# *Representing Culture: Essays on Identity, Visuality and Technology* edited by Claudia Alvares

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In the editor's introduction, Claudia Alvares makes clear the breadth of interdisciplinary approaches present in this collection of essays, but also perhaps its main flaw. Alvares acknowledges that the collection obeys 'no single, cohesive narrative' (2008, p. 1), and while its interdisciplinary mosaic nonetheless contains numerous insightful papers, the collection suffers from not making it sufficiently clear why these particular essays warranted publication alongside one another.

In Alvares' defence, this criticism is pre-emptively recognised as one frequently levied at the 'undisciplined discipline' (2008, p. 1) of cultural studies. The book is carefully positioned not as an articulation of any canonical viewpoint but as a hybrid selection of 'new perspectives for the exercise of cultural criticism on the basis of the major issues that confront us today' (2008, p. 6), ostensibly organised around the three intersecting vectors outlined in the title and covering topics ranging from Prisoner of War photographs from the 2003 invasion of Iraq to representations of race in British sitcom *Goodness Gracious Me* (BBC, 1998-2000). Certain contemporary themes do recur; in particular a 'post–9/11' political atmosphere is alluded to in a number of the essays, but this supposed cultural shift does not feature consistently throughout the collection, suggesting that this partial commonality was recognised during editing rather than being a conscious element of the commissioning process. Often

what is evoked is less the 'polyvocal and multifarious' (2008, p. 1) academic melting pot of intersecting ideas, and more the muddled cacophony of a confusingly conceived collection, but one which nonetheless contains a number of excellent individual essays.

Daphne Patai's opening discussion of identity politics in North American education is one such success. Patai criticises the use of identity as 'both a bludgeon and a badge' (2008, p. 11) in academia, questioning the 'do you have to be one to teach it?' (2008, p.10) mentality that ensues. Arguing against what she sees as an insidious and damaging tendency to create hierarchies of credibility based on 'belonging' to particular identity groups, she articulates the vague yet complicated subdivisions thus:

> When I speak as a woman, men had better shut up.
> When I speak as a heterosexual woman, lesbian women
> can trump me, but if they're white, they in turn can be
> trumped by non-white women, lesbian or not. (2008, p.
> 11)

As a white heterosexual male I would be firmly in the 'had better shut up' category, so a challenge to this anti-academic practice, in which '*who says what to whom* counts more than what is said' (2008, p. 16), is personally welcome. But the way she carefully establishes her feminist credentials prior to mounting this criticism perhaps reveals just how difficult it is to ignore identity politics when identity itself is the object of study.

In 'Constructing the 'Muslim Other'', Chris Weedon begins in familiar territory, using Said's Covering Islam as a starting point from which to examine recent news-stories related to Islam. Weedon looks at tabloid fury over Halal Christmas dinners, the riots in Oldham and Bradford in 2001 and the debate over the wearing of the veil in British schools, the latter of which she compares with similar debates in the French media-political sphere, thereby

positioning events in the UK within a wider global context. This balance between the local and the international is most obviously manifest in the US-led 'War on Terror', but Weedon eschews the conventional argument that the conflict has simply exacerbated and perpetuated an Islamophobia that drowns out alternative viewpoints. Instead a more nuanced argument is presented that recognises how 'a growing commitment to multiculturalism and cultural diversity' (2008, p. 40) complicates the notion that caricature and stereotype are the media's primary rhetorical modes, demonstrating a commitment to delving beyond the superficial knee-jerk punditry that too often frames public discussions of such issues.

David Moscowitz's 'Confronting Whiteness: The Performance of Postassimilatory Jewish Heroism' is also successful. Beginning with the claim that 'rhetorically inventive acts of discursive resistance elaborate on the relationship between ideological whiteness and marginalised cultural identity' (2008, p. 56), Moscowitz uses Jeff Goldblum's star persona to establish the post-assimilatory Jewish hero, alternative youth-oriented publication Heeb to explain how a satirical resistance to interpellation challenges dominant ideology by not recognising the forms of identity it offers, and Michael Chabon's novel <u>The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay</u> to suggest the transformative potential of art. The latter example contains an interesting metaphorical correlative in the mythic figure of the Golem, the clay creature from Jewish folklore brought to life by whispered words. Quoting Chabon, Moscowitz notes that 'every universe begins in conversation' (2008, p. 67), an elegant expression of the power of public rhetoric and ideology to shape identities, and one which is relevant to many of these essays.

Later essays suggest more obvious connections – for example, both Katy Perry's 'visual framing analysis' and Frank Möller's premise

that images 'always carry with them more than can be seen' will be familiar to readers of Susan Sontag, or indeed any academic writing on the ontology of the photographic image. The final essays from José Bragança de Miranda and Howard Caygill, both of which consider how technological advances complicate conclusions drawn by Walter Benjamin seventy years prior, are similarly paired, and, along with Joseph A. Tighe's Foucaultian study of the disciplinary authority of mobile phone technology that sequentially precedes them, are most successful at addressing all three of the organisational vectors – identity, visuality and technology. But their late-stage arrival is not enough to dispel the overriding impression that these essays gain little from being published alongside one another, and the reader little from reading them together. However, as the quality of work is high, the book would be well-suited to those with an interdisciplinary interest in culture studies wishing to expose themselves to a variety of current research; though not, perhaps, for those looking to see how such disparate research can be successfully integrated into a coherent and functional whole.

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