The administration of signs and images has effects and stakes that are tangible, constraining, and at times violent.

– Régis Debray

I. Theoretical Orientations

When in the early 2000s the Norwegian journalist Åsne Seierstad, during a trip to Serbia to collect material for her “Portraits from Serbia” (2005), visited an elderly Serbian peasant in the Southern town of Stanjinac, she noticed a reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci’s Last Supper hanging desolatedly in the bedroom. The old man’s reply to the journalist’s request for clarification is revealing with regard to this book’s main topic and likewise a testimony to the opening predication by Debray:

‘Jesus?’ exclaims Deda Bora. ‘That’s not Jesus, that’s Tsar Lazar, who perished on the field of Kosovo in 1389. The painting depicts the meal before the battle. That guy to the left, in yellow? That is Vuk Brankovic, who betrayed Tsar Lazar to the Turks. And that one who whispers in Lazar’s ear, that’s Milos Obilic. He said, ‘You have a traitor at your left knee.’ But Lazar didn’t listen to him and lost the battle.’ (ibid., 14–15)

If there were any point of agreement among the vast and heterogeneous field of Balkan Studies for the explanation of Yugoslavia’s disintegration at all, the central role of the media for the incitement of repressed memories, ethnic prejudice and feelings of threat would surely be one of the top candidates on the list. Even such disciplinary accounts that tend to discount the significance of cultural aspects for social processes, the media influence is not denied with respect to Yugoslavia. Yet, it is our impression that such generalized assessments in fact obscure the complex and contingent preconditions of cultural transmissions. Hence, one of the key motives of this joint endeavor are to overcome simplistic models of cultural mediations on the one hand, and to account for alternative conceptual solutions for describing the cultural dynamics that occurred on the plane of former Yugoslavia on the other. Furthermore,
our goal is to address the same problem constellation that stimulated Debray to develop a special social scientific sub-discipline devoted to bring light into the “black box of meaning’s production” (2000: 7).

The following contributions comprise a variety of visual materials and data such as film, art, graffiti, street-art, public advertisement, and other manifestations of material culture like memorials, monuments, museums, and institutions. For a long time social science has taken up such data just for the sake of (re)presenting the effects of already preconceived ‘socio-logics’ or cultural mechanisms rather than accounting for them as research objects that are fit to inform the workings of social and cultural mechanisms per se. On the other hand, media scholars have often ignored the socio-cultural sphere entirely and were thus charged with hatching different versions of (medial) materialism. In addition to ‘mediology,’ Mitchell’s announcement of the ‘pictorial’ or ‘visual turn’ which takes seriously the claim to see in images “not just a particular kind of sign, but something like an actor on the historical stage” (1986: 9), arose as a response to reductionist explanations. Both theoretical movements, despite their obvious differences, have in common that they stand for a reassessment of the intricate “relationship between aesthetic or semiotic representation and political representation” (Mitchell 1990: 11) as a matter of principle. Against the widespread “gesture of definition” (Mitchell 2003: 250) and the dominant perspectival angles in their respective home disciplines, they attempted to “open up for inquiry the ways our ‘theoretical’ understanding not only of what images are but of what nature is or might become” (Mitchell 1986: 9).

We referred to both contemporary authorities on the field of visual analysis for several reasons. In the first instance, both voices not only argued for a general and fundamental theoretical rethinking of the visual in human and social science but, at the same time, remained unusually moderate and restrained with prescribing methodological ways of achieving it. In the case of Mitchell, it was indeed curious to observe his more recent comments on the accomplishments of the movement he himself

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1 For the sake of communication, we will rephrase the theoretical starting-points of this project in the diction of Debray as well as in the central work of W. J. T. Mitchell.

2 Debray vehemently accused sociology for its “sociological arrogance, manifested in its refusal to delve deeper into and even respect all the technological object’s rebellious and tenacious strangeness” (2000: 87). Mitchell, in turn, saw art history lacking well behind the theoretical movements going on in other disciplines concerned with culture. Accordingly, his colleagues would still stick up for a textual model of representation and therefore remain in a “marginal position” (1994: 57).