



Sights, Sites, and Subjects: Towards Critical Visuality

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Visual culture is proliferating as multiplying images inundate us with their number, speed, and overwhelming presence. The non-verbal (graphocentric) is all set to subsume the verbal (logocentric), generating in the process everyday new uneasy and non-self-congratulatory sights of life, towards a possible ossification of critical visuality. This kind of visuality is not confined to a mere re-ordering of the world into a given normal and naturalized prototype of preferences through visual coordinates. In WJT Mitchell's terms, this visuality does not mark a "turn to naïve mimesis" (*Picture Theory*, "A Pictorial Turn", 16). Rather it is a kind of visuality that is more inclined towards observing the obverse of the scene/ seen, the so-called obscene itself. Critical visuality or 'counter-visuality', in Mirzoeff's preferred terms, therefore is an "attempt to reconfigure the visuality as a whole" (*The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality*, 24).

The present issue of the *dialog* consists of research papers that challenge and question the self-authorizing expressions of culture through a close study of photographs, graphics, cinematic images, frescos, statues, and cartoons of a diverse range of places, people and practices that often remain unlooked at or are just glossed over or are taken at their face value as mere sights of visual entertainment *sans* any historical, cultural or political quotient. The paper-writers probe into the issues of materiality, spectatorship, and technologies involved in the production, dissemination, and reception of visuals. In a very predominant way, the issue has turned out to be a special number on the turn towards critical visuality within the larger rubric of Cultural Studies. Instead of metaphysicalizing sight as 'insight', the papers puncture the seductiveness of pictures to

expose the politics of iconography, its performative gestures, and styles of interpellation and co-option.

The tone is set by Sudhir Mehra's study of the statues of Ambedkar across various phases of Dalit politics as enunciated by Kancha Ilaiah. Not only the materials and the site of statues are strategically chosen, the postures which are superimposed on the persona of Ambedkar to hail him into the nationalist pantheon are also carefully selected. Ambedkar preposterously is cast into an *achkan* wearing Nehru, a stick holding *bhikshuk* leading a band of followers *a la* Gandhi in his Dandi March image, a Stalinified statesman, a Lincolnesque Dalit icon sitting on a chair, a preacher holding his finger upwards like Lord Krishna with his *Sudarshan Chakra*, but hardly as a well-meaning revolutionary who challenged the hierarchical social structure of the country through his scholarly pursuits and fierce debates with the nationalists of the times. The paper questions the democratic claims of contemporary visual culture, rather it goes on to suggest that instead of offering an alternative equitable public sphere, visual culture ends up replicating and perpetuating caste biases.

In the next paper, the focus shifts from the visual of the subalterns to those of the subcultures. The subcultures constitute the very sites of subversive critical visuality. Queer subcultures have their own semiotics and non-verbal sign systems, sartorial styles, and body gestures. Satnam's paper ventures to study the different hairstyles of drag subcultures through a study of selected LGBTIQ documentaries. The paper assigns a functional value to deviant hairstyles – such as Mohawk, Punk, Skinhead, Spike, Dreadlock, and many more – that are adopted by transgenders as a marker of their sexual differences. The exaggerated hairstyles have their shock value as the intention is to parody and caricaturize normative femininity and masculinity.

Marwaris as a community of traders also form a kind of distinct subculture. As harbingers of internal diaspora, this community is known for its opulence, charity, spicy food habits, and business acumen. Vikas Jain reads wall frescos painted on

Marwari *havelis* (mansions) of the Shekhawati region of Rajasthan that have been converted into heritage hotels. These frescos, hitherto, appreciated for their exotic value, turn into visual texts of multiple meanings. At one level, these frescos become tell-tales of the encounter of local entrepreneurial Marwaris with colonial modernity, at another quotidian level these emerge as status symbols of the rich diasporic traders back in their native lands, and at yet another level these act as markers of memorialization. The frescoes painted inside Malji ka Kamra of Churu are divided into two categories – ‘tradition frescoes’ and ‘modernity frescos’ in terms of the themes depicted, but there is a hybridization of styles and motifs, revealing the makings of what the paper-writer terms as ‘Marwari modernity’. Sabuj Sarkar’s paper takes recourse to posters – another instrument of visual agency – to chronicle the journey of tea in India. The posters not only simply enkindle interest with their catchy graphics, exceptional typography, cryptic messages, and aesthetic layout; they rather participate in the very flow of history to shape its direction, mood, and taste. Tea which was a colonial import, through a sustained poster campaign enters into the food unconscious of the nation, and indeed emerges as an indigenous beverage, and posters not only just mirror the spread and penetration of the alien beverage, they instigate its growth.

The next two papers are on cartoons and comics – the two non-photographic visual forms that are normally consumed by middle-class readers for light-hearted entertainment on the sidelines of serious narratives of the nation. In these papers, cartoons and comics carry the burden of history and politics and indeed offer alternative sites/sights of reading the making of the nation and its nationalism. Shipra’s paper on Partition cartoons stands out on two counts. One, the paper-writer harnesses cartoons to map the buildup to Partition which otherwise is dramatized in mainstream historiography as a sudden catastrophe. Two, the cartoons indicate the presence of (dark) humour in the madness of violence that largely defined the heady days of pre- and post-Partition from 1946 to 1948.

Ranjeet Singh's paper on comic series *Chacha Chaudhary* points towards a middle-class-centric dynamics of Indian comics vis-à-vis an ostensible capitalistic foregrounding of American comics on and around larger-than-life characters such as Superman or Batman. Through a study of different panels, he suggests how *Chacha Chaudhary* as a comic series has nurtured the opportunistic nationalism of the Indian middle-class which seeks to criminalize the poor peasantry or the working class as uncouth and illiterate rogues. What is served as innocent, value-neutral light humour, particularly to impressionable children through comics, Ranjeet Singh argues, is often steeped in some kind of default exclusive nationalism that caters to only the aspirations of the dominant middle-class.

Graphic narratives invite more participatory readerly attention as the unregulated gutter spaces demand a different kind of imaginative grammar of reading. The relatively experimental and non-linear arrangement of graphics offers the contemporary artist-author a befitting medium to represent the dynamics of disjointed life. Harleen Kaur reads the graphic biography of socialist revolutionary philosopher Rosa Luxemburg (*Red Rosa* by Kate Evans) as a palimpsestic caricaturization of her fractured 'self' that defies the linearity of narration. Rosa's rich corpus of letters is creatively harnessed by Evans in a framework of supplementarily and juxtaposition to re-define the 'self' of a very complex activist thinker in panels drawn in grey shades.

Shubhaiyu Chakraborty, while approaching Sarnath Banerjee's graphic novel *Corridor* as a novel of fragmented cityscape, tries to relate the growth of comic culture with the rise of urban spaces in India. The disrupted spatial and temporal matrices of modern metropolitan life, the paper-writer argues, can be gainfully represented through a series of disjointed graphic glimpses. Pandemics – due to their scale and suddenness – need a different kind of non-linear story-telling. While the conventional literary forms have bequeathed us a rich corpus of 'pandemic literature', comic strips and graphic narratives also form a visual continuum of the pandemic past creating 'an other

memory' of the difficult times. Barnali Saha's paper takes a long shot on the collective historiography of the pandemic through the coordinates of two graphic narratives – American comic strips on Spanish Flu and Priya's *Mask* a graphic narrative written recently – to underline the operational aesthetics of fun and fear employed in them

Not obliged to operate within the indexical binds of photographic resemblance, animation films and documentaries offer new possibilities of critical visuality. Due to their inherent creative surreal aesthetics, animation films have the potential to capture those liminal, fractured, and traumatic experiences of life which lack evidential directness and regularity of narration. Gurleen's paper explores the counter-visual potentialities of animated documentary as a new media genre through a close study of Ari Folman's *Waltz with Bashir* (2008) that deals with the psychological aftermath of the 1982 Lebanon war on Israeli soldiers. The opening nightmarish frame of barking twenty-six dogs racing towards the screen sets the paper-writer to delve deep into the poetics of animation as a medium of representing the unrepresentable inner space in non-mimetic style, in a non-Euclidian framework. The paper argues for an increasing relevance of animation films in dealing with the emerging issues of trauma, postmemory, and pluralist historiography in contemporary times.

If Gurleen's paper makes a pitch for the natural suitability of animation documentary in representing trauma and other forms of psychic disorientation, Kalplata's paper foregrounds the grammar of close-ups in cinematic language as a technique equally capable of measuring the depth of void and loss among war-torn characters undergoing hallucination and mental disturbance. As cinema/ film studies evolve into a discipline in itself, the paper-writers 'see through' the enigma of moving pictorial frames. Kalplata's paper traces the travails of a five-year-old survivor of Nazi bombing, Paulette as depicted in René Clément's *Jeux Interdits* (Forbidden Games) (1952) through a study of chosen close-ups.

Vijaya Singh's paper on *Raazi*, a film based on Harinder Sikka's book *Calling Sehmet* (2018), employs multiple critical frames to put into perspective how a woman's body is tossed around as a site of communal/ national conflicts. She invokes Anne Sexton's poem "Briar Rose" to lend poignancy to her reading of the character Sehmet, locked as she is between her fatherland and the land of her husband. She takes into her critical stride Bollywood's long tryst with Kashmir which she describes in terms of a double helix structure built around the binaries of love-hate, father-daughter, patriarchy-patriotism. There is one more paper on the use of the close-up technique. In another cinema-centric paper, Niyathi poses some fundamental questions about the representation of differently-abled characters in movies that ostensibly are sympathetic to them. Through a close analysis of *Barfi!* (2012), *Margarita with a Straw* (2015), and *Zero* (2018), she probes the questions of body image, desire, and sexuality of differently-abled women.

Some site-specific papers trace the dynamics of their visualization in local lore, fiction, and other literary narratives. In Simple Kochar's paper, Punjab is not just a geographical site, rather it is visualized as a cultural landscape with no precise atlas; what lends inner momentum and cohesiveness to this landscape are various memes that emanate from the rich *quissa*-lore of the region. From a love-legend to a tragic love story, Waris's *Heer* is approached in terms of a very intimate everyday meme that in her words "robustly empowers and nurtures Punjabiyyat and Punjabi identity". Rachna Sethi in her photo-essay undertakes the issue of branding of Delhi from being a 'Wall City to a World City' through a critical reading of Namita Gokhale's *Priya in Incredible Indyya*. The site yields its own anomalous sights. The larger-than-life icon of gods, the network of flyovers, and ultra-modern glitzy skyscrapers of multinational corporate giants, historical monuments of the medieval past – produce a heterotopic cityscape in which social inequalities or 'urban apartheid' attains ominous proportions with each passing day.

Rahul Chaturvedi's paper deals with islands as sites that are often 'seen' as abject, savage zones pitted as castaway 'others' of the civilization by the islomaniac colonizers. Through a textual study of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and William Golding *Lord of the Flies*, he concludes that islands are often infantilized to be tutored and groomed by the Euro-American mainlanders. Sanju Thomas takes us to the inner recesses of Sunderbans, not through 'the tourist gaze' of Amitav Ghosh, but through a more intimate account of M Mukandan's *On the Banks of Mayyazhi*. Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* is thus put in comparative perspective. From culturally well-recognized provincial spaces such as Punjab to interstitial sites of islands and deltas, the present issue takes into its fold a paper on the non-spaces of the nation as well. Ajay R Venkitachalam's paper on Indian prison writing with a special focus on Indian prison auto-fiction as a sub-genre gives us a peep into the forbidden, secluded space of prison. While cataloguing a range of prison accounts, it attempts to offer us an Indian theory of prison literature. Indian prison writing is as much about the incarcerated personal self as it is about the suffering of other fellow inmates. The use of illustrations in Arun Ferreira's memoir *Colours of the Cage* point towards the possibilities of the arrival of graphic prison narratives.

From obscure sites and subjects like islands and prisons and the criminalized others that inhabit these non-spaces, the issue moves towards the possibility of alternative medicine as counter-science. Ravinder Kumar's paper takes us to occult tradition of treatment as a counterpart to Western science through a close study of Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome*. Counter-science and counter-visibility in some ways do form a homologous relationship. The last paper deals with conundrums of identity formation in transgenders. Lede E Miki Pohshna in her theoretically dense paper also uses the concepts of mirror and symbolic order of language and performativity propounded by Lacan and Butler to understand the conundrums of identity formation of *hijras* – 'the gender outlaws' – in the Indian context through the study of two Indian

fictional transgender characters Bhanggi in *This House of Clay and Water* and Shankra Gowda in *Mohanaswamy*.

What connects the range of papers included in this issue is their overriding thrust towards counter-visuality. The papers deal with pictures, places, and people, locked as they are in contrapuntal relationships and permutations, defying any linear attempt of their visualization in any aesthetic of categorizations. The paper-writers – both young researchers and senior academics – collectively herald a robust arrival of visual studies within the departments of literatures and languages. The relationship of the picture with the text (or vice versa) can no longer be kept out of the critical pur-view. As mediums of representations increase, new hybridized genres emerge and extend the frontiers of knowledge and vision. Once again, the entire editorial team of the *dialog* has worked overtime to bring out this issue which happens to be predominantly on critical visuality. Mr. Jatinder Moudgil, Manager Panjab University, Press has taken extraordinary interest in the timely production of the issue.

Works Cited

- Mirzoeff, Nicholas. *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality*. Duke UP, 2011
- Mitchell, WJT. *Picture Theory*. U of Chicago P, 1986.