

**VISUAL CULTURE DISSOLVING ART?  
EYE AND THE CITY: THE ROLE OF THE CITY IN THE TRANSMISSION OF  
VISUAL CULTURE**

BY

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper examines Visual Culture as encoded in photography, house types and interior decorations in a cluster of rural villages in Delta State of Nigeria to see how the visual cultures of the urban cities of Warri, Benin City and Sapele have been reflected on the emergent new culture in these villages. The city, which is a creation and creator of urbanism, by its characteristics as a melting pot for diversity of thoughts, of ten sets the pace for the country-side in almost every sphere of life. Visual culture cannot be excepted from this influence. The eye is the entry point of almost all visual affections. But most of all, many pleasurable experiences in life depend on seeing forms (Anderson 1961). Art, the manipulation of media under the aegis of forms and images, to simulate significant experiences, is largely conditioned equally by the ideological or physical environment in which it is created. The variable of environment cannot be ignored in considering the material, size, colour, texture et cetera of any tactile – visual material culture. In short, the terms "out of context" or "in context" used in art discourses, derive from the correlation between visual forms and the physical or ideological locality from which such forms emanate. Contemporary urban environments are replete with visual commercial forms, which give false notions of reality. High fidelity photographs advertised exaggerations of technical fantasies have produced utopian values, in fashion, interior decoration, environmental aesthetics and kinetic body carriage. These fictional values foisted on the city people are influential. The result reveals an overwhelming belief among rural people of the suzerainty of the city centres in patterning the visual culture of the rural populace. This bandwagon effect is discernible in the visual arts of painting, sculpture and serious architecture. The trendy as long as it could be traced to a city centre is popular, even if it had a forgotten rural origin. The instruments of dominance such as radio, television, print media are all based in the city and draw their contents from city paradigms.

**Visual Culture**

Visual culture could be defined as the tendency to be affected by what one sees, manifested in what the person henceforth prefers to see, acquire, keep and advocate as pleasurable to see. Simply put, it is a seeing way of life, the quality of which depends, on ones level of visual literacy. The images and artefacts which surround us shape our lives, whether or not one is conscious of this fact, is however immaterial. Theodore Sizer corroborates this view in his essay on "Public Art and Seeing Well".<sup>1</sup> Some of the images people love to see are obtrusive while others they see by choice. It would appear that in Nigeria and especially in the environment under study, photographs, house types, fashion and choice of interior decoration are selected by choice.

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Hence these material cultures among other visual structures of the artificial environment are considered appropriate choice for an assessment of the visual culture of the people. The assumption is that no one will for instance put on dress wears, or keep printed photographs, he does not like to see. House owners have pleasure in the form of their houses; the same applies to those who procure furniture items to decorate their rented apartments. This is because in the view of Anderson most pleasurable experiences in life depend on seeing forms.<sup>2</sup>

Fin 1

Visual culture is a seeing way of life. The city is always a spectacle for its dwellers but more so for the rural dwellers whose simple abode appears to predispose them to **low image resolution** in critical perception. Conversely, the city because of its composition has a visual field associated with **complexity**, an aesthetic principle which demands critical visual intelligibility to decode its **highly resolved imagery**. This is why the artistic innovations of the past in history have always been engendered by the city or urbanism. The **Renaissance** and **Modern Art** are good examples<sup>3</sup>. However, some of the thoughts which are assembled in the city, on which new ideas are built may have rural or "other" origin, as was the case of modern art.

The formal mix of city sceneries, and their strangeness to the rural dweller makes its visual types a **Spectacle**; and spectacle is the operative word, in trying to understand why the city exerts such a telling influence on the visual culture of rural people. From ancient times the city has always been associated with sophistication wherein lies the problem of the foolish in going to the city<sup>4</sup>

The city has licence to present that which has hitherto not been seen and by implication is believed to advance those who encounter it beyond previous acquaintances. When therefore, something unfamiliar and by that spectacular to the one encountering it appears, the percipient tends to give in to the rapture of pleasurable experience even if in awe. This feast for the eye real or assumed, is always associated with materials from the city.



### Contemporary Urban Environments Versus Visual Culture.

Reality is fallacious in contemporary urban space because of commercial persuasive images foisted on the unsuspecting masses.<sup>5</sup> These comprise advertorials, special dresses of professionals, and habitats (kiosks, caravan, restaurants, offices) which are linked with commerce. High fidelity photography (package designs, printed handbills, posters) (still or motion) provides larger than life possibilities upon which the innocent but ambitious public now set their life goals.

Fig.2

For instance a bill-board advert in Nigeria has photomontage images of an exaggerated tall and healthy adolescent beside an over fed infant. The latter looks towards the former in awe and admiration. The caption reads: **So Big How Come?** The connotation assumes that the answer is clear; the good health and rapid growth comes from feeding on **Three Crowns** evaporated milk.<sup>6</sup> As Utopian as the idea appears, the unsuspecting common man is somehow convinced that milk has great powers to create the canvassed position of the advertorial. Yet other conditions which contribute to healthy growth have been ignored. Urban culture transmitted mostly in visual terms especially via adverts moulds visual culture. Twenty-one years ago Augustin Onwordi isolated *logical incompatibility of culture, the superficial use of Nigerian symbols and lack of observable use of product function* as the endemic limitations of this practice. Yet, the practice did not fail to influence local people even if negatively nor has the fashion trend changed.<sup>7</sup>

Fig.3

Fig.4

### Fashion and Visual Culture

The tendency to follow current styles of clothes supports the fact that visual culture is popular culture. Here again the city detects the pace for the countryside. The dress wears of news casters in Nigeria appears to set the pattern of dressing for career women, while those of dancers, musicians and dramatists foreign or local, popularised through photographs has great influence on fashion trend among the youths. Villagers sometimes see Professional and industrial uniforms as fashion. A popular axiom in Nigeria which may be true for

the cities is that "you are what you wear". But it is not surprising to see people in villages dress up like court clerks, civil servants, business tycoons, some even as lawyers, when they do not have such occupational affiliations. This dressing behaviour sometimes turn out to be a way to show admiration for particular kinsmen who live in the city or to show off what they have seen in the city as a sign of "been to". Visually they make their appearance special by so doing. These dressing habit do not connote what they denote. They have different values for villagers who imitate them.



**Kinetic Body Carriage:** The gait of modern men and women have been modified greatly by what they see on the television or cinema screens. People like to walk and dress like Michael Jackson, Tokumbo Ajai, Rambo (Sylvester Stallone), Cyril Stauber, Nelson Mandela or Miriam Makeba. Beauty Contests and fashion modelling has popularised the catwalk that it is now a popular walking style of our youths in Nigeria.



#### **Architecture and Interior Decoration**

In the architectural history of Nigeria the Brazilian prototypes of the coastal areas and the storey buildings of the colonial administrative headquarters, was soon appropriated as country home by successful merchants and other wealthy individuals.<sup>8</sup>



City type architecture are unwittingly copied and reproduced in rural areas even though there is no steady power supply to activate some of their constituent amenities. Windows meant for air-conditioned apartments are fitted even where there are no air-conditioning machines.

Multi-Storey buildings are erected even where there are no pressures on the land space



In interior decoration, it is not uncommon to find furniture meant for commercial houses being appropriated for living houses. Calendars and almanacs are hung indiscriminately as a sign of the civilized individual. Shelves, (room dividers) are acquired and kept in living rooms as status symbol. The glassed shelf with compartments for drinking glasses, saucers, jugs and porcelain or china wares is typical of furnishing items acquired and retained as status



symbol. The glasses, saucers etc are rarely used but kept as a proof of the owners awareness of practices in the city.

Fig.9

### Discussion

What are the reasons for this city-rural bandwagon material culture appropriation? At first it would appear as a thoughtless enchantment of the conceptually weak by the strong. On deep analysis one will see that these material cultures are to a large extent re-contextualized. They serve a functional purpose rather than as art or "seen in the light in which the city persons own them; here is something cerebral, in which the immaterial aspect of the visual objectification satisfies the desires of the owner even when apparently out of context.

To fully appreciate the urban-rural visual cultural pull an understanding of the concept of **the city as spectacle** is pertinent.. A spectacle is inherently imbued with some magnetic forces by which it attracts ideas and people. The visual experience deposits on these people and becomes a basis for action thereafter. First is the attraction, then the exposure before one goes out to disseminate acquired experiences. Importantly, the city brings the "other" and "the other is usually preferred" in the Nigerian context.

Rural people acquire material cultures characteristic of city people and then re-invent them to reinforce extant beliefs now embattled by rapid changes. Material cultures, which rely very much on visual evaluation for their relevance, have from time immemorial served as explicit or implicit tools for the expression of power. The socio-economic and political powers of the rural people have come to be tethered to the new economies of the city.

The instruments of social power are education or appearance of it, manifested in the type of company one can keep, the type of material possessions one could parade such as cars, dress-wears, and house type and its decorations. Economic power has always been the reason for going to the city since new economic order is a product of urban induced activities.

Since political power on encounter with the West shifted from the village or clan heads through the court messenger, district officers, civil servants, then to the modern politicians, the visual culture has tended towards the appropriation of whatever tastes are exercised by these new political agents. Thus the official uniform of the District Commissioners(DC) or Officers (DO) even of soldiers and court messengers became the dresswear preference of early merchants, clan heads and warrant chiefs.

### Conclusion

People are easily persuaded by what they see hence the adage "*seeing is believing*". The pervasive influence of popular arts, as ingrained in everyday useful objects, on the style of contemporary art perhaps owes to this fact. Contemporary arts have consistently towed the path of what is prevalent in the city. It is unequivocal that visual culture is popular culture.<sup>9</sup> One may quickly add that though the city transmits visual culture to the village, the process of re-invention alters its city meaning; in short a new context *translates* the city culture. In painting, sculpture and architecture the trend is to create in the manner of types found in the city. Early wall paintings by folk artists, landscapes by new modern artists, and figures, incorporated into face masks copied city ideas like policemen, crucifixes or the white stranger. Public sculpture made of **cement fondue** are now features of country- houses and sole proprietor business premises. In style Nigerian art is still evolving in which creative adaptations of new found creative possibilities are recombined with time-tested indigenous idioms. Currently the classical conceptual art of old is nascent in performance and installation art of the sixth generation contemporists. In this activity we see a positive multiplication of the **synthetic theory** of the Zarianists. African traditional shrines and the rituals associated with their contexts perhaps cannot be excluded from the integrative principles, which inform postmodernist arts.

**Globalisation is in operation.** Gradually there is a widening of the crevice in ideological frontiers art-wise, between the industrialised nations and the outsider cultures on planet earth. The



instruments of dominance which also includes art is drawing unabatedly from the pool of ideas which the cities offer. Material objects appropriated from the city for the villages are aimed to invent contexts that simulate "modernist realities" for what obviously is **visual transliteration**. There is a tendency for the viewer to disregard artistic categories. These are statements, which may be fine but essentially devoid of niceties.<sup>10</sup> As long as the city is democratic in freely though competitively allowing everyone access to many ideas, contemporary art, if it must serve our aesthetic desires, has no option than be a product of its epoch.

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