

## **Visual Culture, and Feminism, and Critical Race Theory**

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### **Abstract**

Visual culture attempts to expose that other facet of the world which almost hitherto remains concealed from the majority of the populace. This is because the people across the globe were fed with the visual images that largely went on a par with the interests of the white Europeans. In other words, Visual culture views the world from a “subaltern” perspective and challenges the norms set by “a white European Christian male” centric outlook. To put it simply, visual culture studies and interprets the world, which is made up of visual images, from the point of view of marginalized, the suppressed or the disadvantaged. In this connection, the study of visual culture enjoys a close affiliation with feminism and critical race theory.

**Keywords:** visual culture, feminism, and critical race theory

### **Article**

The history of visual culture dates back to 1492 when the encounter resulted between the “natives” and the “strangers” in the Americas. Christopher Columbus’s highly sensationalized discovery of the new land unfolded, perhaps, one of the most unfortunate chapters of the world history and gave birth to the colonial project that spanned more than four hundred years. The brutalities of the white Europeans in the name of culturing the “others” exposed unprecedented moral degradation of the Whites. They took it as a burden to “civilize” the indigenous communities and the blacks; the project was also perceived as the white man’s burden. Even today the residues of colonization continue to have a strong sway on socio cultural dynamics of the world.

Visual culture is also associated with multimodal composition regarding teaching writing to undergraduate students. Many scholars such as Ashok Bhusal (2019) have highlighted the importance of including multimodal texts in First-Year Composition as multimodality offers numerous opportunities for multilingual students to communicate their thoughts. Bhusal says in his article “Addressing FYC instructors' lack of technological expertise in implementing

multimodal assignments” that “Because of the emergence of new technologies, the importance of implementing multimodal assignments in first-year composition has increased” (p. 167). However, he also states that “it is important that teachers be technologically literate so they are able to guide those students through multimodal assignments” (p. 168).

The study of Visual Culture has been a part of a systematic project of overturning the traditional basis of academic disciplines. This also manifests in writing programs as multimodality now has become a new composition practice that is challenging the norms of conventional writing practices. And multimodality does help rupture the conventions of colonizing English language to an extent. This multimodal composition practice, for example, even dates back to the colonial project in Mexico during the 16<sup>th</sup> and the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The colonizers systematically attacked the linguistic heritage of the colonized, and tried to establish their culture and language as the dominant language. Suresh Lohani (2019), in.. “Constructing Nontraditional Rhetoric: Critical Study on Gloria Anzaldua and Suresh Canagarajah,” states that “the best the dominant culture can do is attempt subduing other cultures through discouraging and humiliating their language, affecting all available means, in the name of making these linguistic variants conform to the standard academic language”( p.117).

However, this linguistic imposition can be resisted through the employment of multimodality that heavily makes use of visuality to talk back to the dominating culture. Thus, visuality acted as a strong tool, often to the oblivion of those using it perhaps, to resist the monolithic influence of the Colonial project that so strongly rested on cultural and linguistic dimensions. Next, instead of being defined by their objects, the disciplines are identified by the specific questions they are concerned to ask. Similarly, postmodernism and post colonialism revisit the world from a decentralized ground with new perspectives to unravel multiple hidden facts regarding human history, culture, conflict, economy, etc. In this context, there is a propinquity to study visual culture in relation with postmodernism and post colonialism as both encompass the ideas of gazing the contemporary world and its conflicting relationship between colonizer and colonized from alternative vantage points.

Feminism is a theory that provides tools for emphasizing female voices. The purpose of this theory is to reclaim what females have achieved and to bring their stories into academic discussions. In this context, it is worth noting Ashok Bhusal’s (2017) work “Emphasizing the Suppression of Feminist Voices” where he says that “In the twenty-first century, their influence

will be a continuing presence in rhetorical study. We, as students of rhetoric, need to continue to look for other women rhetors who have been largely marginalized or ignored and reclaim their contributions in the twenty-first century” (p. 56). The point he is making is that it is high time we brought female issues and their stories into discussions.

Similarly, critical race theory also offers a framework for discussing minority voices. Ashok Bhusal (2017) in his “The Rhetoric of Racism and Anti-Miscegenation Laws in the United States” states that “Using personal (counter) narratives, increasing exposure to multicultural education, and incorporating the study of all minorities in critical race theory may prove to be effective practices in the effort to overcome the racism that many say is still prevalent in American society” (p. 88). It is important that we talk about visual culture, feminism and critical race theory to discuss minority people and their stories. Similarly, Bhusal (2019) in “The rhetoric of racism in society” says that racism has caused “many problems for the marginalized” (p. 114). By discussing many minority characters, Bhusal is urging his “readers to combat racism” from every corner of the world.

The way visual culture studies the world is based on the visual events and representations which provide a certain vision and version of the world. In the contemporary world, objects and ideas are strategically visualized for us and we perceive them to be real. If so, the aim of this study, for WJT Mitchell (2005), is to comprehend “the visual construction of the social field” (p. 345). That is to say the social field is visually constructed with bombardment of images. Tying to the same context Mirzoeff (2010) says: “We live in a world saturated with screens, images and objects, all demanding that we look at them. Work is mediated by screens and demands the virtuoso skills of a performing artist” (p. 1). This worldview is therefore made up of virtual as well as physical images where visual culture “concerns the place of visibility in the division of sensible” (p. 3). That is to say, when “sight” “becomes vision” for “the broader understanding of human”, the process of vision is made possible by “involving not just sensory data but the modulating frames of psychology, whether in terms of the conscious or unconscious mind” (pp. 3-4). Vision is therefore created in relation with a police or visibility that determines our perception of the world. We realize that the world and the things that we see are actually mediated by visibility. According to Foster (1988), visibility is “a social fact” and that determines “how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see and how we see this seeing or the unseen therein” (p. ix). In this regard the role of visibility is studied in visual culture with a specific

method. Visual culture basically follows comparative method to study conflicts. There are several aspects and phenomena like “cross-cultural, cross-platform and cross-temporal” which are compared and contrasted in a “paradoxical convergence of war, economy, religion, the environment and global visual media” (Mirzoeff 2010, pp. 1-2). Consequently, while the subject matter of visual culture is varied, the pivot of the field is anything related to war, religion and economy which are responsible for the conflicts within, among and beyond cultures and borders. Visual culture “compares in order to understand such conflicts” which are “everywhere and nowhere” (2010, pp. 2). In this regard, it alludes to postmodernism and post colonialism as both aspire to “transform the broader understanding of the human” (2010, p. 3), however, the basics to their associations are yet to be formulated. This comparative method is significant to analyze further in relation with postmodernism.

Postmodern thoughts are heterogeneous and manifest in numerous forms such as literary writings, arts, music and so on; these are fundamentally connected with the area of study of visual culture. For Aylesworth, postmodernism “can be described as a set of critical, strategic and rhetorical practices employing concepts such as difference, repetition, the trace, the simulacrum, and hyper reality to destabilize other concepts such as presence, identity, historical progress, epistemic certainty, and the unicity of meaning” (p. 32). This idea tries to establish pluralistic vision of the world and the process of comprehension in multiplicity. The centering notion is challenged because such monolithic idea of center does not give space to the margin. This connects to the ideas of Gloria Anzaldua which are examined by Suresh Lohani (2019) in.. “Constructing Nontraditional Rhetoric: Critical Study on Gloria Anzaldua and Suresh Canagarajah.” Similarly, Abrams contends that postmodernism challenges all notions of modernism by attempting to “break away from modernist forms” and to “overthrow the elitism” (p. 176) of all kinds existing in various social strata. In this sense, the so-called “high culture” is substituted by “mass culture” (Abrams, p. 176) expressed in the form of film, television, newspaper cartoons, and popular music.

In addition, Abrams clearly speaks of the priority of postmodernism in literature as something that is diametrically opposite to the focus of modernists’ elitism and high art. In line with Abrams’ claims, talking about the postmodernist regards, Pope affirms them to be “broadly populist rather than narrowly elitist” (p. 128). Furthermore, another significant thinker, Samuel Beckett argues that postmodern writings are designed to “subvert the foundations of . . . accepted

modes of thought and experience” to discover the “meaninglessness of existence and the underlying” hallows in life (Abrams, pp. 176-7). In this context, the challenge is raised against the long standing modernist thoughts or/and human experiences that were the guiding principles and authority for every literary writings and, therefore, self- evident. As a consequence, postmodernist emphasis is simple: it establishes multiple viewpoints which concern with “the self- conscious production, projection and consumption of all reflexive images of all kinds, especially those in the commercial, global domains” (Pope, p.128). As postmodernism challenges logocentrism, this idea can be linked with postcolonialism too.

In the context of postcolonialism, the colonizer centered facts are revisited through various ways from the point of view of the colonized. In this respect, Tyson tries to define the term “postcolonialism” to be “formally colonized peoples as any population that has been subjected to the political domination of another population” (p. 417). Here the so called “discovery” or the “civilizing mission” is not actually as it is projected; rather it is purely orchestrated with the intent of political domination. Likewise, John Docker calls colonizing events a “world historical disaster” (p. 26). Because in order to create European colonizer’s history, the colonizers committed multiple episodes of disasters of the native’s culture, civilization, and way of living. Furthermore, postcolonialism is described as “the colonial subject as having double consciousness or double vision; in other words, a consciousness or a way of perceiving the world that is divided between two antagonistic cultures: that of the colonizer and that of the indigenous community” (Tyson, p. 421). In this way, being aware of these multifaceted problems faced by the colonized due to colonialism, the colonized deliberately refused to accept the colonizers’ grand narratives; and in particular they rejected the version of the European imperialists in which, according to Abhram, “the colonial “other” is not only subordinated and marginalized, but in effect deleted as a cultural agency” (p. 245). In order to counter and replace such apartheid and discriminatory practices, there took the birth of “counter-narrative in which the colonial cultures fight their way back into a world history written by Europeans” (Abrams, p. 245). This functioned as the tool to resist the colonizer’s narratives.

The conflicts that transpired since 1492 are studied in visual culture and through theses we can analyze visual events in history. From the postcolonial perspective, such events were theorized by Meals. He goes: “a condition linked to the cultural logic subtending the history of European conquests begun five hundred years ago, conquests that brought, for the first time, the

world as an empirical totality into human apprehension” (Mirzoeff, p. 6). The events eventually led to worldwide unrests at various levels, times and spaces. The possibilities of these events recurring now and in the future cannot be ruled out. The very mentioned significance of the year 1492 is that of Columbus’ discovery of the present Americas. The European projection of this discovery continued with celebration in Europe by the white Christian colonizers. However, others held that it was not a discovery at all because “there were already people” – the Indians – who were the native inhabitants of the land since a very long time ago. In this way, this year can be considered a turning point in the history, a year that marked the beginning of colonization project.

By revisiting the world history through various points of view, we can find the various changes in economy stretching all the way to the modern times. On the one hand colonization destroyed native world and its beauty, whereas on the other, it produced massive growth of revenue. Europe for the first time highly benefited by the mass production phenomenon and gradually amassed capital from the colonized land. Surprisingly, the economic benefits colonizers acquired in America perhaps were so huge that “one small sugar island of Barbados, 166 square miles in extent, produced more revenue for Britain than New England, New York and Pennsylvania combined” (Mirzoeff, p. 69). This prosperity further accelerated colonizer’s further interest in manipulation and dictation of the world, prompting the colonizers to further march to different corners of the world.

The way colonizers marched across the globe was not merely economical interest but was coupled with the deeper notion of self-superiority too. They did not take care of the rights of the natives to exist and earn their means of living; rather they expelled and expropriated them to maximum and glorified the history of the colonizers. Likewise, millions of world population came under colonial rules and became victims of oppression and other forms of discrimination. So the colonizers lamented by saying: “Tears flow from my eyes, as I seek to overcome my grief over my loneliness in my native land... I am like a resident alien therein, and I see no man about me of my family and kind” (Mirzoeff, p. 48). By analyzing these facts, the idea of European history is also challenged. Here Mirzoeff cites the idea of Dipesh Chakrabarty that “all History as traditionally practiced is therefore European History by definition and that another form has to be found to accommodate different views” (p. 46). In this sense, the contemporary world tries to redraw the boundary visualized by the colonizers. However, at the same time the colonizers

project their ideology in various forms of arts, such as films.

From the past, the practice of colonization has to some extent changed its forms as the colonizers continue to exhibit their ideology through their art forms like films, painting etc. Taking reference of one such film, *Alien*, Mirzoeff says, “Throughout *Alien* heavy hints were dropped that the film was referring to colonialism, such as naming the spaceship *Nostramo* after a novel by Joseph Conrad” (p. 55). Similarly, *King-Kong* is another example of such projection where an ape like huge and black animal called “King-Kong” is shown to be savage and violent. Finally, this creature is brutally killed by the security force on the top of a skyscraper. This film depicts how colonizer are victimizing the natives and portraying them as barbaric and uncivilized through the use of different metaphors.

Colonization is a never ending process because a power relation between colonizers and colonized always plays out. Mirzoeff insists that “empires do not end when the last soldier has been withdrawn, the flag lowered and the retreating planes have taken off” (p. 197). Here, the empires have power and unless they abandon their project of colonization colonies of some form continue to exist. This notion of colonization manifests even when one group of human beings dominates another. Here the colonizers create discourses, write history, highlight their every activity to show as being rationally guided. However, there is another side that the colonizers also gradually develop their power to defend themselves from the colonizers. Mirzoeff further posits: “The twentieth century was marked by a global resistance to colonial rule from Africa to Asia and ultimately the Soviet Union and the United States” (p. 197). The attempts of global resistance can have some perceptible effects but the colonial forces are not so easy to be eradicated and continue to operate in different guises.

At a certain moment in the late twentieth and early twenty first century, a new consideration of the role of the visual, of perception, of images, and of the technologies and subjectivities that are embroiled in these relations became an urgent matter for scholars. This moment, which may be identified with what has been called from various corners and with differing emphasis as “postmodernist & postcolonialism.” It is marked, above all else, by a new degree of saturation of social space flooded by visual technologies, and, one must assume, a related shift in their social function and significance.

The colonizing mentality is transferred to an already colonized society and, ironically, it too begins to look at the minority identities in the society through the lens of the colonizers. This

manifests in the form of a clash between the proponents of heteronormativity and those that believe in the rights of diverse gender identities. Suresh Lohani in (2016) in..... cites a case in Pakistan where the homosexuals, the minority gender identity, has to conform to the broader colonizing mentality of the society though it may tacitly endorse covert homosexual practices. He says how the Pakistani society “suggests the invisibility demanded from homosexuals in the social level, which also suggests that the structure of society should look like heteronormative, and only after that homosexuals are ‘tolerated’(p. 54).The peoples of diverse gender communities here that are positioned as the “colonized” also enact visual resistance and this manifests through the heavy make ups they sport and the kind of brightly distinct clothes they wear. The peoples from these sexual orientations often organize parades in which they exhibit themselves in distinctly flashy colourful outfits, their visual resistance to the mainstream colonizing gender outlook of the society that simply sanctions heteronormativity. These are accompanied by the activities they often publicly display. All these visual ingredients help them talk back to the possessors of heteronormative psyche holders and challenge their colonizing outlook towards minority identities.

At last, we can comprehend that the visual culture helps us understand the binaries between the colonizer and colonized. Their relationship is based on power relationship and they experience regular conflicts, in overt and subtle ways. Our contemporary world as postcolonial and postmodern is painted with so many colors of such global conflicts. Visual culture in this sense gives us an alternative perspective to understand the world, a world not observed through the lens of power centers, but rather from the perspectives of the marginalized. That is to say, the discourse triggered by visual culture surely points to the emergence and perpetuation of a set of urgent problems instigated by the colonization project; the “solutions” to these problems can only be sought in relation to the colonizer-colonized equation. Visual culture has many affinities with critical race theory and feminism.

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