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The World In Pictures: Aesthetics And Visual Culture In The Art Classroom

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THE WORLD IN PICTURES: AESTHETICS AND VISUAL CULTURE IN THE ART
CLASSROOM

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THESIS

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Abstract

The intent of this thesis is to present an argument for the inclusion of aesthetics and the aesthetics of visual culture within the art education curriculum. Technological advancement has created an age of unprecedented dependence on visual imagery; the pervasive (and sometimes misleading) visual culture of contemporary society affects the way in which individuals understand and relate to their world. The study of the aesthetics of visual culture can impact values within society and culture through the formation of self-identity, maintaining culture, and instituting cultural changes. An engaging visual arts program that builds upon students' lived experiences may be the best possibility for educators to encourage creativity and critical thinking skills in their students.

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Art Education, Visual Culture, and Cognition

Visual Culture and Aesthetics: Educational and Cultural Relevance

Art has been part of the curriculum for over 200 years - albeit often as an elective of little or no perceived value (to the student). The poor showing of American students in a global arena has resulted in a narrowing of curriculum and greater focus on core subjects such as mathematics, science, reading and history, but more current research has shown that arts-integrated education programs can positively impact standardized test scores across the curriculum (Gullatt, 2008). However, what is taught, and how it is taught, effects student gains. Including the study of aesthetics and visual culture in the art curriculum would be beneficial because students today absorb much of what they learn through visual imagery that surrounds them – a fluid, rapidly changing, often aesthetically pleasing, visual culture that absorbs fine art, then regurgitates it as commercial product and vice versa - so much so that some writers (Postrel, Nash) have dubbed this “the age of aesthetics”.

In an age of unprecedentedly prolific visual imagery, aesthetics are important socially, culturally and personally. Aesthetic knowledge can no longer continue to be viewed as a luxury for the rich; aesthetics and design are increasingly impacting daily life, often unconsciously. Stuhr believes an important component of art education should be investigating “social and cultural issues from multiple personal, local, national and global perspectives” (2003, p.303); nevertheless, cultural content relevant to students’ lives is often excluded because teachers and administrators feel it could be too controversial. Resistance could occur in the home or community; this is unfortunate, because including aesthetics and visual culture is integral to a well-rounded, meaningful art program.

Aesthetics, Visual Culture and the Senses

Prior to examining successful art education, it is necessary to clarify the terms “aesthetics” and “visual culture”. Aesthetics is often simplistically defined as the philosophy of beauty, but the word has a broader meaning. In attempting to define what aesthetics can encompass, Duncum quotes O’Neil as referring to aesthetics as “amoral hedonism, which has no social purpose other than to give a higher form of pleasure” (2008, p. 124). This interpretation implies that aesthetics is not part of everyday life, but is outside social values, because social value is inextricably tied to morality. In some cultures, the outright pursuit of pleasure for no other purpose would be amoral, but it is a part of life that refuses to be ignored. Explanations such as these also strengthen the perception of aesthetics as an unnecessary luxury, only for those who can afford it. Within the U.S. educational system, logic and fact are more highly prized than the senses; but, as Postrel (2003) points out, humans are visual, tactile creatures, and aesthetics offer pleasure, as well as a form of social communication. Aesthetics are integrally bound to the senses, and the senses are equally as valid as intellect.

In an educational system which validates itself through test scores that arguably measure learning (in “core” subjects), the contribution of the senses to intellect and cognition may be underestimated by parents and teachers. Test-score driven education systems can benefit from sensory stimulation of cognitive development, and according to Gullatt, the senses may play more than a supporting role. He is insistent that without the senses, cognitive development may not be possible, stating that “physical sensation and emotion are essential components of the mind, as integral to thought and learning as logic is” (2008, p. 14). In other words, logic may not be possible without sensation and emotion, because what we see, and how we feel about it, are vital components in the creation of meaning.

The impact of visual culture on cognition and identity makes it important to consider aesthetics and aesthetic experience. We learn about the world through our senses before intellect, so perception and imagery can define and shape our lives. Dewey believed that perception (“the making of meaning”) is what gives an experience its emotional quality, or what makes an aesthetic experience (Constantino, 2004; Dewey, 1934). Aesthetics, generally perceived as intertwined with visual sense, has its roots in the original Greek *aesthesis*, meaning sense perception, and comprises all visual imagery, from the beautiful and sublime to the vulgar, violent and crude (Duncum, 2008). It is used to refer to surface images which can enhance life, create beautiful surroundings, be spiritually uplifting, or create awareness; it may also refer to images of violence and cruelty, imagery that marginalizes specific groups, and imagery that can, if absorbed by a society, be detrimental.

Broadening the Domain of Visual Culture

Learning and communicating through visual culture. Visual culture is a relatively new concept, arising out of the explosion of visual imagery brought about by technology. Technological advances have created a global visual culture heretofore unparalleled. But as Silvers points out, “visual culture requires more than a visual dimension; it requires people to learn from (mainly or at least significantly) visual sources” (2004, p. 19). Dentith agrees, stating that images have become “the dominant means of production and transmission of information” (2004, p. 465). More simply, people learn discriminately from what they see and perceive, not from everything they see. Along with learning predominately from visual sources, Tavin (2003) states that a visual culture is one based on images rather than concepts, or one in which images have largely replaced the written word. In a society that relies heavily on visual imagery to

inculcate, reproduce or change its culture, the community and communication amongst members of the community depend on what is seen and what people fashion for others to see.

Adolescents today learn as much from what they see in their daily lives as from what they are taught at home and in school, but this has not always been the case. In a pre-Gutenberg society, people learned predominately through verbal traditions – stories were told, songs were sung repeatedly. After Gutenberg introduced modern book printing, the written word slowly became the dominant means of transmitting cultural values and expectations; since the inventions of the TV, computer, and internet, images have replaced words as a common instrument to communicate ideas and advocate values (Silvers, 2004). The visual has surpassed the spoken and written words. Images are so important that both celebrities and politicians have learned to carefully manage their personas, or hire someone to do so. Young people today carefully manage their own images because their image is a form of communication - who they are, who they want to be, who they identify with. They are communicating their identity through dress, adornment, and arrangement of personal space.

Art and visual culture: blurring the lines. The lines between visual culture and visual art are becoming increasingly blurred. Not all visual imagery is art or even visual culture; however, all visual art is part of visual culture and some parts of visual culture evolve into art (Silvers, 2004). For many students not trained in art and aesthetics, such works can create confusion, instead of creating accessibility and stimulating curiosity. One has only to look at the work of Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Bettye Saar, or more recently, works by Matthew Barney or Takashi Murakami to see the influence of popular visual culture. Both Japanese artist Murakami and American artist Jeff Koons have exhibited work at Versailles; both artists' work created a public outcry, not because the content of the work is controversial, but because of its

evocation of the banal. Their works have sold for millions, and Murakami is adept at combining art with commerce (Woollard, 2010). Many of the show's critics objected not to the works themselves, but to the works in the context of the location. The values expressed in the works are not the same values expressed by the Chateau de Versailles.

Art Education, Visual Culture, and the Aesthetic Experience

In the face of such controversies, we have to ask whether understanding and interpreting cultural objects is at all similar to aesthetic understanding of art objects; if material objects (including representational images) in the visual culture acquire meaning and value in the same way that art objects do (Silvers, 2004); and what place, if any, should visual culture occupy in art education? Such questions and their answers are important factors in determining what is included (in the curriculum) and how it is taught. Since prehistoric man first created images on rocks, people have sought aesthetic experiences through encounters with art for the experience itself, for the memories triggered, the emotional and intellectual responses, the way it serves society and fuses with culture. Being human necessitates seeking “encounters with works of art not for the sake of art itself but rather for the sake of what works of art contribute instrumentally to human existence and development...” (Smith, 2008, p. 6). Aesthetic experience matters, regardless of whether the catalyst is an acknowledged masterpiece, a beautiful view or a well-executed advertisement; it matters because of the way it makes an individual feel or think, for the way it can reveal or mask truth, or for the ways in which it can change, maintain or enrich society.

Interrelationships between Visual Culture, Aesthetics, Ideology and Self-Identity

In the past, art, aesthetics, ideology and visual culture have frequently been separated because they are not viewed as relational subjects. Maintaining this separation can lead to an obscured understanding of the nature of aesthetic judgment due to the involvement of art and artistic endeavors in aesthetic production and experiences (Carr, 1999). Art, aesthetics, ideology,

and visual culture are related to the everyday aesthetic experience in ways that make separation arguably impossible without detrimental effects. Great works of art may be expected to transcend ideology and visual culture, but they are born from them. Duncum defines ideology as a “characteristic way of thinking, a style of thought, an interpretive scheme employed by people to make the world intelligible to themselves” (2008, p. 123). Ideology works not by calling attention to itself, but rather it can be taken for granted because it is grounded in the everyday aesthetic experience. It is grounded in culture, visual and otherwise. Duncum states that “culture is always a site of struggle to define how life is to be lived and experienced,” and because it is grounded in culture, “the struggle is often rendered invisible”; he goes on to say “ideology establishes the parameters for thinking and experiencing outside of which it is difficult to think or experience, let alone to act...” (2002, p. 6). Currently, American youth learn what is socially acceptable as much from music videos, games, movies and popular TV shows as from their families, peers, or teachers; when conflicts arise, they may question themselves rather than the persistent visual culture permeating everyday life.

The nature of aesthetic judgment is considered to be disinterested or objective in that judgment is not based upon expectations or desires. However, as ideology and visual culture are inherently part of lived experience, they cannot be disinterested. Ideology and visual culture demand that we be engaged, whether accepting or rejecting. Visual culture, at any given time, analyzes, evaluates and elucidates “how visual experiences are constructed within social systems, practices, and structures” (Tavin, 2003, p. 197). Ideology and visual culture bring diverse groups of people together and generate shared understandings. All visual imagery, high or low, regardless of where the artist is from, contains both conscious and unconscious lures for viewers, working osmotically through aesthetics. Sensory perception draws people to specific

cultural, everyday aesthetic experiences that according to Darts are often overlooked, but still important locations “where many of our attitudes, knowledge and beliefs are shaped” (2004, p. 315). For the student not trained in aesthetics and the arts, visual culture images and real life are their predominate source of aesthetic experience; these experiences help shape not only attitudes and acquired knowledge, but self-identity.

Aesthetics and Visual Culture: Benefits for Learners

Without shrewd attention to visual imagery, learners tend to accept what they see without criticism or reflection. They undervalue creativity and originality, opting for choices that will place them ideologically within the groups they identify with. It is a choice that does not require critical thinking, often a variation of choices made by their peers. It does not require reflection on abstract, complex ideas. Moore (2004) believes that nothing in the K-12 curriculum has equal power to cultivate skills such as empathy; no other class can promote and strengthen the ability to perceive and interpret fine distinctions and subtle nuances as the arts and aesthetics does. Studying visual culture within the art classroom requires students to analyze, decipher, and evaluate. A well-rounded art program requires students to interpret imagery, make evaluative judgments and aesthetic choices. The arts may possibly be the best curricular choice to promote empathy and the ability to make connections.

Eisner found that aesthetics require learners to use qualitative forms of thinking, rather than quantitative forms, such as memorization of numerous facts and formulas (Eisner, 2006, n.p.). A visual arts program which includes aesthetics and visual culture can teach students to discern, interpret and evaluate meanings within their culture and the world around them, yet the

arts remain electives with little perceived importance to future success of students. The tendency to regard the arts as being linked exclusively to the realm of feeling is wrong, according to Efland - visual art (and imagery) is about ideas, a way of learning about the natural and social world. It is about “life and death issues that affect people”, about issues such as “war and peace, the need to belong, equity, justice, and morality” (Efland, 2002, p. 105). Because it is about ideas and interpretation, the evaluation and reflection that are requisite to studying the arts can promote empathetic choices.

Evolution of Art Education

Historically, the visual arts have had a wide range of uses, from improving individuals to economic stimulation. As a field, art education has had many different purposes. In the late 1800s, art education was intended to provide an industrial work force; by the early 1900s, it was intended to help in the production of good citizens. During the 20th century, conceptions of what art education should be continued to change; according to Freedman, it was used as “a therapeutic response to a pathological world (1920s), to beautify depressed environments (1930s), to support wartime activities (1940’s), as art for art’s sake (1950s & 1960s), and to emphasize excellence through the study of fine art disciplines (1970s & 1980s)” (2007, abstract). Regardless of conception, art education has continued to be perceived as the province of the inherently talented. More recently, it has been conceived of as a means to enhance student understanding of the visual arts as a creative, social and cultural production, but even this conception is viewed as lesser in importance alongside core subjects. Moore (2004) believes the primary objective of K-12 art education is to develop skills that can be used in the process of

intellectual and social maturation. But too often, art remains an undervalued elective that serves as a break for students and teachers.

The (E)Valuation of Art, Aesthetics and Visual Culture

Schools, as vital producers of culture, have significant influence on what aspects of culture are reproduced. The visual arts classroom is a place where students can, as a community, endeavor to understand difficult tasks through inquiry, create meaning from complex ideas, or forge identity. Efland condemned the degree to which the late nineteenth century materialist philosophy and early twentieth century behaviorist psychology affected attitudes toward art education, believing that these philosophies contributed to the devaluation of the arts by ignoring individual will and intent (Kamhi, 2006, p. 33-34). Denying consciousness, focusing on external matter, reduces individual expression to behavior processed through external motivators. Art has long been perceived as less rigorous, and therefore undervalued by school officials, educators, and parents; aesthetics and the influence of visual culture, possibly even more so. Before art can be valued intrinsically, for the many ways in which it enriches our lives, as well as extrinsically for promoting academic gains, it is important to look at the reasons why it is undervalued and why popular, visual culture is treated with disdain, sometimes even completely disregarded.

Many people, including parents and psychologists, share the view that popular culture can have an irreparable negative impact on youth. In Plato's *Republic*, Plato made the assertion that young people can be morally harmed by exposure to inappropriate materials and experiences; his desire to ban artists from the Republic could, arguably, have been one of the first attempts to make a distinction between "high" culture and "popular" culture (Darts, 2008, p.

5) as well as supporting the devaluation of many forms of art. Historically, in the U.S., the arts have been perceived as the province of the rich, an ornamental rather than important, even necessary, part of life; additionally, the Puritan ethos of the early United States considered art as, at best, ornamentation, and at worst, even sinful (Sykes, 1982).

Within the context of education, the arts are more generally viewed as “fun” classes, a break from the rigors of more academically demanding (core) subjects, or as a chance for the student to express him/herself. This view is supported by the fact that, in an age of widespread standardized testing, few states administer an art test to measure what students are learning. Therefore, few administrators (and fewer parents) worry about what students are learning in art; in fact, art teachers are often challenged by administration, parents, and even colleagues when students receives unsatisfactory grades. The question of whether to include, or exclude, aesthetics and visual culture is given little consideration. However, learners benefit from experiences that promote and enhance their engagement with visual culture and its processes of production (Freedman, 2007). Inclusion of aesthetics and visual culture studies in the visual arts curriculum provides opportunities for creative thinking, critical analysis and problem solving applications.

Art Education: Aesthetics and Visual Culture Meeting Learners Needs

Learners' needs can be partially met by including aesthetics and visual culture. Opportunities to engage with visual culture and artistic production encourage creativity and learners need opportunities such as these to advance cognitively. According to Piaget, preadolescents enter the formal operational stage of development around middle school; as they pass through this stage, they develop the ability to think abstractly about issues such as truth, morality, justice, and the nature of existence (Huitt & Hummel, 2003). As they move to a broader perspective and think beyond themselves, they are able to offer alternative beliefs about complex personal and social issues. Then again, later research suggests that the formal operations stage is not automatically reached due to physical maturity alone; in fact, most students have not reached this stage by the time they leave high school and some are only moving into the concrete operational stage (Huitt & Hummel, 2003). While Piaget's work on cognitive development is still valid, it should not be an exclusive source of information on adolescent cognitive development. It does not take into consideration individual and environmental factors. Vygotsky recognized the impact of society and culture on cognition. He believed that what is learned and how it is learned is dictated by culture and in turn, society (Huitt & Hummel, 2003). Visual culture is significantly influential on what is learned, but schools have the opportunity to impact how visual culture is assimilated by teaching students critical thinking skills.

The theories of Piaget and Vygotsky are only two of many which prospective educators are introduced to. Efland, however, eschewed polar extremes in cognitive theories, embracing an integrated theory through which meaning is constructed with regards to individual personal, social and cultural context (Kamhi, 2006). The importance of background knowledge and

students lived experiences cannot be excluded. Constructing curriculum from a visual culture perspective takes into account the widely differing lived experiences of people in the United States, and the ongoing transformation of culture as it is shaped and experienced in society (Freedman, 1994a). Drawing on students' previous experiences, teachers can facilitate student progression from their current cognitive level to higher levels of thinking.

Teachers can help students progress from one stage to another with carefully structured unbiased lessons. In an era of unprecedented, pervasive visual imagery, it behooves educators to address the impact of such imagery on students. Dewey believed that artistic production and perception of art required “one of the most exacting modes of thought” and “an act of ‘reconstructive doing’, that requires cultivation” (Constantino, 2004, p. 404); he also emphasized art as an activity, not a product - it is the action, experimentation, and practice that lead to growth, not the finished object. The multiple ways of communicating found in the arts play to the strengths of varied learning styles. Gardner believed six of the eight learning styles (bodily kinesthetic, musical, spatial, interpersonal, intrapersonal and naturalistic) are rooted in the arts (Gullatt, 2008). While science is highly valued and viewed as logical and factual, the arts are viewed as expressive and emotive, but both the artist and the scientist work in the realm of ideas, learning through trial and error. Creating knowledge has the power to change our perceptions of our world. According to Sullivan, “the studio experience is a form of cognitive inquiry and is a site where research can be undertaken that is sufficiently robust to yield knowledge and understanding...” (Sullivan, 2003, p. 195-6). Pictorially visualizing ideas and social issues is an interpretive processing of complex ideas, aiding the development of understanding.

Contemplating art objects in a purely intellectual or formalist manner denies the opportunity to understand how an object is constructed, how an idea moves through phases until

it reaches fruition or abandonment. The arts can play a dual role of self-expression and cognitive discovery, allowing students to flex their imaginations and creativity while they simultaneously gain new information (Eisner, 1992). The creating of art, the aesthetic experience, the training of perception may, arguably, help to develop agile, innovative minds capable of “thinking outside the box”, as opposed to what Dewey referred to as “the setting of minds in grooves” (as cited in Constantino, 2004, p. 9). Thinking, no matter how rigorously, is not enough – where deeper understanding and intellectual gains are desired, action is de rigueur.

Impacting higher order thinking skills and creativity. Amidst calls for educational reform are demands for educators to think creatively and unconventionally about their teaching practice, and promote higher order thinking skills and creativity in their students; unfortunately, many educators have few ideas how to do this. An engaging visual arts program that builds upon students’ lived experiences may be the best option, but at the same time, the arts are given little serious consideration as a means of positively impacting creativity and cognition in students.

Darts (2004, p. 315) has stated that:

Several proponents of an art education informed by (and imbued with) visual culture have successfully demonstrated that the visual is inextricably linked to ongoing social, political, psychological and cultural struggles. These struggles occur on numerous cultural fronts and through multiple visual media, including, teenagers’ bedrooms, shopping malls, theme parks, community celebrations, television programs, advertisements and digital environments.

Devoid of accompanying instruction, or deconstruction of everyday visual experiences, many of these struggles are attributed to the youthful antics of adolescence - “kids being kids”. Inclusion

of aesthetics and the aesthetics of visual culture in the (visual) arts curriculum can help learners understand the influence of visual imagery in life – it can be used to create, maintain or change cultural values within society.

Impressions of visual culture. The relentless and often misleading visual culture of contemporary society impacts the way in which individuals understand and relate to their world and each other; therefore, it merits further critical research. In his 2003 essay, Sullivan claims that art and visual imagery have long been used to advance various outcomes in the social, political, cultural and educational arenas. The ever-present, all-encompassing characteristic of visual imagery in the last decades has made it an increasingly relevant area of study. Critical examination of visual culture and aesthetics “can help to move students from uncritical modes of viewing, ... a passive culture of spectatorship, towards more proactive forms of engagement.” (Darts, 2004, p. 324). Addressing deceptive or camouflaged ideologies can lead viewers to deeper understanding of themselves and others.

Art and identity. As adolescents struggle with creating an identity, cultural mores, peer opinions, and lived experiences often play conflicting parts. Teaching students to have a critical awareness of visual culture allows them to gain deeper understanding of cultural issues and values. Freedman claims that artistic production allows students to experience critical and creative connections between form, emotions, sensations and understanding, empowering them through their construction of identity and giving insight into others’ motivations (2003, p. 147). In the arts, “right” and “wrong” answers are often flexible; critical reflection, individual aesthetic preference, and artistic intent are significant. “I like that” becomes “I’m like that” (Postrel, 2003, p. 101) as students struggle to define their identity and align themselves with others. Identity is in flux, as students try on, discard or retain aspects of their emerging self character. Like Postrel,

Gude also believes that aesthetics and art education can increase students' capacity to make connections by engaging and entertaining ideas and images that represent their own experiences. Aesthetic sense is indispensable to visual culture because images are central to the representation of meaning in the world, encompassing both "fine" art and images of popular culture.

Visual Culture in an Aesthetic, Consumerist Age

Aesthetics and visual culture come into play in many arenas (political, economic, and educational), but can be undetected because they are a natural, unobtrusive part of daily life. Postrel (2003, p. 16) states that "aesthetic creativity is as indicative of economic and social progress as technological innovation." An economically sound, technologically advanced culture may arguably spend more time on aesthetic matters; in a highly visual consumer society, as more aesthetic material is generated, more is demanded. Because we live in a visually aesthetic age, "the human experience is now more visual and visualized than ever before, and visual culture is not just a part of our everyday lives, it *is* our everyday lives" (Darts, 2004, p. 315, italics original). Boundaries between the image and the person (or object) represented have become blurred; in Debord's words, images have not only fused with reality, they are our reality (as cited in Duncum, 2001, p. 102). Imagery is integral to directly lived experience and the accretion of knowledge. The importance of visual culture has transformed culture; what we (physically) see, and how we process it, is our lived experience.

Aesthetics, visual culture and economic repercussions. The escalating importance of the visual image has critical economic repercussions. According to Harvey, "... the production of images and the styling of goods" drives the economies of developed countries (as cited in

Duncum, 2001, p. 102); this (consumer) market is highly competitive and spans the globe. GE's head of global aesthetics concurs, saying that aesthetics have become a global selling point, as important as function, price and performance (Postrel, 2003, p. 2). Consumers choose the most aesthetically pleasing product that meets their functional demands, sometimes even choosing more aesthetic but less functional products. Post-industrial countries are placing new emphasis on creativity and work in the creative sector, including a wide range of producers of visual culture from fine art to popular arts, and the growth of visual technologies, ranging from computer graphics to digital video, is greatly impacting economic and social development (Freedman, 2007, p. 205). Aesthetics influences personal appearance, surroundings, how leisure time is spent and how income is disposed of; it is so omnipresent in contemporary culture that even those who avoid the terms are impacted by aesthetics and visual culture. An indicator of the ascendancy of aesthetics is the growth in design fields. According to Postrel (2003), design fields have increased in relation to the aesthetic demands of consumers; graphic, product and environmental design fields have all shown growth. A Google search of visual culture or aesthetics produces literally millions of results; an Amazon book search produces thousands of titles containing the phrases "visual culture" or "aesthetics".

Aesthetics, visual culture and youth consumerism. Through aesthetically pleasing visual imagery, desire is stimulated and consequently, people spend more. Much of the lure of visual culture is directed at youth; Moore (2004) states that American advertisers spend as much money targeting children (4-18 years of age) as taxpayers spend on education. The aesthetics of visual culture have shifted consumer focus from needs to desires, and wants are frequently perceived as needs. Consequently, according to Silvers (2004), art educators like Duncum often focus on intentions to induce consumption by asking students to analyze advertisements for underlying

meaning, creating an awareness of purpose. Intent to stimulate consumption has been so successful that "... one of the fastest growing industries in the United States is the selling of storage space for all those items people have bought but have no space for in their homes" (Duncum, 2007a, p. 7). American children are learning to construct their identity through their role as consumers. Through consumerism, moral decisions are seen as tangential goods that can be easily replaced as fashions change. Emotional needs are also met through consumption, and esteem and identity are becoming contingent upon products and appearances. Culturally and economically, American adolescents are largely consumers of media and goods, not producers. In a 2001 study, Fisherkeller, Butler & Zaslow stated: "American education rarely provides opportunities for even discussing and analyzing media, let alone producing it." (p. 213). American culture starts inculcating citizens to be consumers at a young age; the absence of structured prospects to critically analyze everyday culture influences sensibilities and subjectivities.

Aesthetics and Visual Culture

Identity and Expectations

Creating an aesthetically pleasing appearance is part of creating an identity, part of forming relationships, and part of expressing what we accept (or reject). Personal appearance may be more important than at any other time in history, and we use aesthetics to package ourselves accordingly. It has become, according to Postrel (2003), the most noticeable indicator of the aesthetic age; it is the merging of personal expression with social and economic expectations and aspirations – a pleasing appearance is both a personal advantage and has become a “highly marketable asset for employers...by enhancing and defining the company’s image” (p. 24). Appearances follow the aesthetic sensibilities that fit our social and economic aspirations. We take cues from everyday culture - ads, television shows, music videos, internet and video games. While young children in particular are often viewed as free of cultural attributes, similarities between children’s drawings and popular cultural sources have resulted in questions regarding the validity of many universally accepted development models; additionally, “...research suggests that visual representations of gender have a great potential for influencing student identity, artistic production, and understanding of visual culture.” (Freedman, 1994a, p. 161-3). Visual culture that marginalizes, degrades, or idealizes based upon gender or ethnicity changes how we relate to that group. Ever-present visual imagery has created a visual culture with the power to significantly impact experience, consciousness and subjectivity (Tavin, 2003). Images now play a central role in representation and perception of the world.

Social Uses/Responsibilities

Aesthetic experience and cultural construction. The ever-increasing magnitude of visual imagery in cultural sites has made it crucial for educators to address this phenomenon. For centuries, art and visual imagery have been used to further political aims, maintain and enforce social control, to heighten awareness of social inequities and subjugation. Using aesthetics and visual imagery to attain specific outcomes was employed as early as the fourth century.

Religious art (Christian and Byzantine) was often commissioned by wealthy patrons, reflecting their ambitions and desires; it could also contain subtle messages understood only by the ruling or upper classes (Brenk, 2008), which helped maintain the existing social hierarchy. Religious art packaged the longings of the patron in sublime or beautiful images, seducing the viewer into acceptance through pleasure. However, what was taught was filtered through imagery supported by the dominant class. As Darts says, "...art has consistently been in the tactical employ of leaders and politicians." (2004, p. 313). It has been used to persuade, to incite, to maintain the status quo, to create change.

Viewers (then and now) are intended to embrace a specific ideology, and do so because aesthetic packaging generates a pleasurable or meaningful aesthetic experience – making objectionable ideologies appear acceptable, or creating awareness. Like religious art, producers of visual culture today (such as advertising) tempt viewers to become members of an intended audience by endeavoring to define a certain cultural position (Freedman, 1994a). Visual culture may be selling a product or an idea; it can push boundaries or be firmly anchored in tradition. Advertisements and visual culture imagery are rooted in ideology, conveying "the morals and values of culture" (FisherKeller et al., 2001, p. 209), as well as offering up subtle implications that desired attributes can be acquired.

Art as a means of social control and social (re)construction. During the height of modernism, Western aesthetic theory was dominated by the idea of art for beauty and pleasure, or “art for art’s sake”. In democratic Western nations, art is generally self-justifying because it symbolizes individual freedom. In totalitarian regimes, however, aesthetic theories can and have become legislated policies that serve to ensure collective ideological ends; Lenin, in 1905, used art to advance Socialism (Duncum, 2008, p. 125). Various political regimes have used aesthetic theory and visual imagery to further their political goals.

More recent examples in the United States: during the cold war, the CIA funded exhibitions of American abstract expressionism—proclamations by critics like Greenberg that it was the “epitome of free art” roused patriotic sentiment, and contrasted the lack of freedom expressed by the control of communism (Darts, 2004, p.314); the Bush administration, worried about anti-war protestors pointing out historical parallels, concealed a reproduction of Picasso’s *Guernica* when presenting America’s case for invading Iraq (Darts, 2004, p. 318). The concept of using aesthetics for “the greater good” has existed for centuries. Art and visual culture can shift how reality is perceived, “...representing... an epochal transformation, and a present-day condition where images play a more central role in the construction of consciousness and the creation of knowledge than in the past.” (Tavin, 2003, p. 204). Decades after its creation, *Guernica* is rife with potent symbolism and meaning.

All art can be propaganda. In this sense, art functions as a particularly powerful form of propaganda; it can be used to educate, gain acceptance, and influence behavior through visual imagery. Ideology appears natural because it is working through everyday cultural artifacts (Darts, 2004). This inherent quality of ideology often renders viewers oblivious (on a conscious level) to what is being promoted. The religious and political art of the past has been replaced by

everyday visual cultural images. Popular art found in comic books, television, and political cartoons has largely replaced the roles played by paintings in history (Duncum, 2001). Visual culture is best understood in context with its content and historical presence because it is a cultural construction; it is learned and cultivated in relation to a cultural and social framework.

American Culture Through Art and Visual Culture

The power of visual imagery has continued for centuries and this power continues to expand exponentially in contemporary American society. As graduate programs in visual culture increase, it is scarcely surprising that Duncum shares Aguirre's view that aesthetics and visual imagery are more important than at any other time in history, and that deletion would cut art and aesthetics off from "contemporary social life and current frameworks of understanding." (Duncum, 2007a, p. 3). Visual culture studies focus on visual events through which information, meaning, or pleasure is sought by the consumer; the growth of visual culture studies is an acknowledgment of the overriding influence visual media has on contemporary society's understanding and experience of the world.

The (American) human experience has changed because the pervasiveness of visual imagery has displaced previously accepted values. Tavin (and others) believe that TV, music, fashion, and other forms of pop culture contribute to everyday formation of cultural codes and values that regulate students' understanding of self and the world around them, what Tavin refers to as "social relatedness" (Tavin, 2003, p. 197; Freedman, 1994a, p. 167; Duncum, 2001 p. 107). What was once learned through logic, reason, tradition, perception or intuition has given way to indeterminate areas of sited knowledge.

The World in Pictures: Terrible and Sublime

The world is grasped in pictures, and some of those pictures make inimical ideologies seem acceptable. Images and objects in popular culture often present opinions as if they are fact (Moore, 2004); therefore, learners need to develop critical thinking to sift through the persistent and enticing barrage of everyday images and objects. Tavin wants to educate students to liberate

themselves from social and cultural discourse by sharpening their critical powers to create awareness of dialogue that may “promote or support biases with regard to race, class, gender, sexuality and ability” (Tavin, 2002, p. 47). But Silvers questions the wisdom of educators who feel students need to be rescued from the aesthetic and emotional appeal of these objects rather than “assisting them in tapping the objects power, one aim of art education” (2004, p. 21). Students should be able to immerse themselves in visual culture, but simultaneously maintain lucidity and awareness regarding objects and images, recognizing both an object’s power while being conscious of underlying meaning. Imagery can be both beautiful and terrible; we can acknowledge its beauty while rejecting its values. Visual imagery both mirrors and predicts social dynamics (Duncum, 2008) and is so ubiquitous in society that aesthetics can be used through visual culture to produce change or maintain existing hierarchies within society. People are drawn to the lure of aesthetically appealing images; if the intent is not questioned, it can be absorbed and seem natural. Balanced reflection, remaining aware of both reason and feeling, is critical to the beginnings of understanding. Duncum (2008, p. 126) maintains that all visual imagery carries an ideology and in many forms of cultural production, that ideology is typically consistent with the views and desires of those in power. Conversely, imagery can present challenges to cultural norms; it is for each viewer to decide which ideology he or she accepts.

Intent and Perception: Deceptive Imagery

Freedom granted to Americans allows artists and designers to cross traditional, cultural, and social boundaries, but does not demand social responsibility. Visual imagery can be appealing, but at the same time hold ideas that the viewer may find objectionable and even

reprehensible (Duncum, 2008, p. 123). Because of possible duality, the viewer must be able to think critically and independently in order to discover misrepresentations or outright untruths. Critical awareness is obligatory if hidden ideologies are to be revealed. In 1987, Baudrillard declared imagery an “evil demon” (as cited in Duncum, 2008, p. 129); he is in good company: Plato feared the power of imagery to do harm (Duncum, 2007a, p. 4; 2008, p. 129; Darts, 2008, p. 107) and John Adams (the second U.S. president) is credited with writing that “in all societies ‘Beauty ...can at any time, overbear’ what he called ‘Genius and Virtues’” (as cited in Duncum, 2007a, p. 4). Imagery, in itself is neither good nor evil. It is dependent upon the theoretical and ideological position of the author/artist; however, its power should not be underestimated. It is the intent and the perceived intent that impacts humanity; the “evil demon” is an unconscious ignorance of that which gives pleasure. If the viewer accepts what is presented solely because it is beautifully packaged, they may unconsciously support an ideology that is morally and ethically repugnant.

Perception and Identity: Individual and Cultural

Changing a society begins with understanding; understanding of the visible world begins with seeing. As students mature physically and intellectually, the sensory system becomes more complex; self identity is formed, reformed, and transformed. According to Eisner (2002a), the sensory system evolves from a reflex response aiding survival to the ability to discriminate and differentiate, recognize and recall, becoming a search for stimulation and, eventually, meaning. Students can be consciously or unconsciously trying to persuade others to accept their viewpoint or themselves; they can be fashioning their identity; they can be attempting to understand and

make connections with the world around them. People make connections with the world through their senses and their perceptions of it are shaped by culture, beliefs, and language impacted by individuality (Eisner, 2002a). But at a time when the public is clamoring for a return to the basics, should art continue to be included in the curriculum? Should aesthetics and visual culture be included in arts programs? Aguirre (2004) lists several reasons, including enhancing the learner's search for personal identity and knowledge of others; making connections with others by attaching meaning to personal experiences; developing understanding of their own and other cultural worlds; and stimulating imagination and creativity as justification for teaching art.

Current educational policy calls for more emphasis on the basics in response to poor academic standing in the global arena, making art seem a frivolous addition to the curriculum. Often, the result is a curricular narrowing, a focus on facts without ensuring opportunities for the development of creative and critical thinking skills. The same aesthetic and artistic activities that help form personal identity can be used to promote reflections that help learners identify distortions of conventional thought and frameworks of culture. Aesthetics taught in conjunction with visual culture can enhance learning through reflective, rational response to visual imagery. The practice of aesthetic questioning can widen learners' appreciation of the visual arts as well as alerting one to invasive and persistent imagery and ideas in everyday life. Moore (2004) believes that training aesthetic sensibilities on familiar images can teach young people to pay intelligent and critical attention to the world around them. Paying attention to the world, being able to see through distortions, identifying the lure, are all skills that prepare students to be critical thinkers in adulthood, helping them to realize their social responsibilities both as students and as active participants in life - social responsibilities that, according to Aguirre (2004),

include an obligation to synthesize creative production, interpretation, dissection and reflection in life.

Art, Art Education and Cultural Capital

The importance of educational institutions in the role of transforming or continuing the reproduction of cultural capital (beliefs, morals, social codes and tastes of the ruling class) must be recognized. Conversely, the idea that schools, particularly through art education, can disperse an equitable and democratic “common culture” is erroneous because it is most often based on Western aesthetic values (Freedman, 1994a, 1994b). Visual culture may be equally important part in the formation of cultural capital. Eisner believes that what is not taught in school is as important as what is taught (Eisner, 2002b); Darts adds that this kind of censorship has consequences on “the kinds of skills and outlooks they come to possess, and ultimately, the types of lives they go on to live” (2008, p. 11). Visual culture can be ignored or dismissed by educators, but by doing so teachers are reinforcing present cultural hierarchies. Students learn that what is meaningful to them is least important. Public schools have an impact on American culture that is underestimated; as Darts (2008, p. 3) says, “Schools don’t serve a public so much as they help to create one.” Reproducing the values of a select few is not only undemocratic, it shapes the values and perceptions of all social groups. Rather than indoctrinating students to accept the current concept of success, schools would better serve student needs by enhancing the development of critical thinking and opening discourse that reveals cultural inequities and undemocratic power structures.

To leave out aesthetics and visual culture is a form of exclusionary censorship. Adolescents are forming their identities, expectations and aspirations through popular visual culture; sanctioning museum art as legitimate subjugates students' everyday aesthetic experiences, situating their preferences and interpretations at the bottom of the social hierarchy (Tavin, 2003). The message is clear: to climb up the social ladder, adopt the tastes and values of those in power. If learners are not introduced to critical and rational thinking, their actions may be based upon superficial understanding or desire to belong. Deliberation of imagery without consideration to the initial lure allows dominant groups and their interests to go undiscovered; it allows them to maintain their position while keeping others marginalized (Duncum, 2007b), effectually maintaining existing social hierarchies and allowing social inequities to remain unchallenged.

Content and context. Study of visual culture and aesthetics can address these inequities by creating public consciousness. Art and visual culture become important through context; without context and social perspectives, images are just images. They are imbued with meaning and importance through their social context. In addition to surface and content, art is about “the people who created it, viewed it showed it, bought it, studied it, and criticized it, ... such contexts as cultures, countries, communities, institutions, including school themselves, and the sociopolitical conditions under which art is made, seen, and studied.” (Freedman, 2000, p. 318). Art education that takes a formalist perspective, attempting to understand artworks purely through compositional elements, divorcing it from content and context, may make art seem irrelevant to life. This approach can fail to engage students, because what we see every day is part of our cultural context and identity.

Art, visual culture, and social conscience. Cognizance by itself is not enough; it must be accompanied by belief that cultural conditions can be changed. During the late 1900s, child labor was common. Many states had child labor laws, but these laws were frequently not applied to immigrants and children from the “lower classes”. Entire families, including young children, were hired for various forms of labor. From 1908 to 1912, photographer Lewis Hine documented many cases of severe violations of child labor laws. His photographs were credited by the general secretary of the National Child Labor Commission (NCLC) for focusing public attention on the conditions of child laborers and aiding child labor reformers (History Place, n.d.), resulting in the enactment of stricter laws. Hine’s photos, aesthetic works in their own right, gave an insightful and unwavering look into the lives of children who worked long hours for little pay, routinely performing difficult (sometimes dangerous) jobs. The images contradicted impressions of children at school or play, bringing attention to exploitative child labor throughout the United States. In a culture where visual imagery is increasingly prolific and influential, aesthetics matter and exist partially to serve social conscience.

Art, visual culture, and consciousness. The aesthetic questioning inherently necessary in the arts can create awareness, develop personal ethics, and strengthen higher order thinking skills. Eisner theorizes that creating self-identity is the primary process of education, and the role of the arts is to transform consciousness (Eisner, 2002). Through the process of self invention, students interpret, evaluate, judge, make choices, reflect, make adjustments to previously held ideas and values. According to Smith, “Cultivating the capacity for aesthetic experience through schooling is significant for its production of individuals who embody the values of tolerance, communication, judgment, and freedom and shun intolerance, dogmatism, conformity, and suppression.” (2008, p. 5). Expecting art education to put an end to social

inequities may be too much, but, says Freedman, recent educational policies focusing on basic skills may have overlooked the essential point: Basic skills do not adequately develop meaningful creative experiences, the types of experiences that lead to creating students' personal identity and cultural growth (2007). While basic skills retain importance in preparing students to assume productive roles in society, facilitating deeper understanding of the world is paramount to changing it. Identity and subjectivity are formed as a result of living within particular political, social, and economic structures (Yokley, 1999). Deconstruction or transformation requires critical and reflective examination. Creative thinking uses facts to connect to the world in new ways; critical thinking is the ability to use those connections in beneficial ways.

Global and personal connections. Through art and aesthetics, students can develop their own voice and make connections to the world around them. The arts employ perception, not only recognition – students look not just to classify, but to see and understand, engaging their imagination in interpreting what was seen. Students can begin to understand that “popular culture is not simply a terrain of unproblematic entertainment or static manipulative propaganda” by linking interpretations to cultural values, hierarchies and stereotypes (Tavin, 2003, p. 199-200). Relating art and visual culture to students' lived experiences benefits understanding of past and present culture. Learning is enhanced for students actively participating in their education, and bringing personal interests into play is advantageous to construction of knowledge (Freedman, 2007). Connecting topics to students' lives and interests is advocated by many educational theorists (such as Dewey, Charles, and Kohn), and in a predominately visual age, visual culture must be included. Visual imagery can create aesthetic experiences that disrupt typical social and aesthetic attitudes about society.

Teacher/student roles. Rather than conventional roles in which the teacher dispenses knowledge and the student memorizes, Moore (2004) states that teachers should play an intermediary role, negotiating between traditional aesthetics and what intrigues students, letting students initiate the investigation into the world of visual images that interest them. Traditional roles are transformed: teacher as facilitator for students, and students as active participants, constructing knowledge in a partnership, learning from each other - similar to student/teacher roles presented by Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Using students' interests facilitates greater understanding and appreciation of their world. Naturally, many student interests are tied to visual imagery – from TV, video games, advertisements, music videos, etc., but art educators need to avoid using popular culture imagery as a means of enticing students to contemplate “real art” (Tavin, 2003, p. 199-200). Using visual images from popular culture simply as a lure is insufficient; students gain no insight into underlying meanings or how favored imagery relates to works acknowledged as “fine art”.

Tying art and cultural meaning together. Learners may continue to like, even admire, images without gaining any understanding of how it relates to them, the world, or what the intent may be. “Telling students what to think about popular culture is inadequate and irresponsible. It plays into the logic of traditional teacher authority where educators speak uncontested truths that erase the complicated relationship students have to popular culture.” (Tavin, 2003, p. 201). However, visual art teachers can use the excitement generated by popular visual imagery, facilitating a comparison/contrast between their objects and more traditionally acknowledged artworks, (as long as) they build attentiveness to ties between visual culture, extraordinary works of art (Moore, 2004) and cultural meanings. In this way, their awareness of cultural capital can be extended. Students need to be cognizant of dominant morals and social codes

before they can accept or effectively attempt to transform them and educators should be sensitive to the self-expressive/common culture dichotomy. Freedman (1994a, p. 161-2) believes it is unrealistic to expect a common standard of aesthetics concurrent with the creation of unique art works; student art works reveal both the individual as well as cultural similarities and differences.

Art Education: Shifting Paradigms?

Although there is no single definitive view of the aims of art education, many current arts programs are attempting to address the importance of understanding, creating meaning and forging connections. Davis (as cited in Gullatt, 2008, p. 14) lists eight ways in which the arts are included in U.S. schools:

1. Arts-based: the arts are a required core subject in the curriculum
2. Arts-injected(or infused): arts activities integrated into the general curriculum in order to enhance a particular area of study
3. Arts-included: arts instruction being offered alongside other subjects with or without integration into these subjects
4. Arts-expansion: arts taken outside the school setting
5. Arts-professional: designed to train students who are preparing for careers in the arts
6. Arts-extra: extracurricular arts activities (school plays, piano lessons)
7. Aesthetic education model: arts viewed as ways of knowing; students are encouraged to construct their knowledge

8. Arts-cultura: based on premise that arts connect the cultures of the world; implies that students can be empowered to create their own meaning of content through the arts; encourages risk-taking, critical thinking and diligence

Davis also stated that the first seven roles may be used separately or in combination with each other. Integrating art instruction to make content areas more appealing to students is common, but does not often require students to use higher order thinking skills. According to Gullatt (2008), this approach and performance-based integration are most widely used, but complement the curriculum in limited ways. These styles of arts-integration rarely require students to interpret and evaluate.

However, some arts-integrated programs may be improving the possibility of a paradigm shift in art education. Recent research indicates that arts-integrated programs may result in academic gains across the curriculum, and that they have a more significant effect on struggling students than more conventional arts education (Gullatt, 2008). These developments in cognitive and neuro-science suggest that the arts can enhance student learning in numerous ways because the brain and body are a single, fully integrated cognitive system. “Abstract thought is consistently represented through metaphors that are associated with physical experiences and emotions...”, making both “essential components of the mind” (Gullatt, 2008, p. 14). The physical and intuitive are both required for optimal understanding.

Discipline-based art education. Eisner also lists several different versions of art education, each with a distinct focus, but advises that art education is rarely practiced in one pure form; it is more often an amalgamation of two or more visions (Eisner, 2002). Eisner’s work has supported one of the more well-recognized versions of art education, Discipline-Based Art Education (DBAE). Developed by the Getty Center for the Arts (later, the Getty Education

Institute) during the 1980's, DBAE is sequentially organized into four strands: art production (processes and techniques of creating art); aesthetics (examining conceptions of the nature of art); art history (the context in which a work of art is created); and art criticism (bases for valuing and judging art) (Clark, Day and Greer, 135).

Arts PROPEL. Another model of art education is Arts PROPEL. Arts PROPEL was developed by Harvard University's Project Zero researchers, Educational Testing Service consultants and Pittsburgh area teachers, with the goal of discovering whether Gardner's theories of multiple intelligences could be tested. Arts PROPEL is a student directed learning experience that favors long term, open-ended projects; students are constructors of knowledge, and because projects are directed by their individual interests, they are motivated to actively pursue understanding (Restructuring Education, 2007). Students must be able to organize, manipulate, and apply skills in order for understanding to occur. Since construction of knowledge occurs over time, projects are long term and include both structured and unstructured activities. Making art is a major activity, and a major tenet is that valid learning is based on three intertwining pathways: production (students must have opportunities to perform or create artwork; consistent with the theories of Dewey and Piaget); perception (viewing and understanding artwork - one's own, peers, and professional artists - and honing perceptual skills by close study); and reflection (thinking about art in terms of generating ideas, improving and revising one's own work, placing art in a larger context and continually evaluating one's attitudes toward art). (Arts PROPEL, Project Zero, n.d.; Restructuring Education, 2007).

Desired outcomes. Although the methods are different, the focus of both programs is on student interests, understanding, reasoning and critical thinking skills. Neither program exaggerates humanizing aspects of art or focuses on results that other subjects can equally claim;

instead, they emphasize the importance of reflection, interpretation and understanding (Lindstrom, 2007). DBAE and Arts PROPEL view the student as a constructor of knowledge, placing importance on creative and critical thinking skills as opposed to factual recall or demonstration of skills that have already been mastered. Self and peer evaluation is just as, or perhaps more important than teacher assessment. Eisner (1998, p. 58-59) lists the following desirable outcomes of effective art education:

- Willingness to imagine possibilities that are not now, but which might become
- Acquiring a feel for what it means to transform ideas, images, and feelings into art
- Refining an individuals' awareness of aesthetic qualities (in art and life)
- A desire to explore ambiguity, to be willing to forestall premature closure in pursuing resolutions
- Enabling understanding of the connection between the content and form of art work, and the time and culture in which it was created

Both DBAE and Arts Propel are examples of using an arts-cultura approach to art inclusion, and as such, would yield greater results (for students) overall. These versions of art education address multi-cultural, social and historical aspects of art, as well as encouraging critical thinking, the entertainment of multiple perspectives in communication, and creating meaning through visual imagery.

Art and Community

An art education program that is individually creative and socially responsible is worth supporting because it allows students to create meaning, connect to others, and begin to

understand the continuity of the past to the present. Gude believes that such a program permits students to “become central in their own life stories, ...to create complex and nuanced subject positions in which they can construct meaning, experience pleasure, and work for peace and justice” (2008, p. 99). Outside of school, few opportunities may exist for students to have these experiences. Art and aesthetics matter because they represent both personal experience and community experience. Art and aesthetics use the past to affect the future, and have contributed to community pride and involvement, social justice and self understanding. An example is the murals of Judith Baca. Baca’s well-known mural, *Great Wall of Los Angeles*, is the history of California’s peoples retold, giving voice to minorities and women in Southern California. Baca sought to present the struggles and contributions of people that were frequently omitted from textbooks. Her murals brought art to places where people live and work, employing students, families, and community members, many of whom attributed an increased sense of self-identity, belonging and increased sense of community. Baca wanted to “visualize the whole of the American story” (SPARC, n.d.). According to Yokley and others, the ability of those who are excluded to critically examine power formations and appropriate knowledge presents possibilities to resist the reproduction of oppressive conditions (Yokley, 1999; Freedman, 1994a). Baca’s work has enabled women and ethnic minorities to do so by replacing the people that had been erased from history, whose contributions were omitted or appropriated by others.

Visual Culture: Trendy *and* Traditional

It has been said that art imitates life, and conversely, that life imitates art; Eisner believes that both are correct (2006). He is drawing attention to the fact that artists draw ideas and imagery from life, but people draw ideas and imagery from art and visual culture. New

imagery is created every day, some relying on old works that have been given a fresh twist, becoming new and relevant again; some will be bold new ideas that will be copied and reworked until they too become part of the cultural subconscious. Silvers states that “historical works of art endure, and by enduring they are present with new works and they influence the art world; therefore engaging with art requires that it be placed in context with other equally unique objects”. (2004, p. 21). But art works that endure do not influence only the world of art. While much of visual culture does not endure or acquire meaning and value in virtue of its historical place among images in that culture, it links art and culture with that which is familiar and current. The popularity of visual imagery recognizes both the historical and contemporary, pulling ideas from what is current and poised to become trendy while looking back at tradition; it can, simultaneously, construct an awareness of past and present trends, as well as employing them to further specific ideologies or agendas.

Importance of Student Art-making

Art-making can be thought of as an imaginative response to an external, perceived world, filtered through the student’s creative individuality, or students’ attempts to create meaning from complex, abstract ideas. Without a curriculum that enhances critical capabilities, students see visual culture with an uncritical eye; without experiences that actually promote thoughtful engagement of students with visual imagery production, they will not learn to understand the complexity of these processes (Freedman, 2007), their importance to daily life, or their power to transform knowledge and experience. In response, many visual art educators have moved beyond teaching the basics of line, shape, color, media, and techniques, and the concept of art as therapeutic self-expression; instead, they are teaching students to think critically about

their visual culture (Freedman, 2007). Students “can come to understand the characteristics and the influence of identity through the visual arts” (Freedman, 2007, p. 211); additionally they can come to understand or at least be aware of social and cultural conditions through making and contemplating art. Students can begin to recognize the myth of a common American culture, and instead, gain awareness that the United States is so culturally, ethnically, and economically diverse that “people’s experience of culture differs widely...and these experiences then work to further transform culture.” (Freedman, 1994a, p. 161). Teaching students to use multiple perspectives can create empathy and insight for different cultures.

Curiosity vs. Connoisseurship

Heidegger reportedly believed that “the world conceived and grasped as a picture...is what distinguishes the essence of the modern age” (as cited in Duncum, 2001, p. 102). When philosophers comment on the rapid ascension of imagery, it can easily be assumed that we are living in a visual culture, a culture in which the visual and the aesthetic hold sway. Today, the ordinary-language definition of aesthetics is anything having to do with visual appearance and effect – much closer to the original Greek *aesthesis* - and it is used widely in diverse cultural sites. This ordinary-language definition allows art educators to utilize aesthetics and visual culture to cultivate the “curious eye”. According to Rogoff, “the curious eye implies that not everything is understood” and “is able to discover something not previously known or able to be conceived before”, where as the “good eye” (the goal of connoisseurship) was “intended to discern properties that already existed” (as cited in Duncum, 2001, p. 109-10). Helping students develop a “curious eye” is arguably of more value than teaching them to have a “good eye”

because the “curious eye” perceives its lack of understanding and seeks to rectify, whereas the “good eye” is too easily put to use maintaining the aesthetics already in place.

Art Education, Visual Culture and Aesthetics: Student Benefits vs. Intrinsic Worth

At this time, there is no definitive proof that art education improves understanding across the curriculum, however, the possibility of transfer effects are important enough that research should continue (Winner & Hetland, 2004). Regardless of the outcome, art should continue to be a part of the curriculum for its intrinsic value - what it does for the student, not what it does for student test scores. For many learners, the arts may be their most important learning endeavor because it is where they potentially experience the most success, however, according to Freedman (1994a, 160), art education has historically indoctrinated students to existing culture, but failed to provide crucial foundations necessary for evaluating underlying assumptions of aesthetic value, and in so doing, has encouraged a continuation of existing cultural values.

Bringing visual culture and aesthetics into the art classroom can promote the critical thinking skills fundamental to successfully navigating the visual world. The arts are powerful because they can be used to promote or limit freedom by “revealing, confronting, subverting, or supporting prevailing belief systems or ideologies” (Yokley, 1999, p. 18). Since adolescents often stress the importance of social rules and behaviors of those persons viewed as socially elite, a safe environment is needed for analyzing visual culture which, according to Freedman, “can help students of all ages understand that multiple interpretations can be enriching”. (1994a, p. 167). In supporting an art education program, it is essential to create a secure environment in which students are able to speak freely, and to think about what is central in art, culture, and aesthetics today.

Art Education and Policy

Aesthetics are no longer about refining or instilling “good taste”; art education policy needs to consider why people make art, how people make art, how people use art, and what it means for both creator and viewer (Freedman, 2007, p. 216). Student art work must be understood as an interpretation of their experiences, sometimes marred by racism, sexism, violence and unwarranted hate, making the need for critical understanding vital. Without an accompanying deconstruction of everyday visual culture and related discourse, their work may fail to permeate beyond superficial understanding. Which activities are appropriate, which may be harmful and if the potential for harm outweighs the potential for good must be considered. In return, visual art educators are moving toward an art education that teaches students to critique, helping them to think evaluate and reflect upon their world and the breadth of visual culture they encounter.

Background Knowledge and Lived Experience

Learning has changed with our perception of the world being presented in pictures, but many schools are managed in ways that are conducive to maintaining culture as it is. Consequently, new ideas are prevented from being introduced into the system. Trying to rigidly maintain what is, rather than entertaining what could be, causes students to view school and education as irrelevant and “boring”; they cannot connect the work to their lives (Glasser p. 427). Art educators with a firm conviction that the arts can enrich both personal and academic life by creating meaning out of abstract and seemingly irrelevant ideas realize that students’ backgrounds and experiences need to be taken into account - they need to have knowledge of current social mores before they can create art

that either agrees with or challenges them. Yet American education still relies on the Platonic conception of knowledge, in which the visible world, as a sensory experience, is not as valuable as rationality (Eisner, 1992). Schools have the opportunity to impact how visual culture is viewed by teaching critical reflection, but the mind must be recognized as still in the process of development rather than in a fixed state. Additionally, schooling's impact on culture has to be acknowledged. According to Eisner,

...school constitutes a primary culture in which children's minds are developed and that development is influenced by the culture in which they live. Therefore, decisions that are made about the school's priorities are also fundamental decisions about the kinds of minds children will have the opportunity to develop. (1992, p. 591)

Eisner goes on to say that "much of what passes for knowledge is what we teach our students to believe, rather than what they have learned and truly understand" (1992, p. 592). Schools are not developing critical thinkers, but merely perpetuating current concepts of learning and success. Leaving the study of visual culture and aesthetics out of the curriculum is limiting to students who have been inundated with it virtually since birth. If value is taught through time and emphasis, as Eisner (1992) proclaims, the perpetually low valuation of the arts is (at least partially) explained.

The Image as a form of Communication

Eisner has also said that "Contrary to popular opinion, in the beginning there was the image. It is the image that gives meaning to the label." (1992, p. 592). Like language,

imagery communicates symbolically by referring to experiences or imagination (Eisner, 1992). The arts have the possibility to transform consciousness by deconstructing aesthetic strategies employed by artists and creators of popular, influential visual imagery. By calling attention to the visual aspects of culture that “inform our actions and temper our beliefs”, art education that addresses aesthetics and visual culture can disrupt by upsetting “our identities, our beliefs, and our actions (and inactions)”, in the process undermining “...our ability to function within a dysfunctional world” (Darts, 2004, p. 319-20). The ability to function in a dysfunctional world creates no impetus for change. By forcing us to examine things we accept that are detrimental to society, art and visual culture can bring about change.

In today’s world, the image is the primary medium of perception and conception. The growth of design-related fields demonstrates how completely art and design have become integrated into daily life; additionally, technology has updated art media and visual culture, showcasing their uses as ideological reinforcement. Art and other forms of visual imagery should be recognized as an integral part of the cultural system, acting as a catalyst for aesthetic experience (Aguirre, 2004). Aesthetically pleasing imagery is used partially to influence social conscience and consciousness; therefore, students should be able to absorb visual culture with awareness, understanding, and the ability to think critically. Regardless of whether they are “tapping an objects power”, or viewing with heightened discernment, students should be aware of the power of visual imagery, maintaining a sense of their own control over how the images are perceived and used by them. A student that taps into an objects power should understand or be aware of the possibility of multiple constructions of meaning. The use of a sophisticated aesthetic

throughout visual culture has greatly impacted learning; educators and policy makers would be wise to ask themselves: What kind of culture do we prize? What kind of culture do we want to leave for future generations? Research has shown that arts-integrated programs show academic gains across the curriculum. This suggests that studying the arts can help student learning. Rather than focusing predominately on raising standardized test scores, entertaining questions (such as these) and possible answers would benefit students because examining conceptions of the nature of art and visual imagery lead to deeper understanding of the visual culture in which American students are immersed.

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Curriculum Vitae

Melissa Burger (fourth daughter of John and Frances Burger), was born in Panama, where the family lived several years before John was stationed in El Paso, Texas. She graduated from Irvin High School and declared her intention of never going to school again; however, after a period of approximately 10 years, curiosity about the rigors of higher education got the best of her and she enrolled at El Paso County Community College, eventually transferring to the University of Texas at El Paso, where she received a Bachelor of Fine Arts in May of 1994. After spending several years teaching, she was once again bitten by the education bug and returned to UTEP in pursuit of the degree of Master of Art Education. Upon completion of the requirements, she will be relocating to Colorado.

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