Baby Steps Towards Change: Visual Culture in the Classroom

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Abstract

Believing that art teachers need specific models to change their classroom practice to include a visual culture orientation, the paper begins by reviewing many examples drawn from available literature as well as their alleged benefits. The author then describes in more depth his own teaching experience, introducing theory-informed activities undertaken as part of teacher preparation courses in the United States. Different activities are described that involve three key visual culture concepts: representation, where the author deals with stereotypes, elements like framing and point-of view, and the absence of representation on Internet image banks; aesthetic seduction where the example of Disney animated movies is explored; and the gaze in which students are asked to reflect upon how they look at a wide variety of images and what this reveals about them.

Keywords: Representation, Aesthetics, Seduction, Gaze

This paper offers small steps, baby steps, towards what in the United States is often called a Visual Culture approach to the K-12 art classroom. The Visual Culture orientation of art education has become an umbrella term for many diverse things, informed as it is by different intellectual fields (Duncum, 2003). Nevertheless, the diversity of practice has in common a concern to situate cultural production within the context of contemporary student's lives, which means acknowledging the postmodern implosion of traditional cultural categories of high and low and accepting the implications of the digital and networked revolution (Duncum, 2002; Freeman, 2003; Tavin, 2003).

The impetus for the paper is twofold. In education change is slow, typically occurring piecemeal with each new thing added one at a time. Additionally, teachers typically adopt new approaches only when concrete examples are available. I know that I do. In consideration of these widely acknowledged realities, I begin by reviewing some of the popular visual culture sites that teachers have already addressed in their classrooms as well as the benefits they describe. I then offer in more depth descriptions of some of my own practical, in-class activities.

Previous Sites and Classroom Activity

Many attempts by other art educators have been made to expand beyond fine art to include the more inclusive range of artifacts of visual culture. In 2007 I examined reports of a visual culture orientation as practiced in K-12 classrooms, and again in 2009 I surveyed such activities in teacher education programs (Duncum, 2007; 2009a). Since then others have added to the literature of classroom activities in both schools and teacher preparation classes. These have included, for example, media stereotypes of race (Martinez, 2012), disability (Seidler, 2011), and maternity (Baxter & Wilson-McKay, 2011), as well as a wide range of popular cultural sites, including Argentinian telenovelas (Christopoulou, 2010), shop window displays (Christopoulou, 2011), zines (Klien, 2010), Barbie dolls (Amburgy, 2011), animated film (Madrid, 2012), military training videos (Derby, 2014), popular images of the Buddha (Shin, 2010), play dolls (Chung, 2011), family snapshots (Baxter, 2012), graffiti, tattoos, public and private memorial

shrines (Bey, 2012), adolescents own web pages (Bae, 2011), Tamagotchi electronic pets (Ivashkevich, 2013), and many others. Art educators have also asked students to answer back with digital technologies; for example, by making movies based on YouTube genre (Duncum, 2014a), and video production, including in preschool (McClure, 2013) and as part of after-school programs (Levy & Weber, 2011).

A range of benefits is described (Duncum, 2007). These include greater student motivation, critical thinking, and more complex imagery, each of which are related to how in focusing on their varied lived experience of gender, sexuality, cultural hybridity, consumerism, and ableness, students investigated their own identities. Also, students learnt conventions of popular culture, not through osmosis but through guided discovery and therefore consciously. Additionally, they learned about the media as an institution. Finally, though no less significantly, teachers learnt things about their students in ways they had not previously, or in some cases could not have imagined.

Taking Baby Steps in the Preparation of Art Teachers

In that remains of this paper I want to sketch something of my own pedagogy, my own small steps from a conventional art program practice to a visual culture classroom practice. I do not offer this account as exemplary, but only because it is the development with which I most familiar. And it is certainly not offered as a systematic curriculum.

It is a somewhat difficult for me now to admit that like many art teachers I began my teaching career sensing that my classroom practice was hardly relevant to student's lives, but not knowing what to do. I was aware that in falling back on the tried and true my classroom practice had virtually no carry over into student's lives beyond the art room, but there seemed to be no models to move in the direction I desired. It was patently obvious, for example, that introducing color theory or teaching art history as a succession of movements from long ago, was of little interest to most students.

Little by little, however, by reading the work of trusted colleagues, by listening to students, through my own trailing, failing and sometimes succeeding, though perhaps most significantly reading in the extensive

literature of media education theory and practice, I have developed theory-informed activities that at least point in the right direction. I share a few of them below in relation to just three key visual culture concepts: representation, aesthetic seduction, and the gaze.

Representation

For years I looked at premodern fine art in terms of their compositions, their lines, colors, tones, their harmonies and contrasts, and so on. I would note subject matter of course but I would not consider it problematic, as constitutive of competing, often contradictory, beliefs and values. But to the extent that students were interested at all in old paintings, their interest lay in subject matter.

Gradually, I began to consider some of the most obvious things about the subject matter of fine art images; namely, visual stereotypes. Then I branched out to include stereotypes in current popular imagery and found that they were the same stereotypes. For example, the same general kind of images of children represented as innocents by Picasso were used by popular photographer Anne Geddes. Then I discovered identical tropes had been used for centuries by Raphael and even by the Romans. Then, in one of the most important steps I took, I recognized that my interest in pictorial stereotypes was usefully considered under the general concept of representation, which involves asking three basic questions: What is represented? How is it represented? (see Sturken & Cartwright, 2009). And following the Deconstruction strategy (Norris, 2002), what is not represented, what is absent?

Today, I typically begin by addressing the second question: how are things represented by what I call the elements of realistic-style imagery? With the use of a PowerPoint presentation I introduce the language of framing, angles-of-view, depth-of- field, lighting, body language, and the effects of different camera lenses. We consider the use of distant framing, three-quarter view, half-view, head and shoulders and close-up. For example, we consider how a loose full-frame is less dramatic than a tight full-frame but provides more context. We consider how the use of these different frames when combined with angles-of-view – high, neutral, or low –

spatially position the viewer in relation to the subject of the representation and they help determine what kind of relationship a viewer can have with the subject. Equally, we examine how different lenses – wide, telephoto, and standard – especially in combination with selective and deep focus –also helps determine possible relationships between subject matter and viewer. We also examine the various implications of lighting a figure from the front, side and back. And we break down body language to focus on hand gestures, facial expression, body contact and posture, as well as the activity in which figures are engaged.[1]

I illustrate the above elements by using a mixture of premodern, realistic style paintings and photography for the elements apply equally to both. Then, these relationships are reinforced by students taking their own photographs with their cell phones and making their own PowerPoint's.

The lessons learned from the above are then applied to consider the first question: what is represented? I have students draw upon image banks to create PowerPoint presentations that illustrate how particular and often competing social attitudes towards a topic are constructed by their visual representation. I typically model the activity, often using a PowerPoint presentation on images of childhood. Again mixing premodern fine art imagery and photography I show children represented as innocents, as threats, as victims, as adults, as aesthetic objects, as sexual objects, as learners, and as consumers. In groups students then chose their own topic and their own categories of representation. Some groups begin by brain storming to generate lists of categories; others go directly to the image banks to see what they suggest. I hover about making suggestions, often asking students to investigate historical precedents. When one recent group chose the topic "mothers", I suggested they needed to include images of the Madonna and Child and that moreover there were numerous examples that illustrated different views of motherhood: mother as authority, mother as nurturer; mother as protector; mother as teacher. I also mentioned that the iconography of the Madonna and Child was derived from images of the Egyptian gods Isis as a mother and Horus as a child, and that the students could follow up on this. This example wonderfully demonstrated the longevity

[1] See Duncum (2012a) for further details on the elements of realistic imagery.

of the relationship between mothers and their babies as one of an ideal, loving connection, one that continues in a secular way through the art of many fine artists as well as today's popular greeting cards and calendars.

Usually I need to make suggestions about categories because sometimes initial categories are too subject bound and my aim is to have students think in inclusive, broad terms. For example, with a PowerPoint on athletes, students initially used the category of "muscle bound" to which I responded by suggesting the concept of "the grotesque." The suggestion led students to link pictures of gross, excessive musculature to horrific and abject images, specifically to medieval murals of hell and contemporary horror movies.

Students rarely take more than a few minutes to choose a topic, but where they get stuck the suggestion to look at representations of old people, teenagers, or artists has proven highly productive. Being pre-service teachers, students are often keen to discover how teachers are commonly represented.

When these student PowerPoints are presented to the class it is possible to view them in terms of the language of realistic imagery. In one recent class we found that teachers who the students considered kind had been framed three quarter with a neutral viewpoint, which is just what you would expect to create a friendly but not intimate connection. Teachers who were considered bad were often photographed from a low angle to suggest overbearing authority, a high angle to imply incompetence, a wide-angle lens to suggest threat, or a telephoto lens to suggest disengagement.

To address the third question about the absence or at least the highly selective nature of representation, I show DVDs produced by the Media Education Foundation. The history of Disney animated movies (Sun & Picker, 2001), and the continuing absence of many minority ethnic groups such as Arabs (Shaheen, 2006) and Latinos (Picker & Sun, 2012) in Hollywood movies and U. S. TV situation comedies create engaged discussions.

I also demonstrate the continuing selectivity of representation by asking students to type in the words *Australian People* into either Google or Yahoo Images. They find that what these search engines trawl is predominantly pictures of Australian Aboriginals, mostly in traditional garb and dancing,

which hardly reflects the demographics of Australia. Where are all the Greek Australians, the Italian Australians, the Poles, the Lebanese, the Chinese, the Vietnamese? They barely exist? When some years ago I wanted to create a PowerPoint that illustrated the diversity of contemporary Australia I had to type in Greek Persons or Italian Persons and have them stand in for Greek and Italian Australians. This also applied to most of the other many ethnicities that make up the Australian population. As extensive as these search engines are, they are highly selective of what they offer as representations.

Aesthetic Seduction

A second step I took some years ago was to recognize the serious limitations of a modernist aesthetic as a quasi spiritual phenomenon, an entirely uplifting, life enhancing experience widely associated with fine art, and for which the idea of popular aesthetics was an oxymoron. While modernist aesthetics celebrated the best in us, the most humane, what Matthew Arnold (1869/1891) called “sweetness and light” (p. 39), postmodern aesthetics is very much broader. It is inclusive of all affective experience, not only the beautiful and the sublime, but the boring, the chiming, the horrifying, even the vulgar and the disgusting (Duncum, 2010a). Moreover, it is acknowledged that such affective experiences, whether conventionally pleasant or unpleasant, are used to mold people’s values and beliefs, to manipulate their minds, and always with a desired end in sight that may not always be in the viewer’s best interests. Further still, where modernist aesthetics was focused on just a few kinds of artifacts, namely artworks, postmodern aesthetics is infinitely inclusive. Following my own investigation on the promiscuity of aesthetics (Duncum, 2010a), I have students go onto Amazon and under book titles type in the word *aesthetics*. This review reveals that many other uses, *aesthetics* is commonly applied to such general categories as evil, poverty, kitsch, trash, grotesque, decadence, as well as more specific categories like an aesthetics of plastic surgery, dentistry, queer, sport, weather, shopping malls, anorexia, and video games. Students also find that *aesthetics* is applied to many specific cultural sites such as in the aesthetics of *Buffy the Vampire Killer* and Japanese lunch

boxes; and this is not to mention the aesthetics of the "c" words, as in an aesthetics of *commodities, consumerism, carnival, camp, cool,* and *cute.*

Drawing upon of this postmodern, pluralist view of aesthetics, in class we go on to consider aesthetics as a form of seduction, how specifically visual characteristics of images such as colors and composition impact our bodies. The significance of this reflection is that, like the effect of familiar ideas and/or the use of humor (Walker & Chaplin, 1997), the rejection of suspect ideas is made the more difficult when they come wrapped in aesthetic pleasure, for to reject the idea is to reject the pleasure of the wrapping.

One of the exercises I have students undertake is to examine their reactions to one of the instructional videos mentioned earlier in discussing representation. At the same time students consider the DVD on Disney animation in terms of representation, I ask them to consider how this DVD presents its case in aesthetic terms (Sun & Picker, 2001). Since the topic of Disney animation attracts strong views from students brought up on and now nostalgic for these movies, focusing on the DVD's aesthetics helps them reflect on their instinctive reactions. The DVD moves back and forth between short clips from the much-loved movies and interviews with academics. When I first showed the DVD to classes I was taken aback by the degree of student resistance to the comments made by the academics to the sexism and racism of the films whereas students seemed quite willing to consider similar comments in an article by Tavin and Anderson (2003) that drew extensively from this same DVD. But since the medium is often the message, the student reaction did make sense. The animation is highly seductive. It uses fully saturated color, fluid movements, skillfully rendered characters and humor, and the images invariably evoke the student's childhood memories so that it is near impossible for the students not to enjoy them. By contrast, the interviews with academics are recorded with video, which, being much sharper than conventional film, shows up every imperfection of skin. They are ordinary looking and middle-aged, and some have a frustrated, even an angry, edge to their voices. So now when I show the video I have students taking notes not only on the representational content, but also on their reactions to the people in the interviews. We then examine

the different qualities of image and sound between the animation and the interviews and how the differences might help to inform their reactions to the comments made by the interviewees. In this way I try to get under the radar of their nostalgic yearnings and aesthetic pleasure and encourage them to simultaneously consider representational content and the sometimes-insidious power of aesthetics to influence thought and feeling.

The Gaze

A third, small, but important step, towards a visual culture approach to imagery has involved realizing the significance of the concept of the gaze.[2] By contrast to both representation and aesthetics, which largely concentrate attention on images themselves, the gaze focus more on the viewer. Representation and aesthetics each possess this limitation: by largely excluding the viewer from consideration, they excuse the viewer. Viewing is assumed to be objective, not the profoundly subjective experience in reality it is. The concept of the gaze ensures that viewers are, as it were, brought into the picture and thereby implicated in their viewing, for while viewing is often benign, a life-enhancing act, some of it is not. The concept the gaze requires self-examination on the part of viewers. It requires viewers to reflect on how their own values and beliefs help determine their interpretation of images. We may not wish to acknowledge that we come to images with vestiges of reprehensible values - sexist, or ageist, racist or xenophobic, for example, or that we recoil at the sight of physical disabilities and so on - but reflexively examining ourselves is often where education is the most powerful.

In class I begin with a consideration of the factors involved in any act of gazing: what people look at, what aspects of themselves are trigged when they are looking at images, and the circumstances under which they look. Each factor influences the others so that gazing is always deeply contextualized. We begin by acknowledging the importance of the class context. No matter the differences between any group students - of age, gender, race, and so on - their looking in class is bound by the context of the classroom and their roles within it. Outside the classroom looking is different,

[2] See Duncum (2012b) for further details on the gaze.

not only because students are not students anymore, but also often they do not have the time to gaze in the sense of a prolonged reflective examination in the way they are asked to in a classroom. Instead, weall glance at magazine images, scan computer images, and driving along the highway merely glimpse billboards.

I then turn to consider typical kinds of gazes that are derived from who we are, including gendered gazes such as heterosexual male and female gazes, gay gazes, lesbian gazes, and transsexual gazes, able-bodied gazes, disabled gazes, and so on. We also consider how we use a wide variety of other gazes such as policing, loving, respectful, reverential, condescending, and horrified.

Together, and again with the aid of a PowerPoint presentation, we then discuss the various pleasure of the gaze, including scopophillia (benign looking), voyeurism (looking at someone without their knowledge), sadism (enjoying seeing someone in pain) identification (fantasizing being the person looked at), exhibitionism (the fantasy of exhibiting oneself for the subject of the image), and transgression (looking in a way contrary to social expectations). We reflect that watching movies is invariably voyeuristic and that watching violent imagery is often sadistic, and that both involve the pleasure of exercising power. We can laugh at the people in images, ridicule them, parody them, and there is nothing they can do about it. But staring at images where the figure stares back, engaging us in a mutual gaze, where power seems more equal, can also be to experience the pleasure of exhibiting ourselves. Wedding photographs of a blissfully happy couple invite us to celebrate with the couple. Formal family photographs welcome our gaze and ask for our acknowledgment. Pictures of marginalized people staring back at us may also seem to demand our respect.

I have found the above general discussion necessary to provide students with permission to reflect upon their own ways of responding as well as a language with which to do so.　I show students images intended to draw strong reactions, and require that they write a paragraph in response. They are asked to reflect not only upon their own ways of looking, but also to reflect upon their reflections, that is, to be reflexive. Why do they think they are looking in they do? Although at first a few students typically struggle,

unable to do more than merely describe images, most students are able to act reflexively and most appear to be honest. Recently I used a photograph of an anorexic high fashion model about which many students wrote that they were moralizing, though for different and sometimes opposite reasons. Some thought the woman's condition was her own fault - she was clearly wealthy and could afford to eat. One student wrote that while she felt some sympathy, "It feel like she gets what she deserves. You must pay a price for starving yourself, especially if you're doing it willingly." Some wrote they were angry: at the photographer for exploiting her, because she allowed the exploitation, or because it gave women a bad name. One student said she was using an exotic gaze because she was fascinated by it. Another student wrote that she used a female gaze because as one woman to another she felt sympathy, while yet another student also claimed to use a female gaze because she liked the woman's clothes, shoes and jewelry. Not surprisingly, students were keen to discuss the breath of these responses and to consider issues of identification and the ethics of objectification.

Following these exercises I ask students to choose an image they come upon in the normal course of the following week, which today often means from the Internet. They are again asked to honestly reflect upon how they were looking at the image at the time, but also to take into account the circumstances under which they were looking.

The images students chose vary considerably: fashion models, move star celebrities, religious icons, travel photographs. Being art education students their gazes are sometimes aesthetic, dealing with colors schemes and composition, but most tend to comment on various forms of voyeurism, many of which relate to gender and sexual orientation. Of fashion models some will typically say they used a woman's gaze, a policing gaze, or a condescending gaze, respectively because they look down on the model as prostituting herself, repulsed to see her displaying herself provocatively, or because, unlike the model, students want to do something important with their lives. Some will admit to using a sadistic gaze when looking at a celebrity without makeup, while recently one student in writing of a true crimes magazine confessed to a sadistic gaze because she enjoyed seeing the perpetrator killed. By contrast, other students claim to use a

compassionate or an inspecting gaze in looking at homeless people or people with disabilities. Of images of Brad Pitt and Angelina Jollie one student recently wrote of how she both identified with Jollie in order to fanaticize about being on Brad Pitts arm, while simultaneously also looking at him with a voyeuristic and desiring gaze. Some students wrote about imagining themselves being seen by the celebrities and how they exhibited themselves in front of the picture so as to fantasize being seen as desirable by the celebrity. Recently a male student wrote that in looking at a picture of Jesus in church he used a reverential gaze, while another male student confessed to his use of a desiring gaze of pictures of seductive looking women.

Considering the gaze sometimes involves unmasking the gaze as disreputable, and so destroying it's pleasure. But the concept of the gaze involves more than how we see others; the real value of the concept is that it requires of us to see ourselves seeing others. It deals with the mysteries of human relationships of which we are all intimately implicated. While adopting this reflexive approach to the gaze barely accommodates a psychoanalytical approach that seeks to consider the deeper unconscious motivations that is now influential in art education (e.g., Thomas, 2012), it is at least a baby step in that direction. It represents an acknowledgment that all viewing is highly complicated and that what students see when they look at images should not to be taken for granted.

Summary

The three subjects discussed above – representation, aesthetic seduction, and the gaze – comprise three different steps in the direction of a postmodern, visual culture curriculum. Stressing representation represents a shift away from formalism. It opens up the whole history of art and popular culture to consider how ideas, values and beliefs are constructed and circulated, promulgated and resisted, in visual form. Emphasizing a highly pluralistic view of aesthetics as seduction represents a rejection of the modernist exclusion of all things popular, commercial and vulgar. It acknowledges a broad range of tastes well beyond the beautiful and the sublime, and recognizes that there are many sensory, affective means of

helping to instill ideas, values and beliefs. And employing the idea of the gaze involves a shift from an exclusive focus on images by considering the self and the social norms students uncritically assume. It forces students to reflect upon their own values and beliefs, who they are and how (literally) they view the world.

Of Course There is More

The three small steps I have described in this paper have major implications for art education, but they are only a start. There are many other concepts and issues I have not considered, though others and I have done so elsewhere. I mention them in closing to signpost further steps to be considered. Among other key concepts of visual culture study, for example, are power, ideology, intertextuality, and multimodality (Duncum, 2010b). A visual culture orientation has profound implications for reconceptualizing creativity in art education as collaborative rather than an individual affair (Duncum, 2013), for considering premodern art as popular culture (Duncum, 2014b), and for reinventing the relationship between school practice and youth's unsolicited productions, which today are often on-line (Duncum, 2014c). I have not considered either the multimodal (Duncum, 2004) or the multisensory nature of visual culture (Duncum, 2012c), let alone the far-reaching consequences of its rhizomatic curriculum structure (Duncum, 2011). Specific to pedagogy I have not considered the negotiation needed to deal with student's own modernist resistance to popular culture (Duncum, 2006), the need for a playful as well as critical pedagogy to both challenge and accommodate student's cultural preferences (Duncum, 2009b), or the infinite opportunities for integration with other school subjects offered by a visual culture orientation (Duncum, 2005). What I have offered here are just a few baby steps, though even they have significant implications for classroom practice.

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