

‘The Power of Picture’ and ‘The Picture of Power’ According to W.J.T. Mitchell

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This essay investigates the relationship between power and picture according to W.J.T. Mitchell, an American media theorist. Mitchell was known for his term ‘Pictorial Turn’. Pictorial turn emphasizes the role of picture and image in knowledge formation. In the pictorial turn, image is “a complex interplay between visibility, apparatus, discourse, bodies, and figurality”. Mitchell wants to elaborate on both ‘the power of picture’ and ‘the picture of power’. Mitchell follows Foucault who was picturing power, not as a possession but a relationship that someone enjoys or suffers. According to Mitchell, two models of picture power are “illusionism” and “realism”. Illusionism is the capacity of pictures to deceive or take power over a beholder. In contrast, realism is the capacity of pictures to represent the truth about things or events. Both illusionism and realism affect how people think and behave. Mitchell reveals social and political tendencies behind illusionism and realism, and also dismantles the ideology behind realism and irrealism.

Keywords: Image, Power, W.J.T. Mitchell, Illusionism, Realism

1. Introduction

Since ‘Pictorial Turn’ was coined by W.J.T. Mitchell, scholars have been analyzing issues around visual representation and its power on the spectators. The ‘Pictorial Turn’ marked a significant change both in the academic and public culture sphere, in which image become a central topic of discourse. (Mitchell, 1994: 11-13). In Pictorial Turn, people encounter paradox about pictures. On the one hand, the power of images is inescapable, especially in the era of video and cybernetic technology. On the other hand, the fear and anxiety of images have arisen, particularly on the “power of images” that are capable of destroying previous cultures that are based on literature, even able to destroy their creators, and manipulators. (Mitchell, 1994: p.15). Pictorial Turn has introduced the reader/spectators to the notion of power which is irresistible and its relation to the image. (Matteo Stocchetti, 2011: 11).

Contemporary discourse on the power of images has been influenced by the idea of the ‘pictorial turn’ and its relation to the idea of ‘emotional communities. (Matteo Stocchetti, 2011: 11). The “emotional community” is a community based on the commonality of feeling than interests. The social power of images to affect ‘the emotional community can be exemplified by some of these examples as follow. (Matteo Stocchetti, 2011: 11). Firstly, Nilüfer Demir’s photograph of a Syrian toddler’s dead body on the Turkish (2015) coast has a significant impact on the global policy agenda change related to opening borders to refugees. Secondly, Vietnam war photographs were able to move intellectuals and peace activists across American and European countries to organize Anti-war protests. Thirdly, Darnella Frazier’s video of George Floyd being killed by a Minneapolis police officer (2020) is capable of triggering global rage against racism and police brutality.

This essay investigates the relationship between power and picture according to W.J.T. Mitchell. In his book "Picture Theory", Mitchell deals with the interaction between words and images, the power of pictures, and also the pictures of power. Instead of providing a homogeneous picture of power, he gives a kind of heterogeneous and dialectical picture of power. Mitchell follows Foucault, who defines power, not as something one "possesses" but a relationship one enjoys or suffers. (Mitchell, 1994: 324). In the last part of his Picture Theory, Mitchell also explores the relation between pictures and the public sphere. He borrows the term 'Public Sphere' from Jürgen Habermas. For Mitchell, the Public sphere is a kind of utopian counterpart to the pictures of power, which is a place free from coercion or domination to form a scene of free conversation. (Mitchell, 1994: 364).

2. The Power of Picture: Illusionism, Realism, and Beyond Both of Them

According to Mitchell, there are two models of pictures' power that are called "illusionism" and "realism". Illusionism is the capacity of pictures to deceive or take power over a beholder. In contrast, realism is the capacity of pictures to show the truth about things. As composite imagetext, the realist representation usually was accompanied by the tacit legend: "this is the way things are" and for illusionism: "this is how things look". (Mitchell, 1994: 326).

W.J.T. Mitchell distinguishes illusionism and illusion, although both of them actually cannot sharply distinguish one another. Illusionism is a cultural practice in which humans "'take in' the image with self-conscious awareness that it is only an image". (Mitchell, 1994: 339). Meanwhile, an illusion is a phenomenon that "extends from the animal behavior such as camouflage and mimicry, into *trompe-l'oeil* (deceive the eye) and ultimately, into the universal structure of ideology or false consciousness." (Mitchell, 1994: 343).

Aesthetic illusion has a tight relationship with social power. Aesthetic illusion shows power over others through the capacity to produce an error in other's eyes. The relation of power and domination in aesthetic illusion can reinforce the sense of freedom, because humans can choose to 'take in' the image, while animals can only be 'taken in' by the image. However, this relationship so often represents slavery as freely chosen. Humans enslaved themselves in the image, while animals are enslaved by the image. Therefore, aesthetic illusions simultaneously need to be continued and also repressed. (Mitchell, 1994: 339-340).

According to Ernst Gombrich, the mastery of illusionism is directly targeted to "the overcoming of illusion in the sense of false belief". (Mitchell, 1994: 341). Hence, the illusion is an "error, delusion, or false belief", while Illusionism is "playing with illusions, the self-conscious exploitation of illusion". (Mitchell, 1994: 343)

Mitchell does not only reveal social and political tendencies behind illusion and illusionism. He also dismantles the ideology behind realism and irrealism. Mitchell was inspired by Nelson Goodman who rejects the idea of representation. Like Ferdinand de Saussure's project of structural linguistic, Nelson Goodman would like to map "the fundamental rules and types that operate in all symbolic behavior". (Mitchell, 1994: 347-348).

For Goodman, realism is relative, even it is a version of irrealism. In his work *Languages of Art*, he calls realism "hyperconventional", because it depends on "the system of representation standard for a given culture or person at a given time." For

example, realism in Egyptian is not similar to Japanese realism. According to Goodman, all representations are conventional because they rely on a symbol system. (Mitchell, 1994: 351). As a consequence, there are many realism versions, based on their styles, visions, and the construction of the real. A shift can also occur in a version of realism. For example, a shift from tradition to a new degree of realism. Goodman associates this kind of realism with “revelation”. (Mitchell, 1994: 352).

According to Mitchell, there are two sets of problems with Goodman’s account of realism. Firstly, it fails to say anything specific about realism. Criteria “standard”, “familiar”, or “habitual” for realism is too wide, includes many non-realistic forms of representation. For example, nowadays, cubism is familiar but does it make cubism realistic? Custom, habit, standardization are only necessary conditions for realism, but not sufficient conditions. Secondly, Goodman’s ambivalence account of realism. Most of the time, Goodman considers realism as familiar and traditional, but sometimes novel and revelatory. (Mitchell, 1994: 353).

Mitchell has revealed that realism constitutes the ideology in which realistic representation always associates with truth, certainty, and knowledge. (Mitchell, 1994:357). Western culture often identifies realistic representation as natural and scientific representation. This realistic representation has a social purpose to deliver the truth to people. For example, nineteenth-century “social realism” aims to describe the real socio-political conditions of the working class. (Mitchell, 1994: 358).

Mitchell also revealed the ideology behind Goodman’s irrealism. “Like realism, irrealism must overturn superstition and ideology, provide stable cognitive and symbolic categories, and offer revelations of new understanding”. (Mitchell, 1994: 350). According to Goodman (1978), in “Ways of Worldmaking”, irrealism is not multiple possible alternatives to a single actual world but of multiple actual worlds. No primary world version can compare to all true world versions. For Goodman, not only motion, but even reality is relative. (Goodman, 1978: 2-3).

Nowadays, we live in hyperrealism, where the boundaries between realism and irrealism become vague. Hyperrealism is the technical mastery of illusion and realism that offers itself as an aesthetics object. Irrealism finds its place in illusionistic representation technologies that results in the multiple ways of world-making. Advanced capitalism offers these multiple worlds to the consumer, for example in its manifestations in the contemporary theme parks and films. (Mitchell, 1994: 358).

The power of pictures that involves illusionism, realism, irrealism, and hyperrealism is also deployed in political communication and advertisement. Political advertisements usually create hyperrealistic images using visual metaphors to gain their persuasive power on their audiences. For example, Réka Benczes (2019) examined a visual metaphor that is exploited in a political advertisement that works through a) optimizing the effort–effect balance (by oversimplification and perspectivization); b) metonymic chains; and c) making implicit visual metaphors explicit. (Benczes, 2019: 21-22)

3. The Picture of Power

In Picture Theory, Mitchell also examines the relationship between images, power, violence, and the public sphere. Mitchell distinguishes three basic forms of violence in the images of public art: (1) the image as an act or object of violence. The image is doing violence to beholders, or “suffering” violence as the target of vandalism, disfigurement, or demolition (Mitchell, 1994:381); 2) the image as a weapon of

violence, a device for the attack, coercion, incitement, or more subtle “dislocations” of public spaces; 3) the image as a representation of violence, whether a realistic imitation of a violent act, or a monument, trophy, memorial, or another trace of past violence. All three forms are, in principle, independent of one another. (Mitchell, 1994:382).

The idea of public art is inseparable from, in Habermas’s term, “the liberal model of the public sphere”. The public sphere is a realm separate from economic, private, and political dimensions. In the public sphere, citizens may build public opinion on the common good free of coercion, violence, or private interests circumstances. (Mitchell, 1994: 379).

However, the public sphere is often a kind of utopian counterpart to the pictures’ power. (Mitchell, 1994: 364). Our situation after the Cold War is more likely the telescreen of George Orwell’s 1984. (Mitchell, 1994: 365). We live not only in a "society of the spectacle" (Guy Debord) but also a "surveillance society" (Michel Foucault) (Mitchell, 2005: 5).

According to Mitchell, nowadays we are “undergoing a revolution in the technologies of representation that makes possible the fabrication of realities on an unprecedented scale”. This situation remind us of Europe in the 1930s, when a “New World Order” that is called fascism used representational technologies to produce, in Walter Benjamin’s terms, an “aestheticizing of politics”. It reminds us especially on “the massive production of political hallucinations, the whipping up of war hysteria, and the formation of socially acceptable forms of race hatred and the mass destruction of the population”. (Mitchell, 1994: 423-424). For example, Operation Desert Storm was a kind of utopian replay of World War II. This operation portrayed Saddam Hussein as Hitler, as the Butcher of Baghdad. “The main function of this caricature was reductive and emotional”, which is to simplify moral issues to straightforward choice. Everyone who has different thought seems like a traitor, even when they are rational. This caricature also proliferated war fever and mass hatred against the enemy. (Mitchell, 1994: 404).

Nowadays, visual representations play important roles in increasing and decreasing public awareness of humanity. Judith Butler (2004) emphasized the absence of the representation of precariousness in life leads to violence. For example, at the beginning of the 2000s, the media seems to suspend the precarious life of the Afghan or Iraqi people, instead, they provided “visual aesthetics” of war, such as the view of an aerial bomb. It can be compared to the representation of the Vietnam War that shows the pictures of the children burning and dying caused by napalm. These pictures brought public sense of shock, outrage, remorse, and grief. Butler reminds us “the loss of insensitivity to human suffering and death becomes the mechanism by which dehumanization is accomplished”. (Butler, 2004:146, 148)

4. Summary

- According to W.J.T. Mitchell, two models of picture power are “illusionism” and “realism”. Illusionism is the capacity of pictures to deceive or take power over a beholder. Realism is the capacity of pictures to show the truth about things.
- Mitchell reveals the myth behind both realism and illusionism. Realism is entailed by the tacit legend: “this is the way things are” and for illusionism: “this is how things look”.

- Ideology lies behind realism is that realistic representation always associates with truth, certainty, and knowledge.
- Mitchell distinguishes illusionism and illusion. Illusion is an “error, delusion, or false belief”, while Illusionism is “playing with illusions, the self-conscious exploitation of illusion”.
- Nowadays, we live in hyperrealism, where the boundaries between realism and irrealism become vague. Advanced capitalism and political advertisement often use hyperrealism strategy in their effort to accumulate profit and increase persuasive power.
- Mitchell was influenced by Habermas and Foucault in his view about the picture of power. For Mitchell, the public sphere that is suggested by Habermas is a kind of utopian counterpart to the pictures’ power. (Mitchell, 1994: 364). Today, we live in what Foucault called a "surveillance society".
- Up to now, visual representations play important roles in, Walter Benjamin’s term, an “aestheticizing of politics”. This strategy produces massive political hallucinations and broader race hatred.

5. References

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