

## ‘The Way We Live Now’

introduction to the book *Beyond The Limits*

An appreciation of what is radically novel and innovative in Mitra Tabrizian’s most recent work must begin with an understanding of what her previous work had already accomplished: for the latter provides the creative platform on which the new work stands. Powered by her deep involvement in the debates in the 80’s and 90’s around subjectivity and ideology, psychoanalysis and feminism, gender, race and sexuality, and deeply informed by the explorations in photographic practice and the image which her earlier projects represented, Mitra Tabrizian’s has now vigorously mobilized and resumed all the ‘lessons’ of that whole body of work in order to address radically new subject-matter and to attempt a challenging project— a critique of the everyday life of contemporary corporate-post-modernity and its ‘systems’ of representation.

Tabrizian’s involvement at the cutting edge of theoretical argument which makes her work highly distinctive, is no additional or external ‘add-on’ to her visual practice. These arguments and ideas are integral to, and have been fully absorbed into, her creative practice. Freud on the narcissistic and fetishistic roots of ‘scopophilia’ - the pleasure in looking,, Lacan on ‘the mirror phase’, Laura Mulvey on the gendering of ‘the look’, in *College of Fashion*; Foucault on the constitution and regulation of ‘the subject’, in *Govermentality*; the construction of the feminine through the codes and the ‘world’ of advertising; Catherine Clement, Isabelle de Courtivron, Julia Kristeva, Joan Riviere on ‘woman as masquerade’ - in the *femme fatale*/film noir ‘sequences’ in *Correct Distance*; Homi Bhabha on fetishism and disavowal in the racial stereotype; Derrida on *difference*; women and the black man as ‘Other’, in the narrative sequences of *The Blues*; Foucault again, on the panoptic gaze of power, in that

compelling, single, stereoscopic image of Khomeni's Islamic cultural revolution, with Iranian women staged as part of the spectacle of power, in *Surveillance*. This original body of work represents a deep and sustained engagement with ideas – with the contemporary social and political world re-reviewed *through* the subjective optic and what we may call a post-structuralist visual imaginary. The images function here, not as 'illustrations' or supports of already-constituted concepts but as 'visual concept-spaces' in which ideas are worked through and 'realised' in a series of scenic tableaux or *mise-en-scene*, expanded and developed in another register - a kind of 'thinking-with/in the image'. In the new work, Lyotard and Baudrillard's ambivalent and doom-laden prophecies about the disappearance of meaning in a world of simulation provide the conceptual poles around which much of the new work circles. .

This is a good example of how 'the conceptual' functions for Tabrizian's work: as stimulus and challenge rather than as a constraining box. The question of whether Baudrillard is 'right' or not is not what is at issue here. This is a different kind of 'work'. One can make use of such themes as the decline of mass politics and political participation, the neutralizing of criticism, the weakness of popular resistance and the ebbing of the tide of democratic politics in the so-called 'new world order', without swallowing whole the strategic exaggerations of Baudrillard's *Silent Majority*. One can explore visually the radical insight that the modern global economy is also, and necessarily, an 'economy of signs', and that the boundaries between 'the real' and the 'hyper-real' are blurring, in a media-saturated age, without falling hook, line and sinker for the proposition that reality has been wholly subsumed into 'the sign'. One can appreciate the way contemporary politics has been thoroughly 'mediatized', the logic of the simulacrum substituting for the 'worldliness' of the world, without subscribing to the risible - and ultimately irresponsible - idea that the Gulf War was nothing but a media event.

On the other hand, Baudrillard's argument that when the logic of the basic axioms of the systems which increasingly govern the post-modern, corporate, 'global' economy are pushed to their extreme limits, they go into reverse gear, "with unpredictable and chaotic results", beautifully encapsulates the effect on us spectators of those uncanny 'mishappenings' in the scenarios of, say, *Beyond The Limits*. The high gloss, elegant couture, glamorous settings, the high-tec gleam, the signs everywhere in this series of refined consumerism, money and corporate style, draw us in. This is the familiar world of exclusive advertising, corporate promotions, PR and marketing, where commodity speaks to commodity. Are these images, we wonder, not in danger of falling into the trap of what the critics call 'the fallacy of imitative form' – becoming, in effect, instances of the very thing they are critiquing? In fact, the spectatorial 'distances' are, as always in Tabrizian's work, superbly calculated and judged. Only a tiny, often almost unnoticeable, detail here and there – the size and position of the sheep (Nature as pure simulation), the bloody human organ being transmitted 'down the line' in a glass jar by the executives (the all-encompassing power and 'neutrality' of modern technology), or the hole in the head of the father lunching with his sons (the fine line between suicide and early retirement) - reminds us that something has, not so much 'gone wrong' as 'gone all too right', gone beyond its limits. "The crime becomes perfect when no-one notices".

In her catalogue essay, "Veils, Masks and Mirrors" for Mitra Tabrizian's earlier book, aptly entitled *Correct Distance* (Cornerhouse, 1990), the feminist art critic, Griselda Pollock, made two observations which still provide significant points of departure for more recent work. She noted that Mitra Tabrizian's images are all "contrived fictive spaces", adding that they "allow the spectators a distance from dominant forms of voyeurism and exhibitionism", as found in a variety of contemporary visual codes

and discourses. Pollock also observed that Tabirzian's photographs "are never simply pictures of something...They are as often practices *on* photography as practices *within it*". These insights provide a useful prism through which to approach the new work.

The images which comprise the projects in this book are indeed 'fictive visual spaces'. There is evidence everywhere of a photographic practice inscribed by 'the cinematic' (she is, of course, in other manifestations, a fine film-maker) They are exquisitely 'staged' – triumphs of *mise-en-scene*. But they are also, in another, more psycho-analytic sense, 'scenes' in which the unconscious forces of fantasy and desire, violence and difference, obeying an alternative 'logic' or 'dream-work' of their own, emerge into the surface of the image and freely play. These images operate as beautifully condensed narratives. Often – in *Lost Time* and *The Perfect Crime*, as in *The Blues* and *Correct Distance*, (her 'film noir') - the 'story-lines' are sustained elliptically across 'sequences' – like stills from a series of as-yet unmade films. In others – *Minimal Utopia* or *Silent Majority* - the narrative is fused into a single image.

Some reference their cinematic equivalents directly – for example, the deliberate Takeshi Kitano-Tarrantino-*Reservoir Dogs* echoes and references in the implied narrative of *The Perfect Crime*. The menacing violence of the gang fight to come, with its dramatic registration in black-and-white, is perfectly 'staged': the 'freeze-frame' positions of the four black hoods, 'going to meet the man', posed against an urban dead-end, in *End Zone*; the stereoscopic framing of the five, black-suited, white-faced executive criminals, waiting to "close the deal", in front of the black stretch limo with its white walled tyres and gleaming body, in *Lost Station*. However, far from merely mimicking the cinematic discourse of the contemporary crime film, or mounting a

moral critique of its violence, Tabrizian unravels and re-works its ‘logic’ from the inside.

Un-framing the images from their *Pulp Fiction*-like locations and re-staging them, as she says, “within wider contexts of racial and sexual violence” allow the frames to become charged by deeper, more unconscious currents, permitting these powerful and eloquent contemporary images to signify ‘otherwise.’ The racial and sexual edge, so thoroughly disavowed in Tarantino’s cynical, cartoon-eye universe, is restored.. In *End Zone*, the degraded urban setting becomes a silent ‘actor’ or subject of the sequence in its own right. The ‘look’ from the bearded tramp on the sidewalk, at the four black ‘suits’, deconstructs them, repositioning them closer to the ‘doubling’ discourse of *The Blues*, where vulnerability and aggression are held unresolved (in the knight’s expression, in the hang of his body); and difference, which cannot be denied, nevertheless refuses to divide into its staged opposites. The fact that ‘the crime’ has ‘gone missing’ from the frame, allows its meanings and resonances to expand, hovering ambivalently between the criminal and the corporate. The deeper, implied narrative in the visual text – with its punning titles incorporated as ‘clues’, often in reverse mirror-shot - opens up the very ambiguities around race and difference, , masculinity and violence, fear and vulnerability, which the discourse of the contemporary crime thriller film is deliberately designed to close down. “Who is the victim here, who the victimiser?”

This ambivalence comes together, and is eloquently captured, in the most beautifully constructed ‘still’ of the sequence, *White Knights*. The moving figure of the black ‘knight’ is both hunter and hunted. His corporate gear is both styled, and in disarray. In the stolen privacy of the lavatory, his hard, masculine ‘front’, like his tie and shirt, have become ‘undone’ . His ‘look’, like that of the black figure looking at his white ‘double’

in mirrored reverse (in *Lost Frontier* in *The Blues*), hangs, unresolved, between fear and violence. He seems trapped between the soiled white tile of the wash-basins and the grey-white enamel of the urinals, with his inner fears, like the squalid under-growth of pipes, like entrails, brutally exposed. Here we can see Tabrizian, mobilizing all the resources of distance, staging and the economy of looking to draw the spectator into a disturbed and disturbing space, in that contemporary border-land between cinematic fantasy, racial identification and urban nightmare.

*Minimal Utopia*, on the other hand, takes us into the domain of sci-fi and the eerie dreamland of the city as futuristic urban dystopia. Here everything is pastiche, everything a simulacrum or dead double of itself. The constructed scene contains many people, but no single living thing. Even the grass beneath their feet in lab-produced astro-turf.. Everyone – even the children - are ‘power dressed. Their eyes and faces are empty, without expression. They are ‘dummies/dumbies’. The dog of the man in the elegant leather coat is sniffing one of their hands. A scene of total solitariness, without connection. Not a single path or eye-line crosses that of another. Everything is shrouded in a n artificial lunar half-light, neither night nor day. Blue sky, only briefly glimpsed, is a screen projection on the side of a glass skyscraper of an ad selling shares in Air. The armed, private security cops who police the space are all mutants. Over everything, blankly surveying the scene, from two advertising screens, are the only two black faces present: the black boy, head and shoulders, hanging up-side down; and the piercing electric-blue ‘eyes’ and arched eyebrows of the person with the velvet-soft brown face. The latter offers us that rarest and most paradoxical of commodities – Nature’s Creative System. This is an image of the new ‘global city’, centre of financial flows, share options, and the ‘futures’ market, hub of the ‘new economy’, the fully privatised, policed and gated city, the corporate utopia, where nobody is alive but everybody is ‘on line’ and depression is kept at bay by the free availability of Frozac.

Who lives here? Mitra Tabrizian, who has ‘lovingly’ constructed this scene before photographing it, has used it to stage a possible future already implicit in ‘the way we live now’. She insists that we are already almost there. It must be read in conjunction with its alter ego, *Silent Majority*, another of her striking stereoscopic single images, of the morning crowd, hurrying out of the underground station, which yawns behind them like the mouth to Hades, and scurrying to work in the great glass business canyon of Canary Wharf to the left. This is the ‘crowd’, the silent majorities, that are absent from the clean, half-lit dead corporate spaces of *Minimal Utopia*. Where the figures in *Minimal Utopia* are lifeless and without movement, the working crowd in *Silent Majority* is full of ‘movement’. Well dressed in a casual way, well-fed, they are not your oppressed urban office-proletariat nor “the crowd that flowed over London Bridge..... up the hill and down King William Street” in T.S. Eliot’s *Waste Land*. But they are represented as wholly without political agency. Quite how this is communicated in something of a mystery. It has something to do with the way the great metal arc of modern brutalist urban architecture, which encloses them decisively into the bottom half of the frame, breaks the frame in two, cutting the crowd off from the light, air and open sky in the top half of the frame.

It is sometimes asked whether the political as a source of creativity in the visual arts is dead in the age of silent majorities, urban dystopias and post-modern closure. Few seem to have the ambition any longer even to try. Alan Sekula’s series on life aboard the enormous, ocean-going tankers which are the life-line of the global oil trade, is one of the few attempts successfully to find a metaphor, outside the language of the documentary image, for the new deregulated global consumerist economy which has emerged since the 70’s. In this context, Mitra Tabrizian’s new work is a bold, ambitious, innovative, singular and courageous attempt to break the silence about the

directions in which contemporary post-modern corporate world is going and to find a new language, informed by the exploration in visual practice and theoretical argument of the last two decades, in which a wide-ranging, visually challenging critique of contemporary life can be mounted. For this alone, her new volume commands critical attention.

**Stuart Hall**

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