



Visual culture – an area of educational research

Malgorzata Bielecka m.bielecka@interia.pl
Jan Kochanowski University in Kielce, Poland

Reference

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Abstract

Contemporary culture is defined as "visual" due to the visual form of the message it conveys to a recipient. Its message can be carried out in various ways: literally, using narrative elements of composition derived directly from material reality or through a mental shortcut contained in an aptly chosen sign or a symbol. The triumph of an image over a word means that, cooled in the admiration for the Gutenberg's invention, we go back to the beginning, to the primary form of recording human discourse with what surrounds them. Today's education, more than ever, requires profound changes, not even when it comes to goals, but when it comes to strategies of achieving them. It demands from us to become open for the area which has traditionally been downplayed in the school practice, the area of art and its reception.

While the first part of the article is an attempt to present, in general, the relationship between visual culture and contemporary education, the second part was restricted to a narrow context – the study of the impact of selected phenomena of culture on shaping aesthetic attitudes of children. The study was carried out within the "Ugly City / Nice City" project done by pupils from selected schools in Kielce, as well as groups of students of Jan Kochanowski University in Kielce.

Keywords

visual culture, advertisement, public space, art-educational projects, education.

Introduction

Since pre-historic drawings on rocks and art of Australian aborigines to images recorded by electron microscope visualisation has been the way to express, understand and transfer knowledge. However, in this enormously vast history there were periods when transfer of knowledge was monopolised by Logos. The language, enabling precise description of visual reality, was struggling against ambiguity of abstract notions, but only the skill of writing and reading gave possibilities to make the most of its cognitive functions and communicative potential. For many centuries this competence was a privilege of narrow social groups; for the illiterate a picture was the source of knowledge. A good example is *Biblia pauperum* (The Poor Bible). Even assuming that the adjective "poor" refers rather to intellectual and spiritual poverty, and the notion *Biblia pauperum* itself referred to the vast spectrum of Medieval imagery, or even to the whole Medieval art it is obvious that "reading" a picture, as opposite to a text, is not conditioned by knowledge or special skills of a reader. Such thinking somehow belittles the scientific authority of an image and makes its cognitive abilities to be treated "good-naturedly", not seriously. The invention of print, automation of writing, made the process of rejecting oral and visual culture faster.

The contemporary triumph of the image (also connected with an invention, this time a camera) means that we are less fascinated with Gutenberg's achievement, and coming back to the beginning, to the primordial forms of recording human discourse with the surrounding world



and with another human – the discourse underpinned by the material collected with the help of our senses, which can be read thanks to the instruments of sensory cognition. A logocentric approach to culture is being replaced by artistic imagery (supported by research on the phenomenon of sight), which resulted in creating the term “visual culture” in the end of the 20th century.

The hegemony of visual culture

W.J.T. Mitchell, a theoretician of media and visual culture, maintains that we are witnessing the shift of accent from the analytic linguistic philosophy to the visual pictorial trend and defines this process as “the pictorial turn” (Mitchell, W.J.T., 2005: 32-33). He emphasizes that an image, a picture, has now the status of a central topic in the liberal arts, just like a language was in the past. The over-representation of picture is proved also by the researches on various media: newspapers, comic strips, magazines, websites – they show the dominance of pictorial elements over traditional text. Gunther Kress, the author of “Literacy in the New Media Age”, indicates that not only mass media change their character. Changes can also be seen in the form of documents and publications of various kinds, they appear in modern stylistic, typographic arrangements, type faces, advertisements filling urban space (Kress, (2007: 65). The apotheosis of image is connected with considering sight the basic source of information. H. Belting wrote that an image, a picture “(...) is something more than just a product of perceiving. It is a result of both personal and collective symbolisation. Everything that is perceived outside or with an “inner eye” can be explained as a picture, or can be transformed into a picture” (Belting, 2001:11-12). Visual culture attributes to a picture various meanings, makes us comprehend it in its different “incarnations”: as a mental product, stored in our memory, or media product (of photography, television, Internet, advertisement, etc.). Thanks to the technical progress people nowadays have at their disposal means of unbelievable possibilities. People can use them individually and for various reasons and aims. The potential of visual media has been used perfectly in advertising, according to the well-known rule: “it doesn't matter what is advertised – it does matter that the picture causes positive emotions”. All these processes are mirrored in Polish cities. One can observe that the urban space has been slowly turning into a visual refuse dump. This phenomenon reflects the low level of visual culture consciousness and of general aesthetic sensibility. Scientists warn also, that the flood of images can cause indifference, frustration being the result of too many visual stimuli and also aggression and powerlessness due to the feeling of being mentally lost, but it can also force us to perceive the reality in a new way, without any concentration.

These and other threats generated by the increasing power of images are a serious challenge for education, especially children, who are more vulnerable, prone to “persuasion” of images. Research referring to the visual culture don't have a long tradition in Poland. They are carried by the main academic centres in the areas related to anthropology of image, visual alphabetisation or visualisation of data. Despite the promising dynamics, the impact of actual results on education seems rather premature. Art academies are interesting phenomena in this area, but it must be added that here the experiments with images have more intuitive character and are filled with the element of individual quest.

The remarks presented above are a sketchy background for the main course of this reflection dealing with the art-and-education projects presented below.

Projects

Basing on the premises of environmental psychology referring to the relation between human beings and the environment, and on the principle of feedback which regulates this relation, it has been assumed, that shaping the environment we shape ourselves. The space we live in is our “business card”. We create it, but we are also, to some extent, its products. This space, certainly, can be understood in various ways (apartment, flat, natural environment, etc.), but in this very case urban space is the point, because due to abundant contexts it seems the most interesting. A city, together with different forms of existence, is inscribed within culture. The most important cultural tendencies are reflected in urban space, which both is culturally transformed and transforms culture, right in front of our eyes. The projects were preceded with initial interviews to find out the opinion about the aesthetics of Polish cities. When asked a question “What spoils urban space?” the overwhelming majority indicated outdoor



advertisements. The districts of concrete blocks of flats, being the heritage of the former socialistic regime, ranked second.

An aesthetic experience of a place is private, personal and unique for everybody. That is why many research on perception of place have a phenomenological character. It's hard to make an appraisal, especially when it is to deal with an aesthetic value. The significance of a place appears in the interaction between our experiences, physical surrounding, actions in space, and individual feeling of beauty. The interpretation and appraisal of the environment is not only the sum of information reaching us. It is the processing of data received through various channels, both the most important, selected ones, and those from the background.

“Ugly city / Nice city” project

The project was done in Kielce, in 2011/2012.

Participants: pupils of the public primary school number 15 in Kielce and of Mikołaj Rej secondary school in Kielce. Altogether 48 pupils took part in the project; they were working in 4-person groups (there were six groups in each school)

Main goals:

- Turn attention to the aesthetics of the space surrounding us; learn to evaluate;
- Possibility to participate in the “repairing program”; learn to work collectively;
- Learn to reflect on perceived media messages.

Description: Each team got an expert function of one of six problems-categories (colour, form, originality, communicativeness, exposition, composition). The chosen group leaders were to coordinate the work.

The workshops were basing on the supplied materials: each group received the same set of 24 photos of outdoor advertisements. According to the attributed competences the groups made a ranking of advertisements; this list was a basis for choosing super-advertisements and anti-advertisements. The next task, “taming the space”, was performed individually. Every participant made a work using elements of the advertisements as “citations”. The point was to give individual contents to the objective signs, and to use them creating ones own language and poetics. Another task, “Metamorphoses”, dealt with aesthetising the neglected parts of the city. They worked on real photos printed on A3 pages with the aim to make them more appealing – the propositions of aesthetisation were given within attributed competences. The “Metamorphoses” was performed also in real space of school staircase (fig. 1, 2).

Figure 1 and 2. Both photos present the final results of the “Metamorphosis” task (in frame of “Ugly city / Nice city”). The Pupils -the participants of the project- decorated the bleak space of their school. On the left: Wall hanging relief made with polymer clay. On the right: The school's staircase painted with acrylics. Source: Photos by Marek Pokutycki (2011)



“The Panorama” project

The project was done within the “Transfer” Summer Academy in Scheersberg in Germany (2011).

Participants: students of Jan Kochanowski University in Kielce, of University of Bozen in South Tyrol in Italy, and of Bielefeld University in Germany; altogether 12 students.



Main goals:

- Turn attention to the differences of aesthetics of the space, and to the reasons of these differences; learn to evaluate
- Learn “to read” the elements which form the visual space of the city
- Possibility to participate in the “repairing program”; learning to work collectively

Description: Each of twelve participants got an enlarged part of panorama photo of Kielce. Basing on it he or she had to make a drawing which depicted the original, finally to be a part of a joint large-format work. The visualised parts had to be at least recognisable. At the last stage the drawings were to be arranged together and presented as one monumental composition (60 cm x 420 cm). The “Panorama” project done within the International Academy of Art referred directly to its slogan. The capacious notion of “transfer”, hence so interesting for interpretations, was taken in its basic meaning – as a flow of information. The content was “transferred” by the panorama of Kielce – a picture taken in the 1970s. The picture showed the typical policy of the socialistic country: grey concrete blocks of flats, cuboids put either horizontally or vertically. There were rows and columns of identical windows and balconies on their fronts and backs. In spite of robust, careless and primitive way of building, there was logic and order in those simple compositions of vertical and horizontal elements. All participants chose, out of many possible techniques, just a plain pencil explaining it was the most convenient to the atmosphere of those dwelling districts (fig. 3,4).

Figure 3 and 4. Both photos relate to the “Panorama” project (which was in frame of the international art academy “Transfer”, Scheersberg, Germany, (November, 2011)). On the left: One of the participants drawing a piece of panorama of city Kielce. On the right: Opening in Scheersberg; panorama photos of Kielce in the upper row, participants' drawings in the lower row (November, 2011). Source: Photos by Artur Ptak



Conclusions

Below are the main conclusions from the “Ugly city / Nice city” and “The Panorama” pilot projects:

- Work of expert teams proved the basic knowledge of the problems-categories within the scope of attributed competences, as well as the skills to use them in practice („Ugly city / Nice city”).
- The pupil judged the city space positively; they perceived the omnipresence of advertisements as a phenomenon immanent for the aesthetics of contemporary cities, an expression of their energy. The propositions they presented within the project aiming to aestheticize urban space focused on colours and “decorating the city with flowers” (“Colours of the city – the city of colours” and “Cities – gardens”). Colours were the most often used improvement measure.
- The drawing interpretation of the city (“The Panorama”) turned students’ attention to the strict dependence of architecture (art) on politics. The analysis of the form enabled to decode aesthetically socio-realistic districts of blocks of flats, and inspired some references to the look of contemporary dwelling buildings.
- The students found the degradation of public space of Polish cities is, to large extent, the heritage of the former political regime, socialistic Poland, but partially it is also the product of economical freedom. The participants’ reflections proved a surprising ability of empathy.



“The Panorama” was a lesson of history for everybody, run by themselves when “reading” architecture.

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