



Regular Research

Mediated Resistance: The Role of Visual Art in Shaping Identity and Power Discourse in Postmodern Communication

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Abstract

This study explores how visual art operates as a medium of mediated resistance in the context of postmodern communication. Drawing on interdisciplinary theories from cultural studies, critical discourse, and media ecology, the research investigates how visual artworks—such as political murals, protest posters, and digital illustrations—challenge dominant ideologies and contribute to the construction of collective identity. Using a qualitative methodology combining semiotic analysis and Visual Discourse Analysis (VDA), the study analyzes selected visual texts to examine their representational strategies, ideological content, and audience interaction. The findings reveal that visual art functions not only as an aesthetic form but as a discursive force that reclaims marginalized narratives, negotiates symbolic power, and activates participatory resistance. This research affirms the role of visual culture as a central arena for the articulation of agency, identity, and alternative worldviews within postmodern media ecologies.

Keywords: Visual art; mediated resistance; postmodern communication; identity construction; visual discourse.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the interplay between visual art and communication has become a critical domain within postmodern cultural studies. As societies increasingly operate within hyper-mediated environments, visual art has evolved beyond its traditional aesthetic and decorative roles to emerge as a potent communicative force. It functions not only as a representational practice but as a dynamic site for the construction of meaning, power, and identity [1], [2].

In the context of postmodernity—characterized by the collapse of grand narratives, fragmentation of authority, and proliferation of media—images do not merely illustrate social realities; they constitute them. As such, visual artworks serve as both medium and message, encoding symbolic resistance against hegemonic discourses and providing platforms for the articulation of subaltern perspectives [3]. Visual culture becomes a terrain where ideological struggles are waged, where the seen and the unseen are actively negotiated.

This paper explores the function of visual art as a form of mediated resistance that participates in shaping social identities and reconfiguring power relations. Specifically, it examines

how artistic expressions, especially those emanating from marginalized or oppositional communities' critique dominant representations and propose alternative modes of subjectivity and agency [4], [5]. These practices are not merely reactive but generative, offering new vocabularies of resistance and visibility.

Through an interdisciplinary lens that incorporates theories from sociology, media studies, critical discourse analysis, and art history, the study analyzes how visual art operates as a communicative mechanism within postmodern media ecologies. The objective is to interrogate the ways in which visual texts disrupt normative structures and contribute to the broader project of cultural resistance. By situating art within the communicative matrix of postmodern society, this research aims to advance our understanding of how mediated visual practices shape contemporary discourses on identity, power, and collective memory.

2. Materials and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative research design, employing a dual approach that combines semiotic analysis and Visual Discourse Analysis (VDA) to examine how visual artworks mediate resistance and construct social identity within postmodern communication landscapes. The interpretive nature of this research allows for a nuanced reading of visual texts as socio-political artifacts rather than merely aesthetic expressions.

2.1 Sampling and Data Sources

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select three categories of visual artworks that represent distinct modes of mediated resistance:

1. Political murals – exemplified by the *Ayotzinapa 43* mural in Mexico.
2. Protest posters – including feminist visuals from the Women's March and Black Lives Matter (BLM) movements.
3. Digital illustrations – such as climate justice memes distributed via Instagram.

These cases were selected for their thematic focus on resistance, their diverse media forms, and their circulation within distinct socio-technological ecologies. Data were collected from a range of sources, including visual artifacts themselves, accompanying textual captions, hashtags, and audience interactions (e.g., comments, shares, and remixes).

2.2 Analytical Framework

The study applies semiotic analysis to identify and deconstruct visual signs, symbols, and metaphors. This includes the examination of color schemes, compositional arrangements, body language, and iconography.

Complementing this, the research incorporates Visual Discourse Analysis (VDA), drawing from the frameworks of van Leeuwen and Gillian Rose. VDA treats visual representations as discursive acts embedded within ideological and institutional power structures [4], [6], [7]. It investigates three interrelated aspects:

- Representation: How subjects and events are visually portrayed (e.g., passive/active, marginalized/centralized).
- Interaction: How the image positions the viewer through gaze, perspective, and modality.
- Composition: How elements are organized to produce salience, hierarchy, and meaning. Rose's (2007) tripartite model is also applied to examine:
 - The site of production – Who creates the artwork and under what socio-political conditions?
 - The site of the image itself – Its visual features, style, and symbolic references.
 - The site of audience interpretation – How meaning is constructed or contested through audience engagement, especially in digital contexts.

This integrated analytical framework allows for a multi-layered understanding of how visual media function as tools of resistance, identity articulation, and power negotiation in postmodern society.

2.3 Validity and Triangulation

To enhance analytical validity, the study employs triangulation across three sources of data: (a) academic literature and theoretical frameworks (e.g., Hall, Baudrillard, Butler, Foucault),

- (b) journalistic and archival documentation of the artworks, and
 (c) interviews or recorded statements from artists and activists when available.

This triangulated methodology strengthens the reliability of interpretation and ensures contextual depth.

Table 1. Categories of Visual Art and Key Analytical Characteristics

| Category | Representative Example | Medium | Dominant Themes | Audience Interaction |
|-----------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------|--|--|
| Political Murals | <i>Ayotzinapa 43 Mural</i> (Mexico) | Public wall art | Memory, Justice, State Critique | On-site visibility, urban foot traffic, guided tours [13] |
| Protest Posters | Women's March & BLM Visuals | Print and digital | Gender Equality, Racial Justice, Liberation | Street demonstrations, online reposts, hashtags [14], [15] |
| Digital Illustrations | Climate Justice Memes (Instagram) | Social media | Environmental Crisis, Satire, Youth Activism | Likes, shares, remixing, participatory commentary [16], [17] |

3. Results

This section presents the findings from the semiotic and visual discourse analyses conducted on selected visual artworks categorized into three types: political murals, protest posters, and digital illustrations. Each category reveals distinct yet overlapping modes of resistance, strategies of representation, and audience engagements that shape the production of meaning and identity within postmodern communication contexts.

4.1 Political Murals: Public Memory, Spatial Resistance, and Visual Permanence

Political murals operate as monumental acts of resistance by reclaiming public space and embedding memory within the urban fabric. The *Ayotzinapa 43 mural* in Mexico exemplifies how muralism functions not merely as commemoration but as indictment. The semiotic reading of the mural uncovers an intentional interplay between grief and accusation: the faces of the disappeared students are rendered in stark monochrome, juxtaposed with the fiery hues of protest slogans like "Fue el Estado" ("It was the State") [11], [13]. The use of blood-red color symbolism, national emblems in distress, and fragmented imagery of violence connotes both national trauma and the rupture of civic trust.

From a VDA perspective, this mural constructs a site of counter-hegemonic visibility. Its placement on public walls subverts the commodified use of space and converts mundane surfaces into memory infrastructure. According to van Leeuwen's framework, the mural directs gaze toward shared grief (demand images), positions the public as witnesses, and structures compositionally salient zones of pain, identity, and protest. These spatial interventions foster what Foucault might describe as heterotopias—counter-sites where marginalized truths become narratively and visually possible.

Furthermore, the performative dimension of these murals is critical: public rituals such as candlelit vigils, graffiti layering, and community-led tours reanimate the mural as a living, evolving discourse. It becomes a locus for pedagogical and activist engagement, particularly in contexts where institutional silence prevails.

4.2 Protest Posters: Symbolic Condensation and Visual Mobilization

Protest posters synthesize complex political ideas into immediately recognizable visual codes, enabling rapid dissemination and emotional resonance. Posters from the Women's March and BLM movement frequently employ repetitive iconography such as raised fists, shattered chains,

maternal imagery, and slogans like “Nevertheless, she persisted” or “I Can’t Breathe” [14], [15]. These symbols are semantically dense: a single image condenses histories of oppression, contemporary outrage, and aspirational resistance.

From a semiotic standpoint, the posters exemplify what Roland Barthes refers to as mythic signification—where the sign (e.g., a clenched fist) transcends its literal meaning and enters the realm of ideological abstraction. Their use of high-contrast colors (especially black, red, and purple), bold sans-serif typography, and simplified human figures aligns with the aesthetic grammar of urgency and defiance.

VDA reveals that these posters foster interactivity not only through physical mobilization (marches, rallies) but also via digital reproduction. Viewers are invited to download, reprint, remix, and redistribute them online, fostering participatory visual economies. Their compositional balance—centrally placed figures, upward angles, and frontal gazes—functions as addressive imagery, establishing a direct communicative relationship with the viewer. These characteristics reinforce collective identity and emotional catharsis, turning protest into a semiotic ritual.

Moreover, the hybridity of protest posters—occupying both the street and the screen—demonstrates their adaptability in transmedia resistance, echoing McLuhan’s notion that “the medium is the message” [6]. Their portability ensures that resistance becomes mobile, visible, and accessible across geopolitical boundaries.

4.3 Digital Illustrations and Memes: Ephemeral Aesthetics, Enduring Critique

In digital platforms, illustrations and memes represent a democratized and accelerated form of visual resistance. Unlike murals or posters which are often authored by trained artists or collectives, digital artworks are frequently produced and shared by grassroots users, activists, and even anonymous creators. Climate justice memes, for instance, combine cartoon-style visuals with sarcastic or ironic captions—such as melting earths, drowning politicians, or fossil fuel executives rendered as villains [16], [17].

The semiotic structure of these memes relies heavily on juxtaposition, parody, and intertextuality. They borrow stylistic elements from commercial advertising, pop culture (e.g., film stills, celebrity photos), and emoji culture to encode serious political critique within familiar formats. This strategy aligns with postmodern aesthetics of fragmentation and pastiche, which disrupt the perceived neutrality of dominant discourses through humor and irreverence.

Visual discourse analysis highlights the participatory logic embedded in these artifacts. Unlike murals or posters which may be static, memes are inherently iterative—they invite remixing, reposting, and recontextualizing. The viewer becomes a co-producer of meaning, altering and amplifying messages through collective digital interaction. This supports Hall’s encoding/decoding model where meaning is negotiated, not imposed [4].

Importantly, the virality of these illustrations depends not only on aesthetic quality but also on platform affordances—the algorithmic visibility, shareability, and memeability of the content. The emotional registers often shift between outrage and satire, allowing for affective identification while simultaneously provoking critique. These digital texts circulate through non-hierarchical networks, bypassing traditional gatekeepers and enabling decentralized forms of resistance, especially among youth-led movements.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study affirm that visual art is not a passive reflection of sociopolitical conditions but an active agent in the negotiation of identity, power, and resistance. Visual artworks—whether monumental murals, transient protest posters, or digitally circulated illustrations—function as contested symbolic terrains where marginalized voices reclaim visibility and assert alternative narratives. Through symbolic representation, these artists inscribe new subjectivities into visual culture, resisting hegemonic codifications that often silence or erase them from dominant discourses [18], [19].

5.1 Visual Resistance and Cultural Agency

In postmodern contexts characterized by fluidity, pluralism, and fragmentation, visual art becomes a strategic site for cultural agency. Artists from subaltern or oppositional positions deploy visual tropes to challenge fixed identities and to expose the constructed nature of social categories such as race, gender, and citizenship. This aligns with Butler's performativity theory, which posits that identity is not a stable essence but a continuous enactment within cultural scripts [5]. Visual art, in this sense, becomes a performative medium—a stage upon which identities are both contested and reimagined.

The political murals analyzed in this study, for instance, are not merely aesthetic interventions but deliberate acts of memory reclamation and spatial resistance. They reinscribe political grief and historical trauma into the public domain, challenging state-sanctioned amnesia. Simultaneously, protest posters crystallize ideological critiques into powerful semiotic packages, contributing to the construction of collective political consciousness. Digital memes and illustrations, meanwhile, remix dominant symbols and inject satire into everyday visual consumption, turning scrolling into a potential site of ideological disruption.

5.2 Platform Ecologies and Participatory Resistance

The rise of digital platforms has reconfigured the dynamics of visual communication. In an era of hyperreality—where representations often precede and define the real (Baudrillard, 1981)—the image becomes a powerful mediator of both perception and political possibility. Social media, with its participatory architecture, enables visual artworks to circumvent traditional cultural gatekeepers and reach global publics in real-time. This allows for what Jenkins (2006) terms participatory culture, where meaning is co-produced and disseminated horizontally across networks.

Hall's theory of encoding/decoding is particularly relevant here: audiences are not passive recipients of visual messages but engage in negotiated readings, recontextualizing and re-signifying visual content based on their sociocultural positioning [4]. Likes, shares, hashtags, and remix practices become modes of visual participation, enabling dispersed communities to engage in resistance across geographical and linguistic boundaries.

Importantly, the digital realm enhances the scalability of resistance while also introducing new risks—such as algorithmic suppression, digital surveillance, or content commodification. While memes and illustrations gain rapid traction, their radical edge is often tempered by platform logics that prioritize engagement over ideology, thus partially muting their critical force.

5.3 Aesthetic Strategies and Ideological Disruption

The aesthetics of resistance in the visual artifacts studied are distinctly postmodern, characterized by irony, fragmentation, bricolage, and intertextuality. These stylistic elements are not incidental but serve to undermine dominant narratives by revealing their artificiality and instability [22], [23]. Satirical posters that reconfigure corporate logos into anti-capitalist critiques, or feminist memes that appropriate pop-culture scenes for subversive purposes, embody this destabilizing impulse.

This ironic and referential aesthetic not only invites deeper cognitive engagement but also challenges viewers to question naturalized assumptions about authority, identity, and truth. However, the proliferation of these styles in mainstream marketing and fashion illustrates a paradox: as resistance aesthetics gain visibility, they risk becoming aestheticized and absorbed into the very systems they seek to challenge. This phenomenon of co-option—where radical imagery is repurposed as marketable trend—raises critical questions about the limits of visual resistance in a commodified media environment.

5.4 Visual Discourse as Power Negotiation

Ultimately, visual art operates as a form of discourse—not simply a collection of images, but a field of power where meanings are produced, contested, and circulated. Foucault's notion of power/knowledge underscores how discourses are vehicles of regulation and resistance [9]. The

visual is not neutral; it carries ideological weight and becomes an arena for both domination and subversion.

This research shows that through representation, interaction, and composition—core elements of Visual Discourse Analysis—visual texts produce meanings that challenge dominant worldviews and open up spaces for counter-hegemonic imaginaries. These visual texts are part of broader cultural struggles that unfold not only in galleries or public walls but in hashtags, stories, reposts, and viral loops..

5. Conclusions

This research concludes that visual art constitutes a critical discursive medium in the architecture of postmodern communication, wherein the boundaries between aesthetics, identity, and ideology are inherently blurred. As demonstrated in this study, visual artworks—particularly those emerging from marginalized and oppositional communities—are not simply cultural artifacts, but active agents in shaping sociopolitical discourse. They contest dominant narratives, visualize subaltern identities, and open representational spaces for dissent and transformation.

Building from the premise in the introduction—that images in postmodern society are both message and medium—this study affirms that visual culture is central, not peripheral, to the negotiation of meaning and power. Through interdisciplinary analysis drawing from semiotics, critical theory, and visual discourse analysis, it becomes clear that artworks function as communicative acts: they not only depict reality but intervene in it.

By analyzing political murals, protest posters, and digital illustrations, the research illustrates how different forms of visual art mobilize resistance across physical and digital spaces. These artworks disrupt hegemonic visual regimes through strategies of representation, interaction, and composition, aligning with theoretical models advanced by Hall, Foucault, Butler, and Baudrillard.

Furthermore, the participatory nature of digital media enhances the transformative potential of these artworks by enabling wider circulation, negotiation of meanings, and collaborative authorship. Yet, the discussion also identifies the inherent tension between radical aesthetics and the risk of their commodification dynamic that underscores the complex relationship between resistance and representation in capitalist media environments.

In essence, visual art within postmodernity acts as a site of ideological contestation, identity articulation, and discursive intervention. It provides a language through which individuals and communities can resist, remember, and reimagine social realities.

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