THE EMERGENCE OF DEATH REPRESENTATIONS IN VISUAL ARTS: STEREOTYPES AND SOCIAL REALITIES

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Abstract

This article will investigate the impact of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) on the contemporary practices of today's artists. Therefore, this investigation will lead to an analogy between the visual representations created by the artist and the representations created by the various forms of ICT. Accordingly, do the artists in this regards critique the stereotypical representations of images or do they copy what they see, the artwork may appear in different visualizations, but the concept is the same. What is the role of the artist in telling the real story behind the fake image created by media? The contemporary artists in some cases created clear distinctions between media and art. The images of death and terror in global media created a strong impact on the global art scene, where some artists copied those images without investigating the real situation on ground. They became another tool controlled by false messages. However, other contemporary artists started to investigate the social reality of media messages and analyse it in their art. Some artists led significant role in criticizing the common stereotypes, which the global media had established in the late few years.

Keywords

Death Representations, Visual Arts, Multimedia, Communication, Art and Design

1. Death as Stereotype: Media vs. Visual Art

Figure 1: *Christian Lemmerz (2007) Abu Ghraib*

Death is a classical topic, which exists in the literature made by different scholars; it encounters the "Other" in different points of views representing different cultural approaches (Pappe, 2010). "The dead other" is a controversial subject, which brings to our minds a diverse literature done by postcolonial scholars. The sculptor Christian Lemmerz from Germany presented the subject of death, which loaded the media with images of dead people from Africa, Asia, and especially the Middle East. His artworks express the current human situation, which affected the culture of our contemporary time. Death appears in contemporary arts in different cultures, especially when it takes a civilized philosophy. Art expressed this issue from different point of views, reflecting different social realities. Lemmerz represented Abu Ghraib Person in his sculptures, which is one of the well-known issues in the Middle Eastern contemporary social reality. Lemmerz was affected by a group of "public domain" images that depicted prisoners being tortured in huge person. This sculpture represents a group of four life-size figures carved in

white marble; the sculpture shows the Middle Eastern identity of the victims, which appear in the realistic representation of Lemmerz, apparently, he practices a high technique in carving human figure in solid white Carrara marble.

The conception of death takes different ideological structures according to the different social realities that differ from place to another place as a result of the plural cultures, geographic location, historical events, and political events. On the other hand the social dynamics create diverse influences on contemporary arts, when gender rules, as well as social class play a certain role in a community. Contemporary art shows many examples of the social influence on different aspects of life including individual experience and collective experience.

Figure 2: *Fernando Botero (2005) Abu Graib 50*

Media create streams of images that represent false news establishing direct impact on the people's awareness. Therefore, artists try to criticize such fake representations of death as well as other social representations. Artists try to create distinction between the commercial driven representations of media and their real representations of the current situation in their

communities. Dynamics of media change the common norms of people and also can change their traditional aesthetics. In such context of art and socio politics, contemporary artist reflects himself through different mediums, according to his individual experience. This individual experience refers to verity of sources; one of those sources is the artist's current situation, it is the environment where the artist interacts with its elements every day. Furthermore the society is the context where any artist constructs his experience; it's a self-portrait where the artist represents his own social reality.

The society is the main stream where the artist collects his thoughts; it is the place where he or she constructs the cognitive process, facing social and cultural factors that integrate with this cognition. The social reality is constructed by a combination of relationships between the artist and the others, where the society's culture is the context of artist's cognition "Sometimes it's called socio-cultural cognition whereby reality is a social structure…cognition is a mental and physical activity that takes place within a socio-cultural contexts" (Sullivan, 2005, p.128). The artist reflects himself by representing society being a human processor of all these data received from surrounding space. Also the artist constructs identity by interacting with social environment; by gaining experience from others who share the same cultural identity, observing the similarities and differences with others. The artist develops cognition according to the social and cultural daily codes, reflecting theoretical and practical experience, which could be based somehow on social cultural knowledge.

Artists criticize media that create false representations of death because they interact directly with social reality and know that media fake reality in order to attract followers and promote their agendas. On the other hand, artists reflect the society's contemporary culture; and take part in representing cultural identity. Depicting values and integrate these values with the contemporary cultural concepts, as they integrate also with other factors that affect the cultural identity like politics, socio- economics, and religion. The visual culture of any place is an indication on the common thoughts of its people, and the culture is a distinctive feature that helps us to identify intellectual works from a certain place and era. Cultural identities reflect and express the place and time of certain works of art, along with language, religion, and social structures.

2. The Image of Death from Different Socio-Political Perspectives

The influence of politics on art as well as media appears in different aspects. Media represent the image of death which is associated with different political approaches according to different ideologies. Art on the other hand investigates those images and criticizes them. Death images fall into two major categories, which symbolize direct and indirect messages, in the first direct message, political subjects or political major impacts take place in the community as political attitudes that have cultural significance expressing political beliefs, which sometimes portray the desires of people. It is a part of the cultural propaganda that nations create to promote ideologies to educate people. Visual arts and media could be a direct tool to promote political ideologies to instruct people (Shalabi, 2008). In the second indirect message the visual arts create a script to describe the effects of politics on the people's daily life, when certain artist reflects his or her individual experience by telling how political situations interact with the course of their life. Indirect political influence on the individual creative experience creates significant indications on social reality, because it shows the interaction between the social aspects and politics.

Social Political systems exist in all communities, where they construct the mainstream ideologies for individuals, groups and institutions, as we identify a number of social political systems such as Nationalism, Capitalism and Communism, along with other local social systems that were made to suite the cultures, believes and traditions of local people in various countries. During contemporary times we notice that national states have their own approaches in building the state according to their cultural and national identity, reflecting the national ideology in the different life aspects especially the cultural ones, therefore art critics found different methods in locating the intersections between politics, social systems and visual arts to investigate the relation between the socio political change, death representations, and modernism in arts (Harris, 2001).

These variables affected the representations of death in art and media and created different social realities for artists and in the same time different contexts for their representations even if they share the same common issues or express the same themes. The critical accounts of politics and social systems in visual art provide art critics and historians with diverse perspectives to interpret artworks according to the artist's perception from one hand, and according to the people's perceptions from the other hand, when the art critic locates the relation

between the art experience and the political elements in this experience, and then identify those elements in reference to their meanings which appear in the different layers of the located social reality. Art critics conduct this approach according to certain times and cultures which construct social realities that affect artistic experience, because creative individuals involve themselves by different ways into the social circle and became themselves a part of socio political orders in the community.

Figure 3: *Gustave Courbet (1850) Stone Breakers*

One of the significant examples is the study of Clark T. J. (1999) that studied the interaction between politics, social systems and artistic experience, as we can touch on many examples from the world because politics in social art criticism affects the contemporary visual arts on "glocal" scales. Clark's in his study located the socio political effects on Courbet's artistic experience, trying to find out the relation between the modernisms of the artist's age and his artwork as well as the temporality of our contemporary time. Clark highlighted the influence of the critical political situation in France in 1850's on Courbet's representations in artworks such as The Stone Breakers, which represents workers while they are trying to break down the stone. Stone breaking was a kind of craft that involves in construction industry where builders used the stones as building materials (Harris, 2001).

"Social Realist Paintings" is an expression used by Harris (2001) to describe artworks done by the French artist Courbet between the years 1848 to 1851 to represent themes from the daily social realities which took place back then during the French social revolution, this social revolution was against the social class in the French community, advocating workers as integral part of the modern community, this revolution moved from France to other places in Europe, motivating artist to represent the new social political changes in community. These examples from French revolution bring to mind the image of the Raft of Meduza by Gericault which documents the death of drowning people in the middle of a sea storm. The Raft of Meduza is another side of the French revelation which promoted freedom in Europe and slavery in Africa. The reality in this analogy represented two stories, one for workers and one for death which are both the results of the same social and political system that started in France in the 19th century.

Figure 4: *Gerecult (1819) the Raft of Meduza*

Clark T. J. builds an argument regarding the relation between art and socio political change which took place in Europe at Courbet's time. Taking the European social reality as a background of his study to analyze and understand the motivations behind Courbet's visual representations. However Harris (2001) argues that we could not describe the social history of art as "framework of analytic devices" but instead it is more like open ended process which includes a lot of considerations for time, culture and values, therefore art critics and historians should

locate those social elements inside the artwork and relate it to political contexts to avoid prejudgments in their investigation.

Harris J. (2001) gives an analogy between social accounts of Clark T. J. and Houser's The Social History of Art. They both analyzed sequential periods of visual arts according to social frameworks; also they related the development in contemporary art at that time with socio political changes. The difference between those two approaches appears in the construction of the analysis itself where Houser builds his arguments on the relationship between the mainstream ideas of that age and art, as he related the development of the Soviet Socialist Realism in the history of Russian Art with Russian revolution according to the Marxist ideology.

Clark on the other hand built his argument on empirical case study by establishing a theoretical model, where he brings a different perspective about revolution from the ideal or utopian concepts which could be stereotypical ideologies to the actual real concepts that construct relations out of different layers of socio political realities. Intellectuality in social history of art therefore takes different aspects from the ideal or "stereotypical" to the real or "authentic" criticisms.

Themes of contemporary socio politics reflect a set of similarities and differences among the Middle Eastern artists. In addition to the segments of the political landscape which is constructed from a diverse points of views along with layers of explanations that cluster motivations of artistic experience with socio political contexts. Cultural revival in the modern Middle East through a controversial reconsideration of the terminologies of democracy, old and new regimes, as well as adopting new social systems to develop the concepts of civil rights, states, and human capital, and constructing multi party governments instead of single party domination (Owen, 2004), this is the effects of socio politics on the social realities of the visual arts, because it constructs the contexts of a contemporary visual art experiences.

3. Conclusion

This paper conceptualized the artists' methods in criticizing media in representing Death and Terror images in stereotypical manners that ignore the real situation on ground. It is significant because it questions the ethics of representing death images as a commercial product. Media used death images to attract people rather than representing the real situation on ground. As a result, media have established more cultural stereotypes to gain more followers. The impact

of such fake representations is significant on the perception of everyday people when they have more exposure of death images they became more familiar with such images, and subsequently they lose their human touch with reality.

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