

JOURNAL OF AFRICAN ARTS & CULTURE

Editors

Professor Mary Dzansi-McPalm, PhD
Professor C.W.K. Mireku, PhD
Professor Eric Akrofi, PhD

Patrique deGraft - Yankson, PhD
Ebenezer Acquah, PhD
Osuanya Quaicoo Essel, PhD

<https://jaac-sca.org>

ISSN 2637-3610

Volume 4 Issue 3

September 30, 2020

Imaging: The 'Constructor' of Modern, Post-modern and Contemporary Life

Selasi Awusi Sosu ¹
Cyril Senyo Kpodo ²
Department of Art Education
University of Education, Winneba
selasosu2013@gmail.com ¹
sirkpo2@gmail.com ²

Reuben Agbelengor Glover ³
Department of Publishing Studies,
Kwame Nkrumah University of Science
and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana
reubenglover.rg@gmail

Citation: Sosu, S. A., Kpodo, C. S. & Glover, R. A. (2020). Imaging: The 'constructor' of modern, post-modern and contemporary life. *Journal of African Arts & Culture*, 4(3), 29-37.

Abstract



Photography has become ubiquitous in contemporary experience, manifesting mostly onscreen. This paper explores the scopophilic trends of modern, post-modern and contemporary living as anticipated in the work of Freud and affirmed by Lacan in the coinage scopic regime. It explores how pervasive imaging has become today and exposes how layered the visual can be in contemporary society. Locating photography's place in contemporary experience brings into focus decades of thought on semiotic discussions. These discussions introduce the political, social and cultural aspects of photographic experience from the 18th century till date. Enwezor's reflections on the ubiquity, form and power that the image wields especially on contemporary society, condense these contextual implications the image conjures. Our conclusion is that, despite the unease about the impact of the image on society, it seems to have come to stay as a constructor of

contemporary life. This paper therefore introduces the photographic image and highlights some of the concerns that surfaced with its introduction. Important theories and trends are discussed with respect to the proliferation of the image today. The imaging technologies and culture of modern men are explored while the coded messages that images transmit are exposed. Views and projections of critical thinkers from different generations and locations are helpful in analyzing the culture of viewing that has pervaded the living conditions of the 21st century citizen. The conclusion is clearly a matter of interpretation since the discovery of the truth in an image is subjective.

Keywords: Image, photography, semiotics, simulacrum, occularcentrism

Introduction

This paper seeks to point out the dominance of the photographic image in the daily construct of many people. It is motivated by developments in the fast-evolving field of visual culture. It is underpinned by the ideas and concepts of modern thinkers and philosophers in the field, through archival studies and analyses of secondary data. Photography at its onset was referred to as *light writing* because it fools the eye with its technique through its unrealistic play of visual techniques (Baudrillard, 2005). The variety of forms the photographic image manifests itself in and, the frequency of its use in the daily life of an average modern citizen is high (Enwezor, 2010; Mirzoeff, 2006). From the face scanning, iris detection photographic technologies of personal hand-held devices used at home during waking moments, to the photographic images of security cameras in homes, neighbourhoods, offices and from outer space, these *vision machines* are designed to use still or moving images to assist people to function effectively in the modern world.

The view is critical in photography and so it is in modern life and living, fueled by a love for the visual. What is captured or left out of the image by the image making equipment or its operator is important as it opens up the discussion or interpretation(s), especially, when employing qualitative research methodologies like content analysis. By modern, post-modern and contemporary, we are referring generally to the period from the 17th century till date when these trends manifested fully in our *scopic regime* (Hunt, 2020).

Photography

The art of photography freed the hands of the artist. Locating photography brings into focus decades of thought on the discipline. A familiarization with Semiotic discussion on signs and the Benjaminian theories of reproduction, the aura of authenticity and temporality introduce debates in the genre of photography (Benjamin, 1968). Painters were apprehensive about the whole business of representation because with the introduction of the camera, the cult object was shattered along with the aura of authenticity of the art object. Photography made it so easy to execute and go beyond what painters did then (and still do today anyway).

Benjamin was also concerned about temporality: how eye and hand coordination gave reality a different look especially with the camera. For example, the camera and therefore the photograph could zoom into a given scene with such ease. Photography evolved into filmmaking and the fears got even worse as the purposeful spread of the two-dimensional image itself was not the only threat but also, that of motion picture. We daresay today's imaging technologies would shock Benjamin for one. Benjaminian theories on photography and, the semiotic implications of any study on photographic imaging have shaped the views in this essay.

The foremost American philosopher and semiotician, Charles Sanders Peirce developed the well-known Peircian sign-generating graph. However, its view on the indexical nature of the photograph can be questioned today because modern day technologies for image manipulation are myriad. This indexicality as proposed by Peirce offers a route into the interpretation of signs; the image being one of such signs. Apart from being literal, or metaphorical, interpretation of images is also phenomenal. Thus, discussion is not only about what can be seen literally; but also, what can be inferred. Could we term the phenomenal inferences "the mind picture"? The Saussurean dyad, Peircean triad and sign-generating graph are important to our observations in this paper. The signifier and signified offer an understanding of how we see and make meaning of things in our environment. Peirce's version of signification with its built-in sign dynamism, incorporating the *Representamen*, the *Object* and the *Interpretant* as well, further deepen our understanding of how we see and understand things in our environment.

The indexicality of the image can, however, be questioned today because, modern day photography lends itself to fantastic levels of manipulation. Seeing is therefore, no longer always believing. "What are we to believe if seeing is no longer believing?" (Mirzoeff, 2006, p.3). Despite this 'mistrust' of what we see in images, "there is an awful lot of hype around 'the visual' these days" hence Baudrillard's coinage the 'simulacrum' referring to the difficulty in distinguishing between the real and the unreal (Rose, 2005, p.1). These days, people live in a world where information as well as lots of entertainment are visually constructed, and where what people see (image) is equally important, if not more than what they read (text). "Illiteracy is told off, and there are calls to restructure school and college curricula so that visual grammar can be learnt along-side the understandings of texts, numbers and molecules" (Rose, 2005, p.1). Sontag believes in this grammar that photographs teach using a new visual code. More importantly, she asserts that they are an ethics of seeing (Sontag, 1977).

In our view, the power photography wields today can be likened to that of Painting and Sculpture in the 18th and 19th century, when they were the buzz of the civilized world, allowing Michelangelo and his contemporaries to draw attention to the deeper things of life. Photography's impetus can be linked to the excitement around the visual in our societies today. Writers like Jay point to the importance of the visual today, claiming that western societies are progressively more inundated by unprecedented levels of visual images (Jay, 1993). Contemporary African and Ghanaian societies also evidence this trend; hence, Jay's coinage of the term *ocularcentrisim* (the privileging of vision over the other senses) to describe the obvious fundamentality of the visual to contemporary life.

In fact, modern-day photography has raised several concerns on the impact of the photographic image on society. Even though the camera is an observation site, photographing is more than a passive pursuit. Fyfe and Law (1988) in Rose (2005) claim "depiction, picturing and seeing are ubiquitous features of the process by which most human beings come to know the world as it really *is* for them". Authors like Berger (1972) also suggests that this is because "seeing comes before words" and that, "the child looks and recognizes before it can speak" (p.6), even though this pays little attention to those children who are born blind.

Imaging and its manifestations in modern, post-modern and contemporary society

Imaging is a term for a multi-disciplinary and developing field that refers to the generation, acquisition, duplication, analysis, modification, visualization of two-dimensional and three-dimensional images. Imaging applies to many fields; from medicine to psychology, art, astronomy, physics and computer science. It is useful for many purposes in many more fields. Imaging is valuable in the fields of imaging science, illustration, photography, digital image editing, 3-D modeling techniques such as holograms, carvings, handicrafts created manually or with pneumatic tools or recently, with 3-D printers, many optical devices such as telescopes, cameras, 2-D and 3-D printers, lenses, mirrors, microscopes, indeed water, any reflective surface, or, the human eye. Images can be generated using one or more natural or artificial means, very simple or very sophisticated means to last for a short period (volatile image) or for long periods. They could even be generated mentally and be based on a variety of themes. Animation, avatar (computing), cinematography, digital imaging, film, fine art photography, graphics, painting and sculpture are some of the manifestations of imaging in our *vie quotidien*.

Medical x-rays offer a good example of some of the needs that give impetus to the proliferation and multiplicity of uses and opportunities for the consumption of images and imaging technologies. The need to make transparent in order to reveal and comprehend better in the case of viewing internal organs and their situations. Medical images and imaging technologies no doubt offer real solutions to the modern-day health needs of man.

The attenuation of images as they migrate from stage to stage is worthy of notice. Attenuation causes a loss in image quality due to pixelation or loss in sharpness. A typical present-day image creation path for social or artistic work is from the creating equipment usually a camera, to the PC, (maybe manipulated with software or not), to the internet to be viewed through the receiver's PC, phone, tablet or on television. It could also travel to be viewed through the projector, print media or other forms of display.

Since the image was *everything* in modern, post-modern and now contemporary society (Mirzoeff, 2006), one can say that the ability to see, see through and comprehend layers of coded messages embedded in images is reflective of Freud and Lacan's term scopophilia (the pleasure of looking at; especially, in the artistic context). How layered the visual can be in contemporary society is your

guess.

The typical 17th and 18th century European nude paintings analyzed by Berger in *Ways of Seeing* indicate the power relationships layered up in these images (paintings of nude women). In Tintoretto's *Susannah and the Elders*, Susannah joins the spectators of herself by looking at her own nakedness in the painting as the viewer (most likely a male commissioner or owner enjoys looking at the painting). Contemporary newspapers, lifestyle magazines and television adverts of products (especially, of designer perfumes) are typical examples of today's layered images in which coded messages are sent to the viewer usually depicting achievable class, status, power and or, beauty.

The political, social and cultural implications of photography today

Modern day thinker, Okwui Enwezor muses on the ubiquity, form and, power the image wields especially on post-modern and contemporary society, giving an idea of the social and cultural implications it brings up. The politics of the image is introduced. These include the image of the world that modern and post-modern technologies and lifestyles have succeeded in creating. Articulated by Heidegger as "the world picture" meaning, our perception of the world largely aided by images. The accompanying expression "the rise of the image" by Mirzoeff (2006) conveys how much power the image wields in our daily construct. The usefulness of the image and imaging technologies for surveillance, space imaging, forensic imaging, romanticized touristic images further establishes the diversity of the fields that benefit from imaging technology today.

Walter Benjamin's views captured in his 1937 publication *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* anticipated the form photography and film would take in the future. That future is with us today. Enwezor has observed and captured some of the manifestations of Benjamin's projections in 1937 for the future of the photograph and more. He wrote:

The snapshot that documents scenes of life's many turns – birthdays, holidays, and events of all kinds ... The photographic image, then, can be likened to an anthropological space in which to observe and study the way members and institutions of a society reflect their relationship to it. From family albums to police files to the digital on Google, Yahoo, Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, mobile phones, digital cameras, computer hard drives, and assorted file-sharing

programs, a vast, shapeless empire of images has accrued...In this prosaic form, the photograph becomes the sovereign analogue of identity, memory, and history, joining past and present, virtual and real, thus giving the photographic document the aura of an anthropological artifact and the authority of a social instrument. (Enwezor, 2010, p.13)

Our *scopophilia* has fueled voyeurism. Today's versions of the practice of voyeurism are evident in popular culture such as television series like *Survivor*, *Big Brother* and *The Real World*. They are examples of how much the view has metamorphosed and become commonplace. The view or the spectacle has taken over contemporary life and Mirzoeff has noted that, "modern life takes place on screen" (Mirzoeff, 2006, p.1). The love of the spectacle in modern times could be read through Baudelaire's prism of *flâneurism*. *Flâneurism* connotes a practice that highlights navigation.

The *flâneur's* love for viewing is evident in the design of modern-day architectural masterpieces. In modern day airports, train stations and especially in shopping malls, a good view is very much desired in the design concepts for these public places. The use of transparent building materials like glass for such projects, achieves this objective of satisfying the view, also epitomized by the Parisian arcades projects. Even private homes today are seen to favour see-through building materials for a good view that brings the outside inside and vice versa. This trend is traceable to artists like Moholy Nagy who pioneered and experimented with transparency by using transparent cellophane sheets, transparent plastic and moving light. He believed in metaphorical transparency. That some superimpositions of form overcome space and time fixations and transpose insignificant singularities into meaningful complexities suggests a transparency of context as well, revealing unnoticed structural qualities in an object. There is a tendency as we might notice of literal transparency to be associated with the *trompe l'oeil* effect.

Conclusion

In Susan Sontag's writing, she argues that the act of photographing is appropriating the thing photographed. It means putting one's self into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge, and therefore like power. The desire to know and conquer the world can also be seen in one's *appropriation* of the world through imaging. It must however be noted that in interpreting the visual, there seems to be a general consensus that there is not one single

or *correct* answer to the questions, *What does this image mean?* or *What is this advert saying?*

It is bound to be interpretive and debatable. It is not about who is *right* and who is *wrong* but about finding meaning between equally plausible understandings, which may sometimes present opposing and matching, meanings and interpretations. Interpreting is interpretation, not the discovery of their *truth*. However, it must be justified. The image is pivotal to modern life and navigation. The photographic image has come to stay, thanks to the persistence of certain trends in contemporary times. Haraway's coinage, *the technological feast* which is our lot today best describes one of the trends fueling the imaging culture of our times. The image is indeed a *constructor* of daily life today.

References

- Baudrillard, J. (2005). *The system of objects*. London: Verso.
- Benjamin, W. (1968). *The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction*. In Benjamin, W., *Illuminations*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc.
- Berger, J. (1972). *Ways of seeing*. London: Penguin.
- Enwezor, O. (2010). *Archive fever: Photography between history and the monument*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Fyfe, G. & Law, J. (Eds.). (1988). *Introduction: On the invisibility of the invisible*, in Fyfe G. & Law, J., *Picturing power: Visual depictions and social relations*. London: Routledge.
- Hunt, L. (2020) *Measuring time, making history*. Budapest. Central European University Press.
- Jay, M. (1993). *Downcast eyes: The denigration of vision in twentieth century French thought*. Berkley: California University Press.
- Mirzoeff, N. (2006). *An introduction to visual culture*. New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group.
- Rose, G. (2005). *Visual methodologies*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Sontag, S. (1977). *On photography*. London: Penguin.

About the authors

Selasi Awusi Sosu is an international artist and art educator. She teaches courses in art at the Department of Art Education, University of Education Winneba (UEW). She has been exploring the medium glass and its aesthetics through photography/videography, sound and installation as part of her PhD research work which has been exhibited in Ghana and abroad. Her interest in imaging, exploring visual culture, collaboration and education led her to pioneer the on-going collaboration *Exploring Visual Cultures* between three departments in UEW, the Academy of Fine Art, the Ludwig Maximillian University, Munich and other international partners.

Cyril Senyo Kpodo desires diversity. Nature is full of diversity that makes this world ever fascinating. Making use of available and affordable materials in the environment to satisfy artistic and industrial needs inspires me to use discarded items to make my sculptures. The concept of mortality and the ever-evolving life on this planet is evident in my sculptures that have the tendency to transform over time. My research interest currently is about facial expressions and perceptions, leading to a curiosity of perceiving the face and even body postures as “mask”. This has charted a path towards semiotics in visuality.

Reuben Agbelengor Glover is a Senior Lecturer, Barrister-at-Law, a Solicitor and an advocate of the supreme court of Ghana, Intellectual property law teacher, Human rights advocate, an accomplished illustrator, graphic designer, a creative concept development consultant, creative arts and cultural policy analyst with three decades practical experience in the creative art industry and academia. He is also credited with scholarly journal articles, art exhibitions and design concepts both home and abroad. He is the Head, Department of Publishing Studies, Faculty of Art, College of Art and Built Environment, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana.

Editorial Board

JAAC have committed editorial team with expertise in the diverse fields in the African Arts and Culture disciplines. They are well grounded and work together to maintain the reputation of the journal in academism.

Chief Editor

Professor Mary Dzansi-McPalm, PhD

Co-Editors

Professor C.W.K. Mereku, PhD

Professor Eric Akrofi, PhD

Ebenezer Acquah, PhD

Osuanyi Quaicoo Essel, PhD

Managing Editor

Frimpong Kwaku Duku, PhD

Graphic Editors

Patrique deGraft-Yankson, PhD

Joseph Essuman, PhD

Distribution Editor

Ernest Kwesi Amponsah, PhD

Advisory Board

Kingsley Ampomah, PhD

Rev. Ohene-Okantah

Isaac Opoku-Mensah

Past Chief Editor

Prof Kojo Fosu

Call for Paper

The Journal of African Arts & Culture (JAAC) is an open access online platform for scholarly dialogue relating to African Arts and culture. It is committed to publishing and disseminating high quality scholarly materials that demonstrate the power and significances of the arts and culture in general in African society past and present. This journal with interdisciplinary scope publishes progressive research in the field of ancient, contemporary and modern African Arts and Culture. It covers issues in both performing and visual arts; accepts original scientific papers, critical essays, interviews, exhibition and book reviews, critiques, short reports amongst others.

JAAC welcomes article submissions at any time. JAAC is published four times a year: March, June, September, and December.

Send all inquiries about your article submission to:

jaac.journal@gmail.com OR

info@jaac-sca.org

For more information on submission guidelines visit <https://jaac-sca.org>