

SOCIO-CULTURAL EFFECTS OF VISUAL TURN

Najmiddinova Gulnoza Umarovna

Researcher of Journalism and Mass Communication University of Uzbekistan
Senior teacher of the Department of “Digital Media and Internet Journalism”.




Abstract: This article explores the concept of the “visual turn” and how it is reflected in humanities research. The characteristics of the image as an alternative code system to language have been studied. The starting point of each visual turn was analyzed. Visual distortions are periodized in the context of Toffler waves.

Keywords: visual turn, humanitarian studies, visual studies, visuality, visual culture, image, Internet, television, comics, photography

The symbol of today’s culture, where new means and technologies of information storage and distribution are discovered and actively implemented, is, without exaggeration, visual characters and image. Modern man lives in the period of visualization in such conditions as the screen culture, the cult of “viewing”, the formation of consumerism¹, the science and technology revolution, which has developed against the background of the regular increase of image content transmission channels. Therefore, in today’s world, researching the place of the image, its scope, possibilities, influence on culture and society as a form of communication is of special relevance.

German researcher D.Bachmann-Medic in his book titled “Cultural Turns: New Directions in the Cultural Sciences” refers to the concept of image as “not only signs, pictures and illustrations; forms its own influence independent of language” [1; P.395]. The Russian semiotic scientist Y.Lotman is also mentioned in his scientific works. Lotman emphasizes the existence of two independent cultural signs in the history of mankind – word and image. The scientist says that the connection between the structure, form and content of the word is conditional. In his opinion, images are better than words when it comes to understanding. In figurative or iconic signs,

expression and content are a stable combination, that is, the content has a unique, specific expression [6; P.6]. Another semiologist, sociologist R.Barth, in his scientific research, also comments on two types of language – natural object-language and artificial metalanguage [1; P.131]. Another scientist, linguist U.Fitch also discusses a special “language of signs” [9; P.469]. Research like this means that the image is consolidating its position as a universal code of expression. Because when a person does not know the language, or even cannot speak, the image serves as an alternative means of communication. In this point, as a proof of our opinion, let’s turn to an event [12] that was actively discussed in social networks in 2019. A foreign student studying in China goes to the hospital and is scheduled for surgery. The nurse who has to prepare the patient for surgery does not speak English well. Then he writes the following text on a piece of paper and gives it to the student:

“Tonight 22:00 after no , no  . Tomorrow morning  8:00”.

(Meaning: “Don’t eat or drink anything after 22:00 today. Surgery tomorrow morning at 8:00”).

A photo of the nurse’s letter has gone viral on Reddit, sparking a flurry of comments. Most users positively assessed the ingenuity of the author of the text, the fact that she was able to find a unique solution to the situation. However, comments were also made stating that this rebus can be interpreted differently out of context. In particular, there were reasons why the text could be perceived as an encrypted threat or warning.

The sphere of media and communication has undergone several revolutionary changes. The “image revolution” that began in the second half of the 19th century and the changes observed in the mediasphere under the influence of the Internet and digital technologies at the end of the 20th century caused new reflections on the iconic, pictorial and visual turn.

The purpose of visual-based turns is to manage the endless flow of images and characters through critical analysis. This opinion is noted in the works of most

scientists who have conducted research in this regard. It is worth noting that researches on images and characters were initially carried out intensively in the spheres of science such as art and philosophy. In particular, foreign scholars and scientists who joined the discussions about “turns” such as U.Mitchell, G. Byom, K. Moxey, M. Bal, G.Elkins, M.Smith, L.Cartwright, M.Holly, G.Herbert, M.Dikovitskaya, N.Mirzoev emphasize that these turns are characteristic of Western societies and that they are characterized by the primary importance of visual communication and visual images in everyday life [3].

Today, due to the visual turn, visualization has become an integral part of scientific and practical activities. Russian researcher E.Kudryashova basing on U.Mitchell’s ideas, describes the phenomenon of the visual turn as a random product of historical and economic processes. In particular, she argues that the phenomenon of the visual turn arose as a way to find solutions to a set of problems of a universal scale [5]. In our opinion, increasing attention to visuality and visual turns, in general, are formed in response to processes taking place in society such as: the increase in the amount of information, the reduction of the time spent on preparing and distributing information, the emergence of new sources of information, the specialization and personalization of content transmission channels, giving the audience the opportunity to prepare content along with the opportunity to choose, and the fact that a person oneself has become a media, and was formed as a logical continuation.

At the beginning of the 21st century, visuality has become not a new socio-cultural trend, but a fundamental basis of modern culture, and in our opinion, two interrelated factors can be cited as the reason for this:

- transition from the traditional stage of development to the industrialized stage;
- rapid development of visual technologies: wide spread of photography and television, at the border of the 20th and 21st centuries, the emergence of new digital technologies and the Internet.

Among the fundamental works focused on the research of visuality and visual turns can be also cited to M.McLuhan, J.Baudriyar, U. Eco, M.Foucault's works. Philosophical and sometimes futurological works reflect on the society undergoing transformation under the influence of media, especially television. However, these studies were carried out in the 1960s and 1980s and mainly approached social and cultural changes through the prism of television opportunities, a universal miracle of its time. These works, in a certain sense, formed the modern tradition of visual arts. However, based on a series of studies on visuality and visual culture, we can state that at least three visual turns have occurred in the sphere of humanities studies. In addition, the culture that discovers new forms of visuality has always been a visual phenomenon. Russian researcher V.Sklyarova researches the features of verbal, handwritten and printed word communication. From a perceptual point of view, these forms of communication are perceived to a certain degree ocular, that is, through the sense of sight. In addition, in the process of verbal and non-verbal speech in particular, visual components such as gestures, physiognomy, ophthalmology (direction of gaze, continuity of direct eye contact) are actively used. Therefore, it can be said that culture has been visual to a certain extent even in the times when verbal communication was the priority, as well as in the era of the handwritten and printed word [7; P.116-117].

The first visual turn in the humanities took place in the 1920s and 1930s. This was caused by the emergence and development of cinematography, comics and photography in the second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. According to the famous German philosopher V.Benyamin, in the middle of the 19th century, the creation of means of mass reproduction of works of visual art and their wide distribution to the audience caused a serious blow to the concept of "fine art". [7; P.117-118].

The Russian scientist E.Ishchenko pays attention that this visual turn caused a number of changes in the study of phenomena related to visuality in culture [4; P.17].

Researcher V.Sklyarova uses the term “media syncretism” to explain visual turns. Syncretism means integration of various factors while preserving their characteristics [6; P.31]. Under the concept of “media syncretism” recommended by Sklyarova, there is a meaning of the integration of all the means of expression and communication used by a person, and every visual turn is necessarily realized in the conditions of media syncretism that has arisen in culture. Accordingly, the emergence and popularization of photography, cinematography, and comics in the mid-19th and early 20th centuries characterized the first visual turn in the 1920s-1930s. During the second visual turn, a number of important events took place:

- the emergence of performance (spectacle) as a separate event in the sphere of “fine arts” and as a result, the audience turns from a spectator to a participant in the spectacle;

- syncretic complexes that create new, dynamic, high-efficiency communicative situations, the wide spread of mass communication tools, and, as a result, technically expressed reality will displace real reality, and it will become difficult to distinguish reality from textual content.;

- the rapid development of performance-exhibition types of art, including the beginning of the era of large-scale sci-fi films in cinematography (for instance, film projects such as “Star Wars” by G. Lucas, “Stranger” by R.Scott).

The possibilities of the Internet have developed new forms of media syncretism. They are blurring the lines between the virtual and real worlds. In particular, let’s remember “PokemonGO”, which became the most sensational mobile game of 2016. This game is one of the first to introduce augmented reality (AR) technology. In it, players will be tasked with hunting pokémon². The game is adapted for mobile devices running on Android and iOS operating systems. The player chooses a hero (boy or girl) and the pokémon hunt begins. For this, the game determines the geographical location of the user through Google's map service and provides a virtual map of that space. The player goes to the locations of pokémon

through this map and catches them in a special virtual device (pokeball). All this is done through the phone's camera. "PokemonGO" demonstrated the integration of social, physical and virtual environments on a global scale for the first time. That is, firstly, it united the fans of the game into separate communities, providing them with the opportunity of team play; secondly, searching for pokemon is done using a real environment map; thirdly, placed virtual creatures and pokeball stocks in real space (often statues, large objects marked on the map). The game was met with great interest in Uzbekistan. Among the countries where its official release was made, the name of our country is also mentioned [14]

The development of visual and audiovisual media has realized the concepts of mass society and global world. The world began to be viewed as a whole structure. The second visual turn shaped the mass audience with its meaning. However, it was clear that such a rapid development of media and communication would cause new changes. Forecasts about these changes can be found in the researches of field researchers of that time. In particular, in futurologist A.Toffler's works "Awe of the Future" and "Third Wave" the "infosphere" created as a result of the development of new computer technologies and its impact on social and individual consciousness are discussed in detail [8]. Toffler analyzes the sphere of communication and information exchange in terms of the characteristics of each "wave". According to his interpretation, as a result of technological progress, media and communication tools go through the cycle of "characterized – publicity – characterized".

After the second visual revolution, developed under the influence of television and interactive technologies, today humanity is experiencing a third visual revolution, characterized by the development of the Internet and computer games. This process started from the second half of 2000 and made the image of artificial realities closer to reality. In particular, the introduction of Motion Capture (MoCap) technologies⁴, which was initially used in the field of computer games, into cinematography, advertising and television, led to the widespread practice of actions such as increasing the authenticity of images, anthropomorphizing animals and objects (giving them

human characteristics). As a result, talking dragons from folklore and characters from fiction literature were brought to life with maximum authenticity. For instance, dragon Smaug and other mythical creatures such as hobbits, orcs, elves in P.Jackson's "Hobbit" trilogy based on Tolkien's novels or animals in the movie "Jungle Book" based on R.Kipling's work or the characters in "Avatar" by G.Cameron's are proof of our opinion.

In addition, as mentioned above, the Internet and web technologies have shown that images can be multi-dimensional, multi-layered variations. For instance, on July 26, 2022, a young French artist working under the name Vaskange shared a digital picture with his subscribers on his personal page on Twitter. Although this image is drawn in a simple 2D format typical of a graphic image, as you zoom in on it, new images are revealed. The artist posted this zooming process online in the form of a small video clip [13].

The modern visual turn, along with the implementation of more perfect representations of image and characters, has created a feeling of tiredness in the audience from technically expressed performances. In particular, one of the main reasons is that high-quality simulacra (image, copy of something that does not actually exist) are becoming a weapon of disinformation. As a result, interest in live performances increased. A clear example of this is the development of streaming services and live broadcasting in recent years.

Before reflecting on the socio-cultural significance of the changes that we conventionally call the third visual turn, it would be appropriate to approach these processes retrospectively. In this regard, we prefer to rely on A.Toffler's "waves". Taking into account that in the current state of society, signs of the last, third wave (media demassification and specialization, simplification of information production by consumers, widespread use of communication tools and channels in business, etc.) are observed, conditionally, it can be said that this stage started almost parallel with the third visual turn. However, we cannot say the same about the second wave. The reason is that Toffler links this stage to the industrial revolution, particularly the

development of media such as printing presses, post-telegraph, photography, radio communication, and television. Including, the first two visual turns occurred during the second wave period. We take the rise of cable television as the first sign that the second wave will give way to the next. It started the process of re-segmentation of the global mass audience gathered by television. The next sign was the transformation of the Internet into a free service open to all. This corresponds to the beginning of the 90s. Against the background of such changes, a special, interactive, communication-ready audience, prone to selective consumption of content, was formed in the virtual environment on the basis of Web2.0 technologies. But there was only one push, a lever missing to mobilize this audience, to reveal its potential. In such a situation, the death of Princess Diana of Great Britain in a car accident (1997), the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal in White House (1998), V.Putin's rise to power (1999), the terroristic attacks of the Twin Towers in New York City (2001), and the Iraq war (2003) served as the significant impetus. The audience has now become a full-fledged participant in the processes of information production and distribution. Social networks, blogging, civil journalism have developed. The amount of information has increased so much that the segmentation of the audience according to their interests has deepened. In this period, at the beginning of 2000, the American Internet activist E.Pariser uses the concept of "filter bubble"⁵ while analyzing the role of web technologies in human life. He recognizes that in the modern world, people and their media consumption habits count as content, and emphasizes the importance of privacy and user control [10; P.132].

The proof of G.Calkin's, American scientist, Director of the Center for Communications at Fordham University, USA, in 1967, says "We shape the tools (communication tools – the author) and then they shape us", [11] words is evident today. As technology becomes a weapon of political propaganda, we see the mass media struggling to maintain its position as an agency of truth and objectivity. For the audience, the interpretation prevails over the image, that is, the news about events, its

review, analysis and interpretation are more important than information, and the explanatory function of the mass media is becoming primary.

By way of conclusion, it is worth noting that visual changes appeared in society on the basis of the development of communication tools, the increase in the volume of information, and the need to systematize information in a simple, understandable form. These days, the importance of the image demands its recognition as an independent code system, a separate language. The shaping of images and visual media with modern technologies has created alternative simulated realities to reality. Such creative-technological changes have been showing their influence on society and culture. The study and research of these processes is relevant for today's visual studies, media and communication theory.

Glossary

¹ *Consumerism* – the main concept of the activity is a set of regulative ideas, hopes and moods that direct behavior, lifestyle and relationships aimed at the pursuit of “prestigious” consumption, desire, pleasure and entertainment.

² *Pokemon* – abbreviation of the expression of “pocket monster”, video game and cartoon characters created by Japanese game designer S.Tadziiri, in 1996

³ *Motion Capture (MoCap) technologies* – method of character and image animation. In this case, the animation is not drawn by hand, but the movements of the real object are digitized (“duplicated”) and transferred to a three-dimensional model.

⁵ *“Filter bubble”* – negative aspect of media personalization. In this case, sites and search engines provide content that is suitable for the user based on the history of his actions on the network. As a result, the user begins to consume only content that matches his point of view, opinion, and interests. The notion was first used in 2011, in the book titled “The Filter Bubble: What Internet Is Hiding from You” by Internet activist E.Pariser’s.

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