Why is it that the commodity is pervasively visible, while common people are marginalized and remain invisible? By looking at the nineteenth century, this article drafts a genealogy of the modern/colonial regime of visibility. It is a step in the wider effort of tracing the genealogy of modernity’s hegemony over representation.

The article starts by interrogating the omnipresent visual rhetoric of the commodity. It looks at how the commodity spread its rhetoric in the realm of the visual. To address this question we look at entwinement between Marx’s fetish character of the commodity, Baudrillard’s principle of simulation and Benjamin’s phantasmagoria of modernity. The second part of the article looks at specific nineteenth century practices of display and spectacle. The color lithographic poster is a concrete historical example of the nascent technologies of display that enabled the entry of the commodity into the realm of the visual. These technologies transformed the physiognomy of the city and the experiences of everyday-life. Then we speak of the circus that sits at the birth of the modern entertainment industry. The circus with its ethnographic exhibitions illustrates a particular operation of the visual regime of modernity, namely that of turning the other, the non-western, into a spectacle. The circus reveals the coloniality of the regime of visibility. Both the poster and the circus show the constitution of the modern/colonial regime of visibility; a regime that at one and the same time produces perceptible experience and veils other social realities.
O life of clay! O dying of the century!
I fear you may be known
Only by him who shows the errant smile
Of those who've lost themselves.

Osip Mandelstam, 1921

Mexico City, the Question of Visibility

‘You’ are in Mexico City, driving for one, two or three hours to get to work amid millions of commuters. Your sight is cluttered with hundreds of billboards, of commodity images. Your car is your physiognomy, your public face and identity. It speaks of your place in society. As you enter the city centre and you come to a red light, you see street-children, teenagers selling something, scrambling to clean the windscreen for a few coins. These children outside, in the nowhere outside your car, vanish with the green light.

‘Your’ drive in Mexico City illustrates two very simple, almost banal observations; the first, that in the global consumer societies the commodity has an overwhelming visual presence, on billboards, magazines, web-pages, packages, TV, etc; the second, that there are millions of excluded persons, who are almost completely neglected. When seen in isolation, these two observations appear to be common sense, even simplistic. However, in the montage of ‘your’ driving experience they come side by side; and in a sudden realization they say: ‘commodities reign over the visible while common people, the ‘non-consumers’, are made invisible, erased.

This montage of daily life opens a powerful question and a demand on us to understand. How can we think the mediation between the visibility of the commodity and the invisibility of common people, of the dispossessed? Can we speak of a visual regime in which the inequality of the world expresses and affirms itself in an economy of the senses, in a regime of representation that establishes itself as reality? In what follows we will seek to explain the hegemony of the commodity and more generally of modernity over visibility.

This essay is concerned with a form of inequality that cannot be fully understood along the lines of the materialist traditions in the social sciences that denounce the economic systems of exploitation. The problem of visibility and invisibility brings us along a different path. We hope to reveal how modernity extends its hegemony over the visible and how the very visibility of the commodity can be seen as a mechanism that negates the other, by rendering her invisible. These pages ask: how is the spectacle of excess entwined with the erasure of common people, the marginalized, the dispossessed? They search for a genealogy of modernity’s hegemony over visibility and of the expansion of its regime of representation. The control of visibility and more generally of representation are the basis of modernity’s universal validity claim over reality.
We will start by addressing the question of how the commodity has been able to enter the realm of visibility. How has the pervasive rhetoric of commodity images been possible? To do this we explore the symbolic value of the commodity by analyzing the concept of commodity fetishism and the mediation between the simulation and phantasmagoria. Then we will look at the nineteenth century practices of display in which the symbolic dimension of the commodity encountered its material affirmation and came to radically transform the physiognomy of the city. Here we will see how the commodity entered everyday-life through the image. In particular, we will speak about the nineteenth century poster as an early practice that turned the city walls into spaces for the circulation of commercial images, of commodity-images. We argue that the nineteenth century poster signals the advent of the phantasmagoria of modernity, a key moment in the configuration of the modern/colonial regime of representation. Following the trail of the nineteenth century practices of representation we look at the circus. The circus sits at the birth of the entertainment industry, but most importantly the circus reveals a mechanism of representation by which the other, i.e. the 'non-western' is turned into a spectacle. We argue that this spectacle of difference was instrumental for enforcing the categories of race, the system of classification and the forms of temporal discrimination, and thus for upholding the modern colonial regime of visibility and its hegemony over the representation of the real.

These practices of display and spectacle are at one and the same time practices of establishment of the real and of erasure of the other. By revealing these mechanisms of the modern/colonial regime of representation, by thinking together simulation and erasure, modernity and coloniality, we contribute to bridging the gap between the 'intra-European' critiques of modernity (i.e. Baudrillard, de Certeau et al.) and decolonial thinking (i.e. Quijano, Mignolo et al.). In the moment in which the other is turned into a spectacle she is erased. The modern/colonial regime of representation is one in which the reign of the commodity signifies the erasure of other realities.

Times Square, the Commodity and Visibility

*Seeing Manhattan from the 110th floor of the World Trade Center... A wave of verticals. Its agitation is momentarily arrested by vision. The gigantic mass is immobilized before the eyes... On this stage of concrete, steel and glass... the tallest letters in the world compose a gigantic rhetoric of excess in both expenditure and production.*

*Michel de Certeau, 1988*

From the skyscraper’s window ‘you’ can see an angle of the glittering rhetoric of Times Square. You are curious about the composition and you begin to read: ‘PBS, Toshiba, TDK, Chevrolet, Budweiser Light, News Corporation, Panasonic, Yahoo, Ultimate Fighting Championship, Premier February 10th, Castle, Pop Joy, JVC, Swatch,
We live in a visual world of commodities as much as we live in a material one. The everyday life of the consumer is surrounded by manufactured images and hence also played out in the field of the visual. ‘Global consumers enthusiastically consume images; brand images, corporate images and self-images are critical economic and consumer values ...’ (Schroeder 2004, p. 230). That the commodity has entered and transformed the realm of the visual, thus far we know. However, why and how did it take this visual form? How did it come to be a hegemonic visual rhetoric?

To explore these questions we will begin by discussing the fetishism of the commodity and the mediation between Baudrillard’s notion of simulation and Benjamin’s phantasmagoria of modernity. We will try to show that it is precisely the fetish character of the commodity, its symbolic dimension, which takes a visual form and thus enters the realm of sense perception. Most importantly, the fetish character of the commodity helps us see how the commodity’s visual configuration emerges as part of a symbolic value that is already detached from social relations.

The Fetishism of the Commodity and Simulation

The task of understanding modernity’s regime of visibility in which the hegemony of the commodity comes hand in hand with the invisibility of common people, the dispossessed, bears an undeniable affinity to Marx’s thoughts on the fetishism of the commodity. In fact, Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism can be read as an attempt to explain that in our society things have taken on social characteristics, whereas social relations have taken the form of relations between things.

The commodity, says Marx, is much more than a simple object of use. It has a very strange and powerful appearance; it is the top curiosity of capitalism. ‘A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties’ (Marx 1983, p. 76). Marx's idea of commodity fetishism enables us to understand the process through which the commodity form gives origin to capitalism as a spectacle, as a realm of perception and visual experience, as a rhetoric that not only holds claim to the real but that transforms everyday perceptible experience. Furthermore, the fetishism of the commodity already designates the commodity form as a mechanism that veils social reality. ‘There it is a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things’ (Marx 1983, p. 77). We
know that behind the flow of commodity images, of technologies of display there is an untold social reality, a social reality that is erased by that very same mechanism of display. Can we then not speak of the fetishism of the commodity as a mechanism of invisibility: fetishism as concealment?

Marx did not only show that human relations were veiled by relations between things, but rather that, in the commodity economy, social production relations inevitably took the form of things and could not be expressed except through things. The structure of the commodity economy causes things to play particular and highly important social role and thus to acquire particular social properties. (Rubin 1972, p. 6)

Things have taken the social role of configuring a social reality. The fetishism of the commodity provides the grounds for Jean Baudrillard’s principle of simulation and Walter Benjamin’s phantasmagoria of modernity. Jean Baudrillard is one of the first to contend that we should look at the commodity beyond its material dimension.

For Baudrillard ‘[c]ommodities were socially significant not so much as material objects which were produced by labor but as signs, as a mode of signification that was independent of the mode of production ... Today, commodities no longer function as use values, as things which serve the needs of the rational individual, rather they are part of the social system of the exchange of meanings.’ (Poster 1979, p. 281)

This logic of the commodity as detached from the system of production shows the limits that materialist frameworks have for understanding the power of the commodity in the constitution of the experience of social reality. Furthermore, Baudrillard extends the logic of the symbolic dimension of the commodity to show that the commodity has established a self-sufficient system of signs, a virtual simulation. ‘Today, the entire system is fluctuating in indeterminacy, all of reality absorbed by the hyperreality of the code and of simulation. It is now a principle of simulation, and not of reality, that regulates social life’ (Baudrillard 1988, p. 120). With Baudrillard we can think that the visual presence of the commodity is a manifestation of its symbolic dimension, and of the principle of simulation. Thus the visual rhetoric of the commodity is entwined with the principle of simulation and its fetish character; it establishes a rhetoric of the visible that is primarily mediated by the symbolic dimension of the commodity and by its mode of signification.

The principle of simulation of the commodity, of its detachment from social relations, should be complemented by an understanding of how this very same principle of simulation has come to configure a realm of everyday sense experience. This movement is what Walter Benjamin calls the phantasmagoria of modernity.
The Phantasmagoria of Modernity and Visibility

The phantasmagoria of modernity designates the reverse movement and in a way the completion of the fetishism of the commodity and its principle of simulation. Whereas the fetishism of the commodity shows how the world of things acquires a magical appearance, the phantasmagoria of modernity expresses how this magical appearance of the commodity becomes itself material reality and thus perceptible experience. In other words, the phantasmagoria of modernity names how the magical appearance of the commodity and the principle of simulation are realized as objective reality and come to constitute a universe of sensory experience.

The discussion of the phantasmagoria of modernity addresses the question of modernity’s establishment of the real. ‘This establishment of the real is the most visible form of our contemporary dogmas’ (de Certeau 1988, p. 186). The hegemony of modernity over visibility and more generally, over representation, is essential to understand the pervasiveness and scope of modernity’s claims to truth. The phantasmagoria of modernity and the concurrent regime of representation are central to understanding how modernity claimed for itself the monopoly of the real and constituted itself as reality.

The question of visibility and representation is not limited to the optical. For example in Michel de Certeau’s usage, the visible includes ‘oral and written’ narratives, as it is through visual, written or audible narratives that we frame our idea of the world.

Captured by the radio ... as soon as he awakens, the listener walks all day long through the forest of narrativities from journalism, advertising, and television, narrativities that still find time, as he is getting ready for bed, to slip a few final messages under the portals of sleep. Even more than the God told about by the theologians of earlier days, these stories have a providential and predestining function; they organize in advance our work, our celebrations, and even our dreams ... These narrations have the twofold and strange power of transforming seeing into believing, and of fabricating realities out of appearances. (de Certeau 1988, p. 187)

The phantasmagoria of modernity is precisely a mechanism of transforming seeing into believing and of fabricating realities out of simulation. It is a mechanism through which modernity constitutes itself as a regime of visibility and more generally, of representation; thus asserting itself as reality.

The self-referential simulation of the commodity enters the realm of experience with its rhetoric of visibility. Through the mechanism of the phantasmagoria the grounding notions of modernity are invested with the ‘certainty and truthfulness’ that comes from the experience of the senses.
The phantasmagoria endows with the reality of the senses modernity’s system of belief, the utopia of progress, the cult of novelty and fashion, chronological empty time... It becomes the site of experience in which the self-contained individual, the individual that is drawn in the likeness of an object, finds his re-affirmation, his identity, but more importantly his sense of the real. ‘[T]he ancient postulate of the invisibility of the real has been replaced by the postulation of its visibility ... [N]ow it is a question of what is seen, observed, or shown. The contemporary “simulacrum” is in short the latest localization of belief in vision’ (de Certeau 1988, p. 187). The localization of belief, of certainty in vision corresponds to modernity conception of presence as holding the totality of the real. Modernity’s understanding of presence as the totality of the real is one of its foremost ontological claims (Vázquez 2010a). The equation between presence and the real is fundamental to understanding the hegemonic power that the modern strategies of representation in their visuality and spatialization hold. In the face of modernity’s hegemony over representation, we have to ask, what is being lost under the hegemony of vision and space; what is being erased by the hegemony of presence?

Modernity’s establishment of the real is such that we live under the assumption that there is no other way of knowing and being outside the realm of representation. By establishing the real as visibility, as representation, all that is not visible (presented or re-presented) is discredited as unreal. ‘The simulacrum is what the relationship of the visible to the real becomes when the assumption crumbles that an invisible immensity of Being (or of beings) lies hidden behind appearances’ (de Certeau 1988, p. 187). The epistemic violence of modernity is grounded on the possibility of discriminating other knowledges as being non-existent, backward (that is belonging to the absence of the past) or mythical (not pertaining to objectivity) and thus denying their role as legitimate sources of experience.

In the next section we will look at the nineteenth century in search of concrete practices of display and spectacle that enabled the material realization of modernity’s hegemony over the visible. We will first speak of the color lithographic poster. The nineteenth century poster heralds the transformation of the cityscape, and the transformation of everyday perception. In the city walls the symbolic dimension of the commodity acquired a visual presence, a material affirmation. Then we will speak of the circus as an example of the birth of the industry of spectacle, where the control of representation is used to enforce the hegemony of modernity over other cultures.

The Poster, Display and Visibility

The Bororos of Brazil sink slowly into their collective death, and Lévy-Strauss takes his seat in the French Academy ... [T]he intellectuals are still borne on the backs of the common people.

Michel de Certeau, 1988
Walter Benjamin’s notion of the phantasmagoria of modernity gives us an understanding of how since the nineteenth century the physiognomy of the city, its architecture and urbanism, as well as the industries of entertainment and display can be understood as historical and material realizations of the fetishism of the commodity. ‘World exhibitions are places of pilgrimage to the commodity fetish. “Europe is off to view the merchandise,” says Taine in 1855... World exhibitions thus provide access to a phantasmagoria which the person enters in order to be distracted’ (Benjamin 1999, p. 18). In the nineteenth century the magical appearance of the commodity enters the immediacy of perceptible experience and finds its concrete presence in the Arcades, the World Exhibitions, the Poster, the Circus among other practices of display and spectacle. The entry of the commodity fetish into the realm of sense perception shows modernity’s ability to establish a regime of representation and a realm of sensory experience; thus furthering its hegemony over the real. In the ‘Revue de l’Exposition Universelle de 1889’ the writer and critic Joris-Karl Huysmans gives us an astonishing testimony of the dawn of the phantasmagoria of modernity:

[S]uddenly the magnificent part of the exhibition raises. One enters into the machine hall, and the harassed eyes grow quiet in this prodigious room where the glory of foundry bursts! Imagine a colossal hall, large as one has never seen before, taller than the tallest of naves ... and there, inside, under the infinite sky of glass, the terrifying life of machines ... One gives a few more steps, and, like a call back to reality, the exit door appears and one finds oneself outside the dream, dumbfounded, in the habitual life, in the colorless Paris that seemed so far. (Huysmans 1889a, my translation)

The transformation of experience driven by the experience of novelty that is so striking inside the machine hall of the 1889 World Exhibition finds its equivalent in the street with the advent of the color lithographic poster of La Belle Époque. At this moment, the city walls were transformed into spaces for commodity display, they were put at the service of the visual embodiment of the commodity. An endless reproduction of commodity images came to transform everyday experience in the streets of the metropolis. Since then, a modern-city is also an endless landscape of images, a space of commodity display.

The nineties was a time when, in Paris at any rate, everybody lived in public ... People had time to stroll, to look about them and, incidentally, to gaze upon that picture-gallery of the boulevard which the poster-hoarding had become. There they saw fixed for a moment in the eternity of Art, the very life stream which swirled and danced and bubbled around them. (James Laver in Rennert 1990, p. xii)

The nineteenth century poster, like the famous images of Toulouse-Lautrec and Jules Chéret, represents the moment in which the fetishism of the commodity emerged in a concrete form as a visual...
image and transformed with its visual rhetoric the social experience of the real (Vázquez 2010b). Huysmans gives us a testimony of the fetish character of the poster's visual rhetoric. ‘Mr. Chéret has ... divulged a very particular vision of Parisianism. A superficial and charming vision, adorably false, perceived as if through theater optics [glasses], in a “féerie”, after a fine dinner’ (Huysmans 1889b). Huysmans illustrates how the poster brings to the streets, to the scene of everyday life, the optical experience of the spectacle. The poster, which is an early scopic expression of the commodity, becomes instrumental for the expansion of modernity’s regime of representation.

That the visual presence of the commodity extends modernity’s regime of representation indicates a correspondence between the core epistemic ground of modernity and the visual embodiment of the commodity. The universal exhibitions and the poster are part of an emerging rhetoric of visibility that came to give concrete expression to central tenets of modernity, such as the cult of novelty, the idea of progress and its very notions of space and time. The phantasmagoria of modernity designates the movement through which the modern conception of the real entered the realm of sense perception and came to establish a realm for everyday life experience. The strategies of display became the tangible expression and the confirmation of modernity’s mysticism. In a similar way, Walter Benjamin reads fashion as a concrete expression of the commodity’s illusion of novelty. ‘Newness is a quality independent of the use value of the commodity. It is the source of that illusion of which fashion is the tireless purveyor’ (Benjamin 1999, p. 22). The visual rhetoric of the commodity not only reproduces the fetish-character of the commodity, but it also carries with it the ‘mythology’ of modernity, its notions of novelty, of time as chronology, of presence as the whole of reality, etc... Through its regime of representation modernity affirms itself as the ground for experience and as the territory of the real.

The sociology of the consumer society provides us with harsh examples where we can summon to what extent the visual rhetoric of the commodity has constituted itself as reality and as an identity principle for the denizens of the consumer societies.

The suggestion being that consumption itself can provide the meaning and identity that modern humans crave, and that it is largely through this activity that individuals discover who they are, as well as succeed in combating their sense of ontological insecurity. Hence it is exactly in this aspect of their lives that most people find the firm foundations upon which their grasp of the real and the true are based, while also providing them with their life goal. (Campbell 2004, p. 42)

The visual rhetoric of the commodity meant a radical expansion of the fetish character of the commodity and, more generally, of the ‘mythology’ of modernity into the realm of experience, into the certainty that proceeds from everyday life experience, to the certainty
of one’s own identity. Through its regime of representation the simulacrum of modernity presents itself as everyday experience, as normality.

Spectacle as Erasure

A Clown

There is a clown in dandy attire, sporting a cane, a frock coat and a top hat. By wearing burnt-cork he keeps his face black. Endless tears flow from his glittering eyes. Nobody knows when, where or to which name he was born. He comes from nowhere, a ‘nameless place’ he says, an elsewhere beyond the city, beyond the scene. Crowds flock to see his show. His magic has made him world famous, the magic of turning the unknown into a spectacle. This clown is called modernity.

The Circus; Spectacle and Difference

In this section the nineteenth century circus and more generally the ‘ethnographic exhibition’ will help us illuminate a key aspect of modernity’s regime of representation: its coloniality. With the circus and the ‘ethnographic exhibition’ we begin to see what is being lost within the hegemonic rhetoric of visibility. Here the practices of display and spectacle reveal the power of the phantasmagoria of modernity, not only to reaffirm the universal validity claims of modernity but also to devalue and present as naturally inferior the ‘non-modern,’ the non-western.

In the metropolitan centres of America and Europe ... indigenous performers ... displaced by frontier conflict and strategies of 'dispersal' on the colonial margins of the world, became enmeshed in Western systems of mass entertainment and education, involving display and performance, which marked the emergence of the modern world as spectacle, as it was configured in the fairgrounds, circuses, exhibition halls, theatres and museum spaces. (Poignant 2004, p. 7)

The nineteenth century industry of spectacle and its ‘ethnographic’ practices raise the question of the coloniality of representation. In other words: what is the function that the practices of display and spectacle perform with regards to the modern/colonial system of power? This question is not just about a modern, but a modern/colonial regime of representation.

The modern/colonial system of power was not only deployed through material processes of appropriation, production and violence, it was also implemented through an epistemic apparatus and an accompanying regime of representation. Aníbal Quijano has shown how ‘the expansion of European colonialism to the rest of the world ... needed the elaboration of a Eurocentric perspective of knowledge, a theoretical perspective on the idea of race as a naturalization of colonial relations’ (Quijano 2000, p. 534). According to Quijano the
social classification of the world’s population around the idea of race, is one of the fundamental axes of the modern/colonial model of power (Quijano 2000, p. 533).

Our argument is that the modern/colonial practices of display and spectacle endowed with the certainty of the senses the basic mental constructions needed for the functioning of the modern colonial system of power. The expansion and persistence of the modern/colonial system of power needed a ‘material’ regime of appropriation but also a regime of representation that would legitimate and naturalize the social relations of domination. Through the control of representation, the idea of race but also the notion of temporal discrimination were given legitimacy and credibility in the metropolis as well as in the colonies. The question of the modern/colonial regime of representation brings us back to our initial question, that of the relation between the visibility of the commodity and the devaluation of the ‘other’, the non-modern, the non-western.

From ‘Barnum’s circus and the American dime museums ... to the Crystal Palace in England, Folies Bergère in Paris, Berlin’s Panoptikum, St Petersburg’s ‘Arcadia’ and the court of the Turkish Empire, the Universal Exposition in Paris ... [t]hese sites were arenas for the presentation of cultural difference, which paralleled the development of ideas about the classification of human types. (Poignant 2004, p. 59)

The practices of display and spectacle and more generally the modern/colonial regime of representation became in the nineteenth century, the stage for the reaffirmation and naturalization of the fictional social categories created to legitimize and enforce the modern/colonial order.

In 1875, PT Barnum, the world famous nineteenth century circus impresario, saw the new urban classes emerging from the nascent industrial economy as his target public. He declared that the aim of his enterprise was ‘to bring rational, moral and instructive entertainment, combined with attractions of wonder within the reach of the masses and the possibilities of the slenderest purse, and make them subservient to Christianity and enlightenment, and the auxiliaries of our Public Schools’ (Poignant 2004, p. 80). Barnum’s statement puts in evidence the function of the spectacle not only to bring entertainment but also as a training ground ‘subservient to Christianity and enlightenment’. The circus was an arena where the modern/colonial politics of representation were not only exercised but also reproduced and disseminated. ‘Enlightenment and Christianity’ provided the framework of normalcy against which the spectacular, the different was to be defined.

‘Towards the end of the successful 1882 season of the Greatest Show on Earth, Barnum announced an Ethnological Congress of Strange and Savage Tribes as the star attraction for the following year’ (Poignant 2004, p. 87). The circular letter that PT Barnum sent to
American consuls and dispatching agents throughout the world to help him carry his enterprise, is filled with indications of how the spectacular was to be defined against the modern/colonial system of social classification and notion of civilization. The other was being turned into a very specific commodity, a spectacle for the masses:

I desire to carry out as far as possible an idea I have long entertained, of forming a collection in pairs or otherwise of all the uncivilized races in existance [sic] and my present object is to ask your kindness to render me what assistance is in your power to acquire any specimens of these uncivilized peoples. (Barnum in Poignant 2004, p. 58)

Another prominent example of human display as spectacle can be found in the showman and ‘impresario of the exotic’ Carl Hagenbeck who in 1875 ‘enlisted his network of animal trappers for the first time in order to acquire, deliver, and exhibit humans’ (Ames 2004, p. 316).

When his 1883 Mongolian troupe appeared at the Berlin Zoological Garden, more than 93,000 visitors attended the show in a single day ... Hagenbeck coined the word Völkerschau (or “show of peoples”) for the various modes of human display that he and other impresarios popularized from the mid-1870s to the early 1910s. (Ames 2004, p. 313)

Although Hagenbeck had a different business model than other circus impresarios like Barnum, what they had clearly in common is the ability to gain profit from the ‘spectacularization’ of the other, the non-western, of difference.

The circus was profiting from, as well as enforcing the colonial system of classification that is at the core of the functioning of the modern/colonial matrix of power. The circus, together with other forms of ‘ethnographic exhibition’, is an example of how difference was made into a curiosity and then sold as a visual experience. In a similar way to the visual rhetoric of the commodity, the circus turned the modern/colonial system of social classification into a spectacle. By this very operation the practices of spectacle were endowing the fictional ideas of race and social classification with the certainty of the senses.

In 1841 ‘attracted by poster publicity, spectators were eagerly thronging the newly opened lower rooms of a five storey building ... the wide world presented its wild, bizarre beauty in dioramic and panoramic patterns in front of which groups of trappers, Indians, gipsies [sic], Chinese and Eskimos moulded into a colourful scenery. Alongside a model of the Niagara Falls the newest patent knitting machine could be inspected ... Albinos, fat boys, giants and dwarfs disclosed their abnormalities.’ (Trix & Nowak 1977, p. 25)

Faraway lands and the non-western others were turned into visual commodities. We can say that the modern/colonial regime of representation achieved the naturalization of difference as spectacle.
The other and nature are reduced to be objects of display, commodities. The commoditization of representation is at the same time a mechanism of appropriation of the other as inferior, as curiosity and thus implies the erasure of the other as human being. The spectacle turns difference into a curiosity, into a novelty for consumption, it is its negation.

The moment in which the non-western, the other is turned into a commodity, into an object of display, she is deprived of her ‘humanity’. The life of the indigenous people on display was dispensable and was put at the service of profit and of the configuration of the visual regime of modernity. They gave visible reality to the myth of the ‘savage other’ against which the ‘civilized self’ was to compose itself. Let us read one of Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey posters:

Greatest Educational Feature of All Time!
TRIBE OF GENUINE UBANGI SAVAGES
NEW TO CIVILIZATION!!!
From Africa’s Darkest Depths!
WITH MOUTHS AND LIPS AS LARGE AS THOSE OF FULL-GROWN CROCODILES!
(Fox & Parkinson 1969, p. 23)

The representation of the savage was intimately bound with the notion of progress, and linear time wherein civilization started in nature and ended in western modernity. Through the spectacularization of difference, difference is subsumed under the logic of the commodity, the latest curiosity in the ephemeral market of novelty.

The spectacle of the circus is dependent on the modern establishment of the real where both nature as well as other cultures are seen as outsiders, as the other of civilization. The spectacle of novelty, of technology is concurrent with the spectacle of the other, the outsider, the uncivilized.

For instance, in the 1889 universal exposition in Paris, visitors of European stock could reassure themselves of their superiority by contrasting the Palace of Machines with the reconstructed colonial villages and the performances of ‘savages’ in the entertainment areas along the perimeter of the grounds. (Poignant 2004, p. 7)

In the circus, technological innovations like the knitting machine, animals and indigenous people alike were presented as spectacle. Novelty and curiosity shared the scenario. The spectacle performs the role of rendering the dichotomy civilization/savage, and the concurrent colonial system of classification visible, hence ‘real’. The control of representation through practices of spectacle and visibility was a key mechanism to endow these ideas with legitimacy and validity.

The anthropological spectacles of the nineteenth century have to be studied as being constitutive of modernity/coloniality, as configuring the experience of the real, by turning difference into a commodity.
Furthermore, one should not forget that these anthropological spectacles are clear forerunners of today’s exotic shows for the consumer tourist in the global south. Today these shows are being denounced as cultural destruction and exploitation by indigenous movements.

Visibility and the Political

*From TV to newspapers, from advertising to all sorts of mercantile epiphanies, our society is characterized by a cancerous growth of vision, measuring everything by its ability to show or to be shown and transmuting communication into a visual journey.*

*Michel de Certeau, 1988*

These pages have approached a critique of the modern/colonial regime of visibility, in an attempt to grasp why the commodity is so conspicuously visible while common people remain invisible. By looking at particular strategies of display and entertainment of the nineteenth century such as the World Exhibitions, the color lithographic poster of La Belle Époque and the circus we have been able to see how modernity extended the logic of the commodity into a visual rhetoric. The notion of modernity as a regime of representation illustrates a way in which the fetishism of the commodity and the phantasmagoria of modernity become a strategy of erasure of the other. The regime of visibility establishes a reality that is actively excluding other people, other knowledges, other forms of relating to nature, etc. This becomes clear with the example of the circus where difference is commodified and turned into spectacle. The spectacle not only functions as a mechanism of discrimination and exclusion but it enforces the parameters of reality of what we have come to call the modern/colonial regime of representation. In the process of establishing the ‘real’, the modern/colonial regime of representation has effectively functioned to erase and or naturalize the classification of difference through the spectacle of the other.

The focus on practices of display and spectacle brings to light some of the mechanisms through which large proportions of the world’s population are being excluded from the realm of visibility of the modern consumer society. The modern/colonial regime of representation is a machinery of silencing, of forgetting, or more precisely of invisibilizing ‘the other’, common people. The other is either produced as non-existing (Santos 2006), or as spectacle, ‘the other’ is made dispensable. Most importantly, common people, the marginalized are expelled from the visibility of the political. The fetishism of the commodity, simulation and the phantasmagoria of modernity are mechanisms of erasure and exclusion.

By invisibilizing the marginalized, modernity’s regime of representation becomes a force of de-politicization. Building on Hannah Arendt’s conception of the political (Arendt 1989), we can say that the political is a practice of visibility. For Arendt the political is not
an institutional space; the political belongs to the sphere of human action, to the in-between, to the coming together. The visibility of the political is thus not dependant on a physical space, the media or a scenario; it is rather, a visibility that arises in the in-between, in the coming together to speak and act, in a time and space of togetherness, of shared struggle and shared memories. The Arendtian notion of the political shows to what extent the modern hegemony over visibility, and more generally its regime of representation means the loss of the political as in-between, as togetherness. The modern/colonial regime of representation is tantamount to the depoliticization of ‘the other’.

The practices of resistance that have been emerging primarily in the global south, like those of the Zapatistas, can thus be read as struggles for visibility, for recognition against oblivion. Theirs is a poetic practice that poses a radical challenge to the modern/colonial regime of representation and its monopoly over visibility. To the fiction of security and certainty, the Zapatistas speak with a celebration of uncertainty, in the face of the logic of profit they practice gifting, to the chronology of modernity they offer the time of remembrance, to the logic of individualism they speak of togetherness, to the logic of unity they speak of plurality. Their poetic of resistance shreds the veil of simulacrum.

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1 Here ‘intra-European’ refers to an epistemic territory and not simply to a geographical location see Vazquez (forthcoming 2011) ‘Translation as Erasure, exploring modernity’s epistemic violence’, Journal of Historical Sociology.

2 For a study that focuses on the problem of perception in the nineteenth century, beyond the question of visuality, see Crary (2001) Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture.

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