The Impact of Visuals on the Marginalised Self in Jose Saramago's *The Double*

[1]T. Rajaji & [2]Dr. M. Senthil Kumar

[1]*Ph.D Research Scholar (Part-Time), Research Centre in English, Vivekananda College, Agasteeswaram*
Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu
[2]*Associate Professor, PG Research Department of English, Vivekananda College, Agasteeswaram*
Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu

Copy Right:

Abstract

Ever since the novel has developed into a distinct genre, various techniques in content and narration have been explored by novelists across the globe. In doing so, the genre has attempted to capture the multifaceted complexities of modern life. The Hungarian literary critic George Lukács once said that the novel was the epic of modern life, abandoned by God. This radical view of the novel is exemplified in the works of Portuguese writer José Saramago. In The Double, while addressing various major modernist themes, Saramago delves into a human consciousness that is alienated and marginalized by the overwhelming influence of visuals that dominate human life. It is not commodities, as Marx suggested but the spectacles of them that have come to dominate our existence, according to the neo-Marxist theorist Guy Debord offering a slight twist on Marx's worldview. These visuals not merely accumulate in the present world but also govern our modern lives. Their effects are far-reaching, leading to a range of phenomena from people doubting their own reality to individuals feeling estranged from themselves. This paper aims to explore how visual culture in the contemporary world influences individual identity, leading to the fragmentation and the marginalization of the self.
Keywords: Marginalisation, Visual Culture, postmodernism, hyperreal, simulacra.

Visuals have started ruling almost all planes of human world and made every individual inescapable from their dominance in the contemporary world. The popular adage "seeing is believing" finds deeper resonance today, as the act of seeing has evolved into the primary mode through which reality is perceived, filtered and understood. This strong presence of visuals deeply affects a person's sense of identity and inner self. When people are constantly surrounded by images and representations, their thoughts and emotions get shaped by what they see. They may begin to doubt their own reality or disconnected from who they truly are. The self becomes less stable and more controlled by outside images. In such a world where screens and signs dominate, the self is no longer free and whole. It becomes broken, shaped by what others see or expect. Jose Saramago's *The Double* shows how this can lead to feelings of loneliness, confusion, and being left out or pushed to the margins of society. The novel gives us a strong picture of how modern visual culture can weaken the

sense of self and make people feel like strangers to themselves.

Saramago's *The Double,* published in 2002 is an extraordinary novel in theme as well as in the mode of narration. Saramago was a writer from Portugal who experienced the fascist social policies of Salazar. He spent much of his childhood time with his grand parents hearing stories about the old times and watching the rural life. This made him to take up writing in his later years. The author contests the long-held view that the self and the other are separate and opposed entities. The distinction between the two is blurred and suggested that both the entities are ultimately one. This causes the marginalization of the self and makes the protagonist's identity and self-worth neglected, suppressed and is pushed into a crisis like situation. The style of writing followed by Saramago in this novel is unique. There is obviously a gross transgression of boundaries in narration. In some places he employs a stream-of-conscious mode and there are places with few paragraph breaks and with strange punctuation styles. Thus he conveys a detached, unsentimental and straightforward method of narration.

Today we find the dead leaders coming to life in different forms and there seems to be no death to them and their 'actual' forms are replaced by their doubles. So politically speaking the dead ones reappear again as long as the State apparatus remains the same and not being smashed down. It is like Mao Tse Tung or Franco had several deaths and they are evoked several times to life. So, a head of a State is a simulation and this image of him/her grants the superior power. For quite some time, every ruler has existed merely as the simulacrum of himself, and it is precisely this quality that legitimizes his authority. Genuine individuals attract neither loyalty nor devotion; allegiance is directed instead toward their double, as if the leader were already dead. This myth reflects both the enduring need for the sovereign's symbolic sacrifice and the illusion that sustains it.

The central character Tertuliano Maximo Afonso found a spitting image of himself on a character appearing in a video movie. The film failed to lift the spirit of Tertuliano who had been depressed rather it intensified his depression. He wanted to know who the person was in the screen. He bought a pile of six videos of the same company and was more surprised to see the exact image of him on the actor in the movies. He then ventured out to see the actor in person. He learned that the actor was Antonio Claro who used the stage name Daniel Santa Clara. When he finally met Antonio Claro, both stood nudes to examine the exactitude of each other. In a dramatic turn of events Antonio Claro took Tertuliano's ex-wife whom Tertuliano however maintained an affair to bed. The duo met with an accident and were killed. Tertuliano now assumed the role of Antonio and lived with Antonio's wife.

Baudrillard's observations on the simulacra and simulations are perhaps the best in interpreting the novel. According to Baudrillard 'the postmodern era is characterized by the 'actual' having been replaced by the 'virtual' in the constant circulation of signs or more precisely simulacra signify which do not refer back to the original signified, but only to other signifiers'(cited in Childs,13). Baudrillard refers to this condition as hyperreality. Explaining Baudrillard's theory Peter Childs writes:

In postmodernity, however, there are simulacra – 'the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal.. the desert of the real itself'. Through this argument Baudrillard' posits the end of metaphysics, of questions of imitation and reduplication of the 'real', and the inauguration of an order of perception that operates by substituting signs of the real for the real itself. Baudrillard makes a comparison here with a religion in which there are only icons or images of a non-existent God. (14)

The novel is a very powerful critique of modern society, where the issues of selfhood, obsession with identity, fear and mortality are deeply problematized. In the case of Tertuliano, the protagonist, his self and sense of individuality are constantly challenged by the overwhelming presence of visual media. The simple act of watching a film becomes a turning point that destabilizes his entire sense of being. The visuals do not merely reflect reality—they distort it,

creating alternative versions of the self that lead to confusion, anxiety, and a collapse of personal certainty. As he becomes increasingly obsessed with his double, Tertuliano's original selfhood is pushed to the margins. His inner self loses clarity and is gradually replaced by the need to understand or conquer the image of the 'other' self. This reflects how in modern visual culture, individuals are no longer defined by their lived experiences or internal values, but by how they appear or are represented. The visual, in this way marginalises the self by making it secondary to its own projections. Tertuliano becomes a symbol of a society where identity is fragile, continuously shaped by screens, simulations and the need to conform to what is seen rather than what is deeply felt. The distinction between real and copy gets perplexed and in the last one merges with the other causing an overlap. Tertuliano couldn't suppress his anxiety to know his duplicate until the discovery is complete. This problem is addressed by the theoretical findings of the postmodernist philosopher Jean Baudrillard. According to Baudrillard, real is 'no longer real at all. It is hyperreal: the product of an irradiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere.'

Tertuliano suffers from a kind of depression. It is to lift the spirit from depression he is asked to watch a certain video by his friend that creates the problem of double identity. The author feels that modern society is reeling under an extended form of depression. As a resolve to alleviate the depressed state of mind, the society buries itself in the world of visuals that confuse its members' identities and survival rather than curing their depression. Tertuliano finds his double in a video and he decides to pursue his double. This pursuit itself appears as a horrendous picture of the way visuals trouble our lives on the one hand and engage us all of the time on the other. In his growing obsession, he is unable to differentiate between his own authentic self and the projected image of the other, which begins to reflect his own hidden insecurities. It is needless to say that the solution Tertuliano finds for his depression causes more depression, and therefore the author indirectly presents that modern society moves from one form of depression to more and more other forms of depression, in a repetitive cycle.

The novel also informs us about a new civilization that is glued to 'televised' reality thereby loses the sense of real and unreal. Towards the end of the novel while Tertuliana seeks forgiveness from Helena, the wife of Antonio Claro for all the mix-up she accepts him readily without any misgivings. Helena slips the wedding ring and tells him that there are only two persons who call him Tertuliano Maximo Afonso – one is his mother and the other person is herself which is seemingly a desperate attempt to come to terms with the new reality of life. This patch up is temporary as Tertuliano receives a call from a stranger whose voice is identical and explains all his resemblances with that of Antonio Claro. He tells he wants to meet him in person in a private place. The novel ends up with a fresh possible confusion that is cyclic in nature.

The novel without ever showing itself off as a great prophecy or philosophy brings out a story suitable to interpret the intricacies and complexities of the times that we are living in. It helps us to understand a reality that people unknowingly subscribe to through its mechanizations. When visuals dominate lives, there are chances for confusion between reality and their visual 'others' or representations. The product ordered online by seeing the representative image of it causing disappointment and dissatisfaction after buying it tells a lot about the confusion the visual era could generate in the minds of consumers. Saramago is probably trying to bring home an issue like this. What emerges is not just a mismatch between image and reality, but a deeper loss of selfhood. The individual, overwhelmed by layers of representations begins to experience dislocation from their own emotions, desires and identity. The visual world creates copies and illusions so powerful that the original—the self—is marginalised and often replaced by imposed identities. In this sense, the novel stands as a subtle yet powerful reflection on

how modern society erodes personal integrity and pushes the self to the periphery of its own consciousness.

References
1. Saramago, Jose. *The Double*. London: The Harvill Press, 1997.
2. Childs, Peter. Texts: Contemporary Cultural Texts and Critical Approaches. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006.
3. Debord, Guy. "The Society of Spectacles" The Visual Culture Reader. Ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff. London and New York: Routledge, 2001.
4. Stupples, Peter. "Visual Culture, Synthetic Memory and the Construction of National Identity." *Third Text*. 17.2 2003
5. Baudrillard, Jean. Simulacra and Simulation: Editions Galilee, 1981.