformity, contesting dominant forces over the political definition of the public space.

Sensible Politics gathers extraordinary texts of political critique. For example, in "All Eyes," filmmaker Kirsten Johnson reflects on her depiction of a U.S. military trial of a prisoner of war—termed "detainee" in the official rhetoric—accused of conspiracy and material support for terrorism and confined for six years at the internationally criticized Guantánamo military prison. Because regulations prohibited Johnson from filming the defendant, the trial, and many features of the military complex, Johnson explains how she managed to "translate his presence, evoke his experience, and draw attention to his forced invisibility" (p. 359). She filmed the "negative space" surrounding the defendant, who was sentenced by the military jury to spend five more months in prison before finally being acquitted of all charges by a U.S. Court of Appeals. Similarly, in another chapter on state violence, Kendall Thomas discusses the invisibility of ideologies of race and sexuality in the U.S. justice system, and how those ideologies produce injustice and inequality. In a similar theoretical light, Hugh Raffles examines the effects of ideology on common sense, arguing that the analogy of Nazi death camps for industrial animal

slaughter obfuscates the understanding that Nazis not only massacred human beings as if they were animals but also reduced human beings to the status of animals: "As much as the fact of killing, it is this fact of ontological destruction . . . that remains so raw and incalculable" (p. 216).

In another arena, critical architects Alessandro Petti, Sandi Hilal, and Eyal Weizman reflect on the spatial politics of their project Decolonizing Architecture Art Residency in Beit Sahour. This project aims to counteract Israel's occupation of Palestinian territories by transforming spatial logics in terms of social justice and equality. In an admirable passage on the common good, the authors contend that decolonization "looks for and finds cracks where the potential for the transformation and reuse of the existing dominant structures – architectural, infrastructural, and legal, could be found" (p. 454). This chapter is complemented with editors' interviews with Weizman and Laura Kurgan on spatial research as a counter-hegemonic practice within neoliberal governance.

Despite these formidable strengths, *Sensible Politics* still struggles somewhat to engage with media and political theories and lacks a systematic theoretical account of contemporary transformations. For example, it does not analyze media practices in the context of the network society (Castells, 1996), the regime of capital accumulation (Harvey, 1990), or control society (Deleuze, 1992). It also does not conceptualize how the media system conditions political action through its emphasis on personalization, effects, and scandals (Castells, 1997). Some chapters do touch on these issues, though without developing a cohesive approach drawing together their contributions. Huma Yusuf examines citizens' digital journalism and tensions between new media, mainstream media, and state censorship in Pakistan. In turn, Judith Butler provides insights on relationships between the "politics of the street" (p. 117) and global media, and Negar Azimi questions "the logic of the hyperlink" (p. 239), which rules the circulation of images in the Internet and effaces the connections between virtual meanings and physical referents. In addition, Sam Gregory comments on how media habits condition the communication of human rights testimonies, while McLagan—a critical filmmaker and anthropologist—addresses the impact of marketing on the so-called independent film sector. There are also several discussions of class and of symbolic capital. For instance, Jaleh Mansoor analyzes Lewis Hine's critical photographs of working-class children's defiance in the face of objectification by industrial capitalism in the United States. Carrie Lambert-Beatty and Liza Johnson consider the symbolic implications of art for political practice in their individual chapters on abortion rights and on the use of commodity-images for political critique.

The significance of those perspectives notwithstanding, I wish the book had considered political and cultural theory more thoroughly. Debates on hegemony, social class, the multitude, and social movements from Marxist, post-Marxist, or poststructuralist perspectives are absent, even when authors sometimes take such positions in passing. For example, drawing on Michel Foucault and Rancière, Andrew Herscher looks at "subjectivization" in the heritage policy of post-Yugoslavia states. In more empirical terms, the book limits the study of nongovernmental activism to nongovernmental organizations and activists, despite some authors' consideration of their implications for social movements, such as Faye Ginsburg's discussion of the formation of "indigenous counterpublics" and Charles Zerner's comments on the resonances of alternative food politics in New York City. In this regard, McLagan and McKee clarify that the book was projected "prior to the emergence of demonstrations around the world" (p. 10), such as the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, or those of *indignados* (the outraged) in Spain. The editors fail to

observe, however, that earlier social protests in and from Latin America preceded demonstrations against neoliberal austerity programs elsewhere.

To summarize, *Sensible Politics* contributes to the debate on the relationship between media and political practices and between academic labor and activism. The variety of sociopolitical contexts and forms of praxis it considers will no doubt grab the attention of critical readers worldwide. The book is also provocative for class discussions of media studies and cultural studies. Its collective works stimulate students, scholars, and readers to inquire into the most concrete, *sensible*, foundations of the regimes of social control across global capitalism today.

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