

Examining Visual Culture

T H E O R Y

Art educators including June King McFee and Vincent Lanier have advocated exploring the larger world of visual culture beyond masterworks and cultural artifacts. For example, they have long endorsed the study of mass media, advertising, propaganda, film, and television. Several factors appear to make the study of mass culture even

more critical for today's students. Specifically, the cultural environment is not only increasingly visual; it is multisensory in nature, layered in its meanings, and open to multiple interpretations (Chapman, 2000; Duncum, 2002). Further, it is often driven by the marketplace, loaded with stereotypical imagery, and powerfully seductive in its delivery of implicit and explicit messages. It also yields conflicting and

B E T T E R P R A C T I C E

Teachers who engage students in the study of visual and synesthetic culture develop thinking skills used by social scientists in forming ideas about the ways in which human behavior can be represented, affected, and influenced.

mixed messages about the values, attitudes, and beliefs society holds about issues such as violence, sex, physical image, consumerism, status, and power (Duncum, 1989). From this perspective, aesthetics is reconceptualized as inherently social and political (Freedman, 2000), and criticism is seen as a valuable tool for analyzing culture (Nadaner, 1985).

As a term, "visual culture" embraces popular culture, mass media, advertising, and entertainment as well as what we have traditionally known as fine arts, crafts, design, and artifacts. Duncum (2001) proposes that "visual artifacts exist in relation to other semiotic codes and appeal to sensory modes other than sight such as language, sound, music, human gesture, and cannot be grasped without taking these modes into account" (p. 104). Furthermore, he sees artifacts and perceptions about them as context bound. In other words, they are historically, socially, and politically determined and cannot be studied in isolation from these factors. Chapman (2000) has expressed similar observations about the complex interface of sensory-aesthetic stimuli that pervade contemporary culture including space design, architecture, sound, light, color, and aroma. Thus, the multimodal nature of culture requires citizenry who are multiliterate. And literacy is seen as more than encoding and decoding; it is a profoundly political social practice.

Given the challenges of studying a simultaneous array of sensory input and messages coded in semiotics, methods of inquiry used by ethnographers, psychologists, and sociologists may be helpful (Desai, 2002). Ethnographers provide context-specific methods of inquiry for examining the particularities of experience. Psychologists

study action and response, the subliminal, the overt, and the covert that cause human beings to feel, respond, and act in certain ways. Sociologists, interested in human social behavior and the ways it can be organized, use skills that attend to broad patterns of behaviors, systems, organizations, and institutions. Some contemporary artists have adapted ethnographic methods into their art-making process (Desai, 2002). Others are complicit in the design and shaping of visual and sensory-aesthetic culture. The vast majority is indeed the intended audience for whom cultural experience is targeted with the intent of generating certain desired results.

Psychologists attend to how human beings respond and make sense out of their experiences. They are interested in how the mind and emotions can be influenced and respond. They gather information through data collection and analysis of behaviors and responses under both real and/or experimental conditions.

Sociologists study ways human behavior is organized and orchestrated. Thus, the medium and the message, the intended audience, desired behavior, and motivating force, as well as the interplay between forces set in motion, are all data worth analyzing. Sociologists also evaluate the movement of ideas as well as the scale, scope, and layering of media and message. Subsequently, they can entertain ideas about how human behavior is influenced, affected by a chain of events, redirected, even manipulated—to ends both questionable and honorable, intended and unintended.

P R A C T I C E

Recommended Strategies

Be alert to developmental differences that might have an impact on investigations of visual culture (Cheng, 2002).

Employ questioning strategies that facilitate discovery learning (Yokley, 1997).

Expand “the canon” beyond traditional art to include popular culture and mass media. Enlarge the range of artifacts that are examined with a continued focus on the social worlds of visual imagery as they constitute an embodiment of attitudes, beliefs, and values (Duncum, 2001; Zelevansky, 1998).

Rethink an exclusive focus on things visual (Duncum, 2002a).

Experiment with images to see how text, music, or narrative “anchor” an image and have the capacity to change its meaning (Duncum, 2002a).

Examine the role of text in imagery (Duncum, 2002a).

Study a number of different presentations of the same text (Duncum, 2002a).

Examine imagery created for the corporate world, especially highly seductive multiple modalities (Duncum, 2002a).

Engage students in critical discussions that cause them to reflect and reconsider messages found in popular visual culture; encourage them to find empowerment in creating their own images (Stokrocki, 2001; Tavin & Anderson, in press).

Facilitate examinations of art as a social statement, in a social context, from social perspectives. Help students understand the power of the visual arts and the freedoms and responsibilities that come with it (Freedman, 2000).

Orchestrate dialogues about artworks with an eye to transforming the forms of power and domination (Desai, 2002).

Orchestrate investigations of popular icons that move to and from studio practice to examine ways in which popular culture serves human needs (Pistolessi, 2002).

REFERENCES

- Boughton, D., Freedman, K., Hausman, J., Hicks, L., Madeja, S., Metcalf, S., Rayala, M., Smith-Shank, D., Stankiewicz, M., Stuhr, P., Tavin, K., & Vallance, E. (2002). *Art Education and Visual Culture. NAEA Advisory*. Reston, VA: National Art Education Association.
- Visual culture is reported to reflect "the recent proliferation and pervasiveness of visual images and artifacts and their importance to social life... The range of visual culture reflects and contributes to the construction of knowledge, identity, beliefs, imagination, sense of time and place, feelings of agency, and the quality of life at all ages." This advisory offers background and rationale, aims, and pedagogical recommendations related to visual culture.
- Chapman, L. (2000). The arts of aesthetic persuasion in contemporary life. Paper presented at the National Art Education Association Conference in Los Angeles.
- Chapman raises questions concerning the pervasive and compound impact of multiple sensory-based aesthetic experience in contemporary culture and discusses the social and political problems and challenges in examining visual and sensory-aesthetic culture.
- Congdon, K. G., & Blandy, D. (2001). Approaching the real and the fake: Living life in the fifth world. *Studies in Art Education*, 42 (3), 266-278.
- Discussion considers the human propensity to replicate and the contemporary experience of a world copied, appropriated, simulated, re-created. Suggests, among other ideas, that this has created "a wild and wonderful environment for debate, dialogue, and creation of new ways of thinking and living" (p. 273). Proposes that critical pedagogy will allow art educators to assist learners in clarifying their own values and beliefs while discovering the points of view of others" (p. 276).
- Desai, D. (2000). Working with people to make art: Oral history, aesthetic practice, and art education. *The Journal of Social Theory in Art Education* 21, 72-90.
- Desai, D. (2002). The ethnographic move in contemporary art: What does it mean for art education. *Studies in Art Education* 43 (4), 307-323.
- Desai examines the use of ethnography as a component of contemporary art. Ethnography is defined as a process of inquiry and a written representation of culture. Articles provide specific examples of contemporary artwork that draws on ethnography and notes its increasing popularity in art education.
- Duncum, P. (1989). Children's unsolicited drawings of violence as a site of social contradiction. *Studies in Art Education*, 30 (4), 249-256.
- Article reviews the psychological debate regarding violence in children's unsolicited drawings and the social contradiction of violence as something that is both condemned and authorized. Reviews findings regarding violence in the media. Argues for giving children the choice of their own subjects and warns against a too ready acceptance of the social conditions in which they are selected. Discusses some intervention strategies. Concludes that "children's spontaneous drawings of violence are important because they bear witness to children's attempts to make sense of a major social reality that includes significant contradictions of thought and action" (p. 255). He suggests such efforts should not be ignored even if they pose challenges to teachers. Reference list identifies numerous sources on the effects of television and media.
- Duncum, P. (1990). Clearing the decks for the dominant culture: Some first principles for a contemporary art education. *Studies in Art Education*, 31 (4), 207-215.
- A critique of an emphasis on art education on the promotion of high culture. Discusses seven principles for cultural studies: categories of culture should be regarded as descriptions, not evaluations of what a society should value; understanding culture requires an insider's perspective and a willingness to consider how cultural products are composed of conventions, inventions, and complex variations; cultural production is profoundly social in nature; users of dominant culture actively discriminate; the content of dominant culture is age old; dominant culture has a user orientation and is rooted in people's conditions of existence; and standards of culture vary over time and are politically and socially engaged. Suggests that a socially relevant art education can make a positive contribution by seeking "an insider's experience, with a collaborative model of production, (respecting) students for how they cope with the conditions imposed upon them, (acknowledging) the perennial nature of dominant-culture content, and (recognizing) the changing political and social contexts in which cultural standards are established, maintained, and revised..." (p. 214).
- Duncum, P. (2001). Visual culture: Developments, definitions, and directions for art education. *Studies in Art Education*, 42 (2), 101-112.
- Article discusses assumptions that underpin visual culture, characterizing the study of visual culture as greatly enlarging the range of artifacts that one might examine. While the study of visual culture concerns "substantially visual artifacts," there is "an interest in more than the artifacts themselves, (specifically) the social conditions in which the artifacts have their being including their production, distribution and use" (pp. 106-107).
- Duncum, P. (2002a). Visual culture: Multimodality and meaning. Presentation at the National Art Education Conference in Miami Beach.
- Defines the concerns of visual culture to include its multimodal nature and the manner in which different modalities "anchor" and create meaning. Offers ideas for implementing the study of visual culture.
- Duncum, P. (2002b). Clarifying visual culture art education. *Art Education*, 55 (3), 6-11.
- Further clarification of VCAE. VCAE sees making and critique as symbiotic yet is a new paradigm with profoundly historical roots, cross-cultural in nature, and as natural as another study of culture. It values both aesthetic value and social issues and will emerge incrementally as practice develops.
- Freedman, K. (2000). Social perspectives on art education in the United States: Teaching visual culture in a democracy. *Studies in Art Education*, 41 (4), 314-329.
- Article reviews the theoretical foundations of democratic thought and characterizes "art education as a sociopolitical act" (p. 215). Freedman argues that art must be represented in education as a social statement, in a social context, from social perspectives. Identifies as an essential responsibility of art education teaching students about the power of the visual arts and the freedoms and responsibilities that come with it (p. 326).
- Hamblen, K. A. (1990). Beyond the aesthetic of cash-culture literacy. *Studies in Art Education*, 31 (4), 216-225.
- Paper argues for an ethno-aesthetic approach to the study of culture that couples the study of aesthetics with an anthropological perspective and ethnographic methods of investigation.
- Nadaner, D. (1985). Responding to the image world: A proposal for art curricula. *Art Education*, 37 (1), 9-12.
- Author suggests that art education needs to encourage criticism rather than the regurgitation of images. Further, it needs to produce alternative images rather than reproduce existing ones (p. 11). Nadaner offers three proposals for turning attention to the pervasive, the invisible, and the possible. Sees criticism as playing a significant role in analyzing pervasive imagery, supplemental and alternative imagery as a way of seeing what mass media does not show, and contemporary artists' search for means of effective representation as a model for student work in which a dialogue about experience and representation can be carried into their work.
- Tavin, K. (2000). The impact of visual culture on art education: Teaching in and through visual culture. *The Journal of Multicultural and Cross-Cultural Research in Art Education*, 18 (1), 20-23/37-40.
- Paper argues for transforming art education into a transdisciplinary practice that addresses a wide range of images from everyday life. Visual culture

involves visual representations that saturate the fabric of life, shape experience by capturing imaginations and engaging desires, and contributes language, codes, and values. Discusses the implications of a paradigm shift for the field of art education.

Tavin, K. (2001). Swimming up-stream in the jean pool: Developing a pedagogy towards critical citizenship in visual culture. *The Journal of Social Theory in Art Education, 21*, 129-158.

Paper proposes that art education should "be viewed as a political, social, and cultural practice that addresses a broad range of images if it is going to help students (and teachers) adapt to the new critical landscape (rather than try to escape from it)."

Zelevansky, P. A. (1998). The family life of commonplace images. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Columbia University Teachers College.

Proposes that art education pedagogy expand its concerns to embrace aspects of visual expression beyond those of art and art history. Suggests that commonplace images (maps, postcards, tickets, trading cards, memorabilia, and souvenirs) are dynamic in offering representational and documentary information and provide essential orientations in space, time, and memory. Recommends a visual thinking curriculum that balances theory, formal analysis, art practice, and self-reflexive critique.

R E S E A R C H

Cheng, M. (2002). Culture and interpretation: A study of Taiwanese children's responses to visual images. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Ohio State University. DAI, 63, no. 01A, p. 58.

Database of 56 children, ages 8 to 14, who were asked to interpret six different images from fine art and advertising. Findings include the observation that younger children draw on their family life, the mass media, schooling, and their general beliefs and values to interpret images. Only older children appear to be aware of the commercial purposes of advertisements.

Tavin, K. (2003). A critical pedagogy of visual culture in art education: Toward a performative inter/hypertextual practice. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, the Pennsylvania State University.

Theoretical study investigating the argument for and proposing a critical pedagogy of visual culture in art education.

Wilson McKay, S. K. (2000). Resisting anaesthesia: Mapping attitudes of vision in democratic art education. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, the Pennsylvania State University.

This theoretical study explores unexamined attitudes of vision and argues for "ruptured vision" as a way of developing critical awareness. Sees an important role for art education in the development of critical attitudes in education for a democracy.

Yokley, S. H. (1997). Art, art education, and critical pedagogy: Case studies of elementary education preservice teachers. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, the Pennsylvania State University.

A theoretical investigation using critical social research methods to investigate case studies of high, medium, and low acceptance of critical pedagogy. Findings suggest students are not offered enough opportunities to become critical thinkers in terms of the relationships among art and society. Recommends questioning strategies that promote discovery learning, flexible thinking, and self-reflective metathinking.

R E P O R T S F R O M P R A C T I C E

Anderson, D. (2002). An investigation into visual culture as an issues-based art education. Unpublished master's thesis project, Towson University.

Report describes the motives, design, and implementation of a unit of study with upper-elementary students that translated theory from visual culture into practice. For results of this study see the article by Tavin and Anderson (in press).

Pistolessi, E. (2002). The Elvis icon. *Art Education, 55* (3), 40-46.

Description of a semester long investigation by preservice elementary-education students using Elvis as a focus for investigations of popular culture. In the process, teacher and students came into contact with the vast Elvis culture while engaged in a number of inventive studio projects, some of them generating new stories and discoveries. Author observes that "discoveries and observations of the impact of Elvis as icon on ourselves and those around us taught some unexpected lessons about the human condition, and the ways we use cultural images to provide us with what we need" (p. 46).

Stokrocki, M. (2001). Go to the mall and get it all: Adolescents' aesthetic values in the shopping mall. *Art Education, 54* (2), 18-23.

An Art I high school class participated in a survey and discussion about malls, art, stores, window displays, designers, and artful collections. Conversation explored exploitation, ethical questions, possibilities for art projects related to the mall, and discoveries. The author observes that such conversations are not easy to conduct and that it takes time to get students to be more pensive about their aesthetic experiences. She suggests that meeting in and photographing such places appears to be a productive strategy.

Szekely, G. (1996). Preparation for a new art world. *Art Education, 49* (4), 6-13.

Article makes the case that new art forms may have their origins in what children do. Directs attention to child-study and first-hand observations of children's studios (their rooms), collections, favorite places for shopping and play, basic plays, audiences, and reasons they make art as inspiration for new approaches to teaching. Suggests teachers invite students to bring in interesting "finds" and to engage them in conversations about what makes something art and why.

Tavin, K., & Anderson, D. (2003). Teaching (popular) visual culture: Deconstructing Disney in the elementary art classroom. *Art Education 56* (3), 21-24.

A review of theory related to the study of visual culture. In this translation of theory to practice, students first engage in critical thinking through a sequence of questions and critical viewing activities. They are introduced to artists whose work offers a cultural critique. The unit culminates with opportunities for students to use art making in an empowering way to re-envision movies and offer their own commentary on issues of their choosing.

Yokley, S. H. (1999). Embracing a critical pedagogy in art education. *Art Education, 52* (5), 18-24.

Article offers an example of critical pedagogy as implemented with elementary-education preservice teachers. Works were chosen that would demand a cultural critique. The environment allowed for open, uncensored critical dialogue. From an initial sharing of items that could represent themselves, students "stepped into two self-portraits" to consider internal stylistic, metaphoric, iconic, formal, and expressive content. They also explored contextual information using additional strategies of reflective writing, diagramming connections, research, broad-based questions, and a poetic model for writing an interpretive response.