A Conceptual Inquiry into Virtual Communication as Revealed Through Visual Art from the Primitive Communication Era: With Special Reference to the Murals of Kelaniya Temple

G. D. S. Gunawardhana

University of the Visual and Performing Arts, Sri Lanka

susanuovpa@gmail.com

Abstract

Virtual communication is predominantly associated with contemporary digital technologies. However, its conceptual foundations may be examined through early visual communication practices that represented physically absent objects, environments, and events. This study investigates whether the fundamental elements of visual art, including line, shape, form, colour, space, and texture, reveal pre-virtual characteristics through visual representation, perception, symbolic interpretation, and imagination. Adopting a qualitative conceptual inquiry, the study integrates Pierre Lévy's philosophical understanding of virtuality, Ernst Gombrich's perspectives on pictorial representation, Roland Barthes' semiotic approach, and Steven M. LaValle's explanations of visual perception and perceptual illusions. It conceptually distinguishes visual representation, mental representation, virtuality, and virtual communication to examine the conditions under which artistic images may communicate experiences beyond immediate physical presence. The murals of Kelaniya Temple in Sri Lanka serve as a culturally and religiously significant case for visual semiotic analysis. The inquiry examines how religious symbolism, cultural memory, and prior knowledge may influence the interpretation of visual narratives and contribute to mental representations of physically absent historical events and sacred environments. Previous research concerning religious beliefs and practices at Kelaniya Temple provides contextual support for investigating these relationships. The study proposes that visual art may exhibit pre-virtual characteristics when symbolic representations enable viewers to construct and interpret meaningful experiences of absent realities. However, mental imagery alone is not considered sufficient to establish virtual communication; the communicative mediation of shared meanings is also essential. These characteristics are distinguished from the technological immersion and interactivity of contemporary virtual reality. The research seeks to develop a conceptual framework for understanding the possible pre-digital foundations of virtual communication through visual art, perception, and culturally mediated meaning-making.

Keywords: *Virtual Communication, Pre-Virtual Communication, Technological Immersion, Visual Perception, Virtuality*