

Visual Literacy in a Consumer Culture: Artistic Production and Criticism as Civic Engagement

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A good art curriculum must allow students to fuse emotion and cognition in the visual expression of ideas. It must relate art education to students' present interests and experience while preparing them for a postmodern future. It must respond to the expansion of the visual arts in forms and influence. It must infuse diverse, historical and contemporary visual culture to enable students to gain broad and deep knowledge about making and viewing contexts. And, it must address artists' and educators' growing social concerns and students' demand for change.

Marita Sturken's chapter "Consuming Fear and Selling Comfort" from her 2007 book, *Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch, Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero*, makes a critical contribution to educators' knowledge of visual culture. Sturken argues that the visual culture pervading post-industrial U.S. is saturated with images of fear constructed by people who work in the media, particularly in news and advertising, and that those people use that fear to then sell us comfort in order to convince us to buy products, services, and ideas. The argument that newsmakers and advertisers intend to promote fear in us is not new. For example, David Morley (1992) suggested that television news instills fear about the world at-large in order to keep people at home watching TV. However, Sturken provides a new argument and supportive evidence to illustrate the strategic connection between fear and comfort. The strategy works—during a crisis (real or fabricated), people will stay "glued to their sets" in an attempt to be informed, and by extension, to try to grasp as much power over the situation as possible. As the use of technological tools has expanded, this strategy has become even more pervasive, so that now people can carry the news with them.

I agree with Sturken's analysis of the insidious ways in which visual culture has been used by news and advertising "professionals" to promote terror, and the ways these people then use the same techniques to sell comfort. There is no doubt that we need to make students aware of these techniques in order to prepare them to critique this visual culture. If people do not resist such

manipulation, they may be considered participants in it because the powerful visual techniques used makes participation seem natural and even enjoyable. In contrast, resistance to such techniques may have to be learned. Regardless of whether people want or like to participate in this process of manipulation, it is still the responsibility of educators to provide an alternative to the particular brand of consumer education delivered by news and advertising media makers.

VISUAL LITERACY AS A RESPONSE TO CONSUMER CULTURE

The visual techniques and processes addressed in a good contemporary art curriculum are the foundations for the visual literacy necessary for navigating visual culture communication and knowledge. Visual literacy has had several definitions, most focusing on metaphors of textual language. However, text-based definitions do not adequately represent the ways in which images and objects mediate knowledge. When considering learning from visual culture, it is far more appropriate to use the phrase "visual literacy" to convey the psychobiological ways that people interact differently with images and objects than with texts.

For example, when we encounter visual images, we use eye movements to collect various types of information around the picture, rather than following a textual sequence. We tend to interpret the codes of a picture in layers, from simple to complex, rather than deciphering textual codes in a linear fashion. When decoding images, we tend to form an associative context for holistic analysis, rather than figuring out what words mean as the story unfolds. Images can have a powerful, and subtle, impact on people in ways that text cannot and we have a much larger memory capacity for images. Of course, when we read a novel, we form images in our minds, but most of these are dependent on some form of visual experience, including previously seen visual images.

So, visual literacy now means a working knowledge of the highly influential and unique ways that images and objects mediate the construction of meaning. As a result, visual literacy demands both critical and creative engagement to interpret information and construct knowledge. This engagement is a part of the civic engagement necessary for effective participation in advanced democratic societies.

VISUAL CULTURE, CRITIQUE AND ARTISTIC PRODUCTION

In this chapter, Sturken presents a perspective of response to visual culture that is critical, but it is also dystopic. It does not provide a constructive response to manipulation (although Sturken makes constructive recommendations in the final chapter of the book). One of the purposes of contemporary education must be to provide students with hope for the future. This idea is based on the,

albeit modernist, belief that people can change things for the better and that positive change occurs when individuals improve themselves. However, this belief is also postmodernist, because although it suggests a utopia, it focuses on an ontology of becoming, rather than an epistemology of knowing. The foundation of this type of education is social reconstructionism, which is one of the bases of visual culture approaches to art education.

In the process of helping to create a visually literate population, socially conscious art educators support reconstructive ideals (while accepting that those ideals will not always be achieved). This is important because when children grow up with little hope, hatred and fear are guaranteed to continue generation after generation. For example, Cohen-Evron (2005) has demonstrated that art education can reveal the reproduction of wartime stereotypes and hatred, but it can also help to break that cycle.

Interestingly, students do not tend to watch news programs and many pay less attention to advertising than to their friends' decisions about products. Quite the contrary, students often lead advertising. Advertisers use focus groups to study "cool kids" and keep up with trends these students start so that they can better advertise to those who follow the kids they think are cool. Advertisers only have a few years to make young people commit to brands and are in a desperate search to find role models, such as sports and entertainment professionals, who kids will follow. For students, general feelings of comfort are probably less important than feelings of belonging. But, at the same time, kids in the U.S. are attracted by edgy-ness and individualism—both of which are mainstream cultural ideals. So, advertisers try to walk a fine line with students who are in the process of defining their identities that, at once convinces kids to follow, while making them think that they are being independent.

However, many other forms of popular visual culture intended for students work in contrast to the fear mongering of news and advertising professionals. Forms of visual culture, such as comics, films, video games tend to focus on heroism, social responsibility, and taking action to solve problems.

CREATIVITY AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN ART EDUCATION

To include Sturkens' argument in school means to teach students to critique the rampant consumerism that has ties to contemporary visual culture, but we must also support the development of creative production skills that enable students to respond with hope. From a contemporary art education perspective, creative production is a form of civic engagement (Freedman, 2003). Through their art, students can create new visions of human interaction, alternative solutions to social problems, and other worlds with fewer fears.

Creative production is a vital path to visual literacy—connecting form, feeling, and knowing—a connection that empowers communication (Freedman, 2004). Learning art concepts and skills enable students to express their own ideas and construct their own identities, while providing insight into the artistic motivations and strategies of others.

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