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The Problem of the Viewing Subject

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In 'To boldly torture where no one has tortured before...', Juha Vuori (2017) provides a comprehensive overview of how torture is represented across several series of the *Star Trek* franchise. From this in-depth data analysis, he is able to infer from these representations more general socio-cultural attitudes towards torture at their time of airing. In doing so, this article demonstrates how attitudes towards torture have changed over time as well as provides a valuable archive of specific instances in which torture is mobilised within the *Star Trek* fiction-verse. My contention is that as valuable as these contributions are, the analysis raises an even bigger issue for visual studies in international relations that should resonate regardless of whether one is an avid Trekker or not. This is the issue of the viewing subject and the construction of social imaginaries. More specifically, it is the challenge of developing appropriately rigorous methods for being able to investigate how viewing subjects and social imaginaries are produced.

The visual turn in international relations has thus far demonstrated a preference for exploring representational practices, including inter-textuality, across a range of discursive, semiotic, and aesthetic approaches. This, in part, reflects how visual artefacts have been examined in visual studies. It is also a product of the genealogy of the 'visual turn' and its close relationship to the critical turn that catalysed the third great debate in the discipline. Surprisingly, despite a broader concern with subjectivity across critical currents in international relations, the production of the viewing subject has featured less prominently. Thus, the visual turn has generally demonstrated a preference for Roland Barthes (1977) and WJT Mitchell (1995) over Jonathan Crary (1992) or Norman Bryson (1988).

Crary (1992) has suggested that the viewing subject is important because it has always posed a problem for visual representations, technologies that aid in practices of seeing/representing, and techniques of representation/production. Thus, the viewing subject should not be assumed but rather investigated. As Crary (1992: 6) argues, the vision of the viewing subject is not determined by:

...some deep structure, economic base, or world view, but rather the functioning of a collective assemblage of disparate parts on a single social surface. It may even be necessary to consider the observer as a distribution of events located in many different places. There never was or will be a self-present beholder to whom a world is transparently evident. Instead, there are more or less powerful arrangements of forces out of which the capacities of an observer are made possible.

Thus the neglect of the viewing subject potentially has significant repercussions for the visual turn. These include missing an important product of power dynamics that shape practices of viewing as well as how distributions of the sensible both presume and produce particular subjectivities through practices of observation. To be clear, this is not about audiences-- though these too have been neglected in the visual turn! Audiences are a category of potential consumers and/or fans of a cultural product. The viewing subject centres on what kind of viewing capacities, understandings, and limitations are produced in and through the viewer

such that the artefact in question is (or becomes) sensible to them; it may also be the case that creative teams utilise particular techniques, tropes, representations, inter-texts, sounds, or other sensory cues in attempts to overcome interpretative ambiguity by harnessing broader genre or cultural logics to lean towards some preferred interpretative possibility.

As first steps, Vuori cogently intimates two reasons why we should be interested in the viewing subject. The first, via Ranciere, is to begin the process of unpacking how the viewing subject is imbricated within the distribution of the sensible. What kind of viewing subject can be (and is) recognised? The second, which follows on from the first, is, like Vuori, to take Honneth's social imaginaries as important elements in the construction of the visual field. This raises a series of questions about the ways in which imaginaries are envisioned, who they include within them, who they *might* include within them, and who is left out. More to the point, in what ways might social imaginaries influence who, where, what, why, and how we see?

The visual turn thus faces a profound methodological challenge going forward. While it has a set of sophisticated methods for the analysis of the representational, semiotic, and inter-textual dimensions of the visual field, how to rigorously examine the production of the viewing subject remains relatively fertile ground. In my view, it is here that there is considerable work to be done in mapping out and contextualising the 'collective assemblages of disparate parts' that produce viewing subjects. This will necessarily require that the visual turn in IR go beyond 'reading' particular images or artefacts for their discursive/semiotic/representational qualities and begin the hard task of giving shape to the disparate parts that conjoin to produce distributions of the sensible and social imaginaries. This will potentially require engaging with a range of disciplines from vision science to marketing to comparative political theory. In conclusion then, beyond the analysis of representations of torture in the *Star Trek* fiction-verse, this article provides a major service to the field by drawing our attention to the need to engage with the problem of the viewing subject.

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