

# Adolescent Visualities and Identities Reflections upon a Research Project

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## **Abstract**

**The present paper shares some reflections about a research project carried out between 2015 and 2016 in 5 secondary schools in Montevideo city. The main objective of the research was to analyse how images concerning adolescent bodies are constructed in relation to arts and visual media. The working process and the scope of the whole research are herein discussed and some arising questions are posed.**

## **Keywords**

**Youth, body, images.**

The aim of the present paper is to share some reflections upon the research process and scope of a work which main objective was to analyse how images about adolescent bodies are

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built up in relation to arts and visual media. The analysis focused on the impact that current corporeality discourses have on the construction of identity during adolescence.

Aiming to reach a deeper and subtler comprehension of the complex fabric made up by visibility practices, such identities were firstly identified and then approached through an interdisciplinary work. The practices were analysed in reference to adolescent bodies, and visual technologies conceived as a device or dispositive specially designed to be seen or to facilitate vision (MIRZOEFF, 2003), to say, television, internet, social nets, stages.

Visual Culture Studies offered the conceptual departure and methodological framework of this project because they emphasize the role of visual representations and /.../ the visualizing positions of subjects. In other words, it offered substantial elements to clearly set the problems the project intended to approach. Visual Culture as an analytical perspective oriented the search of strategies and pedagogical dispositives in a manner that permitted that “visual representations could be revised and the traditionally subordinated subjective positionings could be re-equilibrated” (HERNÁNDEZ, 2005, p.10). [translator version]

Lately, the possibilities we have to establish relations with artistic process and artefacts have been widened and reconfigured. Contemporarily, we cannot think ourselves without images, not only images related to the artistic field but also images coming from all the contexts we inhabit. We constantly negotiate, confront and consume an infinite number of images which we appropriate and resignify consciously or unconsciously.

These everyday experiences constitute a process of knowledge construction that obliges us to permanently reflect upon the images spectating conditions. Meanwhile, they give us the possibility to generate some different ones which can dialogue and confront these previously established spectating conditions.

The recovery of visibility (in a culturally strict sense) -its production and interpretation- offers from an aesthetic experience, an appropriate space for identity construction and the iden-

titarian expression of subjects, including body related images.

Therefore, to carry research on image field features and its aesthetic expressions turns into an appropriate scenario for an educational discussion concerning body issues.

As dispositives that generate political and ideological discourses, visual arts can be approached from different perspectives. One of them is to consider the re-signifying potential they have over images, specifically through artistic productions made by adolescents. Different contemporary artistic proposals have taken their interest in problematizing the different visions about the bodies; bodies and means of communication; bodies and genders; race; migrations; among others.

In this regard, we would like to highlight the work of artists such as Muntean (ISRAEL, 1962) and Rosenblum (AUSTRIA, 1962) who approach contemporary adolescent bodies from a pictorial perspective (See: [http://www.arndtberlin.com/website/artist\\_1170?idx=m](http://www.arndtberlin.com/website/artist_1170?idx=m)) and the series by the photographer Rineke Dijkstra (HOLANDA, 1959) who utilizes photography and portrait to unveil adolescent identities and bodies construction in diverse contexts (see: <http://www.photography-now.com/artist/details/rineke-dijkstra>).

Due the core of our work were the adolescents' own experiences we tried to generate a working environment that allowed the discussion of adolescents discourses through their own production of images. Inquiring about visual culture means not only carrying out research on the conditions of visual culture production but also on how the experience itself develops; it means inquiring on the way how meanings and social relations are reified and materialized through images, artifacts, behaviours and practices (AGUIRRE, 2013, p.13).

It is necessary to point out that there are different criteria to theoretically approach adolescence, and different ways of being an adolescent. We do not intend to discuss the diverse conceptions of "youth", for instance, as a chronologically limited life period which varies according to demographic phenomena, or as a life period related to epochal and sociocultural

variations. However, we consider necessary to outline just one operational concept about our understanding of adolescence as an intrinsically dynamic concept.

Referring just to generation, there is a wide variety of manifestations among the youth that we are obliged to question ourselves: how can we depict such expressive diversity? We do not only aim to review diversity but to highlight its relevance, in other words, we aim to give account for the diversity of youth cultures in terms of their identities. Although this means considering the biological cycles of the individuals, it does not mean such cycles are identical, it is a “shared diachrony, a contemporaneity into which memory is built, and of which one can refer to in first person” (MARGULIS, 1996) [translator version]. Since being young in contemporary society means a complex situatedness of permanent construction and a simultaneous inner and external quest for identity; the ways in which these quests manifest are correlated to the loss of meaning of traditional institutions -family, school and state- and express in new group forms, new means of production, and new cultural meanings exchanges.

Currently, visual practices as well as visual technologies place us within the context of hyper connectivity or the tele-techno-media phenomenon (DERRIDA, 1998) and social bonding models in the *pixel zone* that result ambiguous and unattainable: the pixelated image places us in front of an immaterial reality that invites us not to a dialectic experience but to a paradoxical one because we relate to a non-existing image which even lacks a storage place (MIRZOEFF, 2003).

Technological means and virtual environments have a so overwhelming expansion that they deserve attention in both fields, pure research and teaching because “the spaces in which visual images of any condition are produced, distributed and exhibited –including advertising, corporate, and entertainment, are also susceptible of being analysed in their pedagogical condition” (MIRANDA, 2014, p.150).

One of our research group agreed working guidelines is that the metanarratives about adoles-

cent bodies that circulate through the artifacts/dispositives of the media and the web need to be unveiled and posed as matters of debate. Our research approach from the perspective of Visual Culture Studies gives sense to the other two lines that complement this research: collaborative learning and corporality studies.

Firstly, we refer to collaborative learning because the different visualizing positions are actually configured and transformed in the interaction between the subject's and the other's *ways of seeing*, and they, in turn, configure interactions that need to be revised. Secondly, we resort to corporality studies because such visual practices reside nowhere else but in the bodies, not just from the point of view of perception but regarding the experience and memory of corporeal subjects. The research line of collaborative practices represents not only a challenge but also a potentiality. As a methodological strategy, it allows a vivid and dynamic interaction among the participants. One of our premises is that collaborative work has a transforming potential for the subjects involved in its process, since it helps to improve the capacities associated to complex learning.

Therefore, through some dispositives we have previously designed we intend to create an environment of enunciability and conscious listening for the negotiation of meanings, the production of senses and self-discoursivenesses co-participatively generated.

Placing an emphasis on enunciability directs us to redefining corporality as a field of discourse. The idea that we are persons constituted as corporeal subjects implies a deeper comprehension of the corporeal dimension of learning. "Learning never takes place in absence of bodies, emotions, place, time, sound, self-experience, history" (ELLSWORTH, 2005, p. 161)

Learnings inhabit memory and the bodies; they are built, transformed and circulate bodily, meanwhile they are reaffirmed or confronted in social relations. Thus, we refer to adolescent bodies or corporeality -instead of referring to the adolescent body- since there is not just one possible representation and corporeal identity but a personal/relational, unconcluded and dy-

namic elaboration.

Within this framework we develop a research line based on the visibilization, transit and construction of images related to adolescent bodies. Besides, we understand it is necessary to turn visible the models that spread stereotypes and reinforce gender, racial, generation and class pre-existing barriers. These stereotypes re-present social categories and beliefs which are associated to such previous ideas that operate with communicative efficacy (especially the ones related to advertising)

Accordingly, our proposal was twofold. Firstly, we inquired about the influence of the images generated in the adult world and the massive media on the discursiveness about adolescent bodies. Secondly, we identified the images that circulate among the youngsters about their own interests and identities. We were interested in questioning the possible distances between adult attitudes and discourses (considering institutions, advertising, artistic productions, etc.) and the adolescents' discourses and attitudes towards the topic.

One of the premises of the present project is that these discourses reflect experiences, thoughts and processes which contribute to the comprehension of such complex fabric, hence their discussion and debate become significant.

We consider approaches of this kind help introducing other perspectives and they allow an easier access to identity construction in the very instances of production and reflection; and we also understand that the approaches which work through the artistic language are learning opportunities which generate parallel and specific viewpoints on the issue. Accordingly, we share the idea that: “.../ during adolescence it is gradually easier for the individual to consciously reflect upon this transformation process. Art can be an essential instrument to make it possible. During adolescence art is used to reflect upon art itself. This is part of a process called metacognition: the ability of thinking about thinking” (MATTHEWS, 2002, p. 31).

The metacognitive process has been associated to the idea of authorship which supposes we

assume we are able to reflect upon our own experiences, emotions, and thoughts as biographical subjects (FERNÁNDEZ, A. 2007), who have the capacity of thinking and configuring ourselves autobiographically.

A subject who assumes him/herself as an author can play with the relations between knowledge and ignorance. At the same time, he/she activates and develops his/her desire of building up the process. To carry out research with adolescents means considering the persons we invite are able of thinking themselves and of implying themselves in the co-participatively composition process we propose.

### **Some reflections upon the process**

One of the relevant aspects of this experience is that it allowed us to involve in different educational situations and environments. According to the institutional features of each particular context, different approaches to the realities and ways in which adolescents think themselves in relation to their corporeality were possible.

Knowing the youngsters' discourses about their own bodies and the images of these bodies that circulate in adolescent environments help us to widely comprehend the meanings that both -the bodies and the images- carry.

The symbolic representations by which the persons introduce themselves, show us a diversity among people that calls into question the archetype of "the adolescent" and the stereotypes associated to it. This process made us revise some of our prior ideas; as long as the exchange is assumed as a dynamic one, the dispositive demand some adaptations.

Likewise, it challenged our ability to adapt and situate ourselves regarding the issue because we were affected by the "production stages, recollection and interpretation of the information" /.../. It is with the young people, in their own environments, and in their own groups "where the experience is condensed and where the research problem is constantly actualized and re-

actualized” (VERA LUGO, 2007, p.152).

Therefore, this proximity positioned us in front of a plurality of ways in which the adolescents expressed –or did not express- themselves and showed us different ways to access their narratives. Meanwhile, it contributed to widen our prior views which meant we eventually introduced some transformations into the dispositive.

## Dispositive – its introduction to the adolescents

The first activity proposed to the teenagers consists of a series of texts the participants read and debate (initially in small groups), they refer to topics related to adolescent bodies (cultural practices, health, risks, scholarship, work).

Among them are –just to cite a few examples- newspaper articles such as “Mujica want students to wear uniforms for security reasons” or “Selfies become dangerous among vulnerable adolescents”; song lyrics such as “Violent” by Marca Acme; or institutional reports such



Figure 1: Article from a newspaper distributed in Montevideo See: <http://www.elobservador.com.uy/mujica-quiere-que-los-alumnos-usen-uniformes-seguridad-n233257>



as “National Survey of Adolescence and Youth. Home formations, employment and physical activity” [translator versions]

Using the information in this newspaper article as trigger for discussion, a debate is installed. In this first encounter, the purpose is to work with texts –not with images- because one of the objectives is to work with the visualities the participants bring. Doubtlessly, this text triggers internal images and to begin the process searching for such images seems very provocative.

In the introductory and motivating phase we understand the dispositive as a facilitator. Later on, during the whole process, the dispositive functions as a permanent articulator of the materials suggested for each session, the varied ways the teenagers have to respond and participate, and the interventions of the research team.

## **The teacher’s role**

Moving the focus of the reflection to the teacher’s role open new dimensions of interest. Firstly, it has to do with the way we are affected on our adult views and discourses by the ways in which the adolescents feel and express about the dispositive.

It call our prior ideas into question; which prior ideas do we have as teachers (the team and the nexus teacher) about adolescent bodies? Secondly, it gives us elements to revise the artists and artefacts selection we have made, since the teenagers show curiosity, rejection, fascination depending on what they understand each image says about them.

What ideas about adolescent bodies do the artists, the video clips and the selected texts we work with display? In which ways do we incorporate/articulate their inputs into/with the research project? Which aspects can be considered “evidence” for the analysis of the process?

The nexus teacher bonds us with the institution and is the one role that allows the project to be carried out. It has been a determinant factor to access the educational institution and each specific classroom as well. Up to now, the key factor to establish such a relation has been trust,

consequently it is interesting and significant that such a vincular dimension turns out of a greater importance. Pedagogical bonds emerge, as far as this project has been developed, as a central object of inquiry.

Which potential capacity does this project have to influence the teachers' revision of their own approaches? According to the initial and final interviews and the experiences shared with the nexus teachers, it has been found that this project has a potential –mainly derived from the contributions of corporality and visual culture fields- that may help to deepen and widen together with the nexus teachers their own views of corporeity and visual culture.

## **The images**

### **Censored – self-censored / collaborative / produced**

The dispositive has a closing activity -after the viewing of the materials suggested by our team, the ones suggested by the adolescents, and after the debates in the successive meetings- which consists of the production of our own images. As a result, we are all -adolescents, adults, artists, publicists- placed as negotiators of the meanings concerning the images, and we are thus re-situated as potential visual culture producers.

The objective of this closing activity is that each participant elaborate his/her own screenplay to eventually take a picture based on a personal portrait sketch which expresses as clearly as possible the idea he/she intends to transmit, and considering the image planes, the light, the distances and the focus.

The task is open enough so as all the participants could feel included and, at the same time, it tries to be clear enough in order to generate new lines of analysis. The main goal posed is that each adolescent registers and depicts on his/her visual composition those dimensions of him/herself that differentiate him/her from other adolescents; such differentiating factors are the ones expressed in their social presentations forms, in their attitudes, preferences, desires, and

cultural practices. The only conditions we establish are that the shot must be taken inside the institution building, and that any form of the teenager's corporeity must appear on the picture. Accordingly, the resulting images are as varied as their authors: full bodies, fragments, backs, feet, hands, eyes, shadows, silhouettes.

Thus, with the resulting images the situations were varied. Some participants produced clear and concrete ideas they could project into their pieces fluidly. Other students needed aid from his/her classmates or from any of the adults to define their photographic composition – this could be possible because the guidelines provided by our team for the elaboration of the image were firstly presented to the larger group as a whole.

Specifically, with the teenagers that ask the adults about their sketches or express their “lack of ideas” in order to fulfil the image planning, the procedure followed is limited to the gathering of the information the student gives and, as adults, we intend to give feedback based on the possibilities we visualize in that kind of slit the participant opens for us. In summary we try to reorientate such information within a visual discourse that the student could include and reappropriate as of his/her own.

In this regard, it is necessary to be careful not to invade or colonize the teenagers' process of image production with our adult perspectives. Thus, we placed an alert about this and had to spot some bias in the procedure of some colleagues. Although this fact was considered by our team during the planning phase, at the moment of applying the dispositive we had to face there were different versions of it. However, those differences were considered constructive dissensions and eventually enriched the work through the exchange.

Meanwhile, there were some imagined images which were not shot at all. Besides, there were others shot but afterwards **censored or self-censored**. Regarding this issue, a situation that happened with one of the participants is interesting. Firstly, he defined his plan, took the picture and felt satisfied with the result. However, from one week to the following he changed

his mind, he had been fully convinced about his choice (an image provocative in relation to the institution) but some days later he started to doubt about taking part in the project. Between the two sessions some situation -alien to the dispositive- generated a kind of self-censorship of the image he had already chosen and produced. He modified his decision and expressly asked his photography not to appear anywhere since it had resulted from a thought or philosophy that had changed along the last few days.

The following text corresponds to the transcription of the audio in which the participant describes the censored photography: “As a foot to my photo I choose *The third wheel<sup>1</sup> of progress* because I think that religion prohibits stuff which is natural to the human being, it creates prejudices likewise the criticism against woman and intimacy. . . and in the name of religion scientific and philosophical advance of the people has been delayed” (Textual transcription – audio from the field)

Among the **produced** images is the one below. In a previous dialogue this student had expressed she had not felt part neither of the school nor of the class she belongs to, and that she had not experienced any space of the school as “proper” or as her place. She had offered to one of her classmates the possibility of completing her image, thus her picture would had shown her back (as in the present photograph) and her friend hand because she had expressed both shared opinions about the school, studying and their classmates. Finally, she was the only one to appear in the photo. The seats arrangement, the empty seats, her sitting in the back of the classroom, her sitting showing her back to the camera, the distance between her and the rest of the seats are all signs that express her position in the classroom space.

Another interesting example is the fragment below which shows a sequence based on the idea of “advance, tumble, fall, and recovery”. It took the school’s staircase as its space. Body management was a distinctive feature in this group because it was formed by students educated

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<sup>1</sup>The student said *rueda* a Spanish word which can be understood as wheel or row.

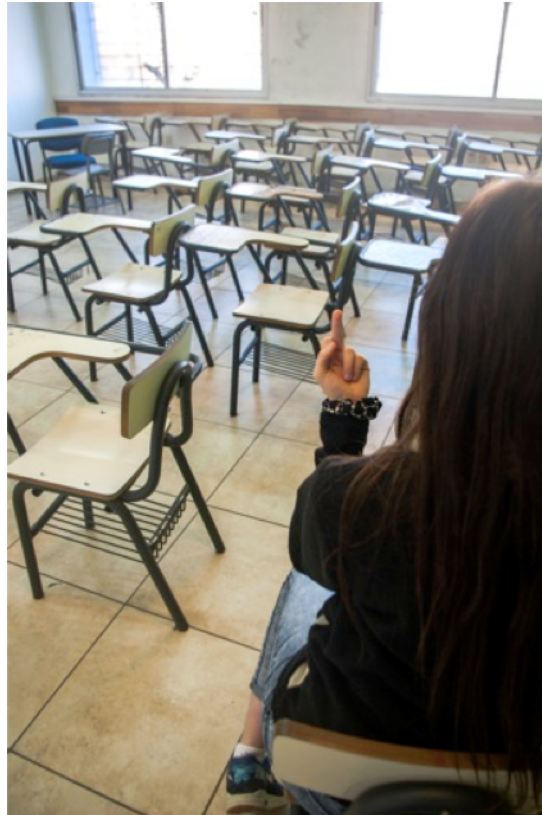


Figure 2: Expression of a student inside the classroom (Researcher's archive)

in performing arts. Felipe composed this image when he was faced to the challenge of generating an image that could identify him and others, as unique adolescents, diverse but with characteristics shared with others of his age. So as, it supposes not only the externalization of an internal and truly personal process, but also a process we realize other adolescents do experience.



Figure 3: Staircase of the school building (Researcher's archive)

The next figure is Sara's image, it is inscribed in the self-introduction mode. She chose her voice and expression as the core of her production, it resulted unexpected within the proposed dispositive so as it triggered comments, questions and debate. Eventually, she sang melodic songs in three different opportunities, her classmates approved her performance, hummed, and all together they built up an enthusiastic environment.



Figure 4: Sara's manifestation (Researcher's archive)

Sara was attending singing classes. She decided to compose the image above after we posed this question: Which dimensions of my own self as an adolescent differentiate me from the rest

of the adolescents, or differentiate me from the vision the society particularly has over my age group? The aspects by which I introduce myself to the others: attitudes; preferences; desires; practices. . .

The following production was planned after a dialogue in which we dealt with the others' first impression about us and our appearance. Clothing, brands, trainers, haircuts, earrings, tattoos. . . they seem to be determinant when classifying people within specific social groups.

The image below is by a participant who chose to take her photograph highlighting the features that had emerged after she had shaved part of her head. She expressed she was two people in one, and that the way people reacted towards her depended on the side she introduced to the others, especially at first sight (on the bus, on the street, in discos).



Figure 5: Students' profile





Figure 6: Students' profile (Researcher's archive)

The following extract is from an audio transcription of a debate about the formerly referred topic, personal corporeal aspects and the reactions we generate on others in relation to a certain corporeal image we project: *plancha or cheto?* which can be translated as: *chav or posh?*<sup>2</sup>

Reference:

E – Member of the research team's contribution. G – Member of the group's contribution.

E – Let's see... Someone who explains what posh people are

G - Posh are the ones who wear brand clothes, the ones that dress up, the ones that occupy certain social class, they demonstrate realities that would be as a social

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<sup>2</sup>(NT) The terms posh and chav has been chosen because of their global popularity, however, the choice does not lack certain arbitrariness.

class above the chav

E – Now, the question I ask you is, if tomorrow TV ads started to show advertisements with chav people and the ordinary was advertising showing chavs? What would happen? (Because what we usually consume are the advertisements without chavs)

E – So... how much is there in the construction of “the chav” and how much is there in the construction of “the other” in relation to the chav?

G- Let’s say now wearing jeans and Nike trainers is in fashion. Three years ago you wore this and you were a chav. And now you are posh. New Balance or the Nikes and the jean pinrolled this way, but very neat. You won’t wear a nylon, a Nike

E – But if chavs decide to wear New Balance tomorrow

G – Posh will stop using them.

E – What is good is thinking about is the number of times we reproduce or reinforce many stereotypes? Isn’t it? When you talked about the clothes of the chavs you said, ok, that they have the brand doesn’t mean they are the original, the value of the original in relation to the false is also a cultural construction. Because if we are talking about the bodies and supposedly we are not worried about how the others build us up but about our bodies because we are original, maybe it does not matter if they have an original Nike or a fake Nike.

G – No, that’s OK, let’s say, there are loads of comments that this guy is a liar a fabricator because they have an original Nike tracksuit. And the one who has a fake one, one from the little green roofs of \$600, yes, that one is a chav.

E – I didn’t understand it

G – The one who has an original is a liar. The one who has a fake one is a true chav.

The conversation with the adolescents shows a complex system of exchanges and elaborations that directly influences the everyday construction of their subjectivities, specifically by wearing brand clothes and circulating around in social spaces where such wearing becomes meaningful.

Throughout this period of work the team has obtained information enough to carry out research based on the audios of each meeting, the images of introduction and exchange, the final photographic productions, some field notes, the team meetings and reference bibliography.

Every meeting with the youth in their diverse environments has contributed with the singularity of each expressive mode and each analytical style, enriching and subtilizing not only the dispositive but also our views about the research topic. Evidently the “bricoleur researcher” notion (LODDI, MARTINS, 2009) we had mentioned in the project basis has showed determinant throughout this research process, especially at the very moment when we had to stand in front of the group of adolescents.

Probably, it is particularly complex to arrive to categorical conclusions within the bounds of this project. Preferably, we are inclined towards a continuous formulation and reformulation of questions in relation to the varied enunciating possibilities the images have when they are generated by diverse adolescent subjects. Their preoccupations, interests and postures show sound and well-grounded when they are condensed by the adolescents own points of view. Therefore, our discussion turns more complex, the roles need to be revised, the dispositives call for re-negotiations, and the prejudices require to be made explicit.

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