

Thesis Report

Teaching Visual Culture Through Semiosis: Transforming Postmodern Paradigms in Arts Education

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I have been invited to discuss this dissertation which main purpose is “to demonstrate what happens when students and preservice teachers of art become aware of how they encode and decode visual experience in contemporary society, and how they relate these experiences to artistic practice”. From this starting point the main objective of this research is ‘demonstrative’ in the sense of showing different forms (strategies, processes) of awareness in the context of different contemporary art and visual culture learning practices.

To accomplish this aim the research inquired into how these two groups of learners “interpret visual culture and contemporary art when it is taught through a process of visual semiosis, involving dialogic inquiry, reflective writing, and art making”. From this position this thesis trays to develop a pedagogical method for promoting artistic and visual culture learning based on: (a) A linguistic model (semiosis) transferred into a theory of visual meaning; (b) A discursive approach for the analysis of conversational encounters; (c) A meta-cognitive strategy for reflection and (d) a process of building transferring experiences based on art and visual culture practices.

In my view this pedagogical aim constitutes a relevant contribution to the field of Visual Culture Art Education because goes beyond the dominant stream that emphasizes the analysis and interpretation of visual culture (what viewers say they see), and suggest to examine how visual culture is experienced by different types of ‘visualizers’ (considering the experience of gaze as an experience of subjectivity).

This qualitative research contributes to discuss about the importance (and the necessity) of studying the ways in which individuals make meaning from what they see, experience and relate in order to construct conceptual frames for the analysis of

practices of visual culture and contemporary art. Under this assumption Ms. Tipton has developed an accurate strategy of research based on an elaborated theoretical frame and an imaginative (because put together several methodological approaches) method for collecting and analyzing evidences.

This dissertation offers to the reader the rare virtue of combining a detailed and broad theoretical frame with a naturalistic methodological design for collecting narrative and visual accounts from the subjects participating in the research.

On the other hand, some parts of this research have allowed me to develop a better understanding of the history and the current situation of art education at the Czech Republic. In this sense, the fact of giving the social and historical context of the experiences collected and analyzed during the process of inquiry has contributed to complete the picture offering in this thesis.

Going beyond these positive considerations of the work done by Ms. Titpon, let me make some observations and suggestions on several issues that have called my attention.

In my view, maybe it could be necessary more discussion about the assumption that "the predominant pedagogical approach in arts education today emphasizes domain knowledge (Perkins, 1994) as the definitive structure of meaning" (p.87). During the 80' and 90' Perkins and Gardner sustained that learning only occurred into disciplinary domain knowledge. This statement was based on a restricted view of curriculum knowledge (only funded in the modern organization of disciplines) and on a certain mystification of the rationality of the structure of disciplines. Currently, into Project Zero, researchers such as Boix Mansilla, has gone beyond this initial position and explore the effects of taking into consideration more interdisciplinary ways of knowing. In the field of arts, the borders of the domain are certainly diffuse, and the majority of the experiences describe and analyze in this dissertation are exempla of the fragility of the domain's notion. When is a common place to describe the field of visual culture as a rizomatic and transdisplinar arena, and when Ms. Tipton has used in her arguments current bibliographical references that illustrate this position, it appears as suppressive the use of this conception as 'definitive structure of meaning'.

Also it becomes suppressive her concern about Constructivism. This concept represents in cognitive psychology a denomination for the explanation of how learning takes place. When it is used as a "New Pedagogy" maybe she is transferring a learning theory to a theory of education. It is necessary to remember that what occurs at school level is more than learning curriculum contents. I suggest explore some criticism on Constructivism. For example this made by Joe Kincheloe (1993) on this book "Toward a critical policy of teacher education".

In consider also that it seems necessary in a dissertation guided by the semiosis of visual and writing representations to consider the contributions of Stuart Hall (1997) to rethink the notion of representation. His analysis constituted, in my view, an intersection between a review of communication theory (his encoding-decoding contribution gives a more contextual frame to the limitations of the sign), cultural studies and visual culture. In a dissertation where an exhaustive journey through references on these areas has been shown, Stuart Hall could contribute to complete the cartography organized by Ms. Titpon.

In found the use of Atlas software maybe unnecessary for the purpose of this kind of research. Particularly because the process of thematization could be done from other vies more coherent with the critical and discursive approaches used in the dissertation. As Ely et al, (1991: 150) have written "*A theme can be defined as a statement of meaning that (1) runs through all or most of the pertinent data, or (2) one in the minority that carries heavy emotional or factual input*". The numbers of times a word is referred in a narrative text could be not the best way to localize a theme. Specially if we consider, as Van Manen (1990: 87) does, *that a theme is "the form of capturing the phenomenon that one is trying to understand; a theme describes an aspect of the structure of lived experienced"*. The mentioned Van Manen suggests a series of questions to capture the theme in a narrative research (as I supposed this research has tried to be):

1. *What sententious phrase may capture the fundamental meaning or main significance of the text as a whole?*
2. *What statement(s) or phrase(s) seem particularly essential or revealing about the phenomenon or experience being described?*

3. *What does this sentence or sentence cluster reveal about the phenomenon or experience being described?* (1990: 93).

In this methodological trajectory I would suggest also to take the 'grounded theory' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Blumer, 1969; Denzin, 1970) as a reference to understand how social life reflected in personal accounts, is regulated by symbols whose meanings were constituted in social interactions (Richarson, 1999:71). This methodology suggests that theoretical concepts and hypotheses are 'discovered' in and refined against the participants' accounts. Its central idea is "that theoretical understanding emerges from an iterative process based on a constant sampling, comparison, and analysis of transcribed excerpts from interviews or other discursive material. Researchers are encouraged to transcend their preconceptions by seeking out counterexamples and validating their interpretations through peer debriefing. (Richarson, 1999:70).

In my view taking into account these considerations could allow to develop theoretical interpretations of the reflexive accounts emerged in the pedagogical situations presented through the dissertation, and could also give the opportunity for constructing more elaborated conclusive remarks that discuss all the research process under the umbrella of the three questions that have guided the research process.

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