Example of essay on visual culture

Nicholas Mirzoeff (3) defines visual culture as the process by which visual consumers seek meaning or pleasure or information from visual events as presented on a technological interface. Visual technology is any medium designed to purpose of enabling or augmenting the visual experience. This paper will interrogate the relevance of visual culture in everyday life. A recent image captured in Egypt will be used to test the application of the concepts of visual culture in post modern images.

The study of visual culture is necessitated by the great divide that exists between contemporary visual experiences and the ability to analyze these observations. The understanding of visual culture is particularly vital in the post modern age where technology has enhanced the visual experience from basic paintings to three dimensional videos. Visual culture overlaps with contemporary studies of film, psychoanalysis, gender, television and queer theory. Other parallels are in the study of advertising, media, internet, traditional art and video games.

There is no simple dividing line between the past as recorded in modern times and the present as experienced in postmodern times. Visual culture has a history embedded in the past and which is ongoing in the present. This history needs to be explored defined from the past to date. Mirzoeff (6) assigns visual culture the role of highlighting cultural terms such as gender, race and sex through visual media.

Postmodernism is the crisis of modernism and more specifically modern culture. Postmodernism as an age has failed to specify the strategies of defining its own cultures. Consequently, modernism is still tangled in the fascination with visual and there is little consensus on how visual

experiences can be defined. Interestingly, it is this visual crisis within modern culture that creates post modernity (Mirzoeff 4). Post modern culture is most recognizable when it is presented visually.

The human experience is now visual and highly visualized than ever before. The industrial and post industrial ages are easily distinguishable from the past by the heightened visibility of its culture and human experiences (Mirzoeff 3). Globalization has speeded up the infiltration of visual content across the globe. The internet has created many avenues for sharing digital visual content. This influx of the visual demands a more comprehensive analysis and interpretation.

The notion of a " world picture" as considered in relation to " a picture of the world" does not address the virtualities that are common in postmodern images (Heidegger 133, as cited in Mirzoef 6). Furthermore, there are new images everyday that do not correspond to any preexisting intellectually endorsed classifications. Visual culture provides the best solution to dealing with the virtual realities and crises present in post modern images. Visual culture is not a strategy but a tactic that can be dealing with daily human points of view on mass culture.

Technology has also created the need for a more scientific approach to understanding the visual. There is a great desire to create taxonomies that would categorize visualization in the same manner as other scientific disciplines such as biology. Visual culture relies heavily on advancements in science and technology to grow. Technology has fused with the visual to create cutting edge technologies such as medical imaging where the faintest brain signals and heart beats are transformed into visual images and

patterns that doctors can use for diagnostics.

Visual culture in modern and post modern times is an affront to the notion held previously by western culture that speech and the spoken work is the highest expression on intellectualism. Visual presentations and forms of culture were seen as second to the spoken language. Visual culture challenges this hegemony by developing a case for the picture theory. The picture theory argues for the pictorial model of the world rather than the traditional textual theories. The world- as-a-text is currently being challenged the world-as-a- picture. A phrase such as " a picture is worth a thousand words" is a reflection of this change.

Visual media is appreciated primarily through sight. However, post modern concepts of visualization go beyond the myopic capabilities of sight. Visualization is the process of perceiving aspects of visual culture that are beyond the visual (Mirzoeff 6). Visualization can result in observations that are not presented visually. Visual culture attempts to explain why both modern and post modern cultures place a premium on presenting experiences in visual forms. Visual culture is not enabled by pictures but by the modern desire to visualize human existence. The modern times are characterized by innumerable images and their reproductions which are neither unique nor distinguishable. This age of mechanical reproduction has made visualization important if not necessary (Mirzoeff 6).

Visual culture helps us to understand the complexities of pictures and images. A picture in modern times is no longer held as the principal means of preserving and defining reality as it was during medieval times (Mirzoeff 7). Visual culture acknowledges that pictures are not created from one medium

or one location as defined in academia. Visual culture diverts attention from formal occasions for viewing culture such as cinemas and galleries to everyday experiences in daily life situations. Indeed, daily experiences may involve visiting cinemas to watch a movie or going to an art exhibition. Visual culture recognizes all visual experiences in formal and informal settings. It prioritizes the daily experience of the visual component from the organized and formal snapshots such as movies and exhibitions (Mirzoeff 7)

Using the example of the picture taken in Egypt during the Egyptian revolution, the image captures a momentous time in the Egyptian history. The revolution was not an ordinary time in Egypt but the image was definitely captured at a time when violence had become an everyday experience. The picture depicts children their national flag while standing on top of a military tanker. A military officer looks on from the top of the tanker and it is not clear whether he is chasing the children off the tanker or not. Since it would be impossible for the children to climb onto the high tanker on their own, it is possible that they were hoisted an adult; most probably their parents. Ordinarily, children are not permitted on tankers and other dangerous military equipment. But since the crowd seems to be in a celebratory mood, no one is concerned about the children apart from the military officer in the tanker (Egyptian photo).

In visualizing the image, it is possible to argue that there is celebration, defiance and even hope for the future in the photograph. The little girl holding her flag up seems to be in defiance of the soldier pointing at her. The other children who are clearly not supposed to be on top of the tanker add to the notion of defiance. The sublime emotion aroused by the image create

pleasure and awe at seeing the children on the military tanker a situation which would be unthinkable in ordinary times (Mirzaeff 9). In visual art, the sublime evokes visual emotion from the limitations of human ability against nature. The image of the children arouses awe and even curiosity because it is uncommon and unexpected in everyday life. The sublime correlates situations that have no relationship in the normal life, such as children showing patriotism on a military tanker, and gives them meaning through context and culture. The sublime is therefore a product of culture and by extension, visual culture (Mirzaeff 9)

Such visual images have the capacity to inform and influence mass culture. The images may not depict the reality due to contextual issues and digital manipulation. However, the visual is still formidable in creating emotions that print and texts cannot arouse. Seeing the children standing on the tanker with their patriotic flag arouses emotions that cannot be created by even descriptive text. The viewers of images should take care not to fall into the prejudices that arise from sublime visual analysis. The challenge for scholars is to find all inclusive frameworks for understanding visual images from across the world. This is necessary because the longevity of visual culture depends on its anticipation and adaptation the future rather than the accuracy of its past analysis of culture.

The future of visual culture is in everyday life. Technology is turning the world into a global village. In a not so distant future, time and place will no longer be barriers to global interaction. Visual culture will play a central role in bridging the gap across cultures. To perform this role effectively, visual culture will have to transcend the bounds of academia and prevail on prevail

on popular culture through practical and applicable concepts. Improvements in technologies such as the internet, software applications, digital recording and high definition displays will improve the visual experience.

Work Cited

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