

CONTEXTS OF VISUAL RESEARCH: SOCIAL REALITY AS CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY MIDDLE EASTERN ART

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Abstract— Images are resourceful materials for different kinds of social studies, as they become significant samples for the visual research in the fields of fine arts, visual communication, visual culture, and social research. In order to investigate those images, this study constructed a context of social reality issues, where those issues turned to codes/categories in the study process, to facilitate the analysis of the images. The issues of politics and cultures are frequently represented and analyzed in the images, to provide different meanings of cultural identities, gender, conflicts, and Diaspora, where studies can locate ethnic diversities in images, or ethnic conflicts, also it can reflect gender roles in certain community, or it can reflect the different cultures of Diasporas. In this kind of research, the personal experience of the researcher as well as the personal experience of the creative people under investigation is significant.

Index Terms— Art and Design, Contemporary Art, Global Art, Middle East, Social Reality, Semiotics.

I. INTRODUCTION

Images can raise many questions about the contemporary social realities, where we can find answers by examining those images through different contexts. Those contexts are constructed in the research process, where the researcher determines certain backgrounds to conceptualize the analysis method. In this study, I will focus of the contemporary social reality as a background, on which I will base all my contexts. Those contexts are the frameworks, which will provide categories of meanings, according to which I will analyze the meaning of the images. Locating certain contexts eventually will lead to explain the images according to the contemporary social reality. Nevertheless, contexts could be constructed according to different frameworks, scopes, and levels such as the people's personal experiences, or the artist personal experience, as well as it could focus on the representations of the people portrayed in the artwork.

II. VISUAL CONTEXTS AND PERSONAL INTERPRETATIONS

Issues of social reality can become the contexts of contemporary visual studies, especially if the studied images cannot be categorized under the conventional art categories, which existed in the conventional critical language, such as abstract art, expressionism, conceptual art, and surrealism.

Although scholars in visual research have significant research ideas, to study certain relationships between deferent paradigms, or to investigate certain issues, concepts, and theories, they do sometimes find difficulties in determining the contexts of their enquiry. Sometimes case studies become unable to access information about the personal experience of the individuals under investigations, or they may assume that they can do research about people's personal experience

without certain sampling instruments such as surveys of interviews. Where the researchers may not be able to access the exact identity of the people represented, where on the other hand he or she may have a strong access to the occasions that control certain aspects in their lives in certain levels. Therefore, the contexts and issues became significant materials of study, in the same level of studying the individual experiences of particular people.

The significance of personal interpretations in visual research appears through some visual methods like Semiotics, because it depends on the personal interpretation of the researcher, who may include on his part some personal cultural aspects into the context of his interpretations, based on his own experience and his own familiarity with the issues interpreted. This leads sometimes to significant connotations, by explaining certain cultural, political, or social backgrounds of the studied materials. When the personal experience of the researcher himself draws the attention to particular denotations and connotations in terms of political and cultural meaning, as Semiotics provides powerful frameworks to conceptualize the process of content analysis (Seale, 2012).

III. PERSONAL INTERPRETATIONS INTO COLLECTIVE CONTEXTS

The term "collective Context" refers to the environment where the case of study exists, and how different persons interpret it within the same frameworks, therefore a number of point of views may establish an agreement of thoughts to identify a certain subject.

The context could be "Subject" when it deals with themes or the issues represented in pictures or on other visual media such as TV, magazines, and cinema screens. As the causes this visuals vary across cultures and communities. On the other hand, "Object" is a fixed physical entity with certain proportions such as time length when we study the TV news, and investigate the frequency of social reality programs, and what kind of issues do they represent. In this case, the physical quality of time may influence the process of the visual research (Leeuwen and Jewitt, 2001).

The significance appears when the research integrates different social, economic, political, and cultural contexts, with visual art, TV, and cinema products, because contexts of culture face different social realities, and produce new iconographies and symbols all the time. These new visual dialogues enhance the study of cultural transformations, towards the symbolic analysis of artworks, pictures and TV shows, because it is the factor of creating the new ways of understanding symbolic dialogues in Visual Art (Preziosi and Farago, 2012).

The integration or the relation between politics and Diaspora for example, across time and cultures generated different symbols, which we can detect in the artworks of Middle Eastern, African, and European artists. This is why cultural representations appear in different occasions in contemporary art, as artists represent cultural issues to deliver different kinds of messages. The world contains many regions with a diverse assembly of cultures. This fact made artists to look for authentic representations of their cultures to reflect their own social reality, where contemporary artists investigate the relations between the objects in their environment and the issues in their social reality. (Cherlin et al., 2009).

The visual arts created scripts to describe the effects of politics on the people's daily life, when certain artist reflects his or her individual experience by telling us about the way political situations interact with the course of their life, into the context of the political environment.

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. There are different examples of artists who illustrate this case when the social layers interact with political layers in the visual artwork, as visual artist represent throughout these contexts the changes and stages of the people's accounts of social reality, by painting daily pictures of their life at homeland and Diaspora. The influence of the contemporary politics on folklore generated cultural phenomena that represent different social realities, which led to different forms of expressions in the local and global contemporary arts (Gharran, 2009).

If we take visual arts into the contemporary accounts of visual criticism, we can find another global example, which is the term of "Social Realist Paintings" which was used by Harris (2001) to describe artworks done by the French artist Courbet (1819 – 1877) 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 many examples that occurred during the years from 2011 to 2013 in the Middle East.

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 inside and outside the Middle East, 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, 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* (Harris, 2001).

Moreover, the society is the main stream where the artist collects his thoughts, facing social and cultural factors that integrate with the artistic cognition. Sullivan (2005) in his statement suggests that 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. In addition, 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.

In the same context, the artist reflects the society's contemporary culture; and takes part in representing cultural identity. Depicting values and integrate these values with the contemporary cultural concepts, as they integrate also with other factor that affect the cultural identity like politics, socio-economics, and religion. The 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.

IV. COLLECTIVE CONTEXTS IN REPRESENTING INDIVIDUALITIES: FEMINISM AS AN EXAMPLE

Feminism for example is a collective context that can include different individual examples of feminine creativities. As part of this cultural investigations scholars established different perspectives to identify a number of issues within the one culture, they made cultures into different categories according to different conceptual frameworks. Therefore, we find comparative studies that locate particular feature in two different cultures or more, and investigate it by making a comparison. For example, we find comparisons between the feminism in the western culture and feminism in the far eastern culture.

The cultural categories such as western feminism is part of western culture, the same as the German gender roles which is a part of the German culture, also the African visual culture is a part of the African culture. Scholars found their way to educate people about their cultural aspects, as a result those people started to realize their cultural similarities and differences, and advocate it under various names such as multiculturalism, freedom of speech, feminism, human rights...etc.

This cultural category, which we call "feminism" in art is not unified (D'Alleva A. 2005) as every society has its own cultural matrix, and therefore societies produce a different types of feminism across history and geography. As we define feminism according to different perspectives, which belong to diverse cultures such as European, African and Asian. Scholars established it as a cultural category to locate the issue of female belongings in the fields of art criticism and art history. Regardless of some stereotypical theories or dissertations due to the absence of empirical approach, throughout the a history of research investigations, which resulted sometimes to a biased point of views especially those which were conducted by the "Orientalists" who made their studies about some eastern and Middle Eastern cultures (Said, 1978).

Fine Art Studies used the cultural category of "Feminist art" as a critical tool to compare between arts from different regions. It is an innovative tool for its capability of integrating different cultural, social, and political layers into the context of Fine Art Studies. This creative approach in art is diverse because it has the capacity to discuss the lives of female artists according to their own experience, another aspect is the capacity of this approach to study "woman" as a subject matter in visual art studies, which makes it more than a study by definition. Therefore, Feminism is not limited to a fixed set of rules; feminisms are a collection of conceptual frameworks and integrated ideas that reflect the status of "Women Belongings" according to diverse contexts (D'Alleva A. 2005).

Themes of feminine culture have appeared throughout the contemporary Middle Eastern art scene as part of the social representations in visual arts. While Middle Eastern artists face challenges on different aspects as they express social themes resembling gender, personal identity, and nostalgia, because such social themes belong to diverse social realities across the middle eastern countries. Consequently contemporary art critics relate feminine themes in Middle Eastern visual arts to different social backgrounds, as gender roles change accordingly with the social contexts.

On the other hand, some social critics put stereotypical art literature under examinations, and they construct arguments according to the concept of "Perception versus Reality" which assembles any argument by adding two main contrasting or complementary points of views. Those arguments are constructed of two levels; the first is the common perception of the women's image, the second one is the real meaning of this image. In the approach of analyzing the first level, we will discuss the stereotypical ideas about women in Middle Eastern visual arts, and its cultural background. The debate between the first level and the second level is based on the concept of Perception versus Reality.

V. COLLECTIVE CONTEXTS IN REPRESENTING INDIVIDUALITIES: SEMIOTICS AS AN EXAMPLE

In the context of using Semiotics as a complementary theory with visual research, Seale (2012) discussed this issue by bringing to our attention an argument between two scholars who are Slater (1998) and Saussure (1974) to make more emphasis on the usefulness of Semiotics in the company of visual research. When Salter (1998) described methodologies such as Content Analysis as pure method with no theoretical conceptualizations and it only can generate theory from observations, also it treats cultural features as non-objective elements in research, because it seeks to avoid the process of interpretation.

On the other hand, Slater (1998) added that Semiotics has the capacity to build a theoretical conceptualization, but with few practical procedures, which makes it less capable to generalize, and conduct collective researches. In this case, the research needs an effective method to access and collect data along with Semiotics.

Seale (2012) used this debate to indicate that Content Analysis has the capacity to integrate with Semiotics to make a complementary conceptual framework for visual research. For this reason, he cited Saussure (1974) to draw out a wider debate between the method of Content Analysis and the theory of Semiotics. To illustrate this distinction between the method and the theory he gave an example about different cultures

when they use a particular word as 'Politics' to mean the source of 'equality, justice, and development', while it could mean in other countries the 'opposite'. Semiotics could investigate the value of a particular word in different cultures because it evaluates the social constructions of phenomenal knowledge without the necessity to refer for a text. While Content Analysis can investigate the meaning of the word 'Politics' in two different cultures, only if the researcher refers to 'texts', which discuss the meanings of politics in both cultures.

VI. CONCLUSION

Perception is the way of understanding visuals, and interpreting them into certain codes of knowledge, the structure of this knowledge in visual arts has three components, which are form, content, and subject or the context of the artwork. All these levels lead to a subjective interpretation of an artwork. On the other hand, reality stands for the actual meaning of the object represented in the artwork, therefore, it leads to objective investigation throughout the social layers of the community. Understanding these components will lead into objective and rational interpretation of the artwork or the artistic experience, where we could locate the effects of Social Reality on visual arts.

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