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THE SPECTACLE OF THE IMAGE: A STUDY INTO THE VISUAL POWER OF SELECT ICONIC IMAGES

Dr. Syeda Afshana,

Sr. Assistant Professor,
University of Kashmir,
Media Education Research Centre, India

Heeba Din,

Doctoral Scholar,
University of Kashmir
Media Education Research Centre, India

ABSTRACT

Given the pervasiveness and domination of visual culture through television, internet, movies, advertising and many other forms, no part of society can remain immune from the invasion of the spectacle. The ability of visual stimuli to communicate and influence is undeniable and inescapable. That's why if seeing believes, then those who can skillfully manipulate what we can see, can also influence what we believe.

This paper seeks to understand the very same spectacle of images. An attempt will be made to see how iconic images over the period of time have shaped our understandings as well as perceptions not only to the events pertaining to certain iconic images but a critical study into how these images becomes symbols and form tools of collective memory and discourse.

Using social semiotic analysis and the context of dissent, the paper will study iconic images like Flower Power (1967) by Marc Riboud, Soiling Old Glory (1976) by Stanley Forman, Tank Man (1989) by Jeff Widener and Buddhist Monk's Self Immolation (1963) by Malcom Brown to draw an interface between these iconic images and the meanings they reported in a given moment of history.

Keywords: Iconic Pictures, Symbols, Dissent, Semiotic Analysis

INTRODUCTION:

As visual pronouncements, images are ideological, they teach us what and how to see and think. They influence our choices and how we interact with one another. J. Francis Davis, an adult educator and media education specialist, captured it well when he said, "In our culture pictures have become tools used to elicit specific and planned emotional reactions in the people who see them" (Jenkinson, n.d)

The recent picture of the Syrian refugee boy Aylan Kurdi has yet again shown the power of images to shape collective consciousness and memory of people; a single image that urged people towards action. However, in the era of visual culture where we as audiences are bombarded with visuals 24x7, and where images consumed alongside breakfast, dinner, in office conversations and in almost all contours of everyday life; how do some image break from the clutter attain iconicity and get burned into our memories. What makes some images overpower others, do only some images form the "spectacle"? What makes an image iconic image? What makes certain images become a symbol of a collective memory, give them the power to form discourse, shape opinion and effect how people think?

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Donkai, Perlmuter, and Spratt (2003) found that images have the ability to "trigger" people's pre-existing values, cognitions, and feelings. These pre-existing ideas can reflect how an image is interpreted. According to experts, it was the familiarity of Aylan in his red shirt and Velcro straps like a kid in any part of the world that triggered the deeply felt resentment.

What also needs to be studied are the accepted codes and symbols within images which strikes the familiar cord with the audiences, thereby forming the part of collective consciousness and discourse on ground.

This study seeks to critically examine the spectacle of images vis-à-vis to the context of "dissent in democracy". The study tries to establish the power of images in both shaping and forming the dominant discourse related to dissent in democracy through the iconic images of the same theme throughout the history.

The method applied is that of semiotics/social semiotics which follows the method of Mendelson and Smith (2006), first identifying the signs in the images, then determining what the signs signify, and lastly exploring the meanings of the signs in a cultural context. The purpose of a semiotic analysis is to understand the meaning of the image, "which arises from understanding the social context in which the images were produced and within the images themselves, as well as from the minds of the audience members." The patterns of composition, specifically the vantage point of the photographer as well as the cultural meaning of the subject matter must be taken into consideration.

Defining Iconicity Hariman and Lucites (2007) defined iconic images as those that are recognized by everyone, are understood to be representations of historically significant events, activate strong emotional responses, and are regularly reproduced across a range of media, genres, or topics. Iconic photos also can motivate public action on behalf of democratic values. Michael Griffin (1999), said the "great pictures". Typically symbolize national valor, human courage, inconceivable inhumanity, or senseless loss.

Perlmutter found that iconic images are created and kept in circulation by "discourse elites"—prominent people in politics, the media, and the academy, "from presidents to anchor people" (Perlmutter, 1998). Perlmutter also defined many qualities of an iconic image, including:

1. Celebrity (a famous image that people can identify when prompted)
2. Prominence (how prominent a photo's appearance is in the media)
3. Frequency (how often a photo appears in the media, measured quantitatively)
4. Profit (the icon's value as a commodity)
5. Instantaneousness (how quickly an image achieves fame)
6. Transposability (reuse across multiple media outlets)
7. Fame of subjects (recognizability or notoriety of the photo's subjects)
8. Importance of event (when an icon is tied to a significant social or historical event)
9. Metonymy (when a photo of a single event is used to exemplify general conditions)
10. Primordially and/or cultural resonance (when an icon alludes to a biblical or classical historical scene)
11. Striking composition (when a photo contains superior compositional or visual elements or depicts "the decisive moment"). Perlmutter said that an icon provokes a strong negative reaction, or outrage.

Defining Democracy- Democracy, or democratic government, is "a system of government in which all the people of a state or polity are involved in making decisions about its affairs, typically by voting to elect

representatives to a parliament or similar assembly," as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary. Democracy is further defined as (a) "Government by the people; especially: rule of the majority (b) "A government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation usually involving periodically held free elections." (Democracy,n.d)

According to political scientist Larry Diamond (2004), it consists of four key elements:

1. A political system for choosing and replacing the government through free and fair elections.
2. The active participation of the people, as citizens, in politics and civic life.
3. Protection of the human rights of all citizens.
4. A rule of law, in which the laws and procedures apply equally to all citizens.

Defining Dissent- Dissent is a sentiment or philosophy of non-agreement or opposition to a prevailing idea (e.g., a government's policies) or an entity (e.g., an individual or political party which supports such policies). In some political systems, dissent may be formally expressed by way of opposition politics, while politically repressive regimes may prohibit any form of dissent, leading to suppression of dissent and the encouragement of social or political activism. Individuals who do not conform or support the policies of certain states are known as 'dissidents'. Several thinkers have argued that a healthy society needs not only to protect, but also to encourage dissent (Dissent, n.d)

METHODOLOGY:

Applying Social Semiotic Analysis-Visual social semiotics is functionalist in the sense that it sees visual resources as having been developed to do specific kinds of semiotic work. It follows Halliday (for example, 1978) in recognizing three main kinds of semiotic work, which are always performed simultaneously. Halliday calls these three kinds of work 'metafunctions', and distinguishes between: the ideational metafunction, the function of creating representations; the inter-personal metafunction, the part language plays in creating interactions between writers and readers or speakers and listeners; and the textual metafunction, which brings together the individual bits of representation-and-interaction into the kind of wholes we recognize as specific kinds of text or communicative event like advertisements, interviews, dinner table conversations, etc.(Hughes, 2012) and (Kress and van Leeuwen,1996) have extended this idea to images, using a slightly different terminology: 'representational' instead of 'ideational'; 'interactive' instead of 'inter-personal'; and 'compositional' instead of 'textual'. Any image, they say, not only represents the world (whether in abstract or concrete ways), but also plays a part in some interaction and, with or without accompanying text, constitutes a recognizable kind of text (a painting, a political poster, a magazine advertisement, etc.)

Metafunctions:

Representational Meaning: Representational meaning is first conveyed by the abstract or concrete 'participants' (people, places or things) depicted. There are two kinds of pattern. Narrative representations relate participants in terms of 'doings' and 'happenings', of the unfolding of actions, events, or processes of change. Conceptual patterns represent participants in terms of their more generalized, stable or timeless 'essences'. They do not represent them as doing something, but as being something, or meaning something, or belonging to some category, or having certain characteristics or components. The choice is important, since the decision to represent something in a narrative or conceptual way provides a key to understanding the discourses which they mediate their representation. (Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001)

Narrative structures:

Narrative pictures (or scenes within pictures) are recognized by the presence of a vector. A vector is a line, often diagonal, that connects participants, for instance an arrow connecting boxes in a diagram. The vector expresses a dynamic, 'doing' or 'happening' kind of relation. More generally, 'actors' are the participants from whom or which the vector emanates, or who themselves form the vector. The concepts of narrative visual analysis (action, reaction, transactive, non-transactive) can help 'interrogate' a visual text, help to frame questions such as who are playing the active roles of doing and/or looking and who the passive roles of being acted upon and/or being looked at in visual texts with certain kinds of participants (for example, minorities) who are shown as people who act, who react in visual texts about certain issues (Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001)

Conceptual structures:

Images which do not contain vectors are 'conceptual'. They visually 'define' or 'analyze' or 'classify' people, places and things (including again abstract things). One kind of conceptual pattern is the classification structure. Classification structures bring different people, places or things together in one picture, distributing them symmetrically across the picture space to show that they have something in common, that they belong to the same class. Symbolic structures define the meaning or identity of a participant. In the symbolic attributive