

Youth, aesthetics, and visual cultural education¹

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For many children and youth around the globe, life in contemporary times is mediated through the swirl of visual imagery. Television, film, the internet, medical imaging devices, cell phone cameras, satellites, newspapers and magazines, and a host of other multi-media devices enhance our sight, represent ideas, and help human beings see and be seen. Attempting to understand this cultural condition, its material and symbolic manifestations, and the effect on the individual and collective identities of youth is the project of *visual culture*.

As a hybrid enterprise recently formed through the convergence of a variety of theories and methodologies, visual culture examines relationships between societies, individuals, and images. Visual culture is the characterization and examination of meaning making through the visual—beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries. Beginning in the early 1990s, scholarly texts, professional journals, web-based articles, new course and program descriptions, and conference proceedings specifically focusing on the concept of *visual culture* began to flourish across disciplines in the U.S and across Europe. These disciplines included art history, anthropology, cultural studies, English, literary studies, media studies, and film studies.

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There are three interrelated definitions of visual culture woven through much of the literature emerging from these disciplines. The definitions suggest that visual culture can be understood as 1) a cultural condition in which human experience is profoundly affected by images, new technologies for looking, and various practices of seeing, showing, and picturing, 2) an inclusive set of images, objects, and apparatuses, or 3) a critical field of study that examines and interprets differing visual manifestations and experiences in culture (Tavin, 2003b). Often the three definitions overlap, converge, and inform one another. In some cases, scholars in art education use the term *visual culture* to mean all three definitions simultaneously. The potential source of confusion notwithstanding, all three definitions of visual culture deal in large part with the process and pressures of constructing individual and collective identity of children, youth, and adults in and through a mass-mediated world.

As a field of study, visual culture attempts to analyze and interpret the wealth of visual (multi-mediated) experiences in culture, and the visual practices of a culture—the interactions between viewers and what is being viewed in what some refer to as a screen culture. While some theorists prefer to use the term *visual culture* to refer to a field of study (Mitchell, 2002) other scholars prefer to deploy the term *visual culture studies* (Walker & Chaplin, 1997) or *visual studies* (Elkins, 2003). For those who prefer to use visual culture to connote the project, the term is usually employed as field of study not abstracted from its substantial content and historical condition. For others, the attempt to extricate formations of

the visual from the cultural is mainly based on the belief that the term visual culture is a potential source of confusion. Either way, whether one uses the term visual culture, visual cultural studies, or visual studies, there seems to be a general theme that cuts across most scholarly writing around the subject of inquiry and methodological process. That theme is “contextualizing visuality of youth in everyday life.”

For many scholars interested in visual culture the subject of inquiry and methodology for their project is often determined around issues that youth confront from the conditions of everyday life. The concept of everyday life is important since it is through the seemingly endless array of visual images they encounter on a daily basis, much of it through the mass media, that meanings and identities are created and contested (Mirzoeff, 1998). The questions involved in the study of visual culture may be determined by the circumstances created by this proliferation of visual representations that function within public and private spaces everyday. When the inquiry turns to specific forms of visual culture, such as an artwork, film, or television program, for example, understanding the context of production and reception is vital. Context includes the cultural purposes of the development, production, distribution, and regulation of images. Context also includes the sociopolitical, economic, environmental, and historical conditions around the production and reception of images.

Although many scholars of visual culture often refuse to adopt a predetermined methodology, there are central questions around *visuality* that seem to be common across disciplines. For instance, these questions may revolve around how identities have been fashioned through the visual in the past and how they are being refashioned in the present (Mirzoeff, 1998). Others questions may deal with the politics of identity as constituted through social categories of seeing, spectatorship, gazing, and glancing. In addition, there may be questions of what it means to be looked at, seen, not seen, or made invisible (Rogoff, 1998).

In this sense, the project may focus on who is privileged as producers of images and as consumers of images, what aspects of history circulate as visual representations, and who is empowered and who is subjugated through *visuality*. Here, *visuality* refers to the socially constructed character of vision, and the politics and ideology of specific visualizing practices that may serve the needs of particular identities. Other inquires in the field of visual culture revolve around the concept of vision as a totality, the ubiquity of vision in particular era, or how images play a central role in representing certain parts of the world or historical manifestations. Additional questions may focus on differences and similarities between so-called high and low culture, or fine art and vernacular images. Although these questions and issues can be understood as part of a larger rubric of inquiry, as stated earlier, the methodologies to engage these issues are usually quite fluid (Tavin, 2003a).

One way to understand visual culture as a rubric is through Donna Haraway's (1998) position that vision "is always a question of the power to see—and perhaps of the violence implicit in our visualizing practices." Haraway asks us to consider the following questions in terms of youth and culture:

How to see? Where to See? What to see for? Whom to see with? What limits to vision? Who gets to have more than one point of view? Who gets blinkered? Who wears blinkers? And, who interprets the visual field, including the visual field of art education? (pp. 194-196)

In the United States, the discipline of art education has joined in the field of visual culture. At its best, this can be seen as an attempt to reconceptualize art education for youth; an attempt to shift from traditional modes of art making and "art thinking" towards a profoundly critical, historical, political, and self-reflexive understanding of culture, coupled with meaningful and transformative student production. Advocates for this reconceptualization in part challenge the canonicity of art curricula, advance the study of an expansive range of objects and images including images from youth culture, and raise issues about visibility and everyday life.

Propelled by postmodernism, the current reconceptualization of art education in the U.S. is struggling through its charge for, and challenge to, traditional, official, and operational curricula in K-12 art classrooms. This struggle embodies the problems and possibilities of visual culture—the need to both understand visual

culture *curricula* as symbolic representation and embrace different symbolic representations as *legitimate content* for the field. In line with visual culture in other disciplines, the reconceptualization of art education asks, “what can be created of what we have been conditioned to be”? (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 1996, p. 51)

While the aforementioned examples of visual culture art education in the U.S. indicate a radical departure from *curricula* of the past, it need not focus on or have as its ultimate goal the exacting prescription of what teachers can and should do with students in educational contexts. In understanding *curricula* as symbolic representation, visual culture might, for example, resist the notion of “best K-12 classroom practices” and step curriculum theory away from obligations to curriculum development. Instead, art educators might ask, for instance, what and where might intellectual, interpretive practices in response to symbolic representations in the social and cultural environment lead art educators? How might a transdisciplinary and reconceptualized art education help teachers to think more comprehensively about the subject matter of *curricula* as embodied in lived experiences? Without limitations on always returning to K-12 classroom practice, where might visual culture explorations take theorists and policy makers around the globe (Carpenter, & Tavin, 2008)?

The field of art education in the U.S. has yet to reconcile how theories and issues of visuality reside within curriculum or even how they might function as

curriculum. The politics of visibility primarily informed by and through visual culture offer a meaningful site for consideration of a reconceptualized art education. This might mean that rather than considering the implications of art curricula in terms of learning *in* visual culture, curriculum might promote learning *as* and *because* of the politics of visibility (Carpenter, & Tavin, 2008).

As a step toward this reconceptualization of art education in the U.S., I have attempted in my own work around youth culture and pedagogy to problematize or trouble the discourse of aesthetics in art education. In the US, I have found that teachers of art often confer the discourse of aesthetics with a kind of magical effectiveness on students, as a locus for sensibility, perception, and imagination. This discourse is generally regarded as universally good for students, and of having supreme value in the field. The categories and practices that make up the discourse of aesthetics in art education, while appearing to the eye as natural and good, are of course themselves part of historical and political institutions that produce and reproduce their faith in the discourse of aesthetics, and in the institutions themselves. In addition, the belief that aesthetics rests somewhere between the realm of the senses and that of reason ultimately obscures the fact that aesthetics is a historical invention while obfuscating the political purposes and antagonisms of the discourse of aesthetics.

As a discourse associated primarily with objects, aesthetics affects art education in the US in part through formalist aesthetics, the notion of pure form removed

from sociopolitical content and context. This position reifies a gap between art and life, and promotes, however unintended, an ahistorical and apolitical perspective. Through the configuration of elements and principles, one can attend to the intrinsic value of the work. According to this theory, a work of art is autonomous, allowing critics such as Fry (1996) to argue, “actual life requires moral responsibility, yet in art we have no such moral responsibility—it presents a life freed from the binding necessities of our actual existence” (p. 79).

In art education formalist aesthetics translates to pedagogical formalism. In most cases, “the ultimate focus of aesthetic attention and critical meaning is, or ought to be, organization and presentation of the visual elements of works of art: line, shape, color, texture, mass, volume, and pattern” (Feldman, 1992, p. 122).

Formalism’s legacy continues to be translated into the classroom as a method of analysis, a process of seeing, and ways of knowing. Freedman (2001) argued that “focus on these models in education is to prepare students to approach art as a series of objects about form and feeling isolated from meaning . . . the assumption [is] that any object can be effectively analyzed using such models” (p. 37). Formalist pedagogy can, and usually does, set up a false dichotomy between objects worthy of study and those deemed unworthy by the teacher, and indeed the larger field, while excusing students (and teachers) of any direct social or moral agency.

As a discourse associated primarily with experience, but still closely linked to objects, aesthetics affects art education through the teaching of a particular type

of perception and inquiry. In this sense, it is about developing feelings and imagination, or learning to appreciate the sense of somehow being immersed in an artwork. According to Bennett (1990), these notions offer “justification for the view that aesthetic [experience] is, ought to be, or one day will be universal just as this, in turn, supports the contention that there is a distinctive aesthetic mode of the subject’s appropriation of reality” (p. 151).

The discourse of “aesthetic experience” in art education serves specific social and political interests while simultaneously masking those interests. An example comes from Kindler (2006), who stated, “The ability to experience the world aesthetically is a very precious gift which significantly adds to the quality of life” (p. 11). On the surface, this seems to be a harmless statement of commonsense. The gift that Kindler refers to, however, while appearing to be natural is a product of history, socially marked by a position of privilege—that is, of being free (or at least the illusion of freedom)—to be humanized through aesthetics, as opposed to someone whose humanity is not yet realized. What is at stake here is nothing less than humanity itself. To be fully human, to have quality of life, one must “experience the world aesthetically.” This is a political position connected to the development of the eighteenth century bourgeois subject and a particular social order. “Like the work of art as defined by the discourse of aesthetics, the bourgeois subject is autonomous and self-determining, acknowledges no merely extrinsic law but instead, in some mysterious fashion, gives law to itself” (Eagleton, 1990, p. 23). Employing this underlying ideology of aesthetics in the

pages of art education journals in the US and elsewhere, without acknowledging or focusing on the history and politics inherent in aesthetics, unwittingly reproduces the discourse of aesthetics in art education as universal, transhistorical, and self-evident.

I believe the challenge to art education in the 21st century is to help youth view, interpret, and respond to the world through a language ideally unfettered by the discourse of aesthetics, with all of its loaded categories, ideological baggage, and troubling taxonomies. I am suggesting we deploy a postmodern language of representation, one that is already in use by scholars in visual culture, cultural studies, sociology, critical theory, media studies, and so on. It begins with the basic premise that responding to images is primarily a process of socialization and signification, and always connected to the material conditions of the world. It is not some natural, amorphous, and ineffable gift from within, removed from politics and reserved for the few. It does deal with issues of attraction, attractiveness, classification, desire, seduction, sensory qualities, subjectivity, value, and a host of artistic practices. Unlike the discourse of aesthetics however, it is a language that never guarantees its goodness, is always understood as political, and in the last resort, incomplete.

When we find it impossible to avoid the term aesthetics, when we refer to aesthetics either as an historical artifact, disciplinary formation, or political discourse, I have argued elsewhere that we should strike it through (i.e.,

aesthetics), marking it as always already under a form of erasure, ensuring that it never speaks for itself (Tavin, 2007).

Perhaps using a language of representation or striking through aesthetics is a simple a beginning in a long process of “self-reflexive dialectic thinking” about visual culture and visibility. Embracing the discourse of representation and the concepts of art education *curricula* as symbolic representation are not easily tasks, especially in the U.S context; “a society that actively discourages individuals from raising difficult questions about purpose, identity construction, and the making of culture” (Carlson, 1992, pp. 244-245). In addition, in the US, many of the pre-service and seasoned art educators come with a very specific set of expectations, attitudes, and beliefs about curricula content in general and art education praxis in particular. It is no easy task to move from the mind-set of K-12 curriculum development to approaches that require and embody knowledge construction and the striking through of aesthetics as means to ongoing and undefined ends (Tavin, 2008).

The most difficult path, [however] and the most promising, is to actively appropriate the awareness that historical change brings to the surface: awareness of the deeply sociopolitical concrete character of knowledge, [art], and education . . . In the visual even more than industrial society, knowledge is power. (Wexler, 1987, p. 192)

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