

**essay title: "How has technology affected global visual culture?"**

The world we inhabit is filled with visual images, which are central to the ways we represent, make meaning and communicate in the world around us. In many ways, our culture is an increasingly visual one. Over the course of the last two centuries, Western culture has come to be dominated by visual rather than oral or textual media. For example, television, a visual and sound-based medium, has come to play the central role daily life. As Sturken and Cartwright note:

*"Hearing and touching are important means of experience and communication, but our values, opinions, and beliefs have increasingly come to be shaped in powerful ways by the many forms of visual culture that we encounter in our day-to-day lives".*

*(Sturken & Cartwright, 2001,*

*p. 1)*

This paper analyses the influence of technology has to the global visual culture. Starting from the way people see the visual culture, that it to say 'human experience', it goes on to explain the different technological changes. In addition, some of the most striking features of the visual culture are being looked at, and Diana's death as a case study.

Human experience is increasingly becoming more visual and visualized. Life is lived under video surveillance from cameras in buses and shops, on highways and of 'course the ATM cash machines. One example of our 'visual age' is the abduction of Jamie Bulger from a Liverpool shopping mall. A video surveillance camera impersonally captured the whole scene, providing chilling evidence of the ease with which the crime was both committed and detected. People felt sad, when they actually saw the video. Yet when Princess Diana died, thousands of people had to see it on the television to believe it. That indicates the power of the 'visual element' to people (Mirzoeff, 1999, pp. 1 – 3).

On the one hand, this shift towards the visual promotes a fascination with the image, while on the other; it produces an anxiety about the potential power of images. Technological changes have made possible these movements of images throughout the globe at much greater speed. The images we encounter every day span the social realms of popular culture, advertising, news and information exchange, commerce, criminal justice and art. They are produced and experienced through a variety of media, such as painting, printmaking, photography, film, television/video, computer digital imaging, and virtual reality. One could argue that all of these media are 'imaging technologies'. Even paintings are produced with the 'technology' of paint, brush and canvas. We live in an increasingly image-saturated society where paintings, photographs, and electronic images depend on one another for their meanings. The technology of images is thus central to our experience of visual culture. However, there are different perceptions of visual culture (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, pp. 1 – 13).

Some people see visual culture as simply ‘the history of images’ handled with a semiotic notion of representation. This definition creates a body of material that no person or even department could ever cover the field. While, for other it represents a means of creating sociology of visual culture that will establish a ‘social theory of visibility’. This second view seems open to the charge that the visual is given an artificial independence from the other senses that has little bearing on real experience. Visual culture is a fluid interpretive structure, centered on understanding the response to visual media of both individuals and groups (Mirzoeff, 1999, pp. 1 – 5).

Although visual media have usually been studied independently, there is now a need to explain the postmodern globalization of the visual as everyday life. The disciplines of cinema, television, and media studies, which were instituted in the 1970s, have helped us to consider how movies, television programs, and media such as the World Wide Web have contributed to changes in culture over the course of this century. Mirzoeff (1999) explains that visual culture is concerned with visual events in which information, meaning, or pleasure is required by the consumer in an interface with visual technology. While visual technology is any form of apparatus designed either to be looked at or to enhance natural vision (Mirzoeff, 1999, pp. 1 – 5).

One of the most striking features of the visual culture is the growing tendency to visualize things that are not in themselves visual. Allied to this intellectual move is the growing technological capacity to make visible things that our eyes could not see unaided, such as the photography. The wiring of the world and the rapid development of wireless communications have lead to a globalization of culture. Combined with the growth of media, this globalization created a synergy in which programming and distribution are held together by single corporate entities, which market globally. As a result, contradictory tendencies have been encouraged, on one hand towards globally shared visual cultures but also towards the rise of an abundance of local discourses and mixed media cultures (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, pp. 315 – 316).

From the 1950s onwards, communications infrastructure began a rapid and dynamic phase of expansion that saw the proliferation of domestic ICTs such as telephones, radios and televisions and the expansion of media content. In the 1960s the somewhat optimistic term the ‘global village’ was coined in response to ongoing processes of global interconnectivity and interaction. Today, four of the five most valuable companies in the world are either wholly or partly concerned with global media, communication and information flows (Microsoft, AOL-Time-Warner, etc.). This tells us much about trends in global economic development and much about the dominant directions in which information flows. The key to understanding this climate of globalisation is visual culture, which means, the understanding of the kind of role they played to support this kind of growth (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, pp. 316 – 318).

The rapid development of communications infrastructure and attendant media industries in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century is most closely associated with a global process that is described as time-space compression. Restrictions in time and space are effectively removed by electronic communications and the geographical boundaries between many nations, cultures, societies and individuals are eroded or removed. Essentially, the world becomes mediated; cultural flows increase and dominant exchanges become informational, rather than material, in nature. The globalization of information

provides channels of communication and interaction between cultures. The latest such channel is the Internet, the global network of electronic communication, which, by canceling distances of time and space, has contracted the planet and accelerated history (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, pp. 316 – 318).

The pioneering thinker, Marshall McLuhan, coined the term, "the global village" in the 1960s to express his belief that electronic communication would unite the world. In this view the Internet democratizes society and collapses distances and cultural differences, forming communities based on shared interests across geographic, national, and cultural boundaries. Indeed, the computer has moved in three decades from being a text only instrument to integrating sound, image and text, and will soon incorporate an increased mobility of images. In general, the growth of television, radio, print media and music industry, all prove the significant affect of technology to the global visual culture (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, pp. 316 – 318).

For instance, television, a powerful communication channel, has been a central tool in constructing concepts of the local and the national, but also it has been central to the increased globalisation of media. With the globalisation of markets, the US model of commercial television has made its way around the world. For example, the show "Neighbors" attracts a global audience of more than 120 million viewers each day, consistently ranking as a top-ten favorite. Moreover, it has now been sold to over 40 broadcasters and screened in over 60 countries worldwide from Australia to Zimbabwe. Thus, television is a crucial factor in globalization. However, despite the fact that television is central to the increased globalisation of media and provides perhaps the first example of global media, new technologies are now redefining the concept of globalisation. For example, as Sturken and Cartwright (2001) state:

*"...the development of the telegraph was believed to be a means of achieving world harmony through global communication, as if the technology's capacity to transmit messages quickly would unify the world..."*

*(Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, p. 333)*

Mirzoeff (1999) illustrates Diana's death as the way to indicate how technology has affected the global visual culture. Before her death, Diana was a combination of a pop star, fashion model and royal figure; she was the most photographed person in the world. When she died, she unleashed a global mourning that was both intensely national and remarkably global (Mirzoeff, 1999, pp. 231 – 233).

By the time of her death, Diana had become a global visual icon. As Sturken and Cartwright (2001, p. 36) explain, an icon is an image that refers to something outside of its individual components, something (or someone) that has great symbolic meaning for many people. Her image was so extraordinary powerful because it incorporated the formal image of royalty, the popular photograph and the virtual image. She was a person who achieved what now appears an exceptional place in the global imagination through the medium of photography. It is photography that created the fantasy of being a princess, and all the gender stereotypes associated with such a fantasy. Whatever the first cause, Diana became involved in a complex exchange of image and gaze between herself and the mass media over the representation as soon as

she became a public figure. For her it was almost impossible to see herself in any way without being photographed (Mirzoeff, 1999, pp. 233 – 240).

Moreover, the photograph in fact created the image that the public always wanted to see, and as Mirzoeff says:

*“Diana’s image was so effective because it was able to cross the gap from the personal to the political, in ways that academics, politicians and writers had not been able to emulate.”*  
(Mirzoeff, 1999, p. 240).

Barthes (in Mirzoeff, 1999, ch. 2) called this ability of photography the *punctum*, which he opposed to the apparent and generally available meanings of the *studium*. It is something that the viewer brings to the image regardless of the intent of the photographer. Besides, what is most striking about such photographs is that the *studium* and *punctum* in fact overlap in the person of the celebrity. Diana’s case (single mother, divorced, bulimic, etc.) made it unavoidable for people not to like her. It was universally observed that Diana was the most photographed person of modern times. Therefore, the power of technology had a lot to do with the way people thought of Diana. Most Diana photographs did not have an obvious sexualized content; however, they were often published in media aimed primarily at women. Women’s desire to see Diana was stronger than men, because in looking at her many women were reworking their own identities (Mirzoeff, 1999, pp. 240 – 244).

The global media public found in Diana the first icon of the new age of the electronic image and the immediate distribution of images. Although she lived her life in a dialog with photography, her death was above all a televisual event. From all the websites that were created in honor, none of them matched the creativity and spontaneity that could be seen live on television. The reason is simply because the Internet is a highly regarded informative resource but does not have television’s capacity for live reporting. We can also see this by the incidents in New York, on September the 11<sup>th</sup>. Thousands of people watched the television although there were several Internet sites analyzing the events (Mirzoeff, 1999, pp. 244 – 253).

Therefore, we can understand the role new media play in changing the global flow of visual images. Mirzoeff sees the death of Princess Diana as marking the end of photography and the inauguration of global visual culture. Overall, the way that technology has affected global visual culture is of great importance. The fact that people depend on a ‘visual element’ to believe something is truly significant, and proves the power of visualizing. The power of this element could not exist without technology. After Diana’s death, thousands of people sat in front of televisions or read newspapers everyday for months (Mirzoeff, 1999, ch. 7).

## **Bibliography:**

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