

# Visual Culture Versus Virtual Culture: When the Visual Culture is All Made by Virtual World Users

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## ABSTRACT

Visual culture in virtual worlds is not purely authentic or purely imaginative. When culture emerges in a visualized virtual world, where everything that can be seen is created by its users, visual culture can be diverse and complex. Users from different cultural backgrounds perceive and construct meanings that may be different from those intended by the virtual world creators and other users. The author used observation, survey, and interview as her research methodologies to analyze visual culture in a visualized virtual world where the content is created by its users.

## KEYWORDS

Education, Second Life, Virtual Culture, Virtual World, Visual Culture

## VISUAL CULTURE IN VIRTUAL WORLD OVERVIEW

Culture is based on people's experiences and cultural backgrounds; therefore, cultures in the virtual world, which are created by users from across the globe, may therefore be more complicated than real world cultures (Han, 2015; Han, 2013a; Han, 2013b). "Reality is constructed from what we sense based on our experience, emotional condition, beliefs, and so forth" (Miller & Burton, 1994, p. 66). However, in the virtual world, users encounter not only their own culture, but also many other cultures. In addition, users of virtual worlds may see mixed cultures and many specialized groups (for example, focusing on education, business, music, or art), with each group sharing its own specific culture.

Second Life, one example of a virtual world, is the most well developed virtual world (McLeod, Liu, & Axline, 2014; Wang & Burton, 2013; Pellas, 2014). Users of Second Life see and live in diverse visual environments, including three dimensional animated visual objects built by residents from around the globe. The virtual world springs from users' imagination, and there is almost no limit on creating a new environment or imaginative objects. The virtual world is not only a new realm for people to live in and travel through, but it is also a place for people to create their own visual environments and culture (Han, 2010).

According to Heidegger (1977), "a world picture ... does not mean a picture of the world but the world conceived and grasped as a picture" (p. 129). When applying Heidegger's theory to the virtual world, people need to be aware of how virtual worlds propagate ideas through images, and

users need to resist unconsciously adapting and accepting everything that is transferred through the images. Images are not innocent (Mirzoeff, 2005). As Barry (1994) notes, about eighty percent of human perception is through vision. If a person's ways of seeing are not precise, they may not notice the full meaning of everything they see. According to Freedman (2003), when people see an image they are used to seeing, it will not attract their attention. However, when they look at a new image, they may focus on it and try to relate their knowledge and experience to the image to make meaning of it. As Freedman states, "an expressive object, regardless of the meaning of the production for the artist, does not have inherent meaning; the experience of an audience with visual culture makes it meaningful" (p. 69).

## CULTURE AND VISUAL CULTURE

### Culture

Culture is about who we are and how we live our lives; therefore, culture is diverse, and each person may have more than one cultural identity at the same time (Wang, 2001). "Cultural identities emerge in everyday discourse and in social practices, as well as by rituals, norms, and myths that are handed down to new members" (p. 516). Human biological differences form different cultures of gender, race, and age. Human psychological differences form different cultures of career, hobby, and religion. Differences in the natural environment influence different lifestyles as well. As McFee and Degge (1977) note, "culture is a pattern of behaviors, ideas, and values shared by a group" (p. 272). "Each culture has its own individuality and has a pattern that binds its parts together" (Dewey, 1934, p. 349). In other words, people in the same culture have a similar way of thinking, feeling, and acting (Wang; Samovar, Porter, McDaniel, & Roy, 2015).

Some scholars believe that culture is homogenizing, while others believe that cultures shift. While the macrocultural system influences individuals, individuals also bring their own unique subcultures into the community (Shifman, 2013). Culture is not stable (Anyanwu, 1998). Lemke (1993) contends that "autonomous cultural dynamics" (p. 3) are present in human social systems and are interdependent with the system of material processes. "Cultural practices are ... material processes; they construe meaning and assign valuation, but they also participate in eco-physical couplings ... and co-evolve over time as parts of a larger unitary eco-social system" (p. 3). Hamelink proposes that due to cultural synchronization, the variety of the world's cultural contexts is disappearing (as cited in Yaple & Korzenny, 1989). Culture is the "result of complex interactions among images, producers, cultural products, and readers/consumers. The meaning of images emerges through these processes of interpretation, engagement, and negotiation" (p. 69). Cultural ideas and values are maintained by visual images because images can communicate, teach, and transmit the behavior, ideas, and values of culture (McFee & Degge, 1977). As Machin and Leeuwen (2007) state, cultural synchronization—in other words, globalization—is associated with cultural imperialism. According to Yaple and Korzenny (1989),

*Neo-evolutionary theorists have argued that cultures may borrow from each other without recapitulating stages of development in order to achieve a state of "modernity." This borrowing, then, becomes the core of the well-known perspective called "diffusion of innovations." The paradigm of diffusion of innovations across cultures originated in the work of those who saw less developed nations as lacking an advantage. Clearly, such a perspective endorses a value system highly aligned with Western values. (p. 302)*

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