

Visual Literacy Through Topic of Gender

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Biography

Zuzana Svatošová is a PhD student and lecturer at the Department of Art Education, Faculty of Education, Charles University in Prague. She focuses on issues of visual and cultural construction of gender and gender in art education.

Abstract

In this paper, author try to introduce various special approaches regarding how to use gender as a topic in Art Education, developing the abilities of visual literacy. These approaches are supported by long-term pedagogical research of art education discourse. The theoretical background of this kind of research is developed by the interdisciplinary turn in humanities which comprise perspectives of structuralism, poststructuralism, linguistics, semiotics, psychoanalysis and cultural/visual/gender studies.

In specific examples, author present the didactic methods of working with visual representations that represent gender issues. These methods critically analyze pictures of popular/mainstream magazines and specific contemporary artworks, a/r/tography (teacher as an author presenting his own artwork) and the re-creative interpretation of an artwork. All these methods teach pupils

how to see through or beyond the image surface to human reality and life experience.

Keywords

Gender, didactic methods, visual literacy.

According to my latest research (2017), teachers in the Czech Republic use the topic of gender and gender stereotypes in Art Education lectures but not always deliberately and competently. Art education, aimed at developing functional visual literacy, creates an educational environment that does not neutralize unreflected stereotypes, but on the contrary, teaches to perceive and work with stereotypes in a creative way. Art in art education is understood as a medium of seeing the world around us which is very complex and involved.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of my position is comprised of several approaches, the fundamental point of view determining poststructuralism and its theories of the formation of a human subject. The human subject (subjectivity) is here understood as the product of specific historical social practices and discourses, and of course, the physical body not being accepted as natural fact. Its method of critical discourse analysis can be taught in art lessons by interpreting visual texts.

Cultural studies are also concerned with the analysis of cultural practices. Cultural studies seek to understand how meaning is generated, disseminated, contested, bound up with systems of power and control, and produced from the social, political and economic spheres within a particular social formation.

Constructivism as a theory of education is working with preconceptions. The process of learning is conditioned by the level of student skills, his/her knowledge and of course, the

learning process itself. The student gradually creates his/her own image of the world - a naive preconception - then compares this construction with new knowledge.

Finally, I use semiotics as a study or science of signs and signification, meaning-making, semiosis, and meaningful communication.

For better understanding of the context, let's name important personalities whose ideas relate to my pedagogical intent: Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, Gilles Deleuze, Judith Butler, Griselda Pollock, Jean Piaget, e.g.

Gender and stereotypes

In the above-mentioned context, I introduce the topic of gender into an art lesson. Gender refers to the cultural practices and assumptions that dominate the social construction of men, women, and their social relationships. Femininity and masculinity as a manifestation of gender are the results of the cultural regulation of behavior considered socially appropriate to the sex. Sex-burdened bodies are always represented as a product of directing discourse. By Judith Butler's words - The "gender" category is a normative and controlling discourse that produces the body and then controls it. (Butler, 1999) Gender stereotypes are rigid simplified representations or reductions to the schematic images of the male or female. It is a set of ideas about how men and women behave, how they look, how they think and how they present their features. Gender stereotypes and their overly negative or overly positive nature lead to fixed attitudes and expectations. The inherent, unequal power mechanism privileges the male scheme in front of the female and changing these schemes is very difficult.

Functional visual literacy

The term of functional visual literacy is essential for art education (Fulková, 2002). It defines the collection of skills required for free dealing with visual pictures or signs. There are a lot of

definitions for Visual literacy, but I use this one, which was developed by Karen Raney in 1999.

The skills are the following:

1. Perceptive sensitivity – the ability to distinguish, see or feel a difference (For example: a scale of shades, color walls or just figure and background)
2. Orientation in visual culture - the Basic ability of visual communication: critical thinking, intense recognition (the reason why the piece of work was created)
3. Openness - the ability to perceive and accept new incentives, relations, and processes
4. Visual expressivity/convincingness – ability to express what I want, feel, experience, perceive...

I prefer this version because it is based on different modalities of sensitivity and not on the stages of the creative process. If we evolve gender in AE in its full visual literacy scale, we manage to avoid the stereotypes.

Didactic methods of working with visual representations

Now I would like to show four examples of how to think about gender issues in different ways.

The first one is focused on analysing how our ideas about men and women are influenced and created by mainstream magazines.

This worksheet (Figure 1) was part of the Gallery Education Program for the exhibition Reality? Identity! Contemporary British Photography at the Rudolfinum Gallery in Prague. This is an example of the worksheet given to children attending general school, 12 years old. Children respond to these questions: What requirements does contemporary society have for a woman and for a man? How are women and men displayed in magazines and public media?



Figure 1: Probe into visual cultural stereotypes. Student's artwork. (Photo by Zuzana Sva-tošová.)

This copy shows childrens' stereotyping about gender as a result of browsing through popular magazines. Children are skillful semioticians – they absorb basic coding of femininity and masculinity and create their own arsenal of visual vocabularies.

Visual signs come in clusters of contextualized meanings: long legs, long blond hair, big blue eyes, full red lips, and fashionable attributes: glittering and glamour looks, sexy underwear, perfume, high heels, a combination of naked skin and long leather boots, etc. In preparation for the program (working with a catalog, talking about images), in many cases children led us to what they considered more interesting: What does it mean to be different? Questions about „Who am I?“ and „Who am I in the eyes of another?“ „What are the requirements to be a woman or a man in contemporary society?“ „How are women and men displayed in the magazines and

public media?“

The second one shows how to work with „weird“ contemporary artwork, which we may not understand easily.



Figure 2: Encounter with contemporary art. (Photo by Zuzana Svatošová)

I show the picture to students and let them study it for a while. Everyone will prepare an explanation. The stereotypes occur from the beginning : „It’s weird.“ „The baby is too big.“ „She looks like a man not like a woman.“ „I don’t like it“ Then I teach them how to explore the meaning of the picture. Who is it? Why was the picture taken? What’s the meaning of the background? Can you see any historical context? Students try to answer themselves, emphasizing the author, then the teacher adds the context and artists’ comment.

For example, here is Catherine Opie's Self Portrait/Nursing and her comment:

„I've pretty much been doing the same thing since I was nine," she said. "I was making portraits of my friends. I was making self-portraits, I was making images of the neighborhood." She was, as she likes to say, "mapping" her reality. (in Levy, 2017)

We teach students how to look through or beyond the image surface to human reality and artistic life experiences. It doesn't matter what it looks like.



Figure 3: Teacher's art research. Motherhood © 2011. (Courtesy of Zuzana Svatošová)

Another method is using the teacher's own artwork. In a method called A/R/Tography, developed by Rita Irwin from the University Of British Columbia in Vancouver, the teacher plays the role of artist, teacher, and researcher.

This is my own artwork which I made as an artistic part of my diploma thesis. It is a collection of three embroidered t-shirts, each of them explaining my experience with the role

of motherhood in my life. The message I am trying to convey is embodied in the medium of embroidery and, consequently, the embroidery is the message. However the work is not about attractive fashion designing.

The first t-shirt bears a single word: Mother. This word „Mother“ is cut by a scalpel into the material of the t-shirt and stitched by simple stitches with a reference to my C-section scar on my stomach.

The second one is embroidered by a very difficult stitch named „Richelieu“ and expresses my problem identifying myself by two social roles in one body: Mother and Lover.

The third shirt uses the bold font as an advertisement and shouts the expression I am the mother but still the same lover. This sign has its own story in my life and it relates with the stereotypical opinion about changes in woman’s body after giving birth.

It is a method of visual education through art when you, as a teacher, can explain how the artwork is connected with your life experience and how it is related to artistic methods and creative processes.

Finally, I would like to show you some examples of student artwork. These are the works of adult students. In the introduction of the lesson, we dealt with the theory of gender, talking about the poststructuralist concept of the word, the stereotypes and the possibility of transforming them. We viewed many artworks and interpreted them, then I showed them my interpretation of gender issues and we discussed these ideas openly in regards to everyday life. Then the students were given the task of creating an interpretation of their own gender identity with ceramic clay. There followed a discussion of artifacts and the process of their creation. They were also tasked with writing a pedagogical reflection on the task, describing the main concepts, direction, the process of creation, their feelings, their thoughts, their intentions, and their evaluation. Here is one of them that refers to the picture with the heart. “When thinking about the essence of my womanhood, I immediately thought of heart. From my point of view, it is something that



Figure 4: Student's artworks (Photo by Zuzana Svatošová)

characterizes each mother, woman, an individual who experiences emotion. Whether it's an emotion to the other person, to a child or a dumb face. First I wanted to make a small rounded heart that would be part of something else. But gradually I made my heart big, dominant. Its structure was taken as petals of a rose, which symbolize my tenderness and fragility for me, which can easily be ruined, wrinkled, drowned by uneasy handling. My heart has been characterized by some painful past experience that is not yet fully integrated, it remarked me, but I had somehow worked on it. I retreated my pain and anger that made me sick and moved further. That's why I made petal slices on most surfaces, on a small part the structure is smooth - choked. At creative process, I felt that the wind was gently blowing, and that which was struck suddenly rose and recover. Relief and feeling of being light. I was surprised how many

viewpoints I can see for the artwork. It can only be superficial, depending on the visual side, or even deeply, depending on how the subject thinks loud - in dialogue. It is very hard to open your heart. Not only for what I tell about myself but for myself as well, which I confess to myself. I also realized how enormously we are each other. Everyone has his own experience and it affects his future. It is up to us whether we will use the stereotypes or that we will realize them and transform them.”

In agreement with Jaworski, Coupland(1999) and Bourriaud (2002), I think that the ability to critically reflect and analyze functions and discourses of images (understood as social relational domain) should become the basic skill of any individual in contemporary social and medialized life.

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