The Contemporary Visual Spectacle — Critical Visual Literacy

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Abstract—In this increasingly visual world, how can we best decipher and understand the many ways that our everyday lives are organized around looking practices and the many images we encounter each day? Indeed, how we interact with and interpret visual images is a basic component of human life. Today, however, we are living in one of the most artificial visual and image-saturated cultures in human history, which makes understanding the complex construction and multiple social functions of visual imagery more important than ever before. Themes regarding our experience of a visually pervasive mediated culture, here, termed visual spectacle.

Keywords—Visual culture, contemporary, visual spectacle.

I. INTRODUCTION

CONTEMPORARY visual spectacles operates of references to re-conceptualize the human subject — via poststructuralist, semiotic, cultural, and social theories. As John Berger reminds us, visual images have long been of utmost significance for human life and our ways of seeing. [1] These contemporary thoughts form the basis of an emerging framework on which to establish a critical pedagogy of visual literacy on behalf of social justice. A critical approach to art/design education creates the possibility for fostering critical visual literacy in young people so that they are better prepared to navigate in a visually mediated society, and have access to power to counter corporate domination of cultural expression/consumption, and engage in the politics of visual practices for purposes of emancipation and democratization. Art/design education for critical visual literacy places on emphasis on critique and creating deconstructed texts so as to prepare new generations for the expanding society, equipping them with the knowledge and skills necessary to process a plethora of pleasurable, and though often sexist, racist, homophobic, and dehumanizing, visual spectacles. This article explores the conceptual underpinnings of teaching visual literacy for social justice. It describes several approaches to developing critical visual literacy and advocates its importance in enabling youths to promote social justice and cultural democracy.

II. EXPANSION OF LITERACY

The notion of literacy continues to expand as visually mediated texts (e.g., media ads and commercials) become the increasingly dominant form of expression and communication facilitating consumption and identity formation. Over time, new media technology has continued to shape what it means to

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be literate. In the modernist era, literacy was treated as a set of technical skills independent of context, culture, or power. Centered on an industrial economy, modernist capitalism required workers to master technical skills in order to produce "hardware" products [2]. Postmodern capitalism, on the other hand, is driven by an information economy in which information is the currency of exchange. The postmodern worker is expected to have flexible (beyond technical) skills to perform multiple "software" tasks [2]. As society continues to transform from an industrial to an information economy, from emphasis on print literacy to multiliteracy, developing critical visual literacy is crucial for students living in an image-saturated society.

The commodification of aesthetics as shaped by postmodern capitalism is today in full operation, especially in cyberspace, offering youth sensory-stimulating visual spectacles. Steinberg and Kincheloe [3] referred to "cultural pedagogy" as the idea that learning takes place through a variety of pedagogical venues such as schooling and the media. Instead of giving dreary classroom lectures and seatwork, cultural pedagogy emphasizes innovative learning adventures such as fantasy kingdoms, animated toy stories, and multimedia games [4], [5]. Unsurprisingly, the current tech-savvy generation of youth is immersing itself in these types of activities as its everyday aesthetic sites/sights.

III. A THEORY OF TEXTS FOR ART EDUCATION

Roland Barthes [6], a proponent in semiotics, defines the concept of "text" as encompassing more than the verbal/textual. Instead, text is an efficient way to describe a social construction in virtually any mode of communication. In other words, whatever is seen, perceived, heard, experienced, or remembered can be a "text." The reconceptualization of images and all other visual sites, signs, and sights as texts has pragmatic implications for visual culture pedagogy and critical visual literacy education. For the purpose of this article, the concept of texts will be defined as a reflective way of referring to all things involving the visual. It is constructed and interpreted according to discursive codes and conventions upon which people rely for meaning making (e.g., to play a video game, certain rules and conventions applied to control fictional characters properly). Although semiotics initially focused on the language mode of communication, media technology has expanded the parameters of semiotics to include various multimodal and interrelated texts. All texts may be said exist in a state of intertextuality [7]. Intertexts provide opportunities to explore power, ideology, and representation in visual culture education [8].

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When considering art-making as a way to make signs, symbols, and icons, we can understand its products and meanings using social semiotics. This provides insights into critical visual literacy education as it emphasizes "the social effects of meaning" [9]. The use of social semiotics offers "a method that can help [the viewers/readers] penetrate the apparent autonomy and reality of adverts, in order to reveal their ideological status," and show how meanings change and are changed in the course of use [9]. A text is always an area of contention where material conflicts and competing social relationships occur. In effect, we should rethink a text as an ideological dynamic that is always related to a socially and politically afforded set of signifieds. Social semiotics illuminates the ways language and images operate in social formations (e.g., race, gender, or class), which in turn shape our knowledge and understanding of the world. When viewers approach images and all visual sites, signs, and sights as texts, it may remove them from making habitual associations primarily with the material aspects of the artistic rendering and instead may focus them on the different layers of meaning the texts deliver. In other words, viewers may be more likely to treat an image as the subject of interrogation rather than an object of appreciation. In the case of looking at art, the position of the viewers and their attention and attitudes toward art/text is shifted from passive to active and from being art appreciators to being interrogators of text, since to examine an image as text is to "read" it with the aim of interpretation, meaning making, and communication. This is done by asking such questions as when, how, and why it was made in order to determine its meanings and purposes.

IV. CRITICAL VISUAL LITERACY

If literacy means the ability to read and write, visual literacy refers to the ability to "read" and produce any kind of text; for example, signs, icons, artworks, ads, billboards, Web banners, and all other cultural artifacts. Visual literacy was an educational movement in the 1960s that posited the need for students to understand the uses and power of images [10]. The proliferation of visually mediated texts in our culture has made visual literacy a necessary skill. The current development of critical visual literacy is different from the visual literacy movement of the 1960s as it goes beyond mere analysis and understanding of visual objects. Critical visual literacy is related to and has been shaped by critical theory, critical pedagogy, and critical literacy.

Critical theory is defined as "a critique of dominance, a commitment to emancipation, and the use of critique and reflection as means to empowerment" [11]. Critical theory builds on a system of self-reflection and critique to challenge the dominant discourse by uncovering the hidden bias in "common sense" assumptions, make explicit the correlation between sanctioned knowledge and power structure, and commit intellectual life to social transformation. A theory is critical to the extent that it seeks human emancipation, "to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them" [12].

Freire [13] highlighted in critical pedagogy the intertextuality between reading the word and reading the world in the literacy process. Critical pedagogy sees literacy as an instrument to help the oppressed and marginalized minorities learn about the world, and as an opportunity for empowerment, liberation, and social justice [13]. For critical pedagogues, literacy is emancipatory when meaning is both "multiaccentual and dispersed, and resists permanent closure" [14] and when meaning is used to problematize power structures in liberating the oppressed and marginalized, thereby leading to an emancipated identity and ultimately the transformation of unjust societies.

No longer meaning the ability to read words, Freire and Macedo [15] defined literacy as a social act involving the ability to respond to and transform the world, a view echoed by Lankshear and McLaren [16], who asserted that critical literacy enables "human subjects to understand and engage the politics of daily life in the quest for a more truly democratic social order". Ciardiello [17] defined critical literacy as "a set of literacy practices and civic competencies that help the learner develop a critical awareness that texts represent particular points of view while often silencing other views" [17]. The practices of critical literacy help students to examine multiple perspectives, identify barriers of social separation, and regain their identity. It calls for a rethinking of taken-for-granted assumptions and supports students in asking questions about representation, marginalization, and interests [11].

Most scholarly work in critical literacy does not regard visual arts as central to fostering critical literacy; thus, the development of critical visual literacy is significant to the field of art education and education in general. Critical visual literacy is the ability to investigate the social, cultural, and economic "contexts" of visual texts in order to illuminate the power relationships in society. Learning becomes critical when it aims at resisting domination and increasing emancipation from oppression and injustice. Critical visual literacy aims at empowering students to appreciate the aesthetic qualities of texts, analyze these texts as sites of ideological struggle, critically negotiate meanings with problems of visual (mis)representation, and use creative tools as instruments for self-emancipation and social activism. It positions students as active agents interrogating different forms of visual culture in the process of deconstructing texts, and using their creative voices to promote an equal, democratic society. Critical readers are those who observe texts carefully and analytically, decoding their ideas, intentions, points of view, and biases; placing them in a sociopolitical context; and ultimately creating their own texts to delegitimize unequal power structures. In essence, critical visual literacy seeks to promote social justice as it examines the operation of texts in shaping the attitudes, beliefs, and values of the individual and group. It approaches texts as sites, signs, and sights of political agency for transformative action.

V. APPROACHES TO CRITICAL VISUAL LITERACY

In articulating a concept of critical visual literacy, we should develop general perspectives on what constitutes a critical

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approach to visual culture as we do in this description, but we also need to construct such conceptions in the context of specific approaches; we need to develop concepts of critical visual literacy in the realm of sexist, racist, homophobic, and dehumanizing, visual spectacles, and so on.

Lewison, Flint, and Sluys [18] have identified four key dimensions of critical literacy applicable to critical visual literacy practices. These include disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple viewpoints, focusing on sociopolitical issues, and taking action to promote social justice. In the following, we describe several approaches to exploring texts through a critical lens to foster critical visual literacy. These approaches require a close analysis of the text in use. Class exploration should focus on a collaborative exchange of different viewpoints to detect the biases and assumptions of the text and unveil its hidden political agendas. Teachers should seek to engage students as critical subjects in liberating and transformative dialogue for personal and social transformation [19]. To empower human agency for social activism, involve students in "culture jamming," creating subvertisements, and participating in guerrilla communications in the quest for social justice and cultural democracy.

A. Poststructuralist Analysis

A poststructuralist analysis of texts examines the limitation of the binary oppositions operating in the texts. Texts in the media usually portray characters or events simplistically, leading to misperceptions and biases toward certain group. Discuss with students the space between and beyond the binary opposition in texts to reveal hidden ideologies and prejudices based on gender, sexual orientation, and race. Using historical images of children's playdolls and picture books marketed in the 20th century can highlight a critical lesson about racial biases. Guide students to reflect upon the values that these texts convey. Who constructed them and why, and what impact do they have on viewers as these texts continue to reinforce prejudices?

B. Postcolonialist Analysis

A postcolonialist approach analyzes how texts (mis)represent other groups through ethnic stereotypes and exotic myths. Texts, especially those portraying non-Western people by the West, can show how the West (mis)represent other ethnicities, thereby legitimizing its exploitation and cultural domination of the world. Texts show a great deal about the exercise of power in society and the ways in which the dominant group advances its cultural beliefs and values, while using stereotypes to inferiorize cultural minorities that differ in values or physical attributes. In examining texts related to ethnicity such as multiethnic dolls by Mattel or ethnic artifacts sold, the teacher should direct students to pay attention to issues of marginalization and inferiorzation in relation to the ethnic stereotypes portrayed in the texts and to what degree these truly (mis)represent the ethnic groups they portray.

C. Feminist Analysis

Texts, especially in the media, often serve as a tool of social control. Historically, the male has been the authority in representing women and other things feminine in cultural texts. Women's bodies have been sites of sexualized commodification and spectacle for the heterosexual male [20]. The silencing of female authorship in cultural texts ahs objectified women to the eyes of a collective heterosexual male gaze. According to Luke [2], "Cultural industries have a long history of male cultural productions of feminine stereotypes and misrepresentations which conceptualize women primarily either as objects of male adornment, pursuit and domination, or as mindless domestic grudges brain-dead bimbos, or saintly supermoms" [2]. One focus of feminist criticism has been sexist portrayals in popular culture as ideology of women's bodies as sexualized commodities continues to prevail in today's most advanced societies.

D. Psychoanalytic Analysis

Psychoanalytic analysis intertextualizes the language and symbolism of a text to unravel its latent thoughts behind the manifest content. Corporate advertising is probably one of the greatest psychological projects ever undertaken, yet its impact on how we live is largely ignored. Texts in the media connect with the subconscious mind of the viewer by conveying repressed wishes and fantasies through metaphors and symbols. Widely disseminated texts (e.g., media ads and commercials) often serve as ideological sites that shape people's perceptions of reality as they formulate attitudes, beliefs, and values. Psychoanalysis may allow youngsters to question the domination of corporate America over media advertising and programming and the manner in which it plays a central role in influencing what they consume, experience, and believe.

To disrupt such cultural domination, involve students in deconstructing and reconstructing media texts and disseminating newly created texts via guerrilla communications and online social networking. Culture jamming is a key tactic for breaking corporate domination over what people consume and experience every day. It is regarded as a resistance movement dedicated to disrupting such domination, control, and cultural influence. Culture jammers recognize that symbols, logos, and slogans are the predominant text through which the discourse of capitalism takes place. In response they produce subvertisements to reveal the sharp contrast between the public images of corporate America and the consequences of corporate behavior, and to provide commentary on unethical business practices. By disseminating parodies of mainstream media constructs, culture jammers attempt to break this cultural domination and unveil the hidden agendas of corporations.

E. Queer Analysis

Queer analysis of texts is concerned with issues of sexual and gender identity and the role of performance in forming and maintaining identity. Queer theorists challenge the privileged discourse of heteronormativity and critique the social construction of gender and sexuality. Heteronormativity refers to the notion that heterosexuals are the dominant group in society holding the political power to legitimize and advance its own heterocentric cultural, economic, and educational agendas.

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The dominant group defines and governs cultural values and social norms such as sexual relationships, marriage, and family structure from a heterocentric cosmology. Queer analysis looks into the ways in which sexual and gender identities either change or resist change, and the relationship between power and heteronormativity. Texts depicting homosexuals can force students to revisit their conceptions of homosexuality, masculinity, and femininity, and confront issues of homophobia.

Heterocentric sex and gender roles have permeated a mainstream ideology that controls almost every aspect of social practice and portrays gay people as deviant, which in turn has a detrimental effect on gay youth as they struggle to understand themselves and construct their own identity [21].

VI. CONCLUSION

Critical visual literacy encompasses a cross-disciplinary orientation to art education aimed at fostering visual literacy, critical faculty, and human agency. It contextualizes the cultural, sociopolitical, and economic aspects of texts and seeks to underline the power of texts in shaping what we know and what can be known. Critical visual literacy is emancipatory in that teachers dare to share their power with students on a learning journey to disrupting hegemonic ideologies and agendas. It enables students to question commonsense assumptions and injustices from an analytical stance, "to research how things are, how things got to be that way, and how they might be changed; and to produce texts that represent the under and misrepresented" [22]. The acquisition of critical visual literacy requires thinking consciously of conditions of privilege and injustice as manifested in texts, and by addressing issues of human rights via critiquing texts, (re)creating texts, and engaging the public with texts to lay the foundation for social justice.

The core of critical visual literacy lies in the interplay between visual literacy and liberation, using texts as a conduit through which to examine the complexities and issues of domination, access, and equity, and transform oppressive structures via educational praxes. Critical visual literacy validates and utilizes students' real-world knowledge and lived-through experiences to examine socially constructed texts and to critically reflect upon their everyday consumption and sociocultural experiences. It positions students as agents of social change in deconstructing and making sense of the pleasures and troubles of visual spectacles in cyber(society) and further analyzing how these spectacles are created, shaped, and embedded with specific values and, often unjust, points of view. To reach this end, an unpoliced media terrain is necessary for youths to learn to think for themselves, develop autonomy from their caretakers, and participate in political discourse/activism via creative venues [23].

Conventional approaches to literacy education are questionable because they prevent youngsters from accessing "real-world" material (e.g., censored or controversial images). Knowing that modern children define their cultures in opposition to adult supervision, values, and taste hierarchies [23], as educators we cannot engage them in critical thought if we imagine them to exist outside the real-world conflicts of race, class, gender, and sexuality [24]. Protecting children from censored/controversial images strips them of active agency, of their ability to analyze images critically. Expressions of censorship project children as powerless victims incapable of shaping their own fate and speaking in their own defense.

Central to critical visual literacy pedagogy is the politicization of knowledge, recognizing that schooling by its very nature is a political enterprise with its hegemonic curricula and pedagogies. Learning itself is political regardless of where it occurs. Teachers should thus raise awareness of the politics of knowledge about visual practices with respect to whose interests are served, who is (dis)empowered, and who is (dis)enfranchised. They should problematize the systems of visual (mis)representations to understand how the world as known today is constructed by power relations and factored by class, gender, race, and sexual orientation. It is important to treat a text as a social construction and analyze both how it maintains the status quo, and how we can disrupt the dominant narratives operating in society, give voice to the marginalized, and take action on important social issues.

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