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# The pathological aesthetics of design: examining repression and perverse representation in contemporary visual culture from the perspective of psychoanalytic theory

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This article explores the pathological aesthetics of design by examining the repression and perverse representations in contemporary visual culture through the lens of psychoanalytic theory. It traces the origins of repression and perversion in visual culture to the context of modernity, characterized by visual centrism, consumer society, and technological innovations. The article then interprets visual culture using key concepts from psychoanalytic theorists such as Freud, Lacan, and Deleuze, revealing the pathological manifestations of repressed desires and perverse imaginaries in various design practices, including advertising, movie posters, and social media. Finally, it proposes a transformative vision for design aesthetics, one that confronts repression, challenges perversion, and embraces a more diverse, inclusive, and humanistic approach to design ethics and aesthetics. The article concludes by reflecting on the critical mission of visual culture criticism and design aesthetics in guiding healthy and responsible design practices.

## KEYWORDS

visual culture, design aesthetics, psychoanalytic theory, repression, perversion, desire, gaze, ethics

## Visual culture in the context of modernity: the origins of repression and perversion

### Visual centralism of modernity and its pathological roots

The ascendancy of modernity has been accompanied by the consolidation of visual centralism—a privileging of sight as the dominant modality for knowing, controlling, and aestheticizing the world (Jay, 1993). Rooted in Enlightenment rationalism, this ocularcentrism elevated vision to the status of epistemological primacy, subordinating other senses and non-visual ways of knowing (Jenks, 1995). While this development facilitated the rise of scientific rationality and technological progress, it also initiated a pathological relationship with visibility: an obsessive pursuit of clarity, legibility, and appearance that obscures emotional, affective, and embodied dimensions of experience (Foucault, 1975).

In contemporary visual culture, this obsession materializes in the “society of the spectacle” (Debord, 1967), where visibility becomes both a form of commodity and a mode of control. The omnipresence of curated imagery—across politics, consumerism, and even interpersonal

life—has normalized performative self-representation and external validation as cultural imperatives. As Marcuse (1955) warned, such a regime of visibility can repress authentic desire under the guise of pleasure and autonomy.

Crucially, visual centralism must not be treated as a neutral or universal mode of perception. It is embedded within Western epistemological traditions and may obscure or marginalize alternative sensory hierarchies—such as those in Indigenous, oral, or affect-driven cultures (Jay, 1993; Jenks, 1995). Moreover, as Freud (1905) suggests, the scopic drive can become pathological when visual pleasure displaces affective or embodied engagement, giving rise to voyeuristic modes of perception. In tandem, the proliferation of visual media has fostered a culture of surveillance, where individuals internalize the disciplinary gaze of others, as Foucault (1975) theorizes in his analysis of panoptic power. Such dynamics heighten self-consciousness and exacerbate the repression of authentic desires.

While the predominance of visibility appears pervasive in late modern societies, it is crucial to recognize that visual centralism is neither culturally universal nor epistemologically neutral. The valorization of sight, often grounded in Western Enlightenment ideals, may not hold the same hegemonic position in non-Western epistemologies, where oral, haptic, or spiritual modes of knowing play a more constitutive role. In many Indigenous, Islamic, or East Asian traditions, visual display is not only regulated by ethical codes but often subordinated to communal values or metaphysical principles (Jay, 1993; Jenks, 1995). Thus, the assumption that the visual dominates across all cultural contexts risks reproducing a Eurocentric bias. A more culturally sensitive critique must account for the uneven global dissemination of visual regimes and the diverse ways in which visual hegemonies are resisted, negotiated, or rearticulated in different sociocultural frameworks.

## The visual landscape of consumer society: sublimation of repression and perverse representation

Consumer society intensifies the pathological fixation on visibility by commodifying desire itself. Visual landscapes are laden with libidinal signals engineered to arouse, misdirect, and manipulate unconscious drives (Baudrillard, 1970). Simultaneously, the relentless bombardment of sexualized and objectifying images perpetuates the fantasy that happiness and fulfillment are attainable through material acquisition (Ewen, 1976). This dynamic fuels a never-ending cycle of desire, dissatisfaction, and consumption, where objects and even human bodies become fetishized to sustain consumerist seduction.

Advertising, in this context, is less an informational medium than a symbolic economy of repressed desire. The saturation of visual culture with hypersexualized and objectified bodies—particularly those of women—reiterates the libidinal economy of male desire, staged under capitalist imperatives. As Kilbourne (1999a, 1999b) and Williamson (1978) observe, such representations do not reflect reality but actively construct and codify fantasies that become mistaken for norms.

Moreover, the visual landscape of consumer society has also given rise to a culture of narcissism, where individuals are encouraged to focus on their own image and to constantly seek validation through the

gaze of others (Lasch, 1979). Social media platforms, in particular, have become a breeding ground for this narcissistic culture, as individuals carefully curate their visual representation to gain likes, followers, and social approval (Turkle, 2011). This obsession with one's own image has led to a disconnection from authentic human experiences and has exacerbated the repression of genuine emotions and desires.

Yet, it is reductive to assume that all designers willingly participate in this cycle. Many practitioners operate under stringent commercial pressures and algorithmic constraints that prioritize audience engagement metrics and consumer data over ethical or artistic considerations (Duffy, 2017; Manovich, 2013). What is often presented as “design choice” is frequently the outcome of algorithmically guided audience testing, market analytics, and platform-imposed norms rather than pure creative volition (Gillespie, 2018; Klinger and Svensson, 2018). Designers thus face systemic production chains that circumscribe their agency, making them complicit yet also constrained within a broader socio-technical ecosystem. Consequently, critical perspectives must move beyond vilifying individual designers to interrogate the structural forces and commercial logics that shape and sustain contemporary visual culture.

## Technological innovation and media shift: intensification of pathological symptoms in visual culture

The advent of new technologies and shifting media ecologies have dramatically intensified the pathological symptoms inherent in visual culture. The invention of photography, for instance, challenged traditional notions of visual truth and authenticity, as the mechanical reproduction of images enabled the manipulation and distortion of reality (Benjamin, 1936). This contributed to a blurring of boundaries between the real and the simulated, a process that Baudrillard (1981) identifies as the formation of a hyperreal condition in which images no longer refer to any stable referent.

The emergence of cinema further deepened these tendencies by institutionalizing the voyeuristic pleasure of looking. As Mulvey (1975) argued, the cinematic apparatus became a tool for the projection of male desire, framing the female body as a passive object of scopophilic pleasure. This normalizes a culture in which looking itself is a mode of domination, reinforcing visual asymmetries and psychological fragmentation.

In the digital media age, the overabundance of visual stimuli and the perpetual access to screens have produced a sensory overload that dulls affective and reflective capacities (Turkle, 2011). The hyper-circulation of images, curated content, and algorithmic feeds generates a culture of distraction, in which emotional repression is not merely a psychic defense but an infrastructural design feature. The anonymous, disembodied affordances of online platforms exacerbate this trend, allowing users to indulge in voyeuristic or perverse fantasies with little accountability. The proliferation of pornography and the normalization of cybersex practices, as Keen (2007) points out, have desensitized users to their psychological and social consequences, further entrenching objectification as a dominant visual logic.

Yet, this regime of digital visibility also produces a paradoxical dynamic: hyper-intimacy and radical alienation. Individuals are encouraged to display curated versions of their private lives—through

selfies, livestreams, and emotionally charged posts—while remaining detached from embodied, reciprocal, and affective forms of connection. This simultaneity is not accidental but reflects the underlying affordances of platform capitalism, which commodifies both attention and affect.

While psychoanalysis has traditionally understood repression as a psychic mechanism (Freud, 1905), the current media environment suggests a shift toward systemic repression—a collective, infrastructural denial of emotional complexity, an enforced optimism, and the marginalization of ambiguity or discomfort in favor of algorithmic legibility (Turkle, 2011; Foucault, 1975). From the mechanical eye of the camera to the predictive vision of algorithmic curation, technological media have not only intensified commodified seeing, but have structurally embedded repression, desire, and alienation into the everyday optics of visual experience.

## Interpreting visual culture through the lens of psychoanalytic theory

### Freud's theory of repression and the issue of "objectification" in visual culture

Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory provides a foundational framework for understanding the hidden mechanisms of repression within visual culture. For Freud, the unconscious operates as a concealed archive of socially unacceptable desires, fears, and traumas that are systematically excluded from conscious awareness (Freud, 1915). These repressed drives, however, do not vanish; they re-emerge in disguised forms—particularly through visual and symbolic representations.

In the context of visual culture, the dynamics of repression are institutionalized through recurring patterns of objectification, especially in commercial and media imagery. Objectification—defined as reducing individuals to mere instruments of pleasure or control (Nussbaum, 1995)—is not merely a symptom of individual desire, but a structural feature of capitalist visual regimes. Freud's id, driven by the pleasure principle, manifests culturally through the saturation of libidinal images that commodify the human body, predominantly the female body, for endless circulation and consumption (Freud, 1923).

This libidinal economy becomes especially apparent in advertising and fashion photography, where the human subject is fragmented into fetishized parts—lips, legs, waistlines—creating a coded language of desire that bypasses rational critique. In this symbolic economy, the image is not simply a reflection of desire but its active producer, shaping what and how we want.

Beyond the immediate aesthetic appeal, such representations enact what can be called a pathological circuit of unresolved stimulation. Freud warned that repeated excitation of the libidinal drives, when unmediated by sublimation, results in psychic disturbance—manifesting as anxiety, compulsive fixation, or discontent (Freud, 1905). In digital media and social platforms, the constant feed of hyper-sexualized and idealized bodies operates as a form of repressive stimulation: it provokes desire without offering resolution, entrapping the viewer in an endless loop of unsatisfied consumption.

Yet, Freud's notion of sublimation also opens a space for critique and transformation. Sublimation enables repressed desires to be rechanneled into culturally sanctioned forms, such as art or

intellectual creation (Freud, 1930). Here, the production and reception of visual art become therapeutic not only for individual artists or viewers but also as a cultural mechanism of navigating collective anxieties. Through visual media that interrogate rather than exploit desire—such as feminist performance art or anti-consumerist visual activism—the unconscious can find socially generative expression.

In this revised frame, visual culture is no longer merely a site of repression but also of contestation, where the symbolic order of desire can be subverted, and the logic of commodification challenged.

### Lacan's mirror stage theory and the imaginary of the "other" in visual culture

Jacques Lacan's psychoanalysis significantly extends Freud's model by emphasizing the visual and symbolic structures through which the self is constituted. His concept of the mirror stage foregrounds the formation of identity as an inherently visual and imaginary process, wherein the ego is built not on internal coherence, but on alienation.

The mirror stage marks a key moment in which the child first identifies with its reflected image—an external idealization of bodily unity (Lacan, 1949). This moment is both jubilant and deceptive. While the mirror image offers an illusion of wholeness, it conceals the fragmented reality of the subject's experience. This misrecognition is foundational: the ego is always shaped by an external image that is both aspirational and unreachable.

In contemporary visual culture, this dynamic is institutionally sustained through mass media, fashion, and digital interfaces. The curated images on Instagram, the airbrushed faces on magazine covers, and the algorithmically promoted aesthetics of success all function as mirror-images of the ideal ego—projected, consumed, and internalized by the viewer. These visual regimes cultivate an affective economy of inadequacy, in which individuals are caught in cycles of comparison, aspiration, and self-surveillance.

Lacan's theory of the gaze offers a critical tool for decoding these mechanisms. The gaze, in his formulation, is not simply the act of looking but the awareness of being looked at—of being constituted as a visible object under the surveillance of the Other (Lacan, 1978). In visual culture, the gaze is institutionalized through omnipresent norms of beauty, success, and desirability. It functions as a superegoic force, internalized and disciplinary, urging individuals to conform to unattainable ideals and punishing failure with shame or exclusion.

The notion of the "big Other"—the symbolic order encompassing language, norms, and ideology—underpins this gaze (Lacan, 1955). In visual culture, the big Other manifests through hegemonic image systems: it dictates what is seen, what is desirable, and who is visible. Yet this symbolic order is inherently unstable; its meanings are contingent, contradictory, and subject to rupture.

By foregrounding the fissures within the symbolic, visual practices can expose the ideological nature of the big Other. For instance, queer visual cultures, counter-advertising campaigns, and experimental cinema resist the dominant gaze by creating dissonant images—those that reject resolution, challenge coherence, or center marginalized subjectivities. In this context, visual culture becomes a field of symbolic disobedience, capable of exposing the ideological artifice of the imaginary and unsettling the illusion of visual mastery.

## Deleuze's concept of "desiring machines" and the production-consumption cycle of visual culture

Gilles Deleuze, along with Félix Guattari, shifts the psychoanalytic focus from repression to production. Their notion of "desiring machines" reframes desire not as a lack (as in Freud or Lacan), but as a productive force that organizes social and libidinal economies (Deleuze and Guattari, 1972). Desire, in this schema, is not obstructed but systematically coded and exploited by capitalist machinery.

In visual culture, this translates into an endless circulation of images that do not reflect desires but engineer them. Advertising operates as a key desiring machine: it organizes signs, affects, and bodies into consumable patterns, creating an artificial scarcity of satisfaction that propels the viewer toward further consumption. This regime transforms the viewer into both a subject of desire and an object of commodification.

What emerges is a structure of systemic repression: not the repression of content, but the control over the forms and circuits through which desire can be expressed. Under platform capitalism, this repression is coded through algorithmic recommendation systems, influencer aesthetics, and participatory metrics such as likes and shares. These platforms simulate emotional intimacy and self-expression while structurally constraining the affective range to commodifiable formats.

It is in this context that the "intimacy/estrangement paradox" arises as a defining pathology of visual culture: platforms offer the illusion of closeness—through images of lifestyle, beauty, or authenticity—while simultaneously intensifying alienation and emotional standardization. This paradox is not merely psychological but infrastructural, shaped by the feedback loops and interface designs of digital environments.

Yet Deleuze and Guattari emphasize that desire always exceeds the structures that attempt to control it. Processes of deterritorialization—where coded desires are disrupted or broken—open spaces for alternative assemblages. Visual culture thus becomes a battleground between the capitalist territorialization of desire and the emergent resistances formed by aesthetic experimentation, ironic détournement, or collective image-making practices.

Critical engagement with visual culture demands not withdrawal but recomposition—the construction of new desiring machines that do not serve accumulation but emancipation. In this sense, visual culture can be reclaimed as a site of affective reengineering, where desire no longer reproduces the market's logic but reimagines forms of relationality, embodiment, and meaning.

## Analysis of the design aesthetics of repression and perverse representation in visual culture

### Advertising design: repressive sublimation and objectified desire under commodity fetishism

#### Objectification of the female body and male gaze in advertising

In the realm of advertising design, the female body is routinely deconstructed and repackaged into a series of fetishized

fragments. As Kilbourne (1999a, 1999b) incisively observes, this process strips women of agency and personhood, positioning them as passive objects of male consumption. Their bodily presence becomes interchangeable with the commodities they endorse, creating a logic of equivalence between sexualized representation and capitalist exchange. This visual economy operates within the logic of the male gaze, as theorized by Mulvey (1975), whereby women are offered up for visual pleasure and erotic decoding, rather than as autonomous agents of meaning. The gaze is not merely scopophilic but disciplinary—it regulates gendered visibility, normalizes sexual asymmetry, and represses female subjectivity under the guise of stylized desire. What appears as creative advertising is, in many instances, the sublimated expression of culturally sanctioned misogyny and psychosexual repression, displaced onto aestheticized surfaces of consumption.

### Advertising creativity and the sublimation of repression: pathological output of visual pleasure

Advertising creativity often operates by harnessing repressed drives and channeling them through visual metaphor and symbolic association. As Jhally (1990) argues, the advertising image does not merely sell a product—it sells a fantasy, a libidinal promise that transforms the object into a vehicle of self-completion. These fantasies are structured around deeply internalized lacks—sexual, emotional, existential—and are projected onto the commodity as a surrogate. The result is a pathological economy of visual pleasure, where the viewer's repressed desires are incessantly solicited but never truly resolved. This cycle, underpinned by commodity fetishism, produces a structure of chronic dissatisfaction: the object of desire recedes as soon as it is consumed, requiring ever-new images to reignite the promise. The perpetual stimulation without fulfillment breeds a condition akin to neurosis, in which the subject is trapped in a circuit of unattainable gratification and aestheticized repression.

### Movie posters: "fragmentation" of the female body and perverse imagination under the male gaze

#### The evolution of female representation in Hollywood movie posters

While visual styles have evolved over time, the core representational logic in Hollywood movie posters remains tethered to the objectification of the female body. As Haralovich (1982) demonstrates, female figures have consistently been depicted through compositional techniques that eroticize and fragment their bodies—legs, lips, curves—transforming them into semiotic cues for visual consumption. Despite shifts in genre and market demographics, the posters continue to reproduce the codes of the male gaze, privileging visual pleasure over narrative substance. This process aligns with Mulvey's (1975) critique of cinematic representation, in which women are frozen into images of to-be-looked-at-ness, serving as erotic spectacles rather than narrative agents. The visual rhetoric of the movie poster, in its static repetition and exaggerated emphasis, reinforces these structures in even more intensified form: the viewer is not asked to



follow a story but to linger on a fantasy. The female body becomes not a signifier of character but a screen for projections of desire and anxiety.

### Movie poster design and the visual gratification of male scopophilic desire

The design strategies employed in movie posters are calibrated to produce maximum visual arousal, often through the aesthetic dismemberment of the female figure. As [Dyer \(1982\)](#) notes, such practices are not incidental but structurally encoded into the logics of promotion and marketing. Close-ups on cleavage, suggestive poses, and strategic lighting construct the female body as a site of erotic signification, inviting the viewer's gaze while concealing agency. The poster becomes a locus of scopophilic gratification: it invites prolonged contemplation, repetition, and visual fetishization in a way the film itself does not. This static fetishism participates in what [Freud \(1905\)](#) termed perversion—not in moral terms, but in the sense of a detour of desire that displaces relational intimacy onto an aestheticized object. In this sense, movie poster design becomes a primary mechanism of cultural pedagogy, teaching viewers how—and what—to desire.

### Social media: pathological carnival of self-presentation and repressive anxiety of the other's presence

#### Selfie culture and narcissistic personality disorder

The proliferation of social media has engendered a new visual economy predicated on self-exhibition and algorithmic approval. The selfie functions as both symptom and performance of what the [American Psychiatric Association \(2013\)](#) classifies as narcissistic personality disorder: a condition marked by inflated self-regard and a compulsive need for external validation. As [Balick \(2014\)](#) observes, this digital narcissism is not simply individual pathology but a culturally normalized affective condition. The curated self-image becomes a prosthetic ego—assembled, filtered, and performed in anticipation of others' gaze. Yet the temporary affirmation gained through likes and follows deepens the subject's dependency on external metrics of worth, generating an affective dissonance between the idealized digital persona and the embodied, flawed self. The selfie thus operates as both an aesthetic technology of the self and a defense mechanism against feelings of inadequacy, loss, and social fragmentation.

#### Like economy and anxieties of subjectivity: the presence of the other on social media

The visual structure of social media platforms functions as a digital panopticon, in which the presence of the Other is constant, anonymous, and judgmental. As [Foucault \(1977\)](#) argues, visibility itself becomes a mode of discipline: individuals internalize the gaze of the Other and modify their behavior accordingly. In the "like economy," value is distributed through quantifiable signs of approval, transforming subjectivity into a competitive performance. This induces a form of affective repression: not only are undesirable emotions excluded from display, but even positive expressions are curated for strategic effect. The fear of exclusion, ridicule, or irrelevance fosters a heightened state of self-surveillance, where authenticity is sacrificed for algorithmic legibility. What emerges is a hall of mirrors in which

identity is not discovered but constructed—and policed—through recursive comparison and mediated self-monitoring. Social media does not merely reflect social reality; it produces a hyperreal mode of sociality that is both hyper-visible and emotionally impoverished.

### Transcending repression and perversion: a shift in the design aesthetics of visual culture

#### Insights from psychoanalytic theory for design practice: confronting repression, breaking through perversion

#### Unveiling unconscious desires, confronting the repressive mechanisms of the subject

Psychoanalytic theory continues to offer critical interventions into design practice by illuminating the unconscious desires and repressive mechanisms that structure both the creation and reception of visual culture. Rather than relegating these psychic forces to the periphery, contemporary design can engage them directly—disrupting sanitized consumer narratives and exposing the tensions between desire and identity ([Zizek, 1989](#)). This confrontation with the repressed involves a movement beyond decorative surface and into the domain of affective truth, where latent anxieties, contradictions, and drives can be rendered visible, not to pathologize them, but to integrate them into a fuller conception of subjectivity.

#### Deconstructing the politics of the gaze, breaking the vicious cycle of perversion and objectification

In tandem with unveiling repression, design practice must interrogate the politics of the gaze that reproduce systems of power and symbolic violence. Visual culture has long participated in the perverse loop of voyeurism, fetishism, and objectification, particularly of marginalized bodies. A critical design ethos should therefore seek to deconstruct these entrenched optics—not simply by reversing roles or aestheticizing resistance, but by disrupting the scopic regime itself ([Sturken and Cartwright, 2001](#)). This involves visual strategies that refuse easy consumption, foreground relationality over possession, and activate the viewer as an ethical subject rather than a passive voyeur.

#### Reconstructing design ethics: from objectification and fragmentation to intersubjectivity

a. Feminist Practices in Design: Resisting Objectification, Affirming Subjectivity.

Feminist design theory foregrounds the interrelation between form and ideology, exposing how patriarchal codes are embedded in everyday aesthetic practices. Rather than framing women as static images to be consumed, feminist design constructs spaces for voice, multiplicity, and agency. By challenging the visual languages of fragmentation, commodification, and eroticized detachment, feminist design affirms lived complexity and relational subjectivity ([Cixous, 1976](#)). This resistance is not solely oppositional but generative, offering

a transformative vision of aesthetics rooted in care, embodiment, and mutual recognition.

### The ethical turn in design: from gaze to dialogue, from possession to empathy

The ethical turn in contemporary design calls for a departure from the possessive, extractive logics of traditional visuality. Drawing on the ethical philosophy of [Levinas \(1969\)](#), design can move toward a dialogical orientation that centers the irreducibility of the Other. Such a shift entails not only formal innovations but an affective reconfiguration of the designer-viewer relationship—from control to responsiveness, from manipulation to mutuality. This empathetic ethics does not eliminate aesthetic desire but reframes it through respect, humility, and responsibility.

### The future landscape of design aesthetics: a return to diversity, inclusion, and humanistic care

#### Difference and coexistence: a multicultural perspective on design aesthetics

In an increasingly globalized but uneven visual culture, the future of design aesthetics must embrace cultural plurality rather than impose universalist ideals. A multicultural perspective resists the flattening effects of visual monoculture and instead affirms the situatedness of aesthetic traditions, enabling cross-cultural resonances without appropriation ([Bhabha, 1994](#)). Such practices foreground the ethics of translation, collaboration, and epistemic humility, emphasizing coexistence over dominance. Design thus becomes a medium of plural dialogue—an archive of difference rather than a homogenizing force.

#### Humanistic technology: infusing design with human care and ethical purpose

The ethical responsibilities of design extend into the domain of technological mediation. Against the backdrop of platform capitalism and algorithmic governance, design must reclaim its humanistic vocation—not by rejecting technology, but by reorienting its purposes toward flourishing and relationality ([Heidegger, 1977](#)). Humanistic design does not fetishize form but integrates aesthetics with function, meaning, and affect, creating artifacts that support the richness of lived experience rather than instrumentalizing it.

#### The social responsibility of design: resisting pathological outputs, cultivating aesthetic health

As visual culture becomes increasingly implicated in the production of social meaning, the role of the designer acquires heightened ethical stakes. Following [Papanek \(1984\)](#) call for socially responsible design, contemporary practice must move beyond formal innovation toward aesthetic stewardship. Designers are not mere image-makers; they are shapers of symbolic worlds. This entails resisting the pathologies of visual culture—its commodified desires, its fetishistic representations, its algorithmic compulsions—and cultivating a visual ethics grounded in care, critique, and community. In this way, design aesthetics can move from complicity in repression and perversion to active participation in liberation and renewal.

## Conclusion reclaiming the critical mission of visual culture and design ethics

The critical interrogation of visual culture—through psychoanalytic theory, feminist critique, and ethical philosophy—has revealed that design is never a neutral aesthetic undertaking. It is a cultural dispositive, deeply implicated in shaping the unconscious desires, social hierarchies, and symbolic orders that structure our lived experience. Far from being merely decorative, visual design participates in the production of subjectivity, mediating how individuals relate to themselves, to others, and to systems of power. As such, the visual field has long served as a battleground where repression and perversion are not only expressed but also regulated, normalized, and circulated through commodified images and aesthetic codes.

Yet this complicity is not inevitable. The mission of critical design aesthetics must be redefined as an active political and ethical intervention—one that resists the visual economies of objectification, surveillance, and fetishistic desire. This entails dismantling the residual legacies of the male gaze, racialized spectacles, and algorithmic governance, while also foregrounding more intersubjective, embodied, and pluralistic visual epistemologies. Designers must move beyond the passive reproduction of dominant cultural codes and toward a practice of radical critique and imaginative reconstruction.

This critical reorientation requires more than the inclusion of “diverse” images or moral intentions. It demands a deeper epistemological shift—what may be called a trans-subjective turn in design: a shift from the logic of isolated selfhood to a relational aesthetics grounded in shared vulnerability, mutual recognition, and co-constituted meaning-making. In contrast to the narcissistic feedback loops of platform capitalism or the possessive dynamics of the gaze, a trans-subjective approach recognizes that subjectivity emerges not in solipsistic assertion but through ethical encounters with the other. It insists that visual representation be accountable to the affective and symbolic complexity of human relations rather than reducing them to data-driven legibility.

Such a shift does not reject technological mediation but insists that digital and visual infrastructures be designed with attunement to the psychic, affective, and ecological wellbeing of their publics. This requires cultivating visual grammars that embrace ambiguity, welcome discomfort, and resist the sanitizing logic of commercial smoothness.

In this spirit, the future of design aesthetics hinges on its ability to operate not as a tool of repression or market manipulation, but as a platform for emancipatory encounter. Design must learn to speak in registers that are not immediately consumable—registers that interrupt, provoke, and invite ethical hesitation. By affirming alterity rather than masking it, by staging difference rather than assimilating it, design can begin to heal the very pathologies it has helped produce.

Ultimately, the task ahead is not simply to reform visual culture but to reimagine its ethical horizon. Design must be reclaimed as a practice of care: for the complexity of human subjectivity, for the fragility of communal life, and for the irreducible uniqueness of the other. In doing so, visual culture can recover its critical potential—not by purging desire, but by transforming its aesthetic forms, narrative

structures, and ethical aspirations. This is the promise—and the responsibility—of design in the twenty-first century.

## Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

## Author contributions

XJ: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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## Generative AI statement

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