

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

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Teresa Tipton's dissertation is an example of a deep and textured scholarly work where contemporary theories and practices are contextualized and mobilized through pedagogy and the politics of everyday life. Throughout the document, Ms. Tipton concerns herself with issues of justice and social change in relation to ways discursive and symbolic power shapes thinking and behavior, through both presence and absence in various forms of visual culture. The breadth and depth of this dissertation indicates a high level of productivity coupled with an equally high standard of scholarship. Most impressive is Ms. Tipton's ability to translate so many relevant theories into a cohesive framework, and interpret how that framework is informed by theories. With that said, I will posit three areas for further discussion and problematizing. The first deals with cognitive models of epistemology. The second area is her critique of visual culture. And, the third area raises questions about semiotics and semiosis.

1) Throughout the dissertation, Tipton discusses and relies upon models of cognition, cognitive structures, and relationships between "knowing and not knowing." Tipton discusses the notion of meta-cognition as a constellation of thought where knowledge and meaning is constructed. Tipton rightly argues that it is a form of self-deception to "believe" that we, as human subjects, can claim to know everything. While Tipton rejects forms of cognitive theories that exacerbate a scientific hegemony, problematizes the privileging of rational inquiry, and critiques Cartesian and Newtonian thinking, she nonetheless risks reproducing a privileging of cognition that relies on a unified subject and a conscious recognition of knowledge and knowing, albeit embodied, situated, and contextual.

Tipton's call for "other kinds of knowingness" and her discussion of Bohm's mental conditioning built on error begins to enter into the realm of the inaccessible epistemology—the absence of knowing. This is an area that I believe Tipton's research would benefit if further developed. Tipton may want to consider going beyond Bohm's work by exploring the very impossibility of a knowing agency at the level of the conscious subject. In other words, what would Tipton's critique of knowledge and analysis of the participant's responses look like through the framework of, and insistence on, a non-subjectified, unconscious knowledge which may constitute the very limits of knowledge itself—instead of thinking about thinking, what about thinking about what we refuse to think about? How might the discourse of psychoanalytic theory help shift Tipton's focus on knowing oneself to a non-recognition of one's own subjectivity—where knowledge appears a kind of foreign substance? Perhaps Tipton may focus more on epistemological failure than insight, discuss knowledge as an affect of the divided subject, and explore the rift between the embodied participant and their reliance on the agency of the signifier.

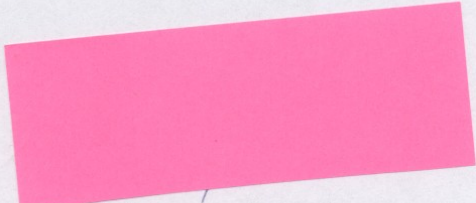
2) Tipton's critique of visual culture may, in some cases, be too reductive. While Tipton embraces visual culture as a major framework for her research she nonetheless claims that visual culture may be creating a new ideology, is mostly unconcerned with contemporary art, and is too disconnected from the practices of classroom. While engaging in auto-critique is necessary and appropriate, some of her claims are problematic. First, if, in fact, advocates of visual culture claim or guarantee that society will be reconstructed thorough the study of images, then, I think, Tipton's first claim would be valid. However, it is not at all apparent to me that advocates for visual culture make this claim. On the contrary, most seem to problematize the very notion of any single or dominant approach, with any emancipatory guarantees. Most advocates embrace complementary and sometimes contradictory approaches, developing questions determined by the circumstances in everyday life and reform and revise their pedagogy based upon the questions asked while remaining committed to making sure the



questions depend on their context. In addition, I believe that visual culture is a theoretical project and a critical engagement with the world that intersects with and relies upon contemporary art.

This raises a second issue of privileging forms of contemporary art over other forms of visual culture. Tipton seems to imply that contemporary art has the power to guarantee provocation, creativity, and evoke deviation and disruption. While her examples certainly attest to these qualities, there may be just as much contemporary art does little if any of these things. The danger here, as I see it, is Tipton's essentializing of artistic practices over other forms of cultural production. Lastly related to this area, Tipton seems to both embrace the theoretical possibilities of visual culture while overdetermining the "practical" aspect of doing visual culture. In other words, there may be fundamental theoretical and anti-theoretical injunctions present in the dissertation, functioning at the same time. For example, Tipton states or implies many times that "study per se cannot make connections"—there is a gap between theory and practice and a need to transfer theory to classroom practice. In one sense, this is referred to as "pretending to establish connections." This may be the case where the need for "practical engagement" may be exerting its pressure on visual culture unnecessarily. Is this pressure to practice (or praxis) allowing enough room for the act of "studying" (theorizing) as a space to continuously re-conceive and re-enact a democratic ethos, not necessarily tied to any particular engagement in the classroom or elsewhere, beyond an engagement with the text? Is it implied that studying should propose solutions or is it the case that theorizing may help reformulate problems in themselves? Is the gap between theory and praxis irreducible and, if so, is that necessarily a negative determinant? What relationships can be made between the gap between theory and practice as described by Tipton and our own, individual and constitutive, divisions between our knowledge and our desires?

- 3) Lastly, how might Tipton's notion of semiosis and critique of traditional (and even radical) forms of semiotics be enhanced by the theory that all signs/signifiers/acts both give and hide at the same time? Is Tipton's framework of semiosis, built in part on Bohm's work, complementary to theories of the subject only being a subject's in the world through signifiers yet irreducible to signifying systems? How might the signs and signifiers active in semiosis be/act indifferent to a conscious subjects will and intentions? Where is the place of, and the role for the signifying excess—the excess of meaning and intention—in semiosis?



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