

SEVEN PRINCIPLES for Visual

The formal elements and principles of art are well known to art educators. Sometimes there are said to be seven of each (Gude, 2004). They were devised as pedagogic tools at the beginning of the 20th century and were used to help understand the modernist, abstract, and non-representational painting of that time. They continue to inform art education, often being used to organize K-12 curriculum. More recently, Gude (2004) has offered reconceptualized principles specifically designed to help consider today's postmodern fine art that often involves computers, collages, and installations. For example, she suggests hybridization, layering, and appropriation.

In contrast to Gude's suggestions, I propose seven principles for examining various forms of imagery, whether they are drawn from fine art or popular culture, [whether they are] vernacular or indigenous, past or present. These principles are: power, ideology, representation, seduction, gaze, intertextuality, and multimodality. They are not offered as fundamental truths, as the modernist elements and principles usually were, but sources from which to create curriculum commensurate with the extent and complexity of today's visually mediated world.

These principles derived from the literature of visual culture (e.g., Barnard, 1998; Dikovitskaya, 2006; Howells, 2003; Mirzoeff, 2002, 2009; Rampley, 2005; Rose, 2006; Sturken & Cartwright, 2009; Walker & Chaplin, 1997) offer contemporary lenses to help understand a world in which imagery has come to characterize everyday life in a historically unprecedented way. I have found these principles to be the most useful in my own teaching. They are proposed as a way of thinking about art objects, experiences, and subsequently curriculum that acknowledge the history of imagery and the visual culture in which we now live.

POWER

Power is the key principle because most of the other principles intersect with issues of power. Who exercises power through imagery? What kind of power? How, when, and why is it exercised? Power is central to a consideration of imagery because all images involve an assertion of ideas, values, and beliefs that serve the interests of those for whom they are made—political, social, and economic—and audiences, in their turn, exercise the power of interpretation.

Because all complex societies are hierarchically ordered, where different groups have different degrees of power, images constitute different agendas. All images offer arguments about what the world is like, [what it] should be, or should not be. Because the corporations who produce most of the cultural material in our society¹ operate within and benefit from social stratification, mainstream forms of cultural production typically carry ideologies consistent with the interests of those in power. Ruling authorities assert the necessity of social order through hierarchy as well as the common sense of concurring. My students, for example, compare as strategies of influence the size of monumental statues from ancient times to the endless repetitions of TV dramas produced by global media corporations.

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Culture Education

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On the other hand, those who struggle to challenge existing hierarchies produce images that are alternative to or even oppositional of widely held ideologies. Today many of the most contentious issues in our society, such as class, race, gender, and sexual orientation, are fought over in terms of their visual representation.

Power is equally exercised when viewers interpret images. While images are often wrongly thought to be powerful in themselves, as if looking at a television program automatically influences thought and behavior, viewers are not passive receptacles, but active discriminators. The producer's preferred meaning of an image—buy this, think like this, for example—is as easily rejected as accepted by viewers. Most commonly, viewers negotiate meaning, accepting some messages, rejecting others, and are ambiguous or undecided about still others. Viewing is usually a to-and-fro negotiating process where viewers employ interpretation.

In these various ways power is exercised as a struggle to control and oppose, influence and resist. This is evident as soon as I have my students discuss images, where even the paintings of the French Impressionists, who were ostensibly non-political, cannot be understood without reference to the encroachment of industrialization during the 19th century. Political and product advertising provides my students with very direct examples; they both consider what image-makers may have intended and reflect upon their own interpretations.

IDEOLOGY

Images are sites of ideological struggle. Ideology refers to ideas, ideals, beliefs, and values. It is a characteristic way of thinking, a style of thought, an interpretive scheme employed by people to make the world intelligible to themselves (Decker, 2004). Visual culture is saturated with ideologies that reveal the hopes, fears, expectations, certainties, uncertainties, and ambiguities of our lives. By means of images we engage with widely shared social assumptions about the way of the world: Who are we? What is good versus bad? How should we act and avoid acting? Images offer any number of answers to each of these questions, as well as to many others. Images offer ideologies that can be racist, sexist, xenophobic, ageist, or marginalize people with physical disabilities, but images also offer support for families, inspire ideals, and work to conserve the environment. Ideologies can be conservative, reactionary, and progressive. Images both condemn war and violence and extol their virtues. The merits of feudalism, socialism, totalitarianism, and liberal democracy have each been offered through images. Today, as part of a consumer culture, the view promoted by advertising is simply put: Seek the good life through a goods life.

I have my students research the unpinning values of images from medieval Europe, Communist China, and current political and advertising campaigns in terms of several binaries: conservatism versus progressivism, collectivism versus individualism, and family versus the state. The exercise demonstrates the social and historically specific nature of ideologies, and leads students to reflect upon their own previously unexamined assumptions.

Ideologies work in part because they are offered as truisms, as in the nature of things, as well as being repeated over and over in numerous ways. However, no matter how self-evident an ideology may appear, or how pervasive it is spread, since ideologies vary and are often contradictory, it is evident that each represents a viewpoint rather than an incontestable truth. All ideologies are historically and culturally specific, which is immediately apparent on considering what images have offered as truth in other historical periods and what they offer today in cultures other than our own. Each is contestable.

REPRESENTATION

Representation is closely aligned with ideology because it refers to how ideology is presented in visual form. It refers to much more than a mere likeness. It involves what images represent, how they represent, and what they fail to represent. What is privileged and what is marginalized? And what rhetorical devices are used to influence our understanding of what is represented?

Many devices are used to situate the viewer in relation to the subjects of representation, including angles-of-view and framing. My students take photographs comparing different angles and frames, discovering that even slight differences change a viewer's relationship to the subject and thus the range of available meanings. In taking photographs for an advertisement they discover the importance of body language, including facial expression, body posture, gestures, body contact, and the gaze of figures. With still photography, lens type is important. With moving images, representational elements also include continuity; camera

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movements such as panning, tracking, and tilting; and the use of hand-held or fixed camera. Again, each of these elements represents a choice. To make this clear in class I have my students repeatedly watch a short clip from a movie, each time examining a different choice.

The people represented in pictures are also subject to stereotyping: for example, of women, men, ethnicities, and sexual orientation. I have my students collect representations from current television programs, movies, and magazines. They find that Hispanics and African Americans are often stereotyped as criminals and uneducated; Asians as smart, short, nerds, and as good with technology; Native Americans as serious and primitive; and Arabs as belly dancers, billionaires, and terrorists. Despite the inroads of feminism, students find that men are commonly represented as strong, aggressive, and crude, while women are represented as weak, overly emotional, and dependent upon men. Students find that male homosexuals are stereotyped as well-dressed, feminine, and flamboyant, while lesbians are stereotyped as masculine and man-hating. They find their examination of Disney animated cartoons especially shocking because they have grown up watching them. To the students' dismay, they find that Disney cartoons have rightly been attacked for their sexism, racism, and xenophobia, as well as representing childhood as a mythic time of purity and innocence (Sun & Picker, 2001).

Each of these stereotypes draws upon ideological constructions. While serving a need to gain immediate recognition, each marginalizes because each denies complexity.

A lack of representation is equally problematic. Students should look not only for what is represented and how, but what is marginalized or left out altogether. My students consider the fact that Disney's animated film *Tarzan* represents Africa without Africans. What is unrepresented is sometimes the most significant factor, the elephant in the room.

SEDUCTION

If ideologies work because they are ground in through repetition, they are equally effective because they come wrapped in seductive forms. Images are seductive in a variety of ways. Sometimes they seduce through their subject matter, because of *what* they represent. When images offer arguments that reflect back our own views, our own ideological positions, they offer the pleasure of confirmation. If we come to images with stereotypes in mind, to see them represented is to experience the pleasure of feeling justified in our views. Equally, images offer the fulfillment of deep-seated, even unconscious, desires, including socially taboo pleasures (Zizek, 1989). I ask my students why they think criminals in movies and on TV so often die terrible deaths rather than going to jail?

Images are also seductive because they are sensory. Many images are beautiful or sublime—two traditional aesthetic qualities—but many other sensory qualities are celebrated today. Some people are drawn in by the grotesque, by Goth, by kitsch, or by camp (Langman, 2008). Perhaps some people have always been drawn to the sentimental and the cute. Harris (2000) argues that today's consumer aesthetics include the cool, the quaint, and the romantic. Today, some people regard the ugly as beautiful, and some clearly are drawn to violence, to the visceral that can simultaneously repulse and fascinate. The sensory lures are manifold, and I have my students consider why they are drawn to particular images and not others. Is it the sensory qualities or the ideas expressed? Students report that sometimes they are conflicted over enjoying the sensory qualities of a cultural form and objecting to its ideology.

Sensory lures are important because they act to wrap ideologies in pleasurable forms that make rejecting ideologies more difficult. Images evoke emotional responses that are registered bodily. When ideologies are offered in forms that appeal to the body, they are the more likely to gain acceptance—a truism known to the ancients as much as to contemporary global corporations.

GAZE

While the foregoing principles primarily concern the images we look at, the gaze concerns how we look at images and the circumstances under which we look. It refers to our predisposition to see things in certain ways, what we bring to images, and the relationships we form with them.

In art museums we are able to take our time and gaze meditatively. However, outside the museum, as part of a frantic everyday life that is saturated by imagery, we look in numerous other ways. Whether we are at a theme park, playing a video game, driving, at an airport, or on vacation, often we are forced more to glance than gaze. We also look differently depending upon our gender, ethnicity, nationality, class, age, and so on. Because of this, our relationship to images can be predetermined as sexist, ageist, or racist, but also as sympathetic, respectful, and loving.

Berger (1972) long ago considered a *male gaze* in which Western paintings and advertisements alike represent men looking at women while women watch themselves being looked at. He suggested that the men watching *in* the image are surrogates for the presumed male spectators of the image. In the cinema the camera teaches us how to look by cutting away to reaction shots, which also frequently work in gendered ways (Mulvey, 1989). Shots of women are dispersed with shots of men looking at women or women looking at men in such a way that, using a *heterosexual gaze*, the opposite gender is objectified or viewed entirely in terms of their form and allure. They are viewed as possessions and thus disempowered. A *queer gaze* can be equally disempowering of the same gender.

In class my students consider gazes that can be *voyeuristic*, where we take pleasure in watching someone unaware of us, and the fact that they can also be *sadistic* where pleasure is taken in watching harm being done. Both gazes place the viewer in a relationship of power over the viewed. As such, the idea of the gaze focuses upon the viewer and their relationship with what they see. We are invited by images to see in a particular way, but we also come to them with already existing relationships to what we see.

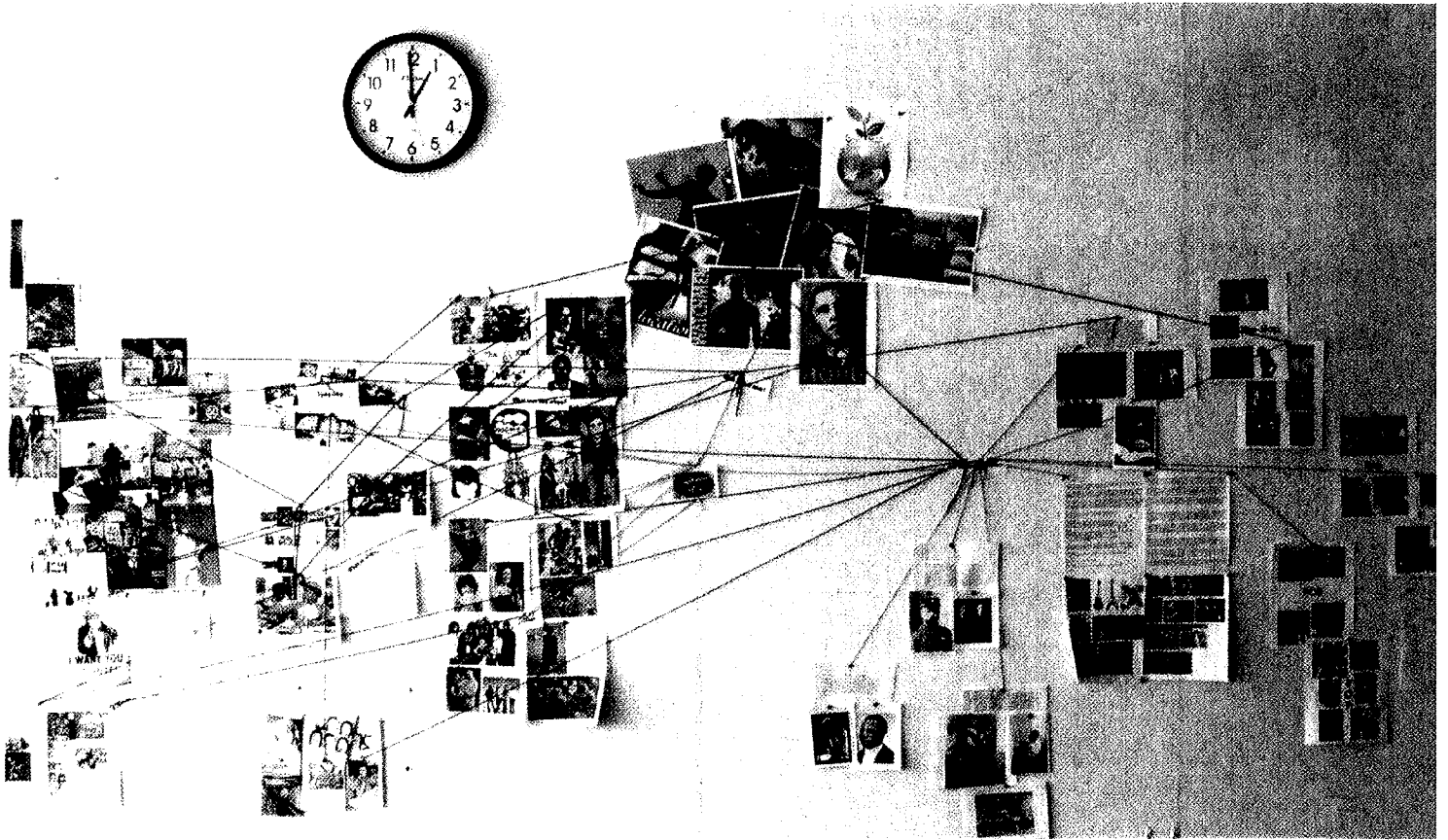


Figure 1. Low-technology intertext created with paper, pushpins, and colored yarn on a large pin board originating with the TV program *American Idol* [detail].

This means that considering the gaze is a way in which to understand ourselves as individuals and as a society. Are our own gazes sexist, racist, and so on? The gaze offers a significantly different orientation to more common approaches to fine art, which tend to focus on artists, and on describing, interpreting, and evaluating their work without necessarily considering ourselves as viewers. Sometimes considering the gaze means reflecting on whether the very act of our looking implicates us in a violation of the subject of our gaze. The gaze throws a spotlight on us as viewers and on our context. While often initially unnerved by reflecting upon their viewing positions, my students generally find it a breakthrough way to better understand themselves. For example, I show a photograph of an obese woman in a wheelchair. Some students say that they view sympathetically while others admit they employ a *policing gaze* in which they blame her for her condition. In looking at a picture of dark-skinned,

middle-aged men wearing turbans, some students admit to feeling unnerved, which, on consideration, they confess to involving an element of racism. In turn, this leads to considering how such predispositions have been created.

INTERTEXTUALITY

All images relate to other cultural texts such as books, poems, music, and, of course, other images (Wilson, 2003). Images draw from other sources, copy them, parody them, and, in turn influence other cultural texts. Today, students are familiar with this basic idea through the Internet. With computers, intertextuality is known as hypertext, where pressing on blue words, and often on pictures, immediately takes the user to a related screen.

The Internet has a rhizomatic structure, which is based on a vast network of connections. Grass is another example; so is the human brain. Images-makers make connections, but so too do viewers. My

students make all kinds of associations, and students are evaluated not only on the basis of the legitimacy of their connections, but the potential of their connections for further exploration. Sometimes we use the computer to create a hypertext. One recent example began with a cartoon-style image called *Where's Bin Laden*, itself referencing the *Where's Waldo* pictures. Students linked this image to historical comedic strategies in movies, animated cartoons, and paintings, as well as historical and contemporary images of children. Additionally, they linked the picture to images of the current conflict with Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism, as well as the rich tradition of Islamic art. Each image was hyperlinked to other images, definitions, discussion of the issues, and personal anecdotes.

Figure 1 is a detail of a low-technology intertext created with paper, pushpins, and colored yarn on a large pin board. The class began with the TV program *American Idol* and connected it to a

range of issues—including celebrity culture, abnormality and democracy—that we later explored by making movies about such issues.

With intertexts, images are connected irrespective of historical categories like high and low, past and present, and, importantly, they connect student interest and knowledge with teacher requirements in a way that is limited only by time and imagination. Any one of the principles can be explored further, or, alternatively any issues raised by an image can be explored using one or more of the principles. Intertexts provide opportunities to explore power, ideology, representation, and the gaze. They also involve multimodality.

MULTIMODALITY

Multimodality refers to the fact that there are no purely visual images; images never appear without words, music, or other sounds. Even in art galleries images appear with labels, and their assumed significance is deeply grounded in art history texts and columns of written critique. The multimodal nature of imagery is even more evident when

considering the forms in which imagery mostly occurs today, on television, at the movies, in print, and on computer screens. Words, music, and sound effects anchor the meaning of images.

I have students consider a picture of happy children with bright and cheerful music. The music complements the image. But then they consider the same image with music that evokes threat, and immediately a narrative is evoked in which something is about to happen to the children. The image has not changed, but its meaning has changed because it is now anchored differently. We turn off the sound on the television to find how important the spoken word is to understand the images. We look through magazines in foreign languages to find how critical the written word is to read the images. Then the students make short movies that rely upon links between pictures, sound effects, music, and speech. The multimodal nature of imagery is yet another reason for considering images in terms of their context.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

While the early 20th-century elements and principles remain important as one way to consider the formal qualities of images, they are hopelessly inadequate as a means to organize a curriculum commensurate with the world in which we now live. We need principles for contemporary curriculum. Those offered here are intended only as starting points. Other organizing principles, drawn from the literature of Visual Culture Studies referenced earlier, might include, in alphabetical order: agency, audience, discourse, globalization, high and low culture, identity, myth, rhetoric, scopoc regime, semiotics, and visuality. Wherever we start, it is past time that we address imagery—past and present, fine and popular—using contemporary lenses that apply to the extraordinary plethora of images that now form a large part of our daily lives.

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ENDNOTE

¹ In the United States this refers to five media conglomerates, Disney (the largest) News Corporation, Viacom, Times Warner, and Sony, who among them produce approximately 90% of all television content, movies, and magazines (Sturken & Cartwright, 2009).



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