



To See or Not to See: Power and Visuality in Modern Art

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Abstract

Our ways of seeing and the representational strategies used in modern visual art often differ, as they reflect perspectives that do not fully fit with everyday perception. This research examines how specific visual cultures or subcultures shape particular modes of visualization and representation. Visualization begins with biological vision but is shaped by culture, ideology, and, most importantly, power relations. The process of visualization starts with biological vision, gets modulated through culture, ideology and predominantly through power dynamics. All in all, it encompasses two ways of seeing: what the audiences want to see and how/what the visual artists want to represent the subject. Theoretically, the discourse analysis of visual culture inherits models of knowledge, thought, and ideation from philosophers and thinkers, predominantly Michael Foucault's 'will to power', Fredrick Jameson's 'will to style' and 'will to automatism,' or 'automatism of the camera-eye's view,' and Walter Benjamin's "the instrumentality of a non-living agent" including other relevant theories. Some representative modern paintings by selected masters have been used as primary text of discussion. The discussion concludes that the central question in visual culture is "To see or not to see" the subjects. Beholder's visualization (which ultimately constitutes a simulated mass psyche) and visuality of the subjects are related to power dynamics. Modern art is all about manifestation of this power-driven visual culture. The discussion on the selected paintings infer that the focal agenda of the modernist painters is to embody the subjects from a different vector that the spectators, ruler or surveyor overlook. They tend to manifest the voice or agencies of characters who are mostly subdued.

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Keywords

Power-driven visuality; Subdued agency; Camera-eye automatism; Epistemics of seeing; Modernist re-embodiment

Introduction: Formation of Visual Culture

“The paradox of visual culture is that it is everywhere and nowhere at once.”

(Nicholas Mirzoeff, 2009)

Visual culture is paradoxically pervasive in our life in the sense that we are living in such a world where almost everything communicates visually: screens, images, objects in everyday life, spectacles and rituals in religion, performance in social events, and human activities like war, love, economy, technology, all kinds of texts, arts, artifacts, multimedia and the list does not exhaust. Especially in present context, communicating through multimedia is so compelling in terms of visuality and its impact. It's not only the text that communicates, medium itself conveys something as expressed in the renowned catch-phrase of Marshal McLuhan: “Medium is the message” (McLuhan, 2013). It encompasses in society so much that W.J.T Mitchell calls it “the visual construction of the social field” (Mitchell, as cited in Mirzoeff, 2009). So how we say things matters more than what we say. For instance, the choice of visual text connects us with our archetypal memory, ritual, and visualization. The medium becomes a metaphor for the world it creates. Choosing to express oneself via painting itself communicates human instinct to visualize abstract ideas through lines, colors and shapes.

On the other hand, it is nowhere in the sense that all mediatized representations are mixed in visual communication. That's why; it is truly called 'Mix media'. The interrelation of medias in visual culture of various art genres is multi-functional as well as multi-dimensional. For example, a motion picture communicates with visual, audio, promo, posters, cast, script, cinematographic effects and so on. Similarly, a modern painting has inter-art relation with other disciplines like literature, sculpture, dance, photography etc.

Reviews on theories and concepts of visuals, visualization and visual culture

Visual does not simply mean the sights. It appeals to human senses so much that sound, color, shapes, textures, and even smells can become the visuals. It is both physiological as well as neurological involvement. For example, just imagining our favorite food stimulates all our senses (pertinently speaking, eyes, taste buds, and nostrils) with a visual of its presentation in our mind (technically on our retina). Rene Descartes introduced the concept of optical formation by mind long back in the 17th century which is still relevant (Mirzoeff, 2009).



In 1994, W.J.T Mitchell discussed it further and called this process of visual sense making ‘A Pictorial Turn’. He was more interested in non-linguistic visual experience like ‘Semiotic or Visual Turn.’ For Mitchell, the reading of visual texts requires the bottom-line of visual literacy:

Spectatorship (the book, the gaze, the glance, the practice of observation, surveillance, and visual pleasure) may be as deep a problem as various forms of reading (deciphering, decoding, interpretation, et.) and that “Visualexperience” or “Visual literacy” might not be fully explicable in the model of textually. (Mitchell, 1994)

As the traditional approach of visualization is limited to mere ‘spectatorship’ or ‘textual reading’, Mitchell proposes “visual culture” as “a new social/political/communicational order that employs mass spectacle and technologies of visual and auditory stimulation in radically new ways (1994).” Mitchell’s argument is closer to the ideas expressed by Walter Benjamin who claimed that modern life was now thoroughly saturated, and “reality” fully mediated by technological forms.

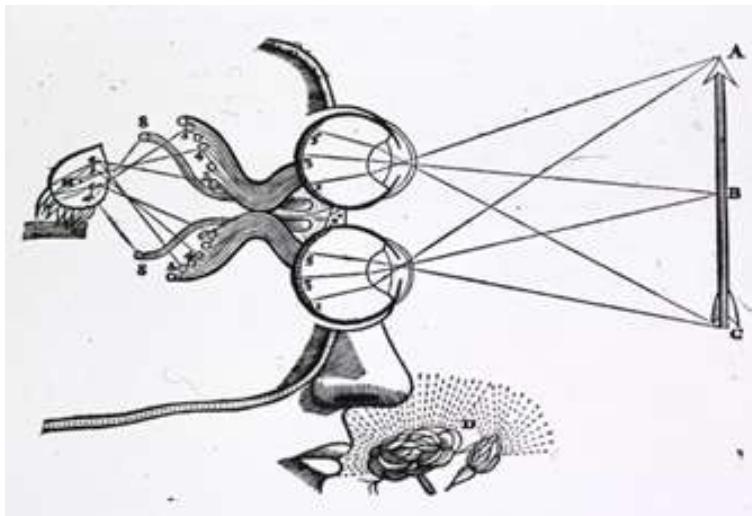


Figure 1 : Descartes Vision and Visual Perception

How does modernity relate to visual culture then? Laura Marcus shares some powerful epithets or metaphors attributed to visual culture by different scholars, such as: ‘The frenzy of the visible’ (Jean-Louis Comolli), ‘the society of the spectacle’ (Guy Debord), ‘the tyranny of the eye’ (Roland Barthes). These are just a few representative terms and phrases coined or deployed by theorists in recent decades to define modernity in relation to visibility, visuality, and perception (Marcus, 2013). She draws on these evocative epithets to illustrate how theorists have framed modernity through the lens of visual culture, perception, and spectacle. Analogous to Marcus, The German philosopher Martin Heidegger named modernity as “age of the world picture”. He asserted modernity as a point of view towards the realm of contemporary world:

A world picture...does not mean a picture of the world but the world conceived and grasped as a picture...The world picture does not change from an earlier medieval one into a modern one, but rather the fact that the world

becomes a picture at all is what distinguishes the essence of the modern age. (Heidegger, as cited in Mirzoeff, 2009)

Therefore, the visual culture of modernity is not about creating or simulating a realm of world picture as it is, rather it is about a need to render the experience of being in the modern, fragmented and fragile world as a picture of present time or contemporaneity. It is phenomenological, unconscious, inconsistent and anarchic; something like Walter Benjamin's coinage "optical unconscious". The camera eye point of view, for Benjamin, becomes a tool that not only allows the visual artists like photographer or painter to snap external visions but also urges the eyes behind the camera to bring out the latent truths about people, places and their own perceptions (Benjamin, 1999). As a classic example, Dali's iconic melting clock best represents the paranoic vision of the surrealist master on fluidity of time and space in contemporary episteme of modernity.

The concept is analogous to the unconscious mind mapped by Freud. In short, modernity in visual culture is a process by which the optical unconscious is produced, experienced and identified as a space for personal identification of an individual, being of a social organization, manipulated by politico-economic power and ultimately commodification of human beings, living organism and natural resources in the present anthropomorphic world.



Figure 2 : 'The Persistence of Memory' by Salvador Dalí, 1931

Mirzoeff writes that one of the most striking aspects in the theorizations of visuality and visual culture is ambivalence towards the primacy, or hegemony, of the visual (2009). The question of vision goes far beyond the literal acts of perception, of seeing and being seen, reach deep into our inherited models of knowledge, thought, and ideation. Predominantly, the act of seeing is driven by will of the beholder or display to exercise power and secondarily, by will to censorings and surveillance in the form of stylizing, automatism of the camera-eye's view (which literally means overlooking the truth). Sometimes, visualization is also guided by external factors like the instrumentality of a non-living agent. For instance, in the context of social media influence, nowadays people

like to display human relations, emotions and culture through digitized and automated images like memes, emojis and trolls. Celebrating special moments like birthdays on social media has becomes mandatory as the visuals are easily noticed and received. Consequently, the central question in visual culture is ‘to see or not to see’ the subjects as well as to delegate or suspend the agency of the subject.

Some modernist writers too have written on visuality of characters and situation in text. D.H. Lawrence implicitly evoked a model of "haptics" ("touching with the eye") as an aesthetic response to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological theory which has become highly influential on art and film theories today. Virginia Woolf tested out the visuality of writing, and the connections between word and (mental) image. Małgorzata Hołda, professor of literature, hermeneutics, aesthetics, at the University of Łódź, analyzes "To the Lighthouse" as a site where Woolf tests the limits of language to embody visual art.

Lily Briscoe's painting becomes a metaphor for Woolf's narrative technique, showing how words can enact painterly composition. This article is crucial for understanding Woolf's ekphrastic strategies and her attempt to merge verbal and visual modes (2022). Likewise, D. H. Lawrence in his *Etruscan Places* (1932) writes about vision as phenomenological act:

A man who sees, sees not as a camera does when it takes a snapshot, not even as a cinema-camera, taking its succession of instantaneous snaps; but in a curious rolling flood of vision, in which the image itself seethes and rolls; and only the mind picks out certain factors which shall represent the image seen.” (Lawrence as cited in Marcus, 2013)

Basically, Lawrence describes the act of seeing as intentionality (which seems to be inspired by Marleau Ponty's idea of ‘intentionality’ as a lived, embodied experience). It's a consciousness directed toward something. We don't just see objects; we see aspects of them. So, a kind of natural partiality is given to this phenomenological experience. For example, when we look at a cup, we never see the entire cup at once. We see it from a particular angle, and our mind fills in the rest. Metonymic expressions of symbolism, Cubic expressionism and Minimalism in arts are related to such paradigmatic selection of mind.

Primarily, visuality is related to power. One can notice that in all theorizations of visuality and visual culture is the ambivalence toward the primacy or hegemony of the visualizer. This negative critique is often identified with the theoretical perspectives of the second half of the twentieth century, influenced substantially by the work of Michel Foucault, whose writings on surveillance and the “panoptical” regime of the nineteenth century identified acts of looking with the exertions of power (Marcus, 2013). Foucault's idea is relevant in all contexts as history of mankind is essentially the history of power exercise.

In context of Nepal, for example, the power blocks in the capital city Kathmandu overlook the existence of the subaltern people and places from the remote part of the country. They tend to stereotype the people of Karnali as a ragged villager; so much such so that even commercial painters use this image of poverty and hunger for making their artworks saleable.

Foucauldian idea of primacy of vision and exertion of power is somewhat similar to the ideas of W. J. T. Mitchell. His works focus on iconography and sign systems within culture, as well as on the relationships between visual and verbal representations. He defines “visual culture” as “a new social, political and communicational order that employs mass spectacle and technologies of visual and auditory stimulation in radically new ways” (Mitchell, 1995). In modern age, those who are in power are seen and heard first. Talk about the everyday news bulletin on tv channels. Every time the prime minister, minister or some high authority speaks for public audience, it gets wider news value (even if they might have spoken nasty things!) in comparison to an insightful opinion of a layman.

Besides, intentional visuality, what gets a coverage or exposure is also related to its intrinsic quality like artistic or non-artistic presentation. For example, an artistically projected photograph or painting easily draws anyone’s attention. Let’s consider the visuality of an acclaimed photograph:

The iconic image of a refugee Afghan girl in a camp in Pakistan is perhaps one of the most acclaimed images in the entire repositories of visual arts. This photograph became so much popular in the internet not because the girl is a celebrity or holds a remarkable agency as a human being. After all, she was a refugee when the photographer captured her in his frame. Neither it was the best photo of the cameraman. It appealed to everyone because of the intrinsic qualities it offered like: simplicity, communicating green eyes and perfect visual that tells the silent agony of a refugee. But sometimes, visualization is amorphous. Later, the photographer was criticized (especially by the orthodox Muslim community) for objectifying an innocent subject.



Figure 3 : ‘The Green-Eyed Afghan’
by Steve McCurry, 1984

However, “What is artistic form and what is non-artistic?” is a debatable question. What is artistic always has a stronger visual appeal than non-artistic entities. Even laymen want certain items to be inherently artistic and visually attractive (like clothes, crafts, houses, garden etc., whereas in case things of utility such as machine, their specifications (functions, horsepower etc.) matter rather than their looks or forms. Nevertheless, R & D units of producers do not overlook the designs, color and forms even in these items. It means artistic forms with aesthetical values are visually appealing for intense perception. Scholars have talked about conceptual and perceptual abilities of viewers to interact with artworks. Martin and Jacobus (2015) share some criteria for identifying and grading a good work of art both conceptually and perceptually. Conceptually, a work of art is not taken for granted unless: i. The object is made by an artist ii. The object or event is intended to be a work of art by its maker, and iii. Recognized experts agree that it is a work of art.

With regards to enhanced perception of a work of art, they consider four basic criteria:

- i. Artistic form (organization of medium and composition)
- ii. Participation (sustained attention and negation of self-awareness)
- iii. Content (for the interpretation of subject matter)
- iv. Subject matter (values, themes expressed)

(Martin and Jacobus, 2015)

Martin and Jacobus make points in asserting artistic forms like lining, grammar of color, textures, shapes and distortion, space and composition as unifying or aesthetical elements in a work of art. Participation and interaction of the artists (via art works) and the audience enrich our phenomenological experience and ultimately affect our thinking process and psychology. Content represent and reflect the subject matters that come from history, tradition, myths, society, lives, and contemporary time and space we live in.

Rajbhandari and et al. (2018) write that a piece of art is perceived in terms of its formal elements (the artistic forms), its symbolic elements (which come from human tendency of metaphorizations, archetypes, allusions, iconography and iconology), and social elements. Audience's perception also depends on the motive of the art works. Fine arts aim to affect the psychology (especially humanistic) of audience whereas applied arts are for the utility of human pleasure and entertainment, and ultimately for making money. After all, choice of modern audience (to see or not to see) works as the prime determinant of visuality of artworks. A modern alienated man, who is just a materialistic consumer, and who has almost lost human sensitivity and values of humanities, is likely to be disengaged towards arts and humanities.

Statement of the problem and Research question

Hence, visual culture (including subcultures) is the product of modernity in the lives and thought process of people, power dynamics of the visualizer and the subjects, primarily, the effect or absence of the agency of the subject; and not the least, the role of non-human agency and instrumentality in the production and dissemination of visual arts (for example, primacy of medium over the message or mechanical reproduction of the artworks). However, scholars have paid less attention to the absence or fragmented presence of subject agency—how subjects resist, negotiate, or remain invisible within visual regimes. Similarly, studies explicitly connect subcultural visual practices to broader epistemics of modernity. How do subcultures generate distinct visual grammars that challenge mainstream visuality? This link between micro-level subcultural aesthetics and macro-level modernity is underdeveloped. On the whole, a distinct visual culture itself produces knowledge and shapes our thought processes. This philosophical dimension (visuality as epistemology) is less explored compared to semiotic or sociological approaches.

In the light of the gap explored in all these theoretical and conceptual epistemics, we set our research question: how does a distinct visual culture or subculture form a perspective of visualizing or representing a subject in particular way? And what are the key drives and constituents of such visual culture?

Research Methodology

This research article primarily incorporates descriptive analysis of selected paintings, the contexts behind these works and painterly motives shaped by the modernist tendencies of the contemporary milieu. The discussion and finding are based on an extensive visual analysis model illustrates how a visual text features the visuals (selected contents and manifestations), their visualization (perspectives, discourse and interpretations of the signs and motifs) by the artist as well as audience and ultimately evolution of a distinct visual culture of their representation and embodiments. The first cluster of representative modern paintings concerns how acclaimed modern painters like Picasso, Matisse and Braque contested the traditional mode of visualizations (especially the Realists and Naturalists). Next cluster deals with entirely new concepts of space and time, and the binary of the static and motion in the sci fi works of Italian Futurists. Some other texts reflect mystifications and objectification of the subjects. A chapter also includes visuals presented from the androcentric perspective of male gaze upon the female body. The inference of the discussion is drawn inductively leaving ample of space for further investigation.

Discussion/Analysis:

Modernity and the Visuals

New means of mobility and communication like telephone and radio, bicycles and automobiles, ocean liners and aircraft, computerization and IT revolution including every walk of life have played crucial role in transforming life into modernist mode of action and thought with a sense of compressed time and space. In the earlier centuries, especially during the post Renaissance period, invention of compass, gun powder and printing press were modernizing factors to a great extent. Thanks to social media and IT technology, now almost everything has become a multimedia based visual text now.

Richard Weston (2006) identified some characteristics of modernity and its passage of becoming in visual culture of the contemporary time:

- Artistic responses to the experience of modernity were like tasting a salad bowl: a mix of different tastes, forms, styles and visuality.
- There was a concentration on the formal means of expressions or “language” particular to each discipline.
- Since the outset of twentieth century, photography took over the representational tasks of painting,
- The “material” of architecture was seen as space itself, not the physical stuff of building.
- Familiar conventions like naturalism and perspective in painting, ornament and symmetry in architecture, tonality in music, narrative in the novel – were rejected in the search for compositional structures better able to represent the complexities and contradictions of modern life.

Weston makes a brief historical survey to Modernist movements to suggest the track record of the major works. He reminds us that the first fully Modernist paintings of Henri Matisse and others were exhibited in Paris at the Salon d'Automne Gallery in 1905. Their works outraged the public, earning the group the nickname Fauves (wild beasts), which later yielded for the acclaimed trend of Fauvism. Two years later, Pablo Picasso painted 'Les Demoiselles d'Avignon' that astonished everyone with its unique visuals of female nudity in Cubic form.

Its distorted and shattered nudes mounted an even more violent assault on conventional ideas of beauty. Picasso was shortly followed by George Braque. Then Cubism was born, most influential of all the Modernist movements. In a Cubist painting such as Braque's 'The Portuguese' of 1911–12, space and form are represented by faceted planes of color that alternate tantalizingly between being read as figure or ground. Space is shallow,

devoid of perspective, and rendered tactile rather than optical. Figures are fragmented and seen from multiple viewpoints – eyes frontally, the nose in profile – a feature widely interpreted as an. In 1912, Picasso glued a piece of oilcloth printed with the pattern of chair-caning to a canvas: “collage” related technique of montage, was to become one of the Modernists’ favored means of suggesting the disjunctions of urban life. On the other hand, there were Italian Futurists including Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1909). Their portrayal of joyride in the typical modern machine, an automobile surprised people. Celebrating the love of danger and beauty of speed, the Futurists embraced the “shock of the new” and set a pattern for future avant-garde movements.

In the meantime, there were serious critiques on the so-called Modernist Movements like Cubism. The critics called it “the troubled art of a troubled era.” They even advocated for a new, all-embracing Purist style, based on rational machine production, not individualistic expression. But again, the so-called Purist style was labeled as propaganda.

The Dadaist movement in Germany and Geneva in 1916, assaulted on the bourgeois culture and values that they believed had led to war. Marcel Duchamp’s urinal – “fountain” and his addition of a moustache to a print of the Mona Lisa became much acclaimed and controversial at the same time. In 1922, Surrealism founded by one time Dadaist, André Breton and later accompanied by Salvador Dali and others came under the limelight. They promoted “Pure psychic automatism” or “Paranoia” as a means of dissent against bourgeois society.

In the meantime, in America, Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko, practitioners of last major

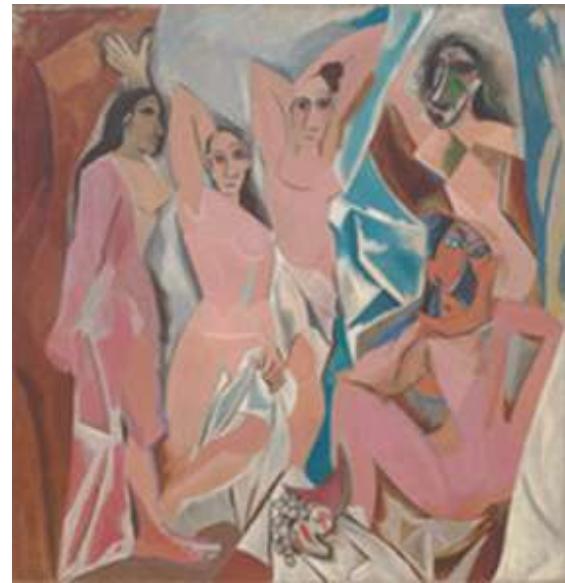


Figure 4 : 'Les Demoiselles d'Avignon'
by Pablo Picasso, 1907



Figure 5 : 'Sky scrappers and Tunnels'
by Italian Futurist Fortunato Depero, 1930

Modernist movement came with their unique style of Abstract Expressionism. All these waves of modernism and avant-gardism aimed at common agenda: the power dynamics of modern societies and acute need of artistic freedom. They challenged only the traditional parameters of referential arts but also questioned on the bourgeois art and the ways it undermined human agency and visuality. They created new visuals of their own.

Reciprocity, power distance and visual culture

Seeing the words comes before reading the words. For initial verbal acquisition, a child looks at the script and recognizes it before it can actually utter the words. Thus gradually, skill and choice of visualization develops into visual culture. Visual culture is about seeing things and being seen by others. Seeing or visual perception establishes our place in the surrounding world. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled. Our knowledge and explanations of the realm around us (expressed via words, images, and actions) do not always fit the sight. That is why, we say sometimes our eyes betray. The way we see things is affected by what we know it or what we believe. In the Middle Ages, when mankind believed in the physical existence of Hell, the sight of fire must have meant something different from what it means today. Nevertheless, their visualization of Hell was the visuals of fire consuming the sinister as well as to their sensation of unbearable pain caused by the burn. Today, however, such labelled visual of fire has changed. Thanks to the modern technology, the induction-based heat energy, infra ray, halogen light, electricity all do the function of fire, though we do not see these forms of heat energies. All these quantum forms of energy are indexed by fire flame. Same is true about modern art in terms of symbolic representation. From the era of referential visual representation, we have come to the time of modern non-referential abstract artworks. The main difference in this paradigm shift of mimetic visual culture is how the visual artists defamiliarize or represent the subject and how the audience visualize or perceive the artworks.

Seeing is not just a question of mechanically reacting to visual stimuli. It is true only when one isolates the small part of the process which concerns the eye's retina. We only see what we look at. To look or overlook is an act of choice. We hardly look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves. As a result of this act, what we see is brought within our reach - though not necessarily within coverage of our visibility. Similarly, to touch something also means to situate oneself in relation to it. If we close our eyes, move round the room, we notice how the sense of touch is like a static, limited form of sight. At this moment, we do not really enjoy the aesthetics of haptics. Exceptionally, people with eye disability are supposed to have hypersensitive power of haptics, auditory and other senses. Our vision is continually active, continually moving, continually holding things in a circle around itself; constituting what is present to us as we are.

Soon after we can see something, we are aware that we can also be seen. The eye of the other combines with our own eye to make it fully credible that we are part of the visible world. If we accept that we can see that hill over there, we propose that from that hill we can be seen. The reciprocal nature of vision is more fundamental than that of spoken dialogue.

Does an artist see in the same way a common person sees? John Berger (1972) makes a point that the painter's way of seeing is reconstituted by the marks he makes on the canvas or paper. Although every image embodies a way of seeing, our perception or appreciation of an image depends on our own way of seeing too. An image or visuality becomes a record of how X has seen Y. This is the result of an increasing consciousness of individuality, accompanying an increasing awareness of history. Berger (1972) further writes that such consciousness has existed since the beginning of the Renaissance in Europe.

When an image is presented as a work of art, the way people look at it is affected by a whole series of learnt assumptions about art such as: Beauty, Truth, Genius, Civilization, Form, Status, Taste etc. When we 'see' a landscape, we situate ourselves in it. If we 'saw' the art of the past, we would situate ourselves in history. Relating to Foucauldian notion of power and vision, Berger explains the process of mystification:

When we are prevented from seeing it, we are being deprived of the history which belongs to us. Who benefits from this deprivation? In the end, the art of the past is being mystified because a privileged minority is striving to invent a history which can retrospectively justify the role of the ruling classes, and such a justification can no longer make sense in modern terms. And so, inevitably, it mystifies. (Berger, 1972)

Besides mystification, Berger elaborately discusses other impact factors of visuality and modernity in relation to what is seen or overlooked. Another salient example of what people want to look or overlook is commercially reproduced artworks. The ideas of Walter Benjamin (1992) on mechanical reproduction of the original works of artworks (basically having cult values) is relevant here. He asserts that mass reproduction of artworks leads the producers and consumers to overlook originality. However, it also comes up with several advantages; for instance, it creates a conducive culture of mass consumption though aura of the original is lost during this process.

Next issue that determines visuality of subject is power dynamics. One who is at the center has a lucrative choice of seeing or overlooking others. Let's consider an example of gender relations or the dichotomy of ruler and the ruled in Edouard Manet's painting 'Olympia':

In patriarchal societies, men see and women appear. In 1975, Laura Mulvey, a feminist and a filmmaker wrote an acclaimed essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" where

she describes the male gaze as scopophilic and voyeuristic act that ignites a deliberate sexual politics. Such politics of gaze empowers only the men, whereas women are presented as mere characters controlled by and existing in terms of what the men or spectators wish to see, or how the male artist tends to represent the female. The iconic nude 'Olympia' by Manet depicts a woman's body as visualized by male gaze. It manifests andro-centric gender roles where the traditional nude woman only appears to excite the male spectators (Kimberly Kapela, 2020). John Berger relates the tendency to the willingness of the surveyor or the surveyed:



Figure 6 : 'Olympia' by Edouard Manet. 1863

Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman is a male: the surveyed female. Thus, she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight. (1972)

The act of seeing and will to be seen are driven by three motives: the male gaze, internalization of the gaze or surveillance by the objects (women) and objectification of female body. Broadly speaking, the act of seeing or being seen is a matter of choice guided by agency and power of both parties.

Conclusion

Thus, a paramount agenda of the modernist painters is to embody the subjects from a different vector that the spectators, ruler or surveyor overlook. Whether, we talk about Michael Foucault's 'will to power', Fredrick Jameson's 'will to style' and 'will to automatism,' or 'automatism of the camera-eye's view,' and Walter Benjamin's "the instrumentality of a non-living agent", the central question is to reflect the male gaze and manipulation of the visuality by the surveyor or power block. Their apprehension seems to be delegating subdued agency, visuality and voice to the subject.

In addition to power dynamics, publicity stunts and propaganda of media, fake news, glamour, primacy of technology and medium over quality (producibility), kitsch in pop art etc. also play vital role in what we see or overlook. For today's consumer-oriented societies, money or capital comes as the sole determining factor in this choice. Modern painters capture such tendency of androcentric, anthropocentric, capitalistic, materialistic and individualistic metropolitan based visuals in their artworks.

This brief article also opens up avenues for researchers and enthusiasts of modern arts to muse from the perspectives of modern visual culture. For instance, they can inquire: How do Nepali modern visual artists represent their subjects in their visual arts like modern paintings, cinemas, fashion trends, music videos and so on? Moreover, future research can interrogate how visual subcultures, whether digital, urban, or regional, construct alternative epistemics of seeing that resist dominant power structures. The interplay between human and non-human agency (for instance, codes, algorithms, AI, mechanical reproduction) in shaping visuality remains a fertile ground for inquiry. Ultimately, the question "to see or not to see" extends beyond modernist painting into the broader cultural politics of visibility, reminding us that visual culture is never neutral but always entangled with power, ideology, and the contested agency of its subjects.

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