

# Visual Culture: The Collective And The Individual

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Here is a broad and sweeping generalization with which to open this discussion: From the moment an infant opens their eyes they are flooded with images; a jumble of images from which eventually, with the development of the emotional and rational self, an individual interacts with the world around them. Life then, through the lens of the human eye, is a continuous active and reactive interplay between responding to these images as well as producing them for a multitude of purposes to which responses are then made by others. Human facial expressions, actions through body 'language' and dress (included in this are clothes and other accoutrements such as the type of vehicle one drives, the partner on one's arm and the perception by others one garners as a result) are the images we create and the ones we see as we go out into the world. We perceive as much as we are perceived. Much of this expression is learned behavior over time as we watch others and develop our own likes and dislikes combined with one's sense of 'self'. However, people, observant people, can learn to manipulate these images to create personas and atmospheres that will illicit desired responses from others for their own purposes, whether that be for sympathy for a cause or political support, creating ethnicity and a sense of nationalism or to separate you from your hard earned money. Essentially, because of our total immersion in visual culture, people are highly receptive to visual manipulation.

Vision, it seems, of all the senses, is the most densely rich mode of communication in our world. It can warp one's sense of rationality in thinking, it can become a deeply held sense of right and wrong, of what is and what isn't, and it taps into the emotions like no other sense. While we listen to music, Bach or ZZ Top, do we only hear sound? Or do we attach emotionally charged, whether vigorous or sublime, mental

images in our minds? Can we think of touch without adding a mental picture and so, too, for each of the other non-visual senses, smell and taste? With the loss of a non-visual sense, say hearing, like that of a present classmate, it becomes amazing how acutely aware and further dependent one becomes on the visual. I assume that if it is sight that is lost then the other heightened senses are used to create a non-visual, but nonetheless mental image, of one's surroundings. I am reminded of the Helen Keller story in this line of thought. This, then, is what I would like to call 'visuality'. This visuality becomes extremely personal as well, for our images are our own, or so we believe, and one could say that what we see is all we truly 'know' and, therefore, can then make judgments about what we like and dislike. But our own visual blindness is as large as our visual sightedness and so one can now see the opportunity, and vulnerability, for the manipulation of a fully sensory able person as much, if not more so, than sensory deprived individuals. To me it is similar to the whiteout condition of a blizzard. Is it not just so much snow that as clearly as we see it, we see naught else?

We also use our visuality, and our understanding and use of it, as a means of individually identifying ourselves, such as an "Art History major", or as a "Gate Keeper" or as both a "practicing and teaching artist" or, as in my own case, a teacher of Social Studies. Some staunchly hang onto their notions of what is acceptable and unacceptable in terms of images and firmly believe, and can seemingly justify by the fact that they were the one's hired to do the chore, that what they like or do not like is good enough for everyone else. Others choose to perpetuate a created norm of what is considered 'art' seemingly oblivious to the notion that all things can be considered art and that what is considered culturally significant is in reality a created norm by those who consider

themselves 'in the know' and therefore are then justified in promoting and perpetuating it for whatever purpose they have in mind. This both broadens and narrows the viewers idea of art in as much as the viewer gets the opportunity to 'see' other expressions, but it then diminishes their own as someone else, such as the National Gallery of Canada, says this is "high art" compared to what you have done or ever seen. Just because many people say that the "Mona Lisa" is a great piece of art does not necessarily mean that it is to all. To the Australian aborigines who don't know about Renaissance Art it is just a picture, impressive and pointless, but their images of the "Dream Time", simple as they may appear to us, are more than just meaningful to them, they are everything - their culture, history and beliefs. Can that be said of DaVinci's "Mona Lisa" or Tom Thomson's "The Jack Pine"? Are they more than just pictures? And if so, who says so, and more importantly, why? Which can be truly said to have 'stood the test of time'?

The past few months have challenged my thoughts on visual culture. However, I cannot help taking the discourses of particular topics: Images in the Classroom; Material and Spatial Displays of Culture; Identities, Subjectivities and Citizenship: Envisioning Nation In Schools and applying them to a larger world context. Art History classes aside (for don't we all have a Janson textbook?) it is interesting to me how images are used, and I don't mean this in the purely negative sense, for any number of purposes. In the western tradition images have always held an exalted place. It seems images have been used to such a great degree to promote ideas to the public, particularly in and about schools, that in as highly a literate population as we are, comparatively speaking to any other period in our history at least, we now need visual literacy to a similar degree to be deemed a literate individual. We are also finding that this 'visual culture' has been so

thoroughly manipulated, on so many different ways and levels and in so many different topics that it becomes in and of itself overwhelming. The 'visual culture', then, is itself our culture. Our means of visual communication is through the various media, both visual and non-visual, where everything is created to make a mental picture, that we hang on to with all of our might, so as to give us a visual identity, a "to be seen" factor if you will, that identifies to ourselves and to others our place in society. The danger lies with manipulation for specific purposes of those images to create new or skewed images to promote certain individuals, groups, ethnicities, cultures and histories over others. Textbooks, chosen by 'authorities' within school systems, have an enormous role in the enculturation of youth in society in terms of both images and text images that students are exposed to. With images themselves, and text that creates images within the mind, people have enormous power to promote and denigrate, entice and admonish, encourage and discourage individual behavior. The portrayal of gender roles, authority figures and historical 'facts' have been illuminating in our discourses and study of the past. Images have been used to create a nationalist sentiment, both in terms of belonging and in generating a national emotion of hate for another group. Unfortunately fundamentalisms of all stripes and kinds use images as weapons against whole regimes and peoples without either side truly understanding the essences of these images from the other. They are used to inflame hostile points of view, keep people in the grip of fear and maintain a state of uncertainty, within which only certain people can thrive, at the expense of the many. Do our text books of today do these same things? Who wrote them and from which vantage point and who was the "Gate Keeper" who selected them?

The following are some observations I have come to regarding ‘Visual Culture’. Those in italics are thoughts coming from my notes from both classes and the readings and from my journal.

*No one, not even the artist, truly likes the individual to come up with independent interpretation – even Jackson Pollack wanted you to see what he saw. And some want you to be fooled by what they are showing you, so to see something else defeats that purpose. Purpose is everything in images. Politicians want a certain image of themselves to be seen and understood. So, too, any form of official administration, any one who wants to promote a certain point of view.*

*Images can be usurped from their original intent and made to serve another purpose, often ulterior and or covert. An image of a dying person, young or old, while initially attempting to garner sympathy can then be used to promote hate for the supposed perpetrators.*

*Images can be used by dominant cultures to denigrate minority cultures, to aid in their cultural demise and the assimilation of their peoples to the dominant.*

*Images can be completely contrived and have no semblance to any truth and yet become iconic. Much of the fashion industry, Hollywood and the film industry rely on this “Disneyland” approach to society – making fantasy into reality. Its harmful effects are everywhere in the unrealistic thoughts and actions of people.*

From Martin Jay, “The antiocularcentric discourse that I hope to examine is precisely that: an often unsystematic, sometimes internally contradictory texture of statements, associations, and metaphors that never fully cohere in a rigorous way.” *But that’s really the point! If it were “rigorous” we wouldn’t have this discourse!*

From Leppert, “That is, images are not mined like ore; they are constructed for the purpose of performing some function within a given sociocultural matrix.” *Purposeful interpretations and intentions – hope, fear, optimism, pessimism – of human emotion.*

*Values change! The times and fashion also change - what was not tolerated before is now tolerated. Why?*

*In the effort to become different we often become the same.*

*Isn't art the meaning of the medium now? In some cases what was 'art' is today meaningless and therefore not 'art' – its meaning lost and irrelevant. Is there a difference between art and artifact? Is art the medium or the subject?*

*Two dimensional Medieval images were to tell the story and not replicate God's work of creation. Three dimensional Renaissance art was to make you a part of the story.*

*What are the images of a culture? Who determines them, the masses or individuals who show them to the masses? And so what is shown?*

*Art as identity, or the visual story of identity, through indoctrination of what is and isn't 'representative' art, whether it be of the Kaiser in Imperial Germany or the Group of Seven in Canada. In discussion around the room it is interesting how each person sees images so differently. Well, I mean, really, their attachment to images. The Group of Seven and to what extent the National Gallery created what Canadian art is, is fascinating. The vehemence with which a member of class clutches on to the idea that the G of 7 are the “epitome” of Canadian art was/is astonishing. “Standing the test of time” was the phrase used. I just had to laugh! Now there's a prime example of the successful indoctrination of the NGC of what constitutes enduring Canadian art, and to an artist no*

*less! I can then only imagine the power of the NGC on the unwitting masses across the country – no wonder so much art in Banff windows looks the same. He is his own best example and he refuses to see his own very real bias over and above what is politically correct to admit to.*



*The three 1895 photos of the Norwegian class are all about relationships and all are true at ‘their’ moment in time: the Classic class photo, the relaxed photo showing relationships and the last waving goodbye to the photographer. What’s there to argue about that?*

*I remain amazed that this seems to some all so new, this critical evaluation of images!! ANYTHING a human does is interpretive from creation to observation to evaluation! There is no such thing as ‘objective’- everything is subjective! Even objective thought is subjective!!!*

*The people in this room are as stereotypical as the images we study, each in their own way, myself included.*

*Am I just so jaded by my studies of politics, economics and history that I trust nothing any longer?*

*To construct, then deconstruct, then reconstruct is to re-invent “old” art into “new” art. The initial construction is studied and deconstructed to determine the original intent, through careful consideration and evaluation of the parts a reconstruction is created to suit the new intent – and so art lives ... for another day at least!*

*Hieroglyphics are pictures of words, as is this  ! and this *

*Schools are reflections of the state. The globalisation of economics and the power of the corporation has outstripped the growth of nationalism and are more powerful and well monied. The response of the nation is to re-brand, or re-image, itself as a competitor to the corporation through loyalty and a sense of belonging to the land, two things a corporation is hard pressed to command.*

*Everything is done for a reason. Esthetic, political, economic ideas and passions are extolled or suppressed. What tremendous power exists in the image to control people. Frightening, very, very frightening.*

*All of us white folks have such a romantic and entrenched view of the noble savage that we even mash this image to imagine what the natives would have done without us. Easter Islanders destroyed their environment, the Maya did the same, do I need more evidence? This whole supposition of what they would have done to their environment without our destructive intervention perpetuates and slightly changes the noble savage notion. It perpetuates the idea that their connection to the land would have remained intact where ours fell apart so long ago and so they have changed into the romanticized Environmental Noble Savage for whom we long and punish ourselves, probably in response to our destruction of their environment and a longing for the not so good, good old days. While I feel sorry for their plight this kind of thing does nothing to help.*

*What the natives all around the world have endured is 'historical interruption' of their cultures, a sort of on hold time machine, which in no way can predict how they would have endured and matured had their culture not been interrupted. Would they have kept it all natural had their population reached 300 million in North America?*

*Would they have developed an industrial revolution of their own? Would their soils be degraded and their forests diminished with or without our help?? But the image at the moment of interruption is a powerful one of pristine lands, fresh flowing rivers and streams, clean air - for both of us - and for entirely different reasons.*

*I have never looked at all my editorial cartoons as a whole before, as a separate and compiled entity. How strange is that? I use them every day, separately and topic specific to enable students to understand cultural identifiers, content and purpose, but never have I had the whole thing together. What a story it tells all by itself!! I will try and see where this takes me! How exciting this is!!! Right under my nose all this time! Go figure.*

And with that I conclude this paper of collected thoughts on visual culture. It has been a very interesting exercise, something that will stick with me and upon which I shall ponder further, perhaps forever. Images and visual culture are important, perhaps even pivotal in our understanding of who and what we are as creatures on this earth. I wish my dog could tell me what he sees.