

Visual History: Visual Vocabularies, and Photography

Sujith Kumar Parayil

Centre for Media Studies, JNU

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Abstract

The visual turn of the society is a contemporary realization, which announces a perpetual break from the conventional visual perception of society. Academic studies in the field of art history and visual culture try to address the shift in different terms and talk about ‘visions of modernity’, ‘technological modernity’, ‘iconocentrism’, ‘visual mediation, ‘the hermeneutic of seeing’, ‘the rhetoric of images’, ‘imagistic signifiers’, ‘visual narratives and histories’, ‘socialness of images’ ‘traumatic realism’, ‘the language of films’, and the like. These writings as well as the new-age media practices—productions and circulations—illustrate the domain of image-centred perceptions in our everyday life. The image or the visual is being treated as a cultural artefact and is grounded with the signified and shared meanings of society. In other words, visual turn remarkably revolutionises the autonomy of the image and pronounce that it has a language of its own. The language and its vocabularies are historically and culturally produced and practiced. It is in this background this paper try to conceptually explores the field of visual history to argue that it transcends visual vocabularies and their generative meanings —whether contextual or beyond—are the significant elements to be considered to write the visual histories of any region.

Introduction

The sense of belongingness, its visual articulations and its aesthetics —photographic and cinematic—have evolved out of the complex juncture of mediated mentalities of globalization and local culture. In other words, the mediated visual subjects and their worldviews are always

present composite identities that need not necessarily completely belong either to the forms of local culture or flows of global capital and embedded ideologies. There are many social, cultural, and economic intricacies and trajectories which adequately contribute to the construction of this composite visual identity of the subject. The photographic subjects are always show art of the ‘act of becoming’(object, image or model) or display an enunciation of fragmented but discursively united ‘presence’ of a subject, who bears the markers of the agency (Barthes 1982, Edwards 2015). In this context, the photographic field is a blurred but composite one, encompassing many layers of the conjunctural formation of a historical subject (see Henriques 2017). The interpretation and reinterpretation of cultural forms, conventions and belief systems enframed in images, within the emerging context of “ electronic globalization” (Appadurai 2005)or “communicative modernity”(Rajagopal 2011) is the best known blurred field, which generates both material and cognitive experiences of the visual subject. In many ways, the identity and mentality of the subject in this composite field, have resonances with global imaginary of human subjects (for instance ideas related to youth culture, social fantasy, justice, human right and ethical and political questions, etc.), however, at the same time, these imaginaries and their ideations are appropriated and redefined according to the entrenched cultural practices of the society. In short, both the historical and contemporary photographic imaginaries and their visual vocabularies are not only having an indexical referent with the context but also these visual signs often traverse across the contexts for further appropriation, production and reproduction of meaning. In the context of visual history, it is not the photographic signifier’s inherent relation with the referent that makes the photographic meaning rather the ways in which how the signifier is being appropriated, reused and decoded in a given realistic, aesthetic, and specific social context, that signifies the historical meaning of a photographic text. Hence, when we look at the visual histories narrated by the image, it is imperatives to study the signification of the visual vocabularies, both within and outside of the frame, and their production, consumption and circulation in a given time and space.

Visual history

The paper is an attempt to map one of the complex issues involved in writing the visual history of the region, i.e. to theorize and interpret historically as well as contemporary photographs and the idea of visual subjects, especially in relation to the various technological conjunctures and other prevalent schemas involved in the image-making processes. Indeed, the field of visual history is abounding in many such image-making practices and technologies, my concern here is to look at the photographically narrated history of the early twentieth century Kerala, its inventive production of visual vocabularies in tune with culture, its intervention, appropriation and, finally, the technological mediation or the visual construction of the social mentalities. Visual history, in the context of photographic materiality, is not reduced to the specific historical temporality of the image rather the meaning of the image moves into or derives from the domains of multiple temporalities (See Pinney 2005: 269-70). This advocates that visual history should focus not only the contents of the image but also the lived experience of the image, as well as the affect it generates in a visual encounter. In the discursive domains of analogue and digital photography, the photographic image ‘cannot be understood through visual content alone but through an embodied engagement with an affective object world, which is both constitutive of and constituted through social relations’ (Edward 2012: 222). These multiple possibilities of the photograph as material object propose to conceptualise photographs as relational or ‘distributed objects’, ‘figural excess’, ‘visual economy and unproportionate the flow of images’, ‘assemblage of image’, and ‘mixed media’, in which the photographic object encompasses more than what its ‘surface visually displays and incorporates what is embodied in their materiality’ (Gell 1998: Pinney 2005: Poole 1997: Deleuze 1986: Mitchell 2005). In these propositions, the photographic object is interlinked not only with a network of social relationships and various technological mediations but also an object which embodies multiple affective sensibilities and emotions entrenched to the discourses in which it belongs.

In this sense photographic materiality or photograph as an object, the analogue and digital photography, as noted by Deleuze in his analysis on cinema became an assemblage of ‘movement-image,’ which carries ‘perception-image,’ ‘affection-image,’ and ‘action-image. Here image coheres with the ways in which people perceive the object-image and the ways in which

how that perception leads to certain embodied reaction and action. The social meaning of photography is not necessarily determined exclusively by the specific visual contents but also by their *perception as an object* through which the visual is performed, circulated and understood (See Edward 2006: 29). Hence, the field of visual history—the history narrated by images—needs to focus on questions such as how image as a material object is enmeshed in social and cultural perception, and what are the ways in which these perceptions are integrated and activated in the form of visual articulations, and how these visual articulations engrave social relations, transformations, experiences and embodied subjectivities.

These phenomenological questions, on the other hand, directly address the interactive nature of photography—as a medium of *dissemination* of ideas—and further insists on retaining the question of what photography has done or what photography does, instead of asking ‘what do they want’ or what Do they lack? (See Mitchell 2005). These questions enable us to understand the field of visual history and its certain constitutive elements in detail. It involves an examination of the power of the image to constructs or constitutes the visual perception and also it deals with an inquiry on the development of early forms of technologically enhanced visual experience and literacy, and its various intersections with society and culture, and the process of mediation. The visual history here is not idealized with the mere visual representation of historical events. However, it does concern about events and moments of visual representation from the viewpoint of phenomenologically apprehended existence of the physical world’ as the way it allows us—as a being in the world--to negotiate with embodied visual meanings, mediations and experiences. This negotiation and intermediation help us to appropriate and decode the connoted visual idioms and their social meanings embodied in different forms of visual articulations in the long *duree* of history. In this background, one of the most important tasks of the visual history is to understand the historical emergence of the visual language, its signifiers and their appropriation and reappropriation, and modification in a heterogeneous and trans-historical context as well as their intersections and intermediations with various technologies of visual representations.

Image and visual language

The visual language or visual semiotics and their signifiers may be entrenched in a specific culture. However, the mind's eye of the photographer/image creator, subject and beholder or viewer is not necessarily dictated completely by these cultural codes but also by their engagements, experiments, and experiences with technologies located in non-specific historical contexts. This again shows the link between the perception of image and the perception of visual language. Both are located beyond the mere contextualisations found in the form of temporality that underlies most narrative history. The photographic materiality cannot be reduced into the narrative history's assumption that mere contemporaneity is enough to the representation of its time and social context precisely because of the perception of the image as material objects do more than simply stand as a representation of the social. In order to criticise the assumption of contemporaneity as a contextual alibi within historiography, Pinney brings Kracauer's 'nonhomogeneity' and 'uncontemporaneity' notion of time and asserts that 'the visual is metonymic of a much larger domain of materiality' and, by extension envisages a visual history 'as in part determined by struggles occurring at the level of the visual'. He contends that "it may be more appropriate to envisage images and objects as densely compressed performances unfolding in unpredictable ways and characterized by what (from the perspective of an aspirant context) looks like disjunctions" (Pinney 2005) The 'figural excess' then not only signify the non-linear historical contexts and multiple temporalities of the image and their intensively felt embodied sensibilities, and 'radical exteriority' but also an indicator of the transcendence of visual language or visual semiotics across time and space.

The language and the visual semiotics of this technologically enhanced sense of perception and experience, or what once Walter Benjamin has called 'optical unconsciousness' (1931), are rather transcended through the complex historical and technological developments of the society. The historical genealogy of such formulation of experience can be located from the discursive domains of colonialism to global capitalism. The technological mediation of this sign language is further interconnected with the earlier visual literacy that spread through the print media to the contemporary proliferation of digital imaging and creativity. Therefore, the visual/pictorial turn might have been filled with different historical and cultural appropriations and practices as well as contingent contemporary impulses, order of incoherence and its technological idealizations. If

one looks back to understand the history of visual literacy of this collective semiotic order of the contemporary, the role played by earlier print and visual media and photography in order to invent, disseminate and institutionalise forms of these visual vocabularies are instantly recognized. This development, innovation and proliferation of the visual language and its history need to be contextualized in the broader platform of visual history.

Visual language or visual semiotics, as mentioned earlier, do not strictly belong to an exclusive sign system of certain social context or its hierarchical relations rather it moves, travels and transcends in-between the image-making technologies, its dissemination across the temporalities, and various intermediation process. This transcendence of visual vocabularies often enable the subjects to presuppose or preconceive their imagined-image and bring into the intermediary the domain of visual interactions. However, this move of the visual signifier through the ‘uncontemporaneous’ domains of the social is not to be considered as a normative or linear entity to use instantaneously, rather it involves the art of appropriation enmeshed in the judgment of popular aesthetics. Therefore, visual practices involved an art of appropriation, the logic of inclusion and dissemination of a signified set of ideas, practices, things, commodities and their signified values and politics. Appropriation of the visual language, either as legitimised or as counter signifiers and their inclusion and exclusion in the frame can further explain with the notion of ‘grounded aesthetics’. According to Paul Willis, grounded aesthetic ‘is the creative element in a process whereby meanings are attributed to symbols and practice and where symbols and practices are selected, reselected, highlighted and recomposed to resonate further appropriated and particularized meanings, such dynamics are emotional as well as cognitive’. Grounded aesthetics are not only the yeast of common culture but also integral to the intermediary and intertextual visual media practices and language of the popular aesthetics (See Willis 1998).

‘Image Move’: Floating Signifiers and Visual Subject

The ‘image move’ indicates the ‘uncontemporaneity’ nature of the image and transposition of its visual language—as floating signifiers—into various modes of technologically enhanced image-making practices, circulations and meaning-making processes. On the other hand, it also points

out the historical consciousness involved in the appropriation of visual signifiers, perception, and presupposition of an 'imagined image' in an intertextual and intermediary domain of the visual articulation of the 'real.' The historical consciousness or unconsciousness inlaid in the image and its expressions and attribution has always achieved through the appropriations of relevant visual signifiers or through the embedded memories (either contextual or posthumous) and bodily gestures. To elucidate this point further, let me briefly explain the relation between photography, memory, and history. It has been argued that photographs trigger contextual memories (Barthes 1982; Hayes 1998). Within the context of rapid social change, the camera offered a credible sense of historical certainty and continuity. Considered in this manner, there appears to be a very strong connection between visual history and oral history. As Hayes argues, the former galvanises the latter (1998, 9). So to say, the historical certainty and consciousness triggered by and through memories are in fact transits through the visual signifiers. Nevertheless, these visual languages refashioned by photography or any other technological devices are often beyond the surface of the visual and time. Kracauer points out that what is significant is that the photograph is not reducible to either merely spatial or merely temporal terms; he further says that memory images are at odds with photographic representations. Memory images appear to be fragmented but only because photography does not completely encompass the meanings to which they refer and in relation to which they cease to be fragmented (Kracauer 1993, 426).

It is in this context of the transcended visual signifiers and their technological dissemination of expressions and counter-narratives, it is imperative to recapitulate the transition or translation of visual language and embedded signifiers happened from analogue photography to digital photography. Instead of concentrating the debates revolve around the questions of 'factuality and superficiality', or 'depth and depthlessness' or 'indexical referent and self-referentiality', and 'real and simulacra', or the shift from the modernist aesthetic to the postmodernist simulation, rather I would like to postulate that the most potential site that helps us to understand the transcend signifiers and the grounded aesthetic practices are that the domain of 'intertextuality' or intermediation (See Jameson. 1992). Scholars at various points explain this site as pastiche', intertextual dialogue, or a field of assemblage, image juxtaposition and forms of mimeticism, and

culture of simulation and the hyperreal (Darley 2000). So the core that made possible in this intertextual or intermediary dialogue is that it brings pastness into the present as a floating visual signifier for appropriation and reuse while inventing new signifiers in tune with the technology and the socio-economic and political conditions of the society. It is indispensable to say that in this process of intertextual intermediation between pastness and present, the visual signifiers inexplicably make the present as 'heterogeneous temporalities,' and by extension, exterior to the contemporaneity.

This disjuncture with the mere contemporaneity of history, in fact, open up the questions related to the reality effect of the analogue and digital photography, or what Mitchell warns that "we must face once again the ineradicable fragility of our ontological distinctions between the imaginary and the real" (1992, 225). it is inappropriate to bring all such discussions here, however, it is essential to mention two points in relation to the aspect of the photographic materiality and reality in this context: the first one is that what Mitchell suggests that the photographic connections to "the real" are heavily dependent upon what precisely counts as the relevant notion of the real, and upon attendant circumstances,..."(2010: 44). Secondly, Mark Poster's observation about the new media is relevant to understand the ruptured flow of the signifiers in different technological domains, he contends that "the material infrastructure of the sign"—both the relation between signifier and signified and the relation between sign and referent—has been "drastically reconfigured" by new media without bemoaning or celebrating the loss of some aboriginal materiality"(Poster 2002: 132). These two observations are clearly making the point that there is continuity in the visual significations; provide that the visual signifiers are entrenched into the image and its world as fragmented entities. In this context of visual signifies and its fragment involving 'a semiology of indication and concealment'; it indicates a visibility in accordance with the universal, moral and secular imperatives attuned to the forms of technological mediation and the social normative (somewhat recalling Kant's idea of aesthetic judgment and faculty of reason), and often conceals the enactment of embodied social relations, sentiments and attachment of the specific cultural context in which it generates meaning. The reality here depends on the way in which how available and relevant notions of

real is defined, and the way in which technological refashioning or supplementation of such real occurs.

Conclusion

Therefore, the study on visual history involves both the visual mediation of the social as well as the social mediation of the visual, specifically the cultural and social appropriation of the photographic representational technology to supplement the existing interpretation of the real. This interpretation, in turn, also enhanced with the production of new visual semiologies, which evolved out from the intermediary domains of modernity, technology and culture. Scholars in the field of photography, history and culture have articulated that the enunciated subjectivity in a frame and related photographic visual experience not only having a strong indexical connection with contextual histories and everyday life of the people but also open up a myriad realms of affective and emotional histories. The 'visual and materiality turn' of photographic studies and subsequent theoretical insights further, validate that the mediated subjectivity in the photographs also had an inextricable link with affective and sensorial signifiers operated in the society, in which the photograph became an embodied social object (social biography) to understand social relations, mentalities or worldviews. In other words, even if photographs followed certain canons of artistic and aesthetic sensibilities, the social and cultural signifiers and connoted meaning (or the visual economy) of photography is specific to the context in which it produced and circulated. As a scholar working in the field of visual history, I can hypothetically suggest that this is true in the case of colonial and postcolonial photography, especially photographs prior to the larger event of globalization and neoliberal economy. The visual experience of modernity and its technological mediations have undergone a substantial change in the age of new media and its digital image-making process. The technological rupture between modernity and postmodernity, and the simultaneous emergence of digital photographic technology announces a new visual subject who is not merely representing as an agent or observer/subject of any particular discourse, rather portray as an active subject who can be part of the interactive domains of the global visual imaginary, while symbolically recruiting himself or herself into it.

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