

Critical Visual Literacy

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Abstract

Current theoretical shifts in art education aspire to reconceptualize the human subject-via poststructuralist, semiotic, cultural, and social theories-as one who actively constructs meaning from, is constructed by, and responds to visual culture (Anderson, Gussak, Hallmark, & Paul, 2010; Chung & Kirby, 2009; Duncum, 2010; Smith-Shank, 2004). 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 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 education for critical visual literacy places on emphasis on critique and creating deconstructed texts so as to prepare new generations for the expanding (cyber)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 (particularly at middle/high school level) to promote social justice and cultural democracy.

Keywords: Art Education, Critical Literacy, Visual Literacy, Visual Culture, Social Justice

Expansion of Literacy

The notion of literacy continues to expand as visually mediated texts (e.g., media ads and TV 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 be literate and change the landscape of visual literacy education. In the modernist era, literacy was treated as a set of technical skills independent of context, culture, or power. Centered on an industrial economy driven by manual labor, modernist capitalism required workers to master technical skills in order to produce “hardware” products (Luke, 1994). 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 yet critical (beyond technical) skills to perform multiple “software” tasks (Luke, 1994). 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 (cyber)society.

The commodification of aesthetics as shaped by postmodern capitalism is today in full operation, especially in cyberspace, offering teenagers sensory-stimulating visual spectacles. Cyberspace is a learning environment where teenagers can construct their identities while immersing themselves in exciting multimedia activities. They learn as much if not more than sitting in the classroom by participating in many cyber-activities. Steinberg and Kincheloe (1997) 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 (Gaimster, 2008; Parks, 2008). Unsurprisingly, the current tech-savvy generation of youth is immersing itself in these types of sensory-stimulating activities as its everyday aesthetic sites/sights.

A Theory of Texts for Art Education

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Roland Barthes (1964), a theorist 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 in general and critical visual literacy education in particular. 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 (Yeoman, 1995). The notion of intertextuality allows art educators and students to examine and understand visual practices at a deeper level from different perspectives, especially when it comes to critical visual literacy education. According to Duncum (2010), intertexts provide opportunities to explore interrelated power, ideology, and representation in visual culture education.

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" (Rose, 2001, p. 70). 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 (Rose, 2001, p. 71). A text is always an area of contention where material conflicts and competing social relationships occur. In effect, we

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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 ideology-loaded 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 or in addition to 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 fundamental questions as when, how, and why it was made in order to determine its meanings and purposes.

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 visual 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 (Gitlin, 2001). The proliferation of visually mediated texts in our globalized 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” (Stevens & Bean, 2007, p. 124). 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” (Horkheimer, 1982, p. 244). Critical theory problematizes knowledge and social practices sanctioned by the dominant cultural group.

Additionally, critical pedagogy plays an important role in shaping critical visual literacy education. Freire (1970) 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 outside world, and as an opportunity for empowerment, liberation, and social justice (Freire, 1970). For critical pedagogues, literacy is emancipatory when meaning is both “multiaccentual and dispersed, and resists permanent closure” (Giroux, 1993, p. 369) 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. Educators use critical pedagogy to empower students to investigate and help change oppressed social practices to make their world a better place.

No longer meaning the ability to read words, Freire and Macedo (1987) defined literacy as a social act involving the ability to respond to and transform the world, a view echoed by Lankshear and McLaren (1993), 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” (p. xviii). Ciardiello (2004) 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” (p. 138). 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

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and supports students in asking questions about representation, marginalization, and interests (Stevens & Bean, 2007).

Most scholarly work in critical literacy does not regard visual arts as central to fostering critical literacy as I have yet found a major piece of published work relating visual arts to critical literacy education. Art education is generally perceived as a recreation program; 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.

Approaches to Critical Visual literacy

Lewison, Flint, and Sluys (2002) 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, I propose 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 (Apple, 1990). 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 (see Chung & Kirby, 2009).

Poststructuralist Analysis

A poststructuralist analysis of texts examines the limitations of the binary oppositions (e. g., good/bad, male/female, or black/white) operating in the texts. Texts in the media usually portray characters or events simplistically, leading to misperceptions and biases toward certain minority groups. 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 early 20th century can highlight a critical lesson about racial biases; for example, American picture books depicting white people as good and black people as evil, and men as strong protectors and women as weak and in need of protection. These biases and associated stereotypes are still common in today's action figures and TV cartoon programs made for children. Guide students to reflect upon the different values that these texts convey (e.g., gender roles on popular TV cartoon program, "The Simpsons"). To help students study artifacts in question, it is necessary to supply or have them brainstorm a list of probing questions such as who constructed the artifacts and why, and what impact do they have on viewers as these texts continue to reinforce prejudices. A fieldwork opportunity can be arranged for students to visit local toy stores to investigate firsthand what biases, stereotypes, and prejudices are

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perpetuated in action figures or play dolls. For instance, racism is often glorified in popular action figures. As shown in Figure 1, the black figure is a beast-like creature with sharp claws in leopard fur, wearing a necklace compiled of animal teeth. The white figure looks more civilized and carries more modernized accessories. This type of action figures can be used for classroom discussion and as an example to prompt further fieldwork investigation.



Figure 1 The racial stereotypes seen in this set of action figures has inspired American artist, Michael Ray Charles to create a body of racially charged artworks. Photograph taken by the author.

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)represents 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.

An example can be seen in children's ethnic playdolls (e.g., Chinese and Japanese Barbie dolls) dressed in exotic pre-Modern costumes produced and marketed in the West from a Eurocentric perspective. The degree of exoticism and the characterization of these playdolls in pre-Modern costumes not only suggest that they belong to an uncivilized group, but also, at best, exude the stereotypes of ethnic minorities subjecting them to an inferior position. 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 inferiorization in relation to the ethnic stereotypes portrayed in the texts and to what degree these texts truly (mis)represent the ethnic groups they portray. For example, I asked my college students to investigate local texts that perpetuate cultural/ethnic stereotypes. One of my students visited a souvenir shop in Texas and uncovered many texts (merchandizes) sold in the shop depicting rodeo and cowboys. which are primarily based on stereotypical perceptions of people in this region. He found that cowboys are often portrayed as tough guys who participate in rodeos and wear big belt buckles and work boots. As a matter of fact, most real-life cowboys do not fit in this type of portrayal. Alarming, stereotyping is a celebrated and often an unchallenged tool for marketing a local culture. Another place for students to study ethnic stereotypes is the souvenir shop in the museum. Many museum shops feature reproductions of cultural artifacts without providing important contextual information, which continually reinforces ethnic stereotypes and miseducates the consumer about people who used those artifacts.

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. In most societies, women's bodies have been sites of sexualized commodification and spectacle for the heterosexual male (cited in Keels, 2005). The silencing of female authorship in cultural texts has objectified women to the eyes of a collective heterosexual male gaze. According to Luke (1994), "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 drudges, brain-dead bimbos, or saintly supermoms" (p. 32).

One focus of feminist criticism has been sexist portrayals in popular media culture as ideology of women's bodies as sexualized commodities continues to prevail in today's most advanced societies. An example is hip-hop music videos that frequently exploit women's bodies as objects of transient sexual gratification whose primary function is to entertain men. An American hip-hop scenario portrays women as club dancers and prostitutes while the rapper (usually male) glorifies himself as a well-off pimp, using provocative language to denigrate women. This depiction suggests that women play a subordinate role by catering to the sexual needs of men in order to survive in a male-controlled arena. In addition to these sexist texts, hip-hop music videos also glorify violence and materialism. Such artistic expression does not simply portray women negatively; it also questions what meaningful contribution they can make to society. One way to challenge sexist hip-hop music videos is to have students compare and contrast misogynist videos with those performed by feminist rappers such as Queen Latifah, Sister Souljah, The Real Roxanne, M.C. Lyte, and Salt-N-Pepa. Although not all are consistent with feminist ideology, the music videos performed by these female rappers can be used to rebut the exploitative characterizations of female bodies in hip-hop. Judith Butler's (1990) theory of

gender as performance serves as a pragmatic approach to deconstructing hip-hop's sexist portrayals. Contrary to society's conventional views of gender roles, Butler argued that the biological gender binary (masculine/feminine) reinforces the differences and inequality of the sexes in society. According to Butler, gender is not a biological condition but rather an enactment or performance (expressed, for instance, in language, clothing, movements, or actions). In other words, it is a socially constructed fluid variable associated with how people behave in certain situations:

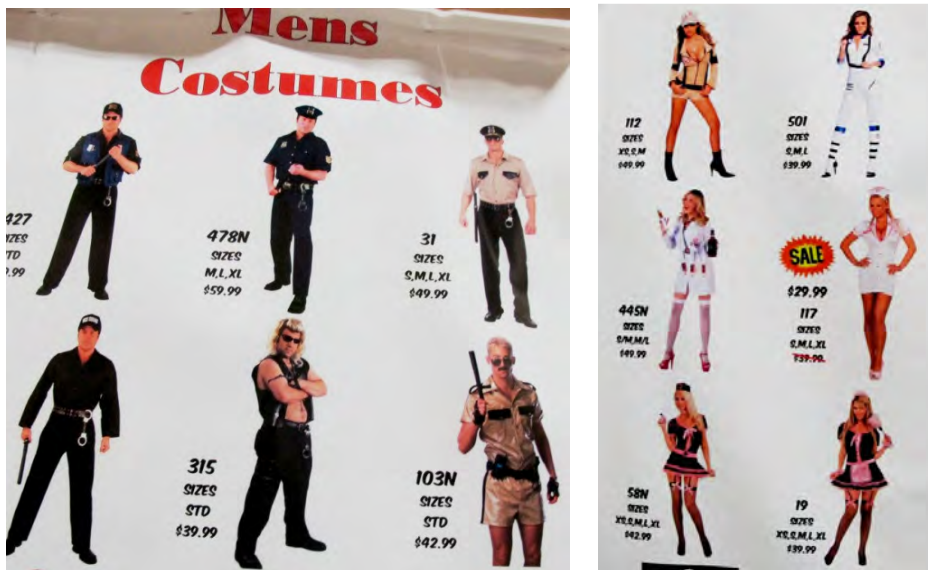
By applying Butler's view of gender as performance to the examination of hip-hop music videos, teachers can help students to identify specific sexist behaviors and attitudes manifested in hip-hop performances and to further articulate the explicit and implicit messages being conveyed through identified gendered performances. When gender is perceived as performance, scenes of a video can be dismantled and analyzed in terms of the cultural capital (e.g., clothing, posture/gestures, facial expressions, speech patterns, or persona) that hip-hop performers adopt to enact their gender roles -- in other words, what and how a video's incorporated visual and linguistic texts contribute to the impression of unjust gender roles. The following questions (in no particular order) can serve to guide high school students in analyzing a typical sexist video scene and interpret its meanings with respect to attitudes, values, self-image, and social expectations:

- What pictorial elements/design techniques are used to get our attention?
- What is the scene trying to tell us? (viewpoint, belief, or value)
- What is the purpose of this scene?
- Is the scene portraying a stereotype? Which stereotype?
- How do we know the portrayal is a stereotype?. Is there a sexist expression in this scene, and how do we know?
- What responses is the scene meant to elicit from the viewer?
- How are the female dancers portrayed?
- Are there other implicit messages in this scene?
- What assumptions do you make from watching the scene?

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- What does the scene teach young women in society and the general public?
- Can you think of any ways to challenge sexist portrayals?
- What other sexist presentations do you frequently see in the media?

In the classroom, art teachers can encourage students to identify and study gendered social/cultural practices in their community provided with these question prompts. For example, one of my students examined Halloween costumes made for men and women for her fieldwork investigation. As seen in Figures 2 and 3, the gendered portrayals in Halloween costumes are questionable across different age groups. These photos were used in my classroom to explore men and women's roles in society from various standpoints.



Figures 2 & 3 Photos taken in a local store selling Halloween costumes. Costumes for men/boys depict more protective roles and those for women/girls emphasize sexy, man-serving, and fantasy characters. Photographs taken by the author.

Psychoanalytic Analysis

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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 TV commercials) often serve as ideological sites that shape children'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 (see Figure 4). By disseminating parodies of mainstream media constructs, culture jammers attempt to break this cultural domination and unveil the hidden agendas of corporations.

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Figure 4 A student subvertisement questions unethical business

A learning goal for students is the recognition that media constructs can be analyzed and deconstructed and virtually all distinctive design elements related to brands or logos are subject to subvertising. For a classroom lesson, I introduced the concepts of culture jamming, subvertising, and deconstruction to middle school students. These concepts are important to youth, as they are constantly bombarded with media images and messages in their public and private spaces that dictate what they should consume, value, be, and become. After exploring these important concepts, the students brainstorm greater issues of concern and choose an issue to produce a subvertisement about, using a logo and slogan with Adobe® Photoshop®. They paid particular attention to how their subvertisements unveiled or illuminated the consequences of corporate behavior or addressed a particular social issue (see Chung & Kirby, 2009). I iterated the elements of an effective logo design to make them more understandable to the students in designing their work. A successful subvertisement, for instance, should be clear about the message it delivers, easy to read (not using too many colors or a complex composition), show appropriate design principles (e.g., space and consistency), sway people into believing the message, convey strong emotions, and challenge people's perceptions.

At the completion of the project, the students shared their work by articulating what issue they were telling people about, how they sought to persuade people with their subvertisements, and what they were trying to accomplish through their work. Through this media literacy art project,

students were expected to gain knowledge and insights about media (mis)representations and how they affect people and society as a whole. Through the design cycle (investigating, planning, creating, and evaluating), students were encouraged to think about and reflect upon the mediated world in which they live, to transform it, and to initiate a positive change. The ultimate goal of the project was to have students go into the real world to increase public awareness about important social issues that people face today. To do so, students printed their designed subvertisements on image-transfer paper and transferred them onto T-shirts. They wore their designed T-shirts and participated in culture jamming using the approach of guerrilla communication.¹ Guerrilla communication moves students from passive spectatorship toward active involvement with culture production. The students wore their T-shirts as living billboards and behaved as cultural producers to solicit comments or reactions from the public.

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. 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

¹ Guerrilla communication is a communication method and a political intervention through street performance/events or public engagements designed to disrupt or change the public's perspectives. It attempts to distort normality by illuminating those hidden desires that are usually silenced by dominant rules of conduct.

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their conceptions of homosexuality, masculinity, and femininity, and confront issues of homophobia.

Images of homosexuals showing public affection (see Figure 5) can be used to explore gay and lesbian issues such as homophobia, same-sex marriage, and stereotypes. In most societies, heterosexuals are free to show their affection in public, while public displays of affection are considered a social taboo for homosexuals. In America and many other countries, it is not uncommon to hear school youngsters use homophobic language to humiliate their peers or tell malicious jokes. Students uninformed about homosexuality are likely to form prejudiced attitudes and use offensive language and/or behavior toward gay people. 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 (Chung, 2007).



Figure 5 A public mural displayed outside a local bar in Houston, Texas

Street art by British artist, Banksy, can be used to explore issues of homosexuality in the classroom. Several of Banksy's images of kissing policemen (two policemen in uniform kissing each other on the street) have been seen in London city streets and can be found on the Web. The

representation of these policemen forces pedestrians to revisit their conceptions of homosexuality and masculinity and to confront the issue of homophobia. The following questions can be used to explore these issues with students while art images such as Banksy's kissing policemen are shown.

- What is your first reaction to this picture? What responses is the picture meant to elicit from the viewer?
- What is the picture trying to tell us? Are there elements you would characterize as symbolic? How do you think this picture was made?
- Where was this picture presented? Is its location important, and why? Is this art, and why?
- Are policemen authority figures in our society? Is it socially acceptable to see policemen act in this way? Would it be more socially acceptable if one of the policemen was a woman, and how so? Are there other implicit messages in this picture?
- Can societies be truly equal and democratic? How does our society as a whole discriminate against gay people? What can we do to make a truly equitable society?

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” (Comber, 2001, p. 1). The acquisition of critical visual literacy requires thinking consciously of conditions of privilege and injustice

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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 (Jenkins, 1997).

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 (Jenkins, 1997), 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 (Rose, 1984). 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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