

Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur

National Programme on Technology Enhanced Learning (NPTEL)

Course Title

Visual Perception and Art: A survey across the cultures.

Lecture – 01

Introductory Lecture

By

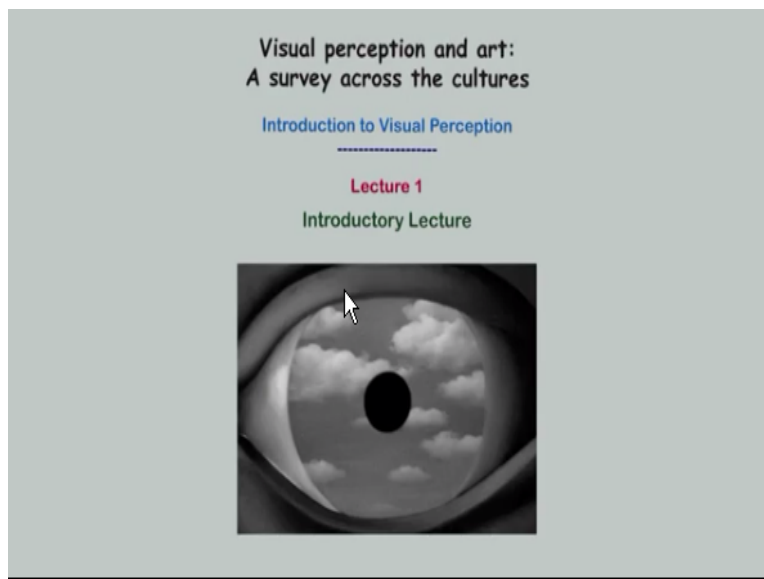
Prof. Soumik Nandy Majmdar

Dept. History of Art, Kala Bhavana, Santiniketan

Visva-Bharati

Hello viewers, welcome to mook's online course on visual perception and art, a survey across the cultures.

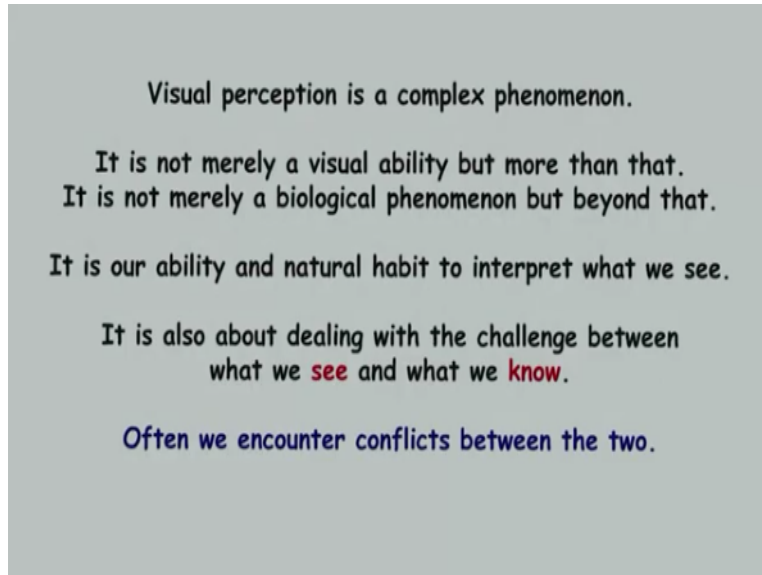
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This is the first lecture that is an introductory lecture of the first week of this course. And in this lecture we shall be introducing ourselves to the idea of visual perception and also to the idea how visual perception is integrally connected to art. So it is mandatory for us to have a reasonably good idea about what visual perception is all about, and how it generally affects an influences the way we not only percept the world visually, but also the way we receive art works and the way

we connect ourselves with the art language. It is needless to say that visual perception is actually a very complex phenomenon.

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And really speaking if you look at the idea of visual perception not just as a phenomenon, but also as an experience, you will realize that visual perception is not merely a visual ability, but it is more than that. It is not merely a biological phenomenon, but it is something beyond that. It is about our ability and habit to interpret what we see. And this is extremely important that visual perception is not about a passive reception of the visual signals.

But it is about our ability to interpret what we are receiving. So it is also about dealing with the challenge between what we see and what we know. Since, there can often be a conflict between the two.

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Simple everyday experiences are full of such conflicts between visual perception and knowledge. One of the commonest such example is the daily occurrence like sunrise or sunset.

In both these cases, what we observe is absolutely different from and opposite to 'what we know'.

Simple everyday experiences are full of such conflicts between visual perception and knowledge. One of the commonest such examples is the daily occurrence like a sunrise or a sunset. In both these cases, what we observe is absolutely different from and opposite to what we know.

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Hence as John Berger says.

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“The relation between what we see and what we know is
never settled.
Each evening we see the sun set.
We know that the earth is turning away from it.
Yet the knowledge, the explanation, never quite fits the sight.”
– John Berger

The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled this unsettling and rather conflicting relationship between what we see and what we know is extremely important for our understanding of how art operates, or art functions in the real morph visual perception. Now following John Berger we can say that each evening we see the sun set yet we know that the earth is turning away from it yet the knowledge the explanation never quite fits the site.

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So this is very interesting this is about that conflict for example when you look at this photograph of a table a small table you know very well that all the four legs of this table are of equal height, yet in this photograph and also in reality we often find that the legs of the chair which are further away from us happen to appear here they happen to appear, smaller than the legs which are closer to us again it is a visual perception which is in conflict with our knowledge that all the 4 legs of the chair are equal in height.

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Similarly when you look at a 4 wheelers from a particular angle what you see is simply a pair of wheels just one single pair of wheels where as any 4 wheelers would certainly have not two but 4 wheels, there obviously behind these two wheels that we are able to say now our knowledge say that this particular vehicle contains 4 wheels but our visual knowledge right now gives a different information all together according to that data at this particular movement from this particular angle this motor care or this vehicle as only two wheels.

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Another example a very common example is the way we often find the two parallel lines attending to or almost about to meet each at a particular point though they are parallel, now this is what we see when we look at the railway track.

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When we look at a road when we look at such two parallel lines running parallel to each other and they are almost as if they appear to meet each other at a particular point yet we know very well that they never met in real life so again we are looking at a conflict between the visual perception and visual knowledge.

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When we look at the railway track when we look at a road when we look at substitute parallel lines running parallel to each other and they are almost as if they are where here to meet each other at the particular point, yet we know very well that will never meet in real life so again we are looking at a conflict between the visual perception and visual knowledge.

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IN visual arts too, do you think artists always painted exactly the way they saw things around?

The way figures and space appear in Egyptian paintings, for example, is not exactly how they appeared in real life.

Does visual perception play a slightly different role in the context of Art?

Now in visual arts too, do you think artists always painted exactly the way they saw things around, more often they not they followed a very, very different kind of method to portrait or a represent the reality the way figures and space appear in Egyptian paintings for example is not exactly how they actually appeared in real life, does visual perception play a slightly different role in the context of art of art, now these have some of the questions very vexed question we will be trying to explore in this course in the subsequent lectures.

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Now this is one example of an Egyptian painting the formality of the body of the figure the profile capture the face the profile positioning of the hands that is arms as well as the legs look like as if it is a constructed reality it is not exactly the way obviously, people Egyptian people during Egyptian period move to all the time this is here can be not walked the artist actually saw but this is the way, he painted or communicated that visual knowledge through a certain kind of visual language.

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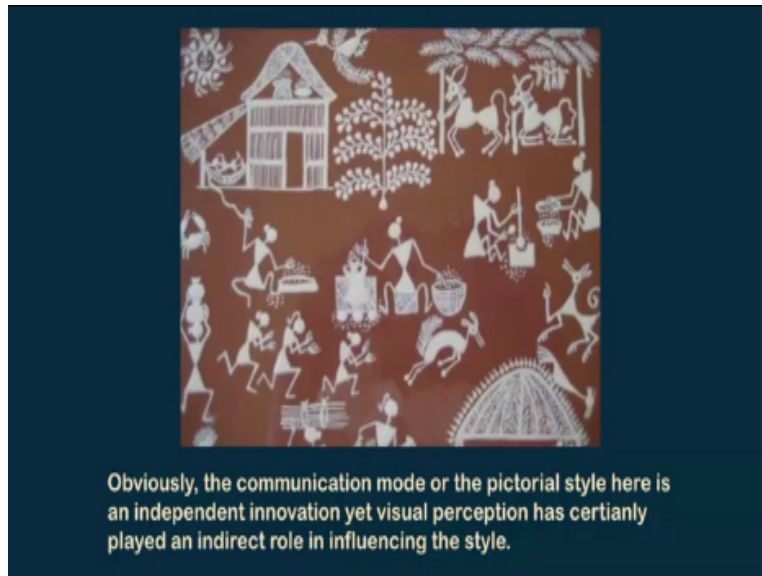
So when we come to this idea of visual language we say that is a very definitive not exactly a conflict or a contrast but a difference between the visual language and visual perception.

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Which in fact implies that in order to, perceive art visually in a proper way we need to actually bring the visual perception of reality into some crises I mean we should not always try to follow the logic of visual perception in our daily life and apply that is straight forward to understand the logic of the visual language, though they are often feet on each other they are integral to each other in more than one way.

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Obviously, the communication mode or the pictorial style here is an independent innovation yet visual perception has certainly played an indirect role in influencing the style.

So when you look at a wall painting a 4th Indian painting painted on the rural walls of Indian villages like this, obviously the communication more or the pictorials style here is an independent innovation yet the visual perception as certainly plate at in this rule in influencing the style when we have a separate lecture all Indian for in next week we shall discuss in detail how exactly the visual perception real life is actually influencing the visual language of a foke or like this.

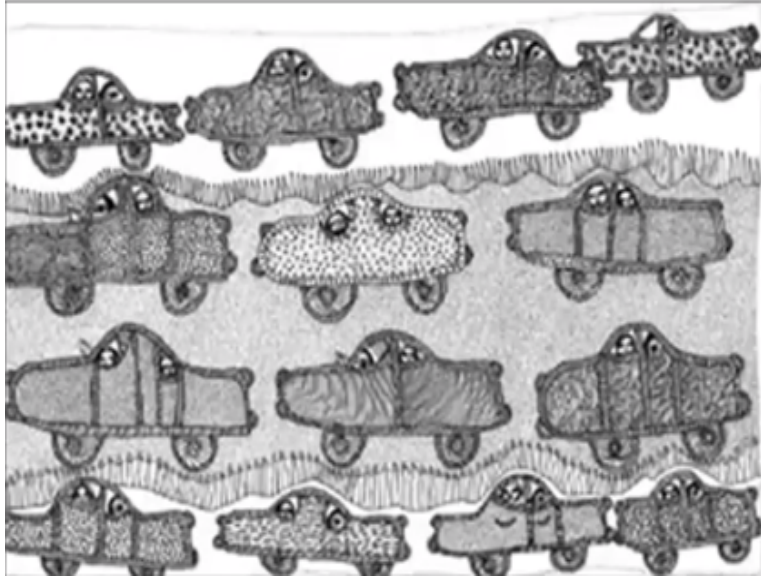
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Or for that matter when you look at a very, very pre-historic painting like imbed cart rock plaiting in Madhya Pradesh of India painted in 1000. 12000 years back, again when you look at these figures it is impossible to believe that the human figures of that period where all stick like they were all in silvers they were all figures without any details no physical features obviously this is the not the way they lived.

They definitely had a more tangible and a more detailed expression of life which of course these painters are not resenting hence the perceived reality visually perceived reality and the visually constructed reality in a painting may not be exactly the same.

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So we have plenty of such painters in the folk art and also you found similar kind of visualization by children you find similarly kind of visualization by naive artist who tend to construct a visual reality on paper or on canvas with paint or in paint and pencil in a way that is certainly derived out of the visual perception of the reality when they construct a visual reality on paper it becomes a different visual perception.

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Now this takes us to a wonderful understanding and a very interesting understanding and a very triaging kind of idea that whether we have only one kind of visual perception that is a normal general visual perception we usually talk about or we have several different kinds of visual perceptions depending on the artwork we are looking at, so when we are looking at a child art like this we need to talk about visual perception from a completely different perspective.

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Like this one, the way they will when we look at a child art like this we usually Witten to say that this is how the child looks at figures, now this is again a problematic assumption is this the way they actually look at figures in the real life or diffuse the way they paint or draw the figures on the paper, so they create a different kind of visual perception different from what they perceive in real life and everybody does that in some way or the other.

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In the context of visual perception as a fundamental aspect of experience and evolution, Berger further says:

“Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak.”

He adds:

“But there is also another sense in which seeing comes before words. It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it.”

In the context of visual perception as a fundamental aspect of experience and evolution John Verger further says seeing comes before words, the child looks and recognizes before it can speak, John Per Jeffers then adds but there is also another sense in which seeing comes before words it is seen which establishes our place in the surrounding world we explain that world with words but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. In other words, words spoken language or written language.

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The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe. In the Middle Ages when men believed in the physical existence of Hell the sight of fire must have meant something different from what it means today.

Nevertheless their idea of Hell owed a lot to the sight of fire consuming and the ashes remaining — as well as to their experience of the pain of burns.

Can never replace our visual experiences or the experience of seeing and looking, in other words visual perception happens to remain a constant feature no matter what different kinds of modes of communications we may incorporate in order to convey our feelings, our messages to the world it can be a writing a novel, writing a poetry it can be a music, it can be a song, but the presence of the visual perception is always there this is what John Vergis trying to say.

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Nevertheless their idea of Hell owed a lot to the sight of fire consuming and the ashes remaining — as well as to their experience of the pain of burns.

The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe. In the middle ages when men believed in the physical existence of hell the sight of fire must have meant something different from what it means today. Never the less their idea of hell owed a lot to the sight of fire consuming and the ashes remaining as well as to their experience of the pain of burns.

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Now when John Verges say something like this it clearly indicates that he is trying to suggest the visual perception is integrally connected with visual experiences of course but more than that cultural experiences, mythical experiences our believes systems, our tradition, our customs, our habits and this is again another very, very important aspect that we shall be exploring in our subsequent lectures that how visual perception tends to go beyond ampere, biological or habitual experience and becomes a major cultural practice an expression of a culture.

And this is how when medieval painter in a painting conceive hell with fire as a major element, this way of conceiving or imagining hell has something to do with the way they experienced fire in real life, and therefore when they look back at the fire after having painted or seen this painting then the fire assumes different sets of mythological meanings which did not have before.

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So in other words, the cultural significance of our visual perception is so important that not only it influences the art we produce but it also influences the way we see the general reality around, once such visual expressional representation of hell where fire is used in a very innovative way.

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Another painting this is a Japanese painting where you can see fire once again been used to represent the sign the character of hell but interestingly in each of this paintings the fire has been painted in a slightly different way though the general context remains more or less the same.

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Yet this seeing which comes before words, and can never be quite covered by them, is not a question of mechanically reacting to stimuli.

(It can only be thought of in this way if one isolates the small part of the process which concerns the eye's retina.)

Yet this seeing which comes before words and can never be quite covered by them is not a question of mechanically reacting to stimuli. It can only be thought of in this way if one isolates the small part of the process which concerns the eyes retina.

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We only see what we look at. To look is an act of choice. As a result of this act, what we see is brought within our reach - though not necessarily within arm's reach. To touch something is to situate oneself in relation to it.

(Close your eyes, move round the room and notice how the faculty of touch is like a static, limited form of sight.) We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves. Our vision is continually active, continually moving, continually holding things in a circle around itself, constituting what is present to us as we are.

We only see what we look at this is again another very interesting observation, because to look is an act of choice as a result of this act what we see is brought within our reach, though not necessarily within arm's reach to touch something is to situate oneself in relation to it, close your eyes this is what John Berjerd is suggesting as an experiment. Close your eyes move round the room and notice how the fertility of touch is like a static limited form of sight.

When you close your eyes or your blind folded and you are ask to walk in your room the room that you know so well yet you try to figure out where you are walking what you are touching through the fertility of touch. Through a tactile sensation, and it is then that you realize that this tactile communication is very, very limited version of visual communication, we never look at just one thing we are always looking at one in relation between things and ourselves our vision is continually active after we are not looking at one thing but we are looking at the relation between things and ourselves.

And being an active being incased in a continuously active vision which is continuously moving continuously holding things in a circle around itself and constituting what is present to us as we are, so this is again a very interesting experience that we all pass through almost every day. (Refer Slide Time: 21:50)

The act of choice on the one hand, and the cultural-natural environment of the time on the other make visual perception itself a bit complex and further the relationship between the visual perception and the visual art-forms more intriguing.

That is why, in highly sophisticated art forms like Ajanta paintings or Rajput miniature paintings – the pictorial styles often look quite fabricated, over-stylized although these art forms are the product of a certain visual culture which was very powerful and influential. In that sense, these art forms are not devoid of the impact of the normal visual perceptions of the society.

The act of choice on the one hand and the cultural natural environment of the time on the other make the visual perception itself a bit complex and further the relationship between the visual perception and the visual art forms more intriguing. That is why in highly sophisticated art forms like Ajanta paintings or Rajput miniature paintings the pictorial styles often look quite fabricated. They look over stylized.

All though these art forms are the product of a certain visual culture which was very powerful and influential at that point of time, in that sense these art forms are not divided of the fact of the normal visual perceptions of the society. This is again another aspect that we shall try to explore in some of a subsequent lecture where we shall see that how visual perception and the given society also have a relationship to establish a relationship to explore.

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This is the painting from Ajanta which it seemingly very over stylized even the figuration looks fabricated artificial but they are all derived from a certain visual perception of the reality.

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For that matter this particular miniature painting from Ragamala the Rajput miniature painting where you see nature, female character, birds, snake, water, tiger everything in a quite convincing way as for as the sign of each and every object is concerned yet they do not look realistic or nature the way a western painting is suppose to do but it is also quite interesting to think that this kind of visual forms have a deep connection with the visual perception this culture has been talked to experience.

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A highly realistic painting appears to have resolved the complicated problem of relating art-form with the visual perception. Seemingly, the visual form in realistic art is a convincing reflection of the immediate visual perception.

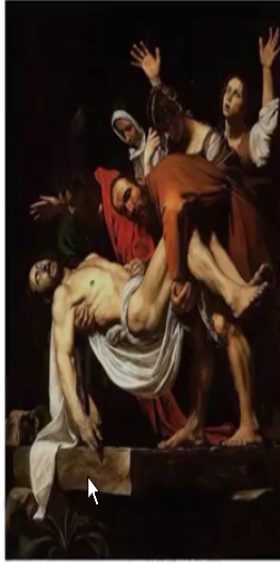
In reality, it is not.

Yes, certainly realistic pictorial style does have, apparently, a close relationship with the 'real' visual perception. Yet, here too it is not devoid of the cultural perception, traditional norms and habits, and of course your choice of what you want to depict with what objective.

A highly realistic painting on the other hand appears to have resolved the complicated problem of relating art-form with the visual perception seemingly the visual form in a realistic art is a convincing reflection of the immediate visual perception but in reality it is not, yes certainly realistic pictorial style does have apparently a close relationship with the real visual perception yet here too it is not devoid of the cultural perception it is not devoid of the traditional norms and habits and of course your choice of what you want to depict and with what kind of objective.

And we shall explore this aspect as well in one of the later lectures where we shall see the event of very convincing high realistic painting will also have a particular way of constructing the visual reality different from the normal visual perception it is not as realistic as it appears to be.

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This is one example of a highly realistic painting from another example of realistic painting which is so real.

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4



Still life

Which is so natural did you feel that almost touch the objects you can also smell the objects but in order to evoke this feelings the realism invoked in this painting as a certain visual language to construct.

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And finally the photography, photography happens to again another highly convincing medium of representing the reality.

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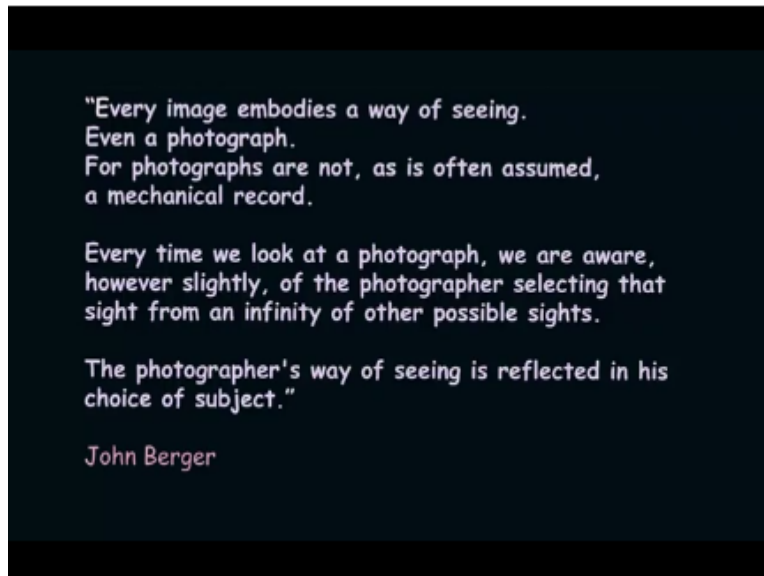
Look at any photograph hither take it in candid rain or taken rather take seriously we will find usually of photograph looks less fabricated less artificial than any hand painted painting.

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But every image embodies a way of seeing even a photograph.

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A way of seeing, even a photograph in bodies is a way of seeing, it is infallible in the sense there is reason why you should take a photographer granted but you have as it where every right to challenge a painting because a photographers are not as is often assumed a mechanical record. Every time we look at a photograph we are aware however slightly of the photographer selecting that sight from infinity of other possible sights.

The photographer way of seeing is reflected in his choice of subject this is what john Berger says and as an extension we can say it is not the photograph, any kind of visual perception, visual reception, visual experience has a choice involved in it. It may not always be a very conference choice, often it is, it is not that consequent that we are making a choice; it is not so obvious that we are making a choice but there is a choice, there is a selection involved.

What we will be looking at will depend on what you want look at and human intervention at this point is extremely important to discuss visual perception and art particularly the relationship the very conflict relationship that exist between them thank you.

Acknowledgement

Ministry of Human Resources & Development

**Prof. Satyaki Roy
Co – ordinator, NPTEL IIT Kanpur**

**NPTEL Team
Sanjay Pal**

**Ashish Singh
Badal Pradhan
Tapobrata Das
Ram Chandra
Dilip Tripathi
Manoj Shrivastava
Padam Shukla
Sanjay Mishra
Shubham Rawat
Shikha Gupta
K.K Mishra
Aradhana Singh
Sweta
Ashutosh Gairola
Dilip Katiyar
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