

Criticality, Visuality and (Asian) Cultural Studies

Yiu Fai Chow (Baptist University) and Jeroen de Kloet (University of Amsterdam)

Like the symposium itself, this paper is occasioned by an anniversary. In our case, it is the vigintennial marking of two creative outputs, which, 6,000 kilometres apart and 20 years ago, seemed to be doing something high impact to their time and place. In 1991, the US-based grunge band Nirvana released in a post-Berlin Wall West the international hit single Smells Like Teen Spirit, subverting the importance of visuality, or a particular breed of visuality conflated with aesthetics meant to be entertaining. In the same year, from Seattle to Beijing, Chinese director Zhang Yimou released his visual spectacle Raise the Red Lanterns, delivering an allegorical critique on authoritarian power, two years after the authorities cracked down on the pro-democracy demonstrations. This critique operated predominantly on a visual plane.

Both cultural products pose questions about the importance of visuality, one pointing at its danger, the other at its possibility to challenge hegemonic patriarchal culture. In this paper, we want to probe into the possibilities of criticality in both Asia and the West, by connecting the presumably non-connectable, the incommensurate; we want to connect Cobain with Zhang, and to connect now, the year 2011, with 20 years ago, the year 1991.

We hope to show how in the past twenty years, the visual gained importance, at the expense of the other senses - a process already in 1992 referred to as occularcentrism by Martin Jay. This urges us to question how to forge links between criticality and visuality, links that move beyond Debord's notion of the spectacle, and how to align criticality with the other senses. In a time of intense globalization, how can the global circulation of vision, touch, smell, taste, and sound be mobilized for critical ends? Moreover, what role can "Asia" play?