

# The Empire of Camps\*

Nicholas Mirzoeff

On September 11, I was on the South Pacific island of Moorea en route to Australia. It was not until September 12 that I first learned of the attack on the World Trade Center, alerted by my confused daughter's unsuccessful efforts to find French cartoons on television. As I stared at the instantly unforgettable images, I kept turning to look out of the window at what was for my British eyes the almost equally unreal sight of palm trees and white sand beaches. Caught between the exoticism of the Orientalist holiday-of-a-lifetime and the anti-modern spectacle of September 11, I experienced the full vertiginous affect of the visual subject in the empire of camps. By the visual subject, I mean a person who is both constituted as an agent of sight (regardless of his or her biological capacity to see) and as the effect of a series of categories of visual subjectivity. The term "empire" is appropriated from Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's instant classic *Empire* (2000) that analyses the new geo-politics of globalization. The camps in question are the internment camps for migrants and refugees that are the true symbol of the new world order, suggesting at a metaphorical level the redivision of geo-politics into an apparently simple system of opposed camps. As it turned out, Australia and Britain, where I have happened to spend the last year, were excellent locations to develop my understanding of the empire of camps. This is my postcard home, wherever that is now, and it is as provisional and sketchy as all postcards.

The camp is the panopticon for our time, at once the site of deployment of new visual technologies, a model institution for global culture and a powerful symbol of the renewed desire of nation states to restrict global freedom of movement to capital. Michel Foucault used the panopticon as his model for the society of surveillance created in the West in the century after 1750. He derived its principle from the all-seeing machine,

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\* This paper was presented as the keynote address for the conference 'Art and the Crisis in Multiculturalism', 13<sup>th</sup> September 2002, at the Nottingham Institute for Research in Visual Culture, University of Nottingham.

invented by the British philosopher Jeremy Bentham in 1786. The panopticon was an inspection house for the reformation of morals, whether of prisoners, workers or prostitutes by means of constant surveillance that the inmates could not perceive, a system summed up by Foucault in the aphorism “visibility is a trap.” Bentham copied a system his brother had used in Russia, in order to persuade the British government to adopt his system of moral discipline derived from the Jesuit plantations in Paraguay and the slave plantations of the Caribbean. When the British instead opted for penal deportation to the new colony of Australia, Bentham simply asserted that panopticons should be built there: the prison at Port Arthur, Van Diemens Land (now Tasmania) did indeed come very close to his specifications. Panoptic modernity was always a global system that affected different parts of the world unevenly. It was also always already a failure, from the basic level of technology to its more refined moral goals. Unable to devise technical means to ensure the permanent visibility of the prisoners, and unsuccessful in persuading governments to formally adopt his scheme, Bentham came to despair of the panopticon. Writing of his papers on the subject, he declared: “it is like opening a drawer where devils are locked up - it is breaking into a haunted house.”<sup>1</sup> Those ghosts are all around us now.

Nonetheless the panoptic prison appeared to be a success. By 1877 the number of prisons in Britain was only 56, down from 113 in Bentham’s day. After 1918 a further 29 prisons were closed and by 1952 the total number of prisons in the U.K was 29. In 1992, the prison population in Britain was 40,600, down from 51,000 in 1988. In the subsequent decade the number of prisoners have risen by 50% and are anticipated to hit 92,000 in 2005.<sup>2</sup> The prison population in the United States, where approximately two million people are incarcerated in the penal system, dwarfs such numbers. Led by a political reaction epitomized in the “three strikes and you’re out” laws, global capital has abandoned any belief in the reforming character of incarceration in favor of a simple and profitable strategy of mass detention.

The overcrowded prisons of the last two centuries are relics, all too visually obvious, subject to riot and reform. The empire of camps has no scruples, no moral agenda and no desire to be seen or to make its prisoners visible, although surveillance is everywhere. The grand architectural sweep of the panoptic prison, the department store and the military barracks has been replaced by the low-rise internment camp, the strip mall and the anonymous delivery of “smart” weapons. Strikingly this policy has been led by the two countries most directly affected by the prison crisis of the 1780s that generated both Bentham’s prison and colonial deportation, namely Britain and Australia. Although Britain has a self-declared reforming administration and Australia a right-wing coalition, their policy in this regard has been identical. Britain has even returned to the eighteenth-century strategy of using prison ships. With HMP Weare moored in Partland Harbour, Dorset, without controversy, plans call for a second such ship in Scotland.

The new internment camps are low structures that do nothing to draw attention to themselves and have no central viewpoint or command post. They are located in remote areas, such as the Woomera camp in South Australia, situated some 300 miles from the nearest town, Adelaide, on an abandoned rocket testing site. The relics of the Cold War have become components for the new system, as in the extraordinary U.S. detention center at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. It is appropriately named Camp X-Ray, a place beyond normal vision, in which mere flesh cannot be seen. Woomera is presently surrounded with fences and coils of razor wire that will be soon replaced with an electrified fence, delivering a

“non-fatal electronic shock” to anyone trying to escape, a tribute to a series of principled wire-cutting protests at the site that allowed inmates a temporary freedom.

The camps generate, in the words of the Australian government’s own human rights advisory group, “a miasma of despair and desperation.”<sup>3</sup> The imprisoned refugees in Woomera and in the British camp of Yarl’s Wood have resorted to burning down their huts in protest, while others at Woomera and the French camp at Sangatte have sewn their mouths closed. In March 2002 twelve inmates at Woomera symbolically dug their own graves and lay in them as a protest. Such resistance nonetheless mimics the intent of the camps. Their goal is to render their inhabitants into the undead, people with no social existence. In a report on the refugee camp at Sangatte, Djaffer Ait Aoudia quotes an anonymous displaced person as saying of life in the camps: “We are already dead. Sangatte is the cemetery of the living.”<sup>4</sup> Bentham’s fear that the ineffective panopticon would turn its inhabitants into ghosts is now government policy. Sangatte itself is now a ghost, as the British and French governments have announced that it will have been closed by April 2003, using the future perfect that Derrida has named as the voice of the specter.

The camps are the center of an expanding transnational industry. The British camp at Yarl’s Wood was run by the private security firm Group 4, while all five Australian camps for detainees are managed by Australasian Correctional Management, a subsidiary of the U.S. penal giant Wackenhut Corrections. This global corporation manages 61 correctional and detentional centres in North America, Europe, Puerto Rico, Australia, South Africa and New Zealand, generating annual revenues in excess of \$500 million and a 14.1 % profit increase in 2001. It deals in “prisoner transportation, electronic monitoring for home detainees, correctional health care and mental health services.” Like any other multinational, Wackenhut sends its capital where profits are to be made and is subject to the monopolizing character of globalization. In 2002, it closed an “unprofitable” prison in Arkansas in favor of a 3024-bed facility in South Africa, only to be taken over by the \$2.5 billion Danish corporation Group 4 Falck.<sup>5</sup> The results were a dramatic 97% increase in net income in the first quarter of 2002 for Wackenhut and the unnoticed creation of a global empire of incarceration in the hands of corporations, not governments.<sup>6</sup>

September 11 did not create these camps but has engendered a legitimating context in which the empire of camps has emerged in its pomp, generating xenophobia and attacks on multiculturalism around the globe. What is at stake here is not the spectacle of September or even the “war on terrorism,” but the way in which globalization will be enacted at the level of everyday life. For the internment camp for migrants is the model institution for a range of social practices, just as the panopticon was the model for nineteenth-century factories and schools. U.S. high schools operating behind metal detectors are one example; the maquilladora factories turning out cheap products for the U.S. economy on the Mexican side of the border are another. While the department store and the Arcade were the commercial outlets of panopticism, the camp retails via the strip mall, the outlet store and the suburban superstore.

The dominant visual technology of the camps is not the all-seeing jailer but closed-circuit television (CCTV). There are some 25 million CCTV cameras in operation today, almost all in the advanced capitalist societies, with some 10% of the total in Britain alone. In July 2002, Samsung introduced its new “high-impact armored dome line” of CCTVs, guaranteed indestructible and recommended as “ideal for use in environments such as prisons or educational campuses.” The camp, like the panopticon, is based on all-seeing

technology, but the difference between the two is that while CCTV really does see everything, it prevents nothing. One of the most striking examples of this paradox was seen on September 11, when Mohammed Atta, a known FBI suspect, was filmed by CCTV getting onto a plane in Boston, which he then hi-jacked and flew into the World Trade Center. This airport footage is now familiar to millions but did nothing to stop the events themselves. The global craze for reality television, in which people voluntarily subject themselves to surveillance for the entertainment of others on shows like *Big Brother* and *Survivor* is a response to the disinterested surveillance of the camps. For in these shows being watched makes a difference: at the end of each episode, one person is voted off and at last a winner emerges. In this scenario, everyday life is a spectacle that cannot be ignored. But it is only television. Elsewhere human consequences are nothing more than collateral damage.

The goal of the empire of camps is simple: to maintain low-waged manufacturing workers in their place in the global marketplace and reduce the social welfare costs of the advanced nations to the lowest possible point. The dilemma is how to enact these restrictions while continuing to permit the instant, electronic nomadism of capital. The response has been to use a degree of force that would have been unthinkable without the enabling context of September 11. The creation of the camps is haunted by two of the most frightening ghosts of modernity – namely slavery and the Holocaust. The camps turn their inmates into slaves. For the goal of slavery was precisely, as Orlando Patterson has long argued, to render the social subject into social death: to make the person undead. Slavery's abolition was held to be one of the great markers of modernity, even though the United Nations estimates that some 200 million people are enslaved today. The empire of camps derives its technology from the concentration camps of the Nazi regime, the Gulag Archipelago and the Alien Internment camps of World War Two. That this has come to pass indicates the failure of fifty years of cultural politics organized around the slogan "Never again." Instead, we have seen, in the words of Rwandan President Paul Kagame, that "never again became wherever again." The Rwandan genocide of 1994 was, in hindsight, the moment at which the empire of camps became operational. Rwanda, a small landlocked country, became a carceral society for the duration of the genocide in which some 500,000 Tutsi and moderate Hutus were massacred by Hutu extremists. Rather than re-enact the now-familiar Western strategy of minimalist memorial sculptures to the genocide, the Rwandan government has instead gone to considerable lengths to preserve the venues of genocide, making the empire of camps visible.

The empire of camps is intensely gendered. The camps figure the migrant as male, fecklessly abandoning a family somewhere in the global ghetto. The British Labour immigration minister (since re-shuffled) Lord Rooker declared in May 2002 that: "most asylum seekers are single men who have deserted their families for economic gain." These remarks were quoted with approval by the anti-immigration tabloid the *Daily Express* as validating its entire xenophobic campaign. At the same time, global capital has changed not just relations of consumption but relations of production, with the consequence that, as Gayatri Spivak has argued: "the subaltern woman is now to a rather large extent the support of production," through piece work, sweatshop labor and reproductive labor in low-wage economies. This condition is acknowledged in the West by displacement. That is to say, globalization within the West is culturally figured as feminine, which I take to be a contested cultural category rather than a biological given. At the same time, this gendered

representation of contemporary culture, while of Western origin, has global effects. The contradiction of this moment can be expressed in many ways but here's one that I have used since 2000 that has become very acute since September 11. The Iranian video artist Shirin Neshat, working in exile in New York, is rightly becoming a global star for her explorations of the gendered divide in Islamic culture. Neshat's video work is lushly cinematic, creating ten-minute epics with casts of hundreds. Black veiled women hired on location pirouette at the edge of the sea in a dis-identification with Orientalism that is nonetheless starkly beautiful. At the same time, since their takeover of power, the Taliban in Afghanistan held public destructions of artworks, television sets and videotapes, while forcibly constraining women to the home and making them literally invisible in public behind the veil. The anti-modernity of the Taliban and their allies relied on the global media to disseminate their actions and discipline their own subjects, even as it disavowed visual culture. For it was an open secret, reported in the Western media, that many Afghans continued to watch television and videos and these were of course the people least convinced by the Taliban. The destruction of the Buddhist statues at Bamayan was the one example of this televised iconoclasm and September 11 was its apogee, continued by the video bulletins issued by Osama bin Laden, distributed by the al-Jazeera network, to celebrate his escape from U.S. armed forces. The paradox here is that the apparently head-on collision of contemporary ideologies between the feminist artist Neshat and the Taliban dictatorship of clerics both rely on nineteenth-century modes of visibility - Orientalism on the one side, panopticism on the other - centered on the figure of the veiled woman, so familiar from imperial culture.

In this light, the events of September 11 were literally reactionary, an attempt to eliminate transculture and recreate a starkly divided world of good and evil that has until the time of writing been disturbingly successful. For the empire of camps has taken advantage of the moment in which for both jihadis and the U.S. government, all aspects of contemporary life can be subjugated to the question: "Are you for us or against us?" After the so-called war on terrorism has faded away, there is now a chance that global capital will have succeeded in consolidating itself in the most reactionary of forms.

How are we, the ghosts, to resist in a world that has no outside? How do we make ourselves seen in this culture of invisibility? What kind of visibility is even desirable? The ghost moves between visibility and invisibility in a tempo that is not "real time." What belongs to it, what is proper to the ghost, is its demand for justice and that demand must be seen as well as heard. In the first scene of Hamlet, the scholar Horatio muses on the ghost of Hamlet's father: "a mote it is to trouble the mind's eye." The sight of the ghost is not simply that of perception but that of critical judgment in the mind's eye, which remains sighted despite all attempts to render it blind. Unlike the disciplinary subject that sees itself seeing itself, the ghost sees that it is seen and thereby becomes visible to itself and others in the constantly weaving spiral of transculture, a transforming encounter that leaves nothing the same as it was before. These multiple interactions are constitutive of the chaotic system that is contemporary visibility. The scholarship of modern visibility has often wanted to constrain the unpredictable effects of the networked visual event into clear, geometric parameters, whether derived from art historical formalism, panoptic surveillance or Lacan's gaze theory. It is time, perhaps past time or just before time, to reimagine the visual subject in what might be called a re-enlightenment. This is the transient, transdimensional, transgendered way of seeing that visual culture seeks to define, describe

and deconstruct with the transverse look or glance. The transverse glance is not a gaze because it resists the imperial domain of gendered sexuality, using what Judith Halberstam has called “the trans gaze.” If this seems a little utopian, let it also be said that this transverse practice is at all times at risk of being undercut by transnational capital. As more links are created in this network by the engagements of individuals or groups, it may be possible to look transversely across the gaze, across the color line, across surveillance, to see otherwise and learn what it is to be a ghost.

## Notes

1. Janet Semple, *Bentham's Prison* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1993), p. 16.
2. Figures from Leslie Fairweather, *Prison Architecture: Policy, Design and Experience* (London: Architectural Press, 2001), quoted by Jonathan Glancey, “Within these walls,” *Guardian*, February 1, 2001.
3. Patrick Barkham, “No Waltzing in Woomera,” *The Guardian Weekend*, May 25, 2002, pp. 24-31.
4. Djaffer Ait Aoudia, “Inside Sangatte,” *The Observer* (May 26, 2002), p. 14.
5. “Wackenhut Corrections Comments on the Merger of the Wackenhut Corporation with Group 4 Falck,” <http://www.prnewswire.com/>, accessed on May 30, 2002.
6. “Wackenhut Corrections Reports First Quarter Results,” <http://www.prnewswire.com/>, accessed on May 30, 2002.