

# Media and Visual Subjectivity: Senses and Mediation

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*This paper is an attempt to understand the formation of media subjectivity in the intermediary domains of visual media practices in India. The article emphasises to examine the historical formation of visual subjectivity while conceptualising forms of various visual-media practices such as painting, photography, cinema, and new media, to argue that the formation of visual media subjectivity is entrenched to the sensorial aspects of the individual and society. Further, it is being argued here that the formation of the visual subjectivity is often mediated by the realms of 'sensorial continuity and break' created through our own direct or indirect interactions with various forms of media technologies and their mechanisms of deliverances. Here, the idea of 'continuity' points out the way visual subject enunciates their subject position in tune with the secular the narrative structure of modernity, and 'break,' on the other hand, indicates an inevitable narrative break proposed by the forms of new media visibility. The paper, therefore, explores the phenomenological existence of the visual subject, in a larger context of technology, media, and sensorial perception, and then points out that the visual subjectivities are constitutive of discursively defined and technologically enhanced entities. They emerge out of a composite site of various practices, involved in technology, media, society, and culture.*

**Key Words:** Media subjectivity, visibility, technologies of the self, secular narrative, grounded aesthetic, modernity, new media subject, technology, sense and perception.

## Introduction

How do we understand the historical constitution of media subjectivity in the present era of 'digital media turn' or within the intermediary domain of Web 2.0 technologies in our everyday life? Primarily, this question leads us to understand the subjectivity in two rather overlapping epistemic structures of knowledge production; the social and technological formation of the subject. In this context, media subjectivity, like media text, makes its processual presence in the intermediary domains of the social and the technological. Media subjectivity here implies an inside-out

entity belonging to the broader field of cultural technologies, in which it is impossible to delimit it either to the social or to the technological experience of the subject. In other words, the enunciation of media subjectivity by and through any form of media encounter or experience is constitutive of both the social and technological practices of the self. The practices of self, as Foucault observes, "are not nevertheless something that the subject invents by himself. They are patterns that he finds in his culture and which are proposed, suggested and imposed on him by his culture, his society and his social group" (Foucault 1987:11). Media,

as one of the technological apparatus of the culture, has the power to determine, alter and modify this subjective consciousness. It often invents new signs, symbolic and gestural narrative forms to mediate this generative consciousness of the subject. Media here not just passively represents the subjectivity, but often actively invokes, invents and disseminates experience and presence of the agency of the subject. Hence, subjectivity is not to be deduced as something static - instead it always attempts to communicate and signify multiple forms of experiences and negotiations through the act of sensorial mediations involved in both the analogue and digital media, such as the act of listening, hearing, seeing, tasting and touching.

In fact, the enunciation of subjectivity through media encounter is in a way connected to the Foucauldian idea of the 'technologies of the self', which permits individuals to "affect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality" (Foucault 1988:18). Undoubtedly, one can argue that media represents or mediates subjectivity as the way in which cultural technologies envisage or constitute them (Media representations of subjectivity are 'subjective in the sense that they constitute instances of media attempting to represent experiences that are necessarily exclusive to the inner realms of a character (or person), and there are representational because

they attempt to medially transform the complex interactions of subjective intentional states into inter-subjectively comprehensible external forms of representation (Reinerth and Jan-Noel 2017:3, original emphasis). However, in the context of communicative modernity, and related interactive digital media era, it is imperative to understand the sensorial affective dimensions of the media subjectivity and their perceptual enunciations instead of simply looking at representational elements of the subject. In this age of converging media and 'convergence culture' (Jenkins 2006, cited Bakardjieva and Georgia 2012), the enunciations of the subject "are tightly intertwined with technologies of sign systems such as the mass communication media, the cultural industry, and the multi-sensory discourse they propagate" (Bakardjieva and Georgia 2012, 160). Media subjectivity, therefore, is not only connected to the historically formed multi-faceted narrative techniques of media to accurately represent the subjective perceptual experience of the character but is also intensively attached to the active, affective and embodied sensory actions and reactions of the recipient—listening, viewing, reading, observing or interactive subject—of the media text.

It is in this context that this paper attempts to analyze the formation of the visual subject in the domain of early modern Indian visuality (painting, photography, and cinema) and also to understand the conjectural rupture created in the sensorial perception of the subject by new media visuality. The first part of the paper proposes that it

is a secular visual narrative structure that predominantly idealises the visual perceptions of Indian modernity. However, the domain of new media visuality is a contested site where, on the one hand, it shows continuity or a superimposition of secular narrative structure, but on the other hand, there are daunting images of victims, the act of violence and bare life that tries to disrupt this secular imaginary and attempts to cater to a new visual subjectivity. However, the former narrative structure and the resultant humanitarian perceptions emerge out of a visual encounter and its affective promises but the latter narrative structure depends not only on the images and its immediate affects, but goes beyond the specific referent and trying to resurface with certain mythical morals, as against the 'universal subjectivity', through the violent and disruptive images. In both of these visual acts of social and political enunciation, the visual subject not only bears the 'presence' in the given space and time but also emphasises features of the 'cultural agency,' whereby, the act of seeing itself becomes the act of being in the world. The paper, therefore, intends to analyze the phenomenological existence of the visual subject, in a larger context of media and sensorial perception.

### **Media and Visual subjectivity**

Social sciences and humanities discussions on sensation and perception, in conjunction with visual mediation, are highlighted with two major perspectives. The first gives an account that the visual media, including

new and social media practices are reproducing forms of historical, cultural and social sensibilities and mentalities of the society hence there is continuity in sensorial perception. The second strand, while agreeing with these notions of reconfiguration of social and cultural elements in visual media practices and its enduring forms, announces a radical shift in perception and sensation. This shift is mainly attributed to the 'affective turn of visual media' in terms of its forms, content, circulation and redistribution, which provides new spectatorial perception and sensation that simultaneously have the power to generate new ethical and political questions, even for a non-contextual reader, viewer or listener. As it provides a sense of (dis) embodied information, this affective intensity involved in visuality, does not necessarily follow a strict historical continuity in its mediation of the senses. However, one of the common concerns for both these stands is the ways in which visuality shapes and reshapes the perception and sensation of the subject.

In the era of photographic flow and communicative modernity, or global visual experience, the visual subject has been defined as "a person who is both the agent of sight — regardless of his or her biological abilities to see — and an object of certain discourses of visuality", whereby the "body stubbornly refused to be in more than one place at once, a networked visuality allowed us a measure of real-time global experience' (Mirzeoff 2006: 22). The visual subject is not only subject to discursive domains but also subject to technologies and related experiences. In the context of

the photographic perceptual image, the subject is located both inside and outside of the frame, whereby the former indicates the subject as an object of photographic act and latter indicates subject as a viewer, observer, or an active interlocutor. The photographic visual subject is an 'inside-out' entity, located in technologies, structures and meaning-making practices. Alternatively, it is located in the dialectical process of 'subjects making objects making subjects' (Pinney 2005:269). This position of the subject is not necessarily reduced to the imperatives of technological determinism but that of a fleeting subject; it is concurrent with visual literacy imparted by various technological disjuncture and social mediations, such as the affective, sonic, and performative aspects. As photographs not only represent but also evoke, the visual subjects are never passive, they think, they experience and are always active, even in the most dehumanizing situations of colonial anthropometric photography or at the times of bare-body experiences (Edward 2009).

The idea of media subjectivity or visual subjectivity cannot be restricted solely to media structure, forms or various institutional apparatus connected to its production, dissemination or consumption. Rather, the subjectivity should be understood as the 'space of the self' both at 'conscious and unconscious levels and the various factors contributing to the self's constitution and agency within the world', the forms of mediation—technological and social—are integral elements of such formation of the subjectivity

(Corner 2011, 87). In other words, the subjectivities are constitutive of discursively defined and technologically enhanced entities. They emerge out of a composite site of various practices, involved in media, society, and culture. John Corner elaborates these points while stating that:

It has levels of agency that are formative of sociality and it is formed by the social in ways that exceed the activities of the institutionalised media. Media processes bear upon the social in ways that are carried through into consequences for subjectivity but they also bear upon subjectivity directly in ways that have consequences for the social. Activities both at the social and the subjective level carry consequences for the operations of the media, even if in many research accounts the media are often seen to be 'dominant' in the relations that involve them, either in their own terms or in the terms of the elites whose power they are seen to reflect (Corner 2011, 90)

It is interesting to note that like the way the 'media text' has been defined as 'assemblage,' 'pastiche,' or 'allegorical,' media subjectivity reflects a compositeness of myriad forms and mentalities as well as social and cultural dispositions embedded in technology and culture. When forms of tenacity, authority, popular opinion, and a priori, as well as the aesthetic and presentable rationality of the media, enunciates the experience of the subject, this process is also being over-determined by the senses of cultural tastes, political self and civic self of the mediated subject

(Gaines 2010, 16-19; Corner 2011, 87). This, mutually inclusive and interactive relation between media and selfhood not only has both cognitive and affective implications in the process of formation of subjectivity but is also highlighted by an overtly media-dependent aspect of consciousness and action of the subject (Corner 2011). The manifestation of the subjective action and reaction, articulation of affective intensities are shaped and reshaped in this intermediary site of media and selfhood. Hence, the site can be considered as an assemblage space where various forms of media effects and affects are being manifested. However, several correlating factors are included in these two domains of media and selfhood, which in fact simultaneously function to enhance the sense and perception of the subject. As mentioned earlier, popular politics, cultural tastes, ethical and political concerns, grounded aesthetics, and fantasies along with dependent media ecology and symbolisms are some of the factors that mould the position of the subject in the everyday culture. 'The subjective is centrally implicated in any engagement with the production and circulation of knowledge and, perhaps even more obviously, with an exploration of pleasure. It is a site of imagination, of desire and of fear as well as of practical rationality' (Corner 2011). What needs to be understood in this symbolic environment and its logic of interactivity is the way it creates a sense of action, reaction or sensorial perception in the subject: the enunciation of affective, ethical and politically responsiveness of the subjectivity. Like the way the formation of subjectivity is in the

process, and as the way it often tends to negotiate with various forms of existing knowledge, the position of the said subjectivity belongs to a cognate area between the local and the global. Local here refers to the 'contexts', in which the historically informed subject is located or the discursive contexts of the subject, which is also conditioned by the forms of institutional apparatus as well as cultural impulses and sentiments of the time.

On the other hand, global refers to an imaginative and universal realm construed through the forms of mediated experience and technologies. It is the combination of materiality of media and mentality of culture that constitutes the worldviews of the media subject. In a way, neither is fixed, and the identity of the subject is always transposed from one to another through appropriation, alteration and modification of knowledge and perception available in this symbolic environment. When it encounters with forms of media, as a dynamic entity, it always tends to show the potential to traverse from the local to the global and vice versa. The identity of the subject is not completely fixed by cultural essentialism or by mediated experience –rather, it always transcends in between culture and media. In this situation, to understand visual subjectivity, we need to study the nature of the affective intensities and the sensorial dimensions of the subject, enticed by and through the encounteral intermediation between media and culture.

The next question that automatically follows is how do we understand the visual subject? Undoubtedly, one can argue that the visual subject came into

existence within ruptural domains of the visual turn of the contemporary society. In other words, visual turn of the society is a contemporary realization, which indicates a perpetual break from the conventional perception, and simultaneously announces the formulation of a new subjectivity, in conjunction with the visuality and forms of visual practices and embodied experiences. In this domain, the ways of seeing and ways of being are collated as a single performative entity, which is an active 'bodily sense-impressions' of the visual subject. The visual subject simultaneously becomes an object of certain visual discourses (visuality) and also an active agent having the potentiality of self-reflexive action and reaction (see Armstrong). The visual subject, in this phenomenological proprioception, cannot belong exclusively to the visual sense but also dwells in the experiences of kinesthesia senses or embodied sensorial perceptions, through which the visual is performed and understood (Edward 29: Paterson 27).

In the context of visual media and process mediation, the sensory experience cannot be compartmentalized on the basis of any single faculty of senses. There are overlapping or collective sensorial experiences—the perception that becomes instrumental in the production of visual media content, its circulation and the consumption of the 'real'. Thus, media's encounter with the senses has the power to rediscover not only the feeling and emotion but also the knowledge of history, memory, experience, political subjectivities, social and cultural embodiments, and fantasies of the human subject. The

visual media re/activation of senses manifested through a systematic and sometimes strategic redeployment of sign languages, signified practices and objectified values, work together to trigger cognition, sense perception, bodily and emotional engagement.

### **Narrative structure and Cultural agency**

In these propositions, the visual subject is interlinked not only with a network of social relations and various technological mediations but also an object, which embodies multiple affective sensibilities and emotions entrenched to the discourses to which it belongs. It doesn't mean that the visual subject is an outcome of specific temporalities of modernity or postmodernity and the contextual visual turn, rather the formulation of the visual subjectivity is connected to the historicity of the myriad forms of social mediation as well as technologies of the visual mediation. Hence, the senses of the subject have been constitutive of historical experiences and also—the way what Cray pointed out—touched with the ideological apparatus and its optical devices, institutions of visual techniques and image-making practices (1990).

Let me explain the ways in which these historical and cultural perceptual experiences of the visual subject have been rooted not only in the ruptural domains of contemporary new media visuality but also in the formative period of the modern Indian visuality. Considering the early visual practices (painting, photography and cinema) it has been argued that the visual

subject has symbolically been recruited into a larger narrative structure of the *longue duree*. This narratological form of *longue duree* encompasses the connoted articulation and sequencing of the conjunctural affective moments and events of oral tradition, history, myth, traditional views and fantasy; quantifiable values and skills involved in the arena of dominant political, economic and cultural order (Rajadhyaksha 1993, 54-67). The iconic and frontal encounters, which are set up in this narrative structure, provide perceptual sense to the visual subject:

All Indian art traditionally places an iconic articulation as central to it: this is elaborated into a series of elliptical, narrational encounters. As we are drawn into the discourse of universal configuration, we repeatedly encounter the icon; even we find our place in the world our seeing, mediated by several social exchanges, converge into the discourse contained by the iconic presence. Now, almost inevitably the iconic presence is placed frontally before us: our encounter with it is what sets off the discourse (Rajadhyaksha 1993, 54 emphases added).

Cultural references, mnemonic memories, icons and the 'series of perceptive shifts' that might occur through a visual encounter became constitutive of this narrative, and which intends to reactivate a historically specific cogitative experience. This narrative, therefore brings the past conjectures into the present, with all its value loaded cultural references—as a pre-text within the domain of

modern—providing a 'standpoint from which, against which, the image could be mediated into the present' for visual consumption (Rajadhyaksha 1993, 54). What is so significant in this visual-narrative pattern and its intermediation process is that it is profoundly grounded within the linguistic imaginary to prefigure a visual image. For instance, as in the case of early Indian films, 'the filmic image exudes an inevitable lure', in order to fulfil the desire of the visual subject, whereby the reciprocal gaze, mediated by the narrative signs of the popular aesthetic (linguistic), which is now resurfaced into the cinema, sought in the realization for images 'it already knew and now saw, kinetically transformed' (Rajadhyaksha 1993, 69). The act of seeing here resonates with the idea of the act of being, and what is perceived in the image is not a psychological fact, but a phenomenological one. "It is "reduced," that is, the reality is "bracketed out." The image is always an image "of something"; it is intentional, pointing to a reality beyond itself..." (Buck-Morss, 1996; 46). Though the affective feeling generated by the image is an outcome of the spontaneous and momentary encounter, the 'reality' of the image is happening in the sphere of 'elsewhere,' beyond the frame and connected to the larger visual economy of consumption. Performative space and corporeal dimension of performance, posthumous memory, oral history, paraphernalia of presentation and theoretical propos, and the like, constitute the sphere of the visual economy of consumption (Frietag, 2001).

The linguistically mediated symbolic

apprehension of the real, as well as its technological interpretations, was not always filled with any unique visual convention or semiology, rather displays an unequal flow of sign-image and its inappropriate presence, however united by the discursive context. For instance, colonial studio photographic practices and their visual semiology articulate the sameness through a unity of civil style, while simultaneously showcasing the differences through a set of behavioral and moral authority. It involves semiology of indication and concealment, and a new 'civil' style of behaviour on the part of the subjects' (Udayakumar 2002, 166). Backdrops help to conceal the 'real' at the same time supplementing a new fusion of performative and theatrical space for body and subjects to enact their subjective imaginary, or in other words, what Kant calls 'subjective universality' (Kant 1998, 70). So, the meaning included in the photographic mediation of the social and social mediation of the photograph cannot be understood through the mere lenses of visual contents or codes, but only through various practices, experiences and embodiments that are generated by this medium.

In this context of linguistic flow of signs, the visual subjects and their perceptions 'are interpellated or 'recruited' by the Symbolic' (Prasad 1998, 10). In other words, the subject has been interpellated and enunciated by the ideologically sutured visual language and grounded perceptions. It means that "ideology involves a process of self-recognition by which the subject comes to acknowledge the truth or naturalness

of its conditions of existence. The ideological process is unconscious and inescapable: there is no position outside ideology" (Ibid). Similarly, it is also been argued that the formation of the visual subject has depended on the specific discursive context, and it is the discursive context that makes meaning for the visual subjectivity; there is nothing outside the discourse, and hence claims that it is the context which needs to be studied to understand the visual subjectivity.

Psychoanalytical perspective, on the other hand, placed the yet to be completely formulated subject into the signs, which is a constitutive domain of linguistic, visual and symbolic. Nevertheless, the visual perception is always mediated by the transaction between the conscious and unconscious drives. The cultural codes and imaginary institutions play a crucial role in these transactions, whereby subjectivity is culturally as well as psychically constructed. The identification of the subject in this exchange with the real and imaginary or ideal, and its symbolic existence not only creates a sense of a traumatic separation from intimacy with referents but also produces a sense of alienation. The formation of the visual subject in this dialectical split between the real and the imaginary then involves an act of self-recognition-misrecognition and self-fragmentation.

It should be understood here that the above conceptual interpretations do not necessarily position the visual subject as a normative or linear entity to be recognized instantaneously as something which is determined by culturalism. On the contrary, the



subject is more active and agential, while appropriating and rearticulating the self in the intermediary domains of technological and cultural representation. This involves an art of appropriation enmeshed in the judgment of popular aesthetics. Therefore, visual practices involve an art of appropriation, the logic of inclusion and dissemination of a signified set of ideas, practices, things, commodities and their signified values and politics. Appropriation of the visual language, either as legitimised or as counter signifiers and their inclusion and exclusion in the frame can be defined as 'grounded aesthetics.' Grounded aesthetics are not only the yeast of common culture but also the intermediary and inter-textual visual media practices, and through which the 'cultural agency' is expressed in the popular and political aesthetics of the time. In many ways, the visual subject here endures the markers of 'cultural agency' either through embodied cultural expression and performativity or the refractory visual excess manifested through proprioception imaginary. 'Cultural agency' connotes a 'feel that exceeds both conventionally conceptualize(d) 'politics' and 'culture', an extended field of intervention, the world in which the spectatorship and appropriation of commercial cultural artefacts play a central role'( Pinney 2001,17).

There are many ways in which these dispositions of cultural agency of the visual subjects and bounded sensibilities have been deployed in the domain of visual narratives. They may address, on the one hand the powers of the image

that dismantle the ever existing binary between linguistic and visual language through its powerful and affective visual syntax and, on the other hand, may assert and claim a disruption in the dominant form of visibility. However, all these disruptive codes and powerful images never managed to overcome or create a narrative/epistemological break in the existing visual mode of production and hence the perceptions of the visual subject either. Rather it encompasses all heterogeneous perceptions, disruptions and subversive ideas into a unique visual narrative; a secular visual narrative, as part of a larger narrative project of universal secular visibilities.

Let me explain this narrative technique while pointing out the ways in which how the Dalit and subaltern visual subjectivity has been integrated into these secular visibilities, which were formulated during the time of colonialism or what usually called as in the epistemic structure of colonial modernity.

### **Secular Aesthetics**

The colonial and nationalist discourses invariably produce complex and hybrid visual practices, which had its genesis in the Western philosophical tradition of aesthetic as well as the artistic realism invented by the colonial art school. As Pinney writes, "colonial realism becomes xeno-real, which claims its power from its closeness to that reality that lies within the truth of colonial power" rather than from a connection to any objectively extant reality—that is, it is "mimicry of what colonialism (rather than nature) authorizes as 'real'

"(2004:31). The visual figure and subject collate a realism popularized by the dominant and mutually inclusive system of representations. These aesthetic formulation had its superimposition on elements such as the convention imposed by academic realism, ideological substances of Brahmanical cultural rituals, signs, objects and they foregrounded the spiritual recurrence of popular Hinduism as 'the natural assets of the entire nation'. The modernism project of Indian art was filled up with these pictorial codes of Indian nationalist modernity and their deep-seated affiliation to certain sociological constructions of cultural identities, and hence failed to produce any alternative perspective or spectatorial sensibility to critique the nature of its own structural formulations. "Social identity in the modernist space gets blurred as the issue of identity was already fixed in the Brahmanical nationalist context' (Alone, 2013). In other words, by reframing Gopal Guru's formulation of the language discourses of the nation, it can be said that the visual language of the beyond and its grounded aesthetic is deeply entrenched within the visual perceptions of the 'derivative' and 'desi' discourses, whereby the socially and culturally conditioned visual reflexes have been predominantly used in order to characterize 'the conditions and consciousness' of the Dalit and subaltern groups (Guru, 2011). In these blurred fields of visual economy, theirs is mere presences which can be easily identifiable as a distinct identity of the other, or as 'a part apart' category, however nevertheless a part. Visual conventions, thus supplemented with the social normative of caste hegemony

where subalterns are caricatured with visual simulacra of negative, stereotype and atemporalize them as having no visual synonyms of political consciousness.

What is significant here is that the visual subject's embodied perceptions are conditioned by the social binaries; and hence, the secular narrative structure gives an adequate space to these binaries without disrupting each other social positioning. Visual subjects are born; they live and lose in this imaginary symbolic order construed by the larger narrative scheme of secular visibility, its continuity and its aesthetical dictum. The visual mediascape (painting, photography, cinema and new media), continuously reproduce culturally coded and politically meaningful visual signs without bemoaning any radical shift or reconfiguration of this narrative strategy. The meaning of the sign and the ways in which it is arranged in the visual spaces or surfaces may change due to the technological apparatus. However, it addresses a visual subject whose visual consumption desires and pleasures, or the embodied sensorial perceptions are conditioned to fit into a narrative order of the secular visibility. Here the visual subject's action and reactions, and affective sensibilities are connected to the visual literacy (secular) which produces both rational and irrational experiences and excesses such as social responsiveness, scopophilia, whistling fans and enthusiastic communities (Srinivas, 2013 and Prasad, 2009). In this context, the position of the visual subject can be identified in a space between social and psychological, between sacred and political.

## New Media Visuality: assemblages and visual subjectivity

The epistemological domain of the secular narrative was, therefore, generated with a composite space to accommodate and fulfil the historical embodied sensory experiences, negotiations and reactionary elements of the visual subject. This secular narrative remains as a formidable visibility till recent times, without showing any epistemological break. However, it was new or social media visibility in the context of digital-visual turn and media convergence, which gave a narrative break in the visual perception of the subject. In India, especially after the 'technological modernity' there are genres of photographs (new media texts or assemblages) which are being widely circulated in the new media spheres, and these visuals - photographs, images, videos—are in a way representing visual-reality of the specific events of violence, tragedy, horror, human right violation, disaster, trauma, pain and suffering of the people. But, at the same time, these interactive visuals, as a new media text or assemblage, has the power to invite the attention of the visual subjects while activating their affective embodiments and sensorial intensities. It creates sensory affects, during the encounter with these new media texts. For instance, these recurring photographic or new media visual genres include the visual narratives of the disastrous industrial gas-tragedy in Bhopal, and the subsequent photographic campaign demanding justice for the victims, photographs of Indian partition and the resultant violence. Similarly we come across disturbing images of civil

right activist- Irom Sharmila and her struggle and the on-going hunger strike demanding the Indian government's repeal of Armed Forces Special Power Act (AFSPA) of 1958. One may also mention here the photographs of the shocking and disturbing visuals of Gujarat genocide in 2002, images of mass movement against the water plunder of the Coco Cola company in Plachimada, Kerala, the photographs of agitation against Kudamkulam Nuclear Plant and Police atrocities, the pricking pictures of the deformed victims of the Endosulfan chemical pesticides, as well as photographs of mob lynching, conditions of refugees and migrants. Images of natural disastrous, caste violence and the like are some of the instances where genres of photographs powerfully disseminate the affective dimension. Such visuals arrest the consciousness of the visual subject and simultaneously these photographs articulate awareness about the captured event.

Indeed, these are visual testimonies of icons of pitiless events and suffering in the past and present; they can be treated as an evidence of the notion 'things have been there', or what existed (Barthes, 1982); they could also be treated as examples of interpretation of the real (Sontag, 1979). Nevertheless, the question here is not the one about 'evidence', 'framing' or 'staging', rather the manner in which these discursively arranged photographs or new media assemblages are able to produce an affective relationship between the suffering body and the viewer or the digital-citizen? Indeed, it can be said that traumatic visual signs, foregrounded

verbal or voice narratives are generative to create specific affective sensibilities or mental traumas (of both image and the viewer), which function as a medium or tool to raise certain critical political and cultural apprehensions about humans, their conditions and rights. In other words, the visual subject's (interactive viewer's) encounter with the surfaced 'bare body' in the spheres of digital visibility and the entrenched affective signifiers instigate a political question about one's own subject position as 'precarious life' within the political ideology of the present. The new media visual assemblage, on the other hand, involves all sorts of disruptive and haunting visual signifiers, political aesthetics, and overall a narrative text filled with emotions and politics. The digital interactions, and subsequent visual encounters and embodied experiences of the visual subject quite often have the power to transpose the consciousness and ethical perception of the subject. In this context, these digitally illuminated photographs are the sites where the subject's ethical and political positions encounter his/her own subjective apprehension about the subjectivity – as a being—belonging in the ideology of the contemporary. Seeing, in this context, is a sense of activism of the being and hence an act of becoming; seeing is not only believing but also being and becoming in the world.

Here, I am not looking at the indexical 'meaning of a single frame' or its symbolic attributions toward the real. My interest is largely foregrounded with the contested political connotations and implicit political consciousness of

the visual subject (viewer), that these photographic or visual genres are able to mobilize, where the new media visual sites – genres of photographs- function as a 'public screen' to apprehending the real (pain, trauma and suffering) and recognizing justice or rights. Though the genres and its diverse visual effects could provide thematic impressions, which potentially provoke the ethical and moral positioning of the observer or visual subject, each frame of the new media visual assemblage or genres of photographs has its own implicated dimension to stimulate the sight of the viewer. Frames embody the conventional aesthetic principles as well as artistic quality; however, it renders the scenes of deformed body, tortured victims, pain and tenderness of bare life and its vulnerability. Therefore, in such photographs, there is an element of simultaneity as the appeal of artistic quality as well as solid engagement with the ethical position. The resultant recurrence of a deep paradox between the aesthetic sensibility and the affective engagements create a dialectical relation between the pleasure and pain in perceiving, which need further analysis. As Fischer wrote aesthetics of "bare life" engage us on an affective level that remains deeply ambiguous. The unsettling subject matter of the photographs and their striking artistic quality work against each other, where one operating as a limit on the other (Fischer, 2007: 15).

On the other hand, the systematic genre formulation based on disturbing contents of the photographs, and its diffusion in multiple popular and new media sites are drawing popular

attention not because of their striking aesthetic quality but its efficacy to activate the political consciousness based upon human virtues. Indeed, it is the discursive genre effect which combined the reflection of everyday life of the victims and epitomized emotions and irrecoverable suffering conditions which necessitate the look. On the other hand, it is also true that the effective nature of photographic genres and “their disturbing subject matter works against any feeling of aesthetic pleasure” (Fischer, 2007: 15). However, while rendering an aesthetic of catastrophe, the element of visual pleasure is an unavoidable component of these genres. The traumatic evident and its realism documented in the photographs or new media visuality may not be treated as an art, but “art” cannot be kept at a proper and secure distance from this atrocity. Apart from the “surplus enjoyment” or *jouissance*- the pleasure and pain principle, how could one define the aesthetic appreciation of sufferings or catastrophe? The common epistemic content of these digital frames of traumatic visual assemblages (victims of riots, lynching, state brutality, war or natural disasters) are that they induced with arbitrary violence and injustice inflicted by the state or the dominant on the vulnerable life of the human (human but not qualified as human!) and the stark visual exposures demanding an intervention of the state to protect their lives, “they appeal to the state for protection, but the state is precisely that from which they require protection”(Butler 2009, 26). These new media visual frames and their depiction of ever haunting suffering have a discursive political context

and it is through which it presents the excessively fragile, decomposed, deceased and victimized figures to pose the idea of social ‘responsiveness’, and recognizability (Butler 2009, 66). These digital visual assemblage of new media always attributed to function as a public screen to diffuse ‘shock waves’, which render public reaction and action; the way in which visual consumptions of shock, act of violence and distracting visual signifiers and their affectivity transmit certain sensibilities of social and political righteousness. These images in the digital public sphere can be considered as an ‘action-image’ as its signifiers, figural excess and feeling always tend to produce certain perceptual experiences to the senses, and to incite subjective action and reaction. These subjective actions and reactions are not necessarily confined to the limited geographical or essentialist cultural context of the subject, rather the new visual media transpose its visual subject into a deterritorial and imagined context to invoke justice and social responsibility of the human. Butler says:

Accordingly, our capacity to respond with outrage, opposition, and critique will depend in part on how the differential norm of the human is communicated through visual and discursive frames. There are ways of framing that will bring the human into view in its frailty and precariousness that will allow us to stand for the value and dignity of human life, to react with outrage when lives are degraded or eviscerated without regard for their value as lives (Butler 2009, 66).

In the new media visual assemblage and its circulation to point out suffering, it is the act of cruelty and torture, which mediates the affect. The shock in sight, the affective reactions, would further necessitate to be spoken about what is moral/immoral, justice/injustice and finally alert one to take a judgment on who is 'considered as human and inhuman'. This is a political judgment where one is dragged in to a query against the subjective conditioning of political discourse as well as against the normative coherence of the political narratives, and indeed a reorganization of one's own sensibility and the subjective position.

### **Visual subject as speaking subject**

The technological ruptures and disjuncture (oil painting, analogue photography and digital simulations) and parallel social transformations and experiences, simultaneously announces the emergence of the visual subject, who does not merely represent an passive spectator, observer, or subject of any particular discourse, rather portrays an active agent who can be part of the interactive domains of the global visual imaginary, while using suitable signifiers, and symbolically recruiting himself or herself into it. Here, the sense of belongingness in the world is made possible through the symbolic significations available in the spheres of visual literacy. The visual culture and the technological dissemination of visual literacy generates particular individuals, as well as socio-cultural subjectivities, instead of visual cultures being created or established by individuals or through a cultural collective (Fuery and Fuery,

2003: 43). However, visual subjectivity and its activities are 'not just about dominant notions of subjectivity, but also about negotiations of selfhood and identity from various gendered, classed and ethnically constituted subject positions' (Doy, 2005: 49). The visual image or new media assemblage moves across historical experiences, so does the visual subject. Various technological interventions and interpretations, as well as bounded social and cultural significations, stimulate the shift in subjectivity from an uncritical and unaware spectating position to a conscious and self-reflexive positioning with respect to an image (Doy, 2005:7). This shift in subjectivity equally articulates the subject's position and involvement in signification as well as their insertion into the symbolic order. This position of the fragmented and flexible subject is what Julia Kristeva (1986) termed as 'speaking subject': the speaking subject is conceptualized as a formation of subjectivity and its multiplicity in the system of significations as well as in a social sphere. According to her, speaking subject involves aspects of reproduction and this is why a focus on the processes and effects of visual cultures and its language is so crucial (The speaking subject is a fundamental element that Kristeva works through in her theories on and about language with regard to signification and psychoanalysis. For her, the speaking subject is a fragmented subject, exposed to and compelled by Freudian drives (psychical energies) and regulated by social and cultural institutions (Kristeva, 1986)). In this insertion, interaction and negotiation, the body—the speaking subject—

moves across all cultural spaces and is part of both the symbolic language, the language of visual cultures, new media visibility, and spaces of resistance and negotiation.

Theoretically speaking, in the context of visual encounter and affective intensities, these reactionary videos or new media visual assemblages and their circulation help to gather ethical and political consciousness against such violent and barbaric acts. Nevertheless, such critically bounded humanitarian visual perception of the visual subject might help to develop an antithetic position against the visuals and the event of violence, but even then, the critical judgment of taste is an outcome of the secular visual narratives. It means the value judgment or the rational sensibility to define what is ugly, beautiful, violent, good or bad, as well as what pertains to atrocity and trauma are part of the visual literacy promulgated by and through the secular visual narrative structure of modernity. Undoubtedly, these disruptive visuals and their interactions not only generate an affective feeling against the visual act-event but also, try to help the visual subject to build ethical responsiveness and resistance against those inhuman acts of violence or disastrous insecure conditions of the human. It is conceptualized that the affective encounters and their intensities will also provide a promise; a shimmering inventiveness as affect is a promise for something. Nonetheless, in a visual encounter, these disruptive visual images and videos refuse to give any promises to the visual subject rather they decline to address

the subjective consciousness and phenomenological experiences of the subject in the secular visibility. It means that these disruptive images are made for cognitive consumption not based on the immediate content or subject matter, not even based on the referent, rather based on 'absent centre' which is either metaphysically connected to the ethical and moral discourses of the universal secular visibility of modernity or the mythically connoted morals, ethical perception of any dominant religion or an ideology. Hence, the latter always challenges the former to disrupt its narrative structure to create a break in its secular perception through ever increasing violent signifiers and new media visual assemblages. The visual subjectivity enunciates its conscience in this contested paradox of secular and non-secular narrative paradigms of the contemporary.

## Conclusions

The article attempted to conceptualise the formation of the visual media subjectivity in conjunction to various visual media technologies and their schemas of representations. While looking at various forms of visual media articulations and their appropriations by the masses, it is argued that the formation of the visual media subject is not only connected to the historically formed multi-faceted narrative techniques of media but also intensively attached to the active, affective and embodied sensory actions and reactions of the recipient—listening, viewing, reading, observing or interactive subject—of the media text. Media technologies and their visual apparatus

have a decisive role in shaping the sensory worldviews of the people. In other words, the mutually inclusive and interactive relation between media and selfhood has both cognitive and affective implications in the process of formation of subjectivity, however it is also highlighted by an overtly media-dependent - technologically defined- aspect of consciousness and action of the subject. If we look at visual subjectivity in the domain of analogue and new media technologies, it is observed here that one of the crucial aspects of the historical formation of the visual subjectivity is that its transition from the passive subjective position to an interactive sensorial subjective position of the contemporary. The visual subject is more active and agential, while appropriating and rearticulating the self in the intermediary domains of technological and cultural

representation, and hence it is called as speaking subject: the one who is both the object and subject of certain discourses of technology and culture, however always enunciated to act according to the ethical imperatives of the present. The agency of this visual subject—or the sense of being in the world—is more prone to the social responsiveness and affective embodiments of the subject, however overtly determined by mediating technologies and their power of dissemination or significations connected to the media text. It depends on the way technologies enhance the sensorial effect of the subject for an effective action and reaction.

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