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So, what comes after? the current state of visual culture and visual education

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Abstract

Visual education is being challenged by an educational system where the arts languish. At the same time, researchers and practitioners in art education show an increasing interest in the concept of visual culture. The concept of visual culture represents roughly two intertwined currents: one current is the idea of visual culture as a field that comprises all types of visual phenomena. Another current is the idea of visual culture as a methodological approach where the concept of visual culture represents the idea of the social constructed glance.

In this article, I discuss the apparent paradox of a threatened teaching subject which is downplayed in political decisions but has an expanding field of knowledge and methodology. This new field of knowledge and methodology which started out as a deconstruction of inadequate scientific structures within art history has now become an important contribution to visual education from a broader perspective. The discussion draws on examples from the Danish case of visual arts education.

Facts of visual (arts) education

Why should the educational system have a programme for visual education?

Is visual education a matter for the educational system at all? If it is - how do we do it?

I want to make and elaborate on the following statement, which supports my ideas for future visual education: Visual education is cross-disciplinary, but also a discipline in its own right, one that encompass visual decoding and interpretation

My field of research is the *educational* system of media, ICT and visual culture from compulsory school to university education. This means that my discussion is framed by my interest in the visual's learning potential in light the developments in ICT, I am interested in the transformation of visual arts education into visual education. Furthermore, I am interested in the educational perspectives of how the teaching subject, which provide future

citizens with competences that seem crucial in a modern society, is in danger of being removed from the curriculum in several countries.

in the following, I present a few about Denmark. Recent figures indicate that visual arts education is in a bad state in Denmark. From a Danish contribution to a Nordic analysis of the structure of visual arts education (Illeris 2009):

“In the *Folkeskole* [in Denmark aut.] visual arts is a compulsory subject from forms 1 to 5 and in most schools it reappears as an optional subject in forms 8 and 9. The subject is separated from the handicrafts of needlework and woodwork (*Sløjd*), which are normally taught in form 6. Visually oriented sub-disciplines, such as picture analysis and the understanding of film and media are mostly taught in the subject of Danish, especially in the higher forms. In Denmark upper secondary education covers three years of study and it is divided into general and vocational programmes. Until the latest reform, visual arts was considered a natural part of the *Bildung* (formation) which general upper secondary educational programmes are expected to provide. From 2006 visual arts has lost much of its status by becoming an optional subject. Furthermore, no Danish upper secondary educational programmes are specialised in visual arts or handicrafts while several general upper secondary schools offer specialisations in music. The lack of compulsory art lessons after form 5 in the *Folkeskole* therefore has the consequence that a considerable number of Danish young people do not receive any specific visual arts education after the age of 11.”

From my recent survey of the teaching subject:

- A report from *The Danish IT Centre for Education and Research*, 2009 concludes that 59% of art teachers in compulsory school are trained at university colleges, which are the main institutions for training compulsory art teachers.. The remaining 41% who teach in school have other backgrounds. In university colleges the training is focused on integrating future teacher’s artistic skills and educational competences. I have previously described some of the central aims/theoretical basis of the study programme over the past years (Buhl 2000, 2004, 2005). The main focus is the educational implications of the so called ‘visual turn’.
- Cut backs at the university colleges, which have been the main provider of art teacher education, has reduced the number of fulltime lecturers in Denmark to 10. A report by the former president of the Danish association of teacher trainers (Rasmussen 2008) documented a reduction of 75% of art teacher students in Denmark from 1998 to 2011 There is now less than 1 full time position per teacher training institution. The number has decreased to 7 full time positions in Denmark in 2010.

•The master degree in art education at the Danish University of Education was shut down in 2004, which means that no new Master's graduate i.e. no PhD students have for a period of 8 years.

Figures and numbers tell us what we already know: visual arts education is languishing in the Danish educational system.

Despite this development, there is a growing interest for visual culture among practitioners, within the art disciplines, cultural studies, ICT and media studies and in education. The past ten years has seen educational research activities attached to visual culture with inspirations from Anglo Saxon e.g. Mitchell, Mirzoeff, Rogoff, Elkins, Buck-Morss, Stuhr and continental currents e.g. Pauwels, Regener (Buhl & Flensburg 2011). One example of this is a network founded in 2003 with participants from all Danish universities (i.e. Dam Christensen og Illeris). Another example is the national journal of visual arts education [Billedpædagogisk Tidsskrift] that published four special issues about visual culture in 2005, which put visual culture on the agenda.

What have we learned from visual culture?

What have we actually learned at this stage? The emergence of the concept of visual culture has taught us that the 'natural', the 'self-evident' and the 'canonical' image is a social construction of the visual. Visual culture emerges from various disciplines. Scholars with roots in art history have set a new agenda to expand the field and to renegotiate the methodology for investigating the visual and together with scholars from social sciences, media studies, philosophy and from education, they make valuable contributions, which have challenged traditional structural boundaries for visual arts production, research, distribution and mediation and education.

The stakeholders of visual arts education have become aware that pictorial production is based on personal visual histories of representations, as documented, among other things, through research in children's drawings. The contemporary visual arts teacher is continuously confronted with new digital devices that call for a redefinition of the pedagogical context. Furthermore, the mastering traditional tools are about to be replaced by the notion of being competent in making digital documentations of social projects and performative attitudes. This conceptual approach assimilated from contemporary art leaves the student with the demand of being capable of talking, of using words and of identifying signs instead of mastering skills of drawing, painting, sculpturing.

How does this new conceptual path legitimate itself as a cause for a particular kind of education and not as an illustration for social sciences or simply cultural exchange outside the educational system?

Images and visualisations' functions in knowledge-building

The visual arts' practical and theoretical basis has segued into a new and broad field of study, into a new methodology – in short a transdisciplinary construction of a particular gaze in the interlocutory space of the arts, of social and culture studies, media and ICT studies, philosophy and pedagogy. The teaching of *art appreciation* has been transferred to museums. *Visual registration* is a method used in social sciences, and images are approached as *objects of analysis* in media studies. Education in *pictorial production*, however, is missing. But at the same time, visual culturalists and contemporary artists claim that art is conceptual and not practical. How does one teach children contemporary art production skills? Should the training of children's, adolescents' and adults' productive skills only be related to traditional art forms, or be reserved for a small group of professional artists, who choose to be painters or sculptures?

As the teaching subject of visual arts in the educational system becomes ever more difficult to legitimate the discussion among educators might lead to abolition of an educational discipline.

Maybe the discussion should be approached from another angle?

Three factors define the evolution of visual arts/visual culture in education. The three factors are building blocks for future visual education, and they are:

- 1The evolution of digital technologies i.e. web 2.0, which represents the challenges from an emerging generation of 'digital natives'
- 2The global visual repertoires and the local interpretations i.e. cultures
- 3Professional aspects of working with rapidly changing visuals i.e. methodologies and fields (Buhl 2010b)

The factors comprise a cross disciplinary sphere and represent the potential field of visual competence and learning. This field of competence goes further than the traditional art perspective. Traditionally, visual education is part of teaching and learning processes with art-based activities. However, the field of visualisation goes further in regard to educational activities to include in other subject areas as well as visual construction of the social practices as such (Buhl 2010c).

The functions of visualisations and images across subject areas emerge in the interlocutory space between ICT, subject matter and learning and are culturally biased.

Five categories of visual functions are represented in the education system (Buhl 2010b):

The first is visualisations for *cognitive modelling*, which refers to the natural sciences and mathematics. Here, the visuals have various functions in knowledge-building (charts, figures, tables, diagrams, etc.) due to their emblematic and schematic qualities. Scientific phenomena are made accessible to the eye through visualisations that provide access to a scientific understanding of the world. The access consists, in part, of creating overviews in

the form of models and, in part, by using technology to obtain new images of, and thus new knowledge about, the world. One example is X-ray images that allow us to 'see' the insides of a human being without surgical intervention (e.g. Pasveer 2006: 41f).

The second category is the role of images and visualisations in the *comprehension of discursive symbols in language learning and in text reading* (Buhl 2008). Examples include images for reading training where images 'show' what a particular word means. The role of images in reading books are either to support, expand or contradict the learning content (Buhl 2010d: 52).

The third category is the visual as the main *actor in research activities and the development of ethics and morals in social sciences* such as ethnographic films (data collection, analysis and communication) and the related discussions of the methodology and science (Pauwels 2006: 136).

However, sciences and images are never neutral or devoid of context. Images are indicators and exponents of a specific visual culture and play an important role in knowledge-building and science communication. Both the natural and the social scientist must take this into account in their research designs and in evaluating the validity of results. The teacher must take this into account when (s)he selects learning content that includes scientific representations.

The fourth category is visualisations to *support design processes in handcraft, technical and vocational training*. This category comprises all professions where instructions are supported by illustrations or plans. Digital technology has expanded the opportunities for using visualisation as well as created new professions. Examples include graphic designs for learning applications or design of virtual learning environments. ICT allows for multimodal approaches when we choose the learning content. This gives rise to new genres of learning environments and learning cultures where scientific approaches are combined with more playful or social approaches.

The fifth category is images and visualisations used to *challenge conventional approaches to understand the world across subject disciplines*. This category set the contemporary arts project into play but also the exploration of how the construction of a particular glance is socially biased. One example is artistic concepts for social projects which are constructed to intertwine artistic investigations with everyday life practices in new hypotheses about life, about values, beliefs and change. Social interventions which aim to solve a deadlocked situation caused by different world views represent the evolutionary phase of artistic cognition and do also belong in the category.

The five categories call for visual cultural competences *across disciplines* and the development of these competences are a matter for the educational system. The educational system must take the skills of decoding as well as meaning making into consideration in order to address this matter (Buhl & Flensburg 2011).

The significance of attaining visual competence becomes evident when the nature of visuals for scientific, and thereby the potential learning content is actualised. Pauwels states that scientific visual representation is influenced by a number of elements that determine, for example, how pictures, figures and charts are constructed, and thereby how knowledge is constructed visually and culturally. The material/physical existence of a phenomenon or conceptual construct of a referent, the production processes and aspects, and the users' context are examples of the complex of visual cultures of science (Pauwels 2006). Pauwels' discussions can be added new perspectives as still more advanced technology emerge and intertwine the scientific areas in new and cross-disciplinary frameworks. For instance, data production takes the form of digital codes that generate visual representations in medicine in e.g. CAT-scan (re)presentations of the body instead of x-rays.

From my point of view, the visual is also brought one step further when I suggest that the visual not only represents, but also presents, reality constructions. If you use *Google Earth*, the world will appear in a version that is reminiscent of classic maps and globes, but the gaze is dynamic, since the bird's-eye perspective of the starting position can zoom in and shift to normal perspective when you position a marker at a particular destination. Satellite photos of the world look different from drawn maps. Another example of a dynamic way of mapping, now with the entire body involved is how it has become possible find the fastest route with the help of a Global Positioning System (GPS) satellite connection and the right hard- and software. This provides a different sort of 'cognitive' map than the traditional atlas. They all have a representational function, but at the same time they present an image domain that the users master in their perception of the world. GPS technology allows us to master a dynamic learning environment based on the positioning of the technology and moves, so to speak, the 'theatre out of the university'. Likewise, this technology provides us opportunities to create new learning cultures free from the physical constraints of synchronous time and space.

Visual learning and designs for learning

As new educational cultures emerge from the introduction of ICT, the visual skills of *decoding* and *meaning-making* are key future competences. Visual learning aspects are something all teachers must consider when they plan, practice and reflect on a teaching and learning situation. Furthermore, the visual learning aspects become a part of every design of e-learning resources e.g. video-podcasts, social platforms and mobile devices (Buhl 2010a). The teacher must take the complexity of these aspects into account in the designs for learning, and must consider the visual aspects in the didactics prescribed in a learning application as well as its integration in a specialised communication practice. This requires not only the competences of planning, practicing and reflecting on teaching and learning

processes (Dale 1989) but also a professional approach to argue for the criteria of a particular practice.

So, what appears at first glance to be the decline and fall of the arts is more likely the emergence of a new field of visual education!

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