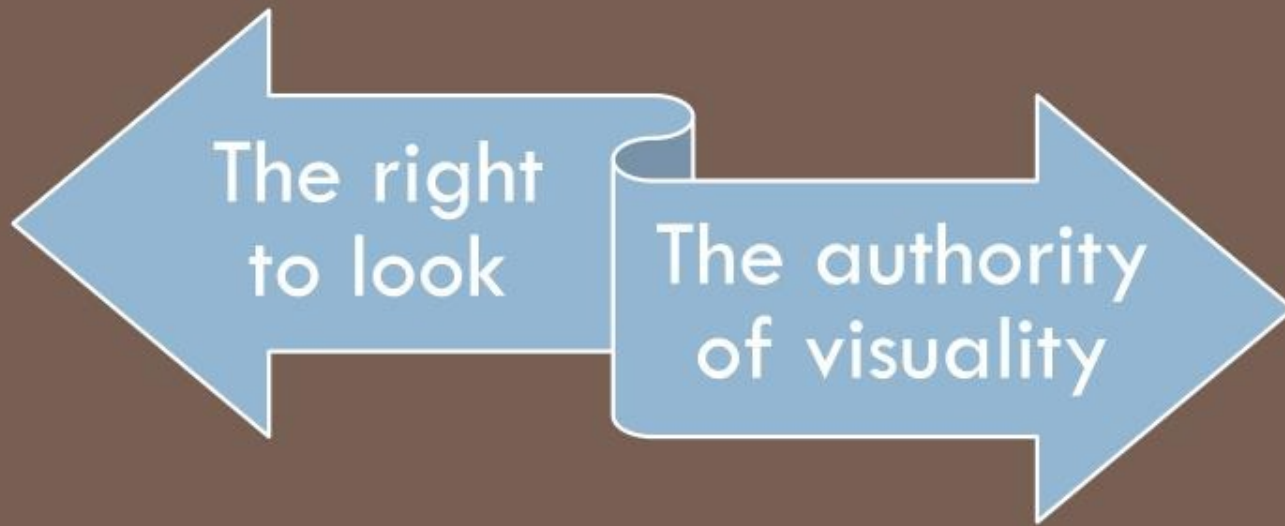


Mirzoeff, “The Right to Look”

- The right to look “is the claim to a subjectivity that has the autonomy to arrange the relations of the visible and the sayable. The right to look confronts the police who say to us, ‘move on, there’s nothing to see here.’ Only there is; we know it, and so do they” (474).



Contrasting Positions



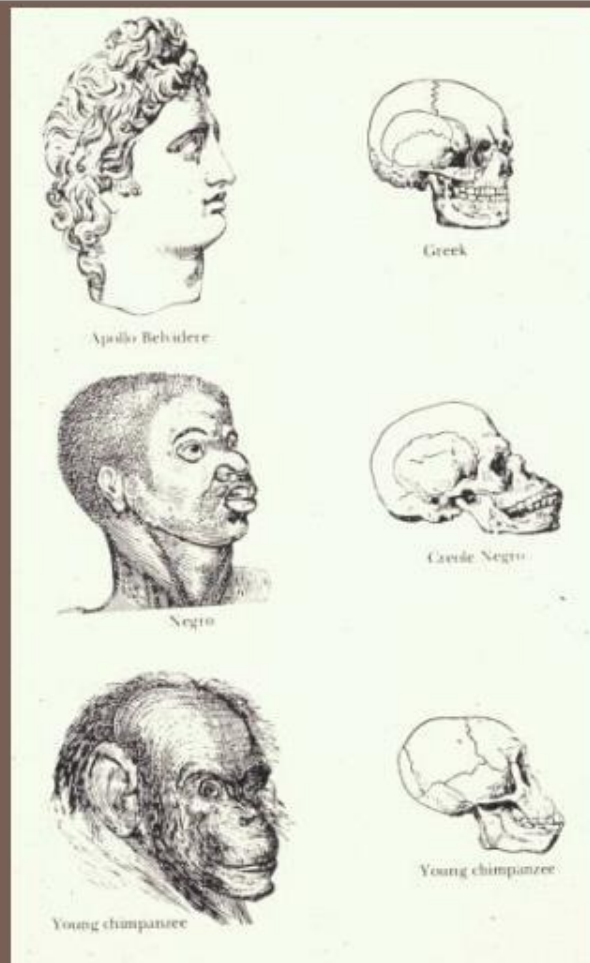
“The Authority of Visuality”

“The opposite of the right to look is not censorship, then, but *visuality*, that authority to tell us to move on and that exclusive claim to be able to look. *Visuality* is an old word for an old project. It is not a trendy theory-word meaning the totality of all visual images and devices, but it is in fact an early nineteenth-century term, meaning the visualization of history. This practice must be imaginary, rather than perceptual, because what is being visualized is too substantial for any one person to see and is created from information, images, and ideas” (474).

Reified Ideas – A Point of Comparison

- What Mirzoeff is referencing is a concept that cultural historians often call a “reified idea,” a concept that is so entrenched into a culture that people believe it to be a given, to be “normal,” to be inevitable. In fact, these ideas are so a part of the culture’s fabric that they can go unnoticed unless we truly LOOK at our surroundings carefully. They are the ideas that we might think are “just the way things are” when they are really CULTURALLY CONSTRUCTED.

An Example of a Reified Idea from Our Recent Past



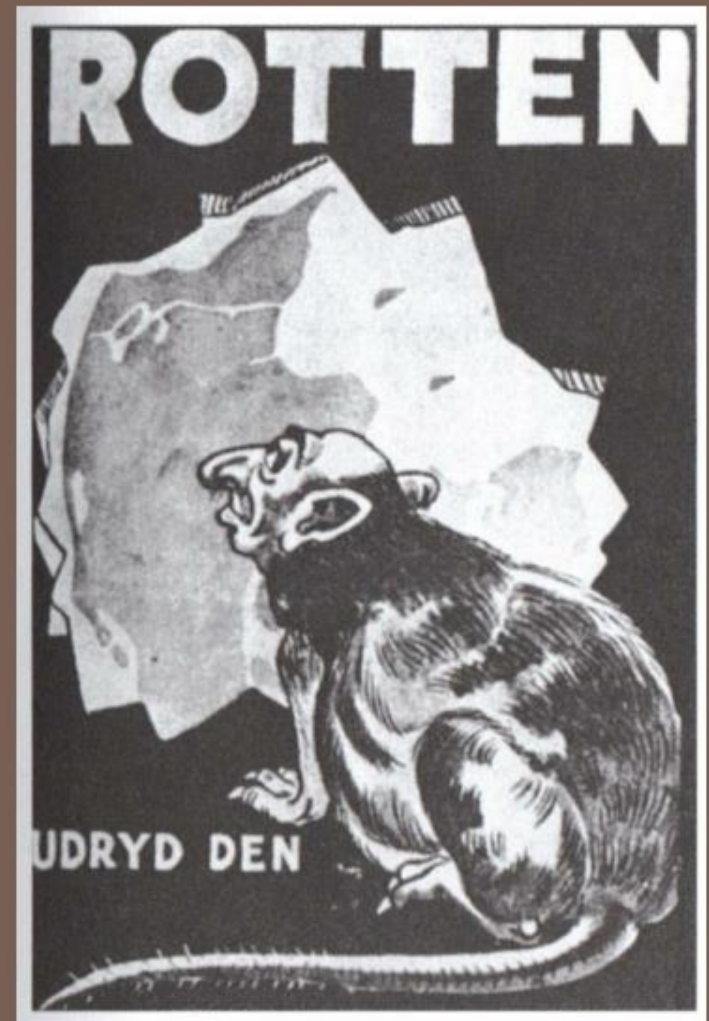
- Illustration from Josiah C. Nott and George Gliddon's *Indigenous Races of the Earth* (1857), a text that argued that brain size was an indicator of human intelligence – support for the reified idea that individuals of European descent possessed greater brain power than those of African descent (and that Africans were closer in intellectual make up to chimps).

A Reified Idea from Our Recent

- Even though there was no real scientific proof that Africans were any more or less intellectually gifted than Europeans, this idea was commonly held. In a country in which slaves were forbidden to learn to read (after 1820) and were denied rites of marriage and any other actions that would be autonomous, it was comforting to many people to believe that slaves' seeming deficiencies were the result of inferior biological construction and not of the cultural circumstances that had been imposed upon them.

Reified Ideas

- These same principles were at work during the Nazi era in Germany, as Hitler and his government played into centuries of prejudice and reified ideas that had been allowed to accrue regarding individuals of Jewish descent. In *MetaMouse*, Spiegelman provides readers with images culled from the German and Polish media that associated Jewish persons with rats and vermin.



Reified Ideas

- Reified ideas sometimes are broadcast this openly, but other times that are put forward subtly, and it is these ideas that are often broadcast in imagery that provide the cement that makes reified ideas stick – and that requires us to use true discernment in order to uncover them.

Then vs. Now/Reified Ideas

- Whenever I teach this concept in my literature courses, say if I am introducing slave narratives or 19th century women's literature, students can identify the reified ideas held by past generations relatively quickly.
- Identifying the reified ideas that govern our own lives in contemporary times is more difficult. It requires more work because without that distance and historical evidence to show that past ideas might be “wrong,” we are required to LOOK at ourselves and our world carefully.

Claiming the right to look

- “This ability to assemble a visualization manifests the authority of the visualizer” (474).
- “In turn, the authorizing of authority requires permanent renewal in order to win consent as the “normal” or everyday because it is always already contested. The autonomy claimed by the right to look is thus opposed by the authority of visibility. But the right to look came first, and we should not forget it” (474).