The Visible Spectrum *
Emily Falvey

What is a visible spectrum? The purely scientific response to this question might be the part of the electromagnetic spectrum visible to the human eye, the rainbow of light observable from the "optical window," whose abbreviated formula is red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet. But one might just as easily imagine another answer, one that plays upon the etymology of the word "spectrum," which is derived from the Latin word for apparition (i.e.: specter), in order to invoke a somewhat more political dynamic. In this context, the term "visible spectrum" – or "*spectre visible*," as it is written in French – might serve to indicate the contradictory product of a particular social process, a sort of chimerical appearance that, inasmuch as seeing is believing, passes for reality. At the same time, one might also associate this expression with the objectives of a critical method that seeks to reveal just such an "apparition," and by extension the tyrannical social order that it is meant to conceal.

These observations are meant, of course, to evoke the notion of ideology and its opposite, the critique of ideology, but more specifically the contradictory relationship that exists between the two. This dialectic is captured beautifully in the ambivalence of their preferred hue, the colour red, which, coincidentally, is located at the end of the visible spectrum. Both liberal and communist, this unruly shade seems to conjure a veritable dilemma of contradictory meanings, being associated at once with debt and revolution, luxury and low prices, police car lights and anarchist symbols, life and death.

At the End of the Visible Spectrum (2014), the immersive installation of artist, Gisele Amantea, seeks to highlight this contradictory dynamic through a combination of signs both political and aesthetic. Completely transforming the exhibition space of the Galerie des arts visuels, this powerful work consists of an immense, black and white photomural of the National Assembly of Quebec broken up by several fields of red flock. This colourful material also invades the surface of the image, where it coalesces in a series of rectangles that suggest the "*carré rouge*" worn by students and their supporters during the "Maple Spring" protests of 2012. Made using a found photograph, the image of the Assembly has been digitally altered so that it resembles a large charcoal drawing. This subtle modification highlights the Napoléon III style of the space, whose ornamental décor clashes appreciably with the modernism of the surrounding red. A similar tension sets up between the ceiling of the gallery, crisscrossed by a network of industrial pipes, and its lustrous white floor, whose mirror surface reflects an inverted image of the installation.

In the field of art history, there is a strong tendency to associate ornament, the decorative, and kitsch with popular culture. This is true for both modernists and postmodernists, with the difference that the former establish this connection out of fear of contamination, while the latter do so in order to subvert hierarchical purity. Depending on your point of view, then, ornament may personify the oppression of commodity fetishism [1] or the revolutionary spirit of the grotesque,[2] the immorality of criminals[3] or a form of political resistance. While today it is generally agreed that decorative excess corresponds to a critique of rationalist order, this has not always been the case, a point that Amantea's work makes well. To be sure, at first glance, the installation's juxtaposition of visual and architectural elements seems to evoke a modernist antagonism between art and ornament: the blocks of red appear to refer to colour field paining and are in conflict with the oppressive anachronism of the decor of the National Assembly. But such a reading quickly recedes as one realises that this stately red is actually composed of flock, a material typically associated with hobbyists and their kitsch creations. Suddenly, the difference between these two elements no longer seems so clear. This dynamic persists as one considers how the monarchist architectural style of the National Assembly symbolically undermines its democratic function, just as the surveillance cameras lining its walls compromise the illusion that it belongs to the public. This having been said, within the matrix of Amantea's work, one could just as easily focus upon the spectre of state communist that haunts the colour red as populist symbol, thus challenging its status as an emblem of revolutionary idealism.

By all accounts, *At the End of the Visible Spectrum* plays assiduously upon the interpenetration of polar opposites, including form and content, oppression and liberation, religion and secularism, the bourgeois state and grassroots movements. It is not necessary, however, to enumerate all these contradictions, as if such a list might somehow serve as an explanation. While it is certainly important to note the dialectical character of this project, what is perhaps more interesting is the way in which it manages to be thoroughly political without anticipating a particular reading on the part of the spectator. In this respect, it does not practice the kind of ideology critique to which we have become accustomed, one that exposes horrors hidden behind the scintillating

---

[1] In a text concerning the London Universal Exposition of 1851, Giorgio Agamben speaks of "the monstrous hypertrophy of ornament that transforms the simplest objects into nightmarish creatures." Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture,* trans. Ronald L. Martinez (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 39.

[2] This notion is often justified through recourse to Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of carnival. See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

[3] In his essay, "Ornament and Crime" (1908), the modernist Adolf Loos links ornament with the tattoos of criminals. "The man of our time who daubs the walls with erotic symbols to satisfy an inner urge is a criminal or a degenerate." See Adolf Loos, "Ornament and Crime," in Bernie Miller and Melony Ward, *Crime and Ornament: The Arts and Popular Culture in the Shadow of Adolf Loos* (Toronto: YYZ Books, 2002), p. 29-36.

surfaces of consumer culture or mocks oppressive bourgeois icons. Amantea's process also has little in common with artistic practices that leave their usual contexts in order to transform themselves into social practices.[4]

While the subject of *At the End of the Visible Spectrum* is indeed political domination, the installation itself does not seek to dominate its audience by explaining some deplorable situation and then imposing a moral judgement. This does not mean, however, that its message is ambivalent, or that it occupies the kind of indeterminate political position typical of postmodern strategies. On the contrary, it represents a strong political perspective, but it dose so by example and not by directive. In other words, this work does not depend upon an inequality between the artist and her audience, inasmuch as Amantea does not employ didactic methods, or seek to expose realities strategically hidden by "the powers that be."

Understood in this way, the installation becomes more a question of shared uncertainty. At the heart of such a problematic lies the issue of appearances that are, nonetheless, material forces. Here we are once again confronted with the notion of a "visible spectre," but this time the distinction between ideology and its opposite (ideology critique) is moot, because Amantea's work does not present reality and appearance as contradictory elements, but rather as two facets of a single relation.

The French philosopher, Louis Althusser, understands ideology along similar lines, famously defining it as "a representation of the imaginary relation of individuals to their real conditions of existence[5]." According to him, ideology amounts to a complex social process through which individuals acquire the illusory sense of a coherent self, a "reflection" that allows one to become a social agent.[6] The sphere of ideology is thus not limited to political life: it is universal. It is, therefore, not a matter of true or false "reality," but rather a form of self-misrecognition, the reassuring illusion of an organized and uniform subject. According to Althusser, our sense of individual freedom is ultimately a mechanism through which we are subjected to the dominant power. Just where one expects to be completely free of ideology, one finds oneself most cruelly beholden to it.[7]

---

[4] Jacques Rancière highlights these three strategies of political art in his important essay, « Les paradoxes de l'art politique », *Le spectateur émancipé* (Paris: La Fabrique éditions, 2008).

[5] My translation. "*L'idéologie est une 'représentation' du rapport imaginaire des individus à leurs conditions réelles d'existence.* » Louis Althusser, "Idéologie et appareils idéologiques d'État. (Notes pour une recherche)," *Positions* (Paris: Les Éditions sociales, 1976), electronic version created by Jean-Marie Tremblay, 26 August 2008, Chicoutimi, Ville de Saguenay, Québec, p. 38.

[6] Althusser calls this process "interpellation." *Ibid.*

[7] Slavoj Žižek often makes this observation. In his own work, he has developed the Althusserian theory of ideological interpellation through an examination of its Lacanian foundations. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: New York, Verso, 1989).

This paradox might seem like an inexorable prison, as Althusser's critiques often charge. But it could just as easily be considered a tool at our disposal, or a means of action. Dialectical theory teaches us that the world transforms itself through the interpenetration of opposites. If the colour red is at the end of the visible spectrum, in a certain sense, it is also at its beginning. To lose sight of this dynamic is to risk getting trapped in a static vision of the world, a cliché in which change is no longer possible.

* *Translated by the author. Initially published in Cahiers 6, a publication of the Galerie des arts visuels.*

Bio

Emily Falvey is a Montreal-based, independent curator and art critic. A PhD student at the Université du Québec à Montréal since 2011, she is the recipient of a Joseph-Armand Bombardier CGS Doctoral Scholarship from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. In 2009, the Canada Council for the Arts awarded her the Joan Yvonne Lowndes Award for excellence in critical and curatorial writing, and she received curatorial writing awards from the Ontario Association of Art Galleries in 2006 and 2012. From 2004 to 2008, she was the Curator of Contemporary Art at the Ottawa Art Gallery. Her current research project examines the relationship between the grotesque and capitalism as it is expressed in contemporary art.