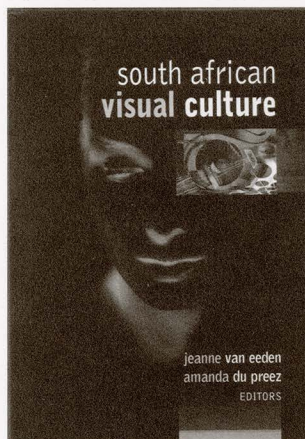


# BOOK REVIEW



## South African visual culture

Jeanne van Eeden and Amanda du Preez (eds). 2005. Pretoria: Van Schaik. 269 pp, illustrated, R209.00 (soft cover).

Reviewed by Ingrid Stevens

Many books have been published in the last few years on South African visual arts, to fill glaring historical gaps in the market. Nonetheless, South African visual culture is unique in that it is the first book to appear in South Africa on our visual culture (according to Mirzoeff in the Foreword, the first in Africa). 'Visual culture' refers to the predominantly visual images that surround, even engulf, us daily, which we must engage with critically because such images are not neutral but are constructed, one might also say 'contaminated', by ideology. Thus the aim of the book is to examine images from popular culture, such as advertisements, shopping malls, clothing, popular magazines, digital media, photography, cinema and television, in order to bring to the light their gender, race and identity politics. The writers include a number of South Africa's most highly regarded art academics, a sure sign that it is aimed at specialist readers and students of visual culture, rather than at the general reader.

It is furthermore interesting that so many art historians are taking an interest in what were once seen as 'frivolous' products such as comic books, Internet sites and graffiti. Clement Greenberg must be turning in his grave, when all that he considered 'kitsch', all that was popular and unworthy of serious consideration, all that should have been pushed aside by the 'true' expressions of avant-garde art, engages seri-

ous intellectuals in scholarly debate, and has become a subject offered by many academic institutions. This publication shows why and how contemporary visual culture is a fitting subject for scholarly attention. The approach is essentially postmodern, evidence of the breaking down of boundaries between disciplines and the undoing of previous hierarchies between the 'good' and the 'bad', the high and the low, the worthy and the unworthy, between avant-garde and kitsch.

The essays are varied in their subjects and approaches. I will not attempt here to cover each one, as there are twelve of them, all notably well written, strongly theoretical and convincing. I will only pick out three to give the flavour of the book.

Michael Herbst in "'Don't give me what I ask for, give me what I need': advertising dilemmas in contemporary South Africa' gives a subtle, theoretically well grounded and carefully argued analysis of four familiar advertisements, arguing that they are not merely manipulative but can give pleasure. It is a view with which I completely disagree and which I see as an apologia for a form that has more social power than Herbst allows. However, his approach is indeed fresh, and starts the book off in an intentionally controversial spirit.

Jeanne van Eeden discusses shopping malls, beginning with a history of their development and unpacking their themes, stereotypes and roles as postmodern environments designed to stimulate (and simulate) pleasure for commercial purposes. They 'delight in quaintness, kitsch and visual clichés [and] the importance of superficial appearances'. Van Eeden then reads these spaces from perspectives of class, gender

and race, arguing convincingly that they are not merely convenient places to shop.

I read with some amusement 'Constructing femininity in *Huisgenoot*', a chapter on *Huisgenoot* magazine (not least because the editor is a family member!). In it, Louise Viljoen and Stella Viljoen deconstruct its construction of femininity through comparing the cover, advertisements, articles and stories of an issue from 1953 and one from 2003. They find that while the position of men vis-à-vis *Huisgenoot* has changed, its construction of femininity remains in some ways unchanged between those dates, in spite of feminism and substantive alterations in female roles. The editor might not agree with this reading of the magazine, but this is one of the delights and the challenge of these essays: they examine much that the image-saturated consumer takes for granted, reading these images against the grain and finding new, often unintended, meanings. Therefore, the 'death of the author' now applies, not only to artists and to authors who no longer control the interpretations of their works, but also to editors, creative directors, copywriters and developers!

While the authors are critical in their approaches to visual material, and underlying issues like capitalism, multi-national capitalism and globalisation are mentioned, there is little critique of these determining ideological and politico-economic power positions. This, I know, is not the intention of the book, nor its editors and authors, yet it remains for me a lacuna at its heart. Nevertheless, this book can be strongly recommended as a collection of creative essays on novel topics, which at the same time are rigorous and of superb academic quality.