The Postman Always Rings Thrice: Visual Culture, Disney and Technology in Society

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Abstract: What do a small group of art educators who reached prominence in the 1960s, Disney and a neo-luddite have in common? On the surface they seem disconnected and dispassionate of each other. Reasons why they should have some form of interaction are that they each have a link to popular visual culture. And these links, although contestable, are the basis for an argument for the inclusion of popular visual culture and new technologies in art education. It becomes clear that the ideas brought forth by Tavin (2005) gain further credence in the context of examinations like those of Sun and Picker's (2001) Mickey Mouse Monopoly, and the implications and effects on society via technology and mass media of these types of influences are further contextualized and criticized by Postman's (1998) Technology and Society conference speech. Their ideas, although not entirely complementary, all point towards the importance of visual culture and influence of media and technology on education; supplicating a place in curricula at all levels.

Keywords: visual culture, Disney, art education, media education, Postman, Tavin

Introduction

Although popular visual culture is not the sole influence in ones life the sheer amount of time we spend embedded in various media devices, entranced and engaged in it warrants the careful and critical study of visual culture and the technologies that distribute it. Should visual culture and new media-technologies be a prominent area of study in education? It is argued here, briefly, that visual culture and media should be an integral part of our education and one that plays a crucial role in the development of discerning, critically aware future generations. In particular this vital role should be elaborated within the field of art education. The speed and advancement of technology makes the inclusion of this role all the more central and urgently in need of implementation. The integration of visual culture should be applied, to varying degrees, to curricula at all levels of education; starting with children and culminating in high school and post-secondary education. Popular visual culture is not limited to commercial or artistic endeavours it encompasses each and every element of the signs and symbols of our visual world, 'it is not just a part of your everyday life, it is your everyday life' (Mizroeff, 2009, p3) and according to Prosser (2007) it can even be used as a tool to analyze the very architecture that house our education.

Tavin's (2005) *Critical Antecedents of Visual Culture in Art Education* was chosen because it revisits the first instances of deliberation over visual culture's inclusion in schools. It is a debate that began in the 1960s and has seen resurgence in the past decade due to the ever increasing and widening reach of visual culture via a ubiquitous assortment of media technologies. Tavin's article situates the debate within an historical context and outlines the key proponents for visual culture's study and suggests reasons for its exclusion until this point in time.

The other key texts analyzed here, were chosen precisely because they are not specific to the realm of education but exemplify reasons both for and against a focus on technology and visual culture in education, although neither author is expressly an advocate for art education. Mickey Mouse Monopoly (2001) provides us with a powerful and insightful visual account of one of the leading global media giants, Disney. They cite that Disney has a wide spread appeal and authority over young and mature minds alike; availing them to not only consume their products but also buy into the manufactured sociologies and fractured racial and historical portrayals which are presented as near truths. Neil Postman, an adamant critic of visual media and technologies as well as popular culture in general, in one of his later pubic addresses (1998) once again attempts to articulate the urgency with which we need to deal with these deleterious new technologies. However despite his overly negative portrayal of media in society, he actually manages to

strengthen rather than deteriorate the calls for inclusion of media education in our schools. On the whole this paper should not be viewed as a compressive look at the debate on visual culture or technologies' inclusion in education but a pithy glance at some of the best reasons for encouraging further debate.

Critical Antecedents of Visual Culture in Art Education (2005) by Kevin M. Tavin

To begin Tavin makes a point of differentiating between the terms popular culture and visual culture. The former being almost everything we encounter in our daily lives; food, media, entertainment, clothes etc. and the latter being a field of study which includes the former specifically in how popular culture is represented visually in images and objects. In many instances, it seems, the elements and pervasiveness of pop culture reinforce the case for their study under the guise of visual culture in art education. Hereon in this paper deals mostly with the concept of popular visual culture, this is to say those most prevalent concepts and ideas, represented visually, that have mass appeal and are current and constantly changing in society.

In this text Tavin (2005) makes a strong case for a more careful focus on visual culture and the importance of its study in art education. His claims are supported with the works of other key proponents of art education and their pleas and arguments over the past four decades for a more socially inclusive art education which explores visual culture. Tavin (2005) states that Vincent Lanier, June King McFee, Laura Chapman, and Brent and Marjory Wilson were (are) rebels and their works confronted the status quo regarding art, pedagogy and the exclusion of popular culture in schools. This led to the shaking of education out of its comfortable and traditional slumber of ignorance, opening and keeping open the discourse on visual culture. "Individually, their work focused on the realm of the everyday in part as a response to the demands of the world outside the classroom. Collectively, their work helped posit popular cultural images as legitimate objects of study in art education" (Tavin, 2005, p.16).

Tavin states that the dialogue surrounding visual culture and art education is a sort of 'palimpsestic discourse' one that both 'erases and retains' ideas from the past almost layering the new over the old; the older ideas having a tendency to resurface through these dense layers and again become part of present discourse. Tavin asserts that by looking to the past we can find the justification for further debate and make room for 're-marks' about visual culture (2005, p.5-6). The issue of visual culture and art education has been ongoing for decades without a consensus upon its precise place in art education and how much attention it should receive in curricula or if it should be excluded all together. This has prompted some schools to make visual culture its own program of study; University of Bergen, York University, University of Aberdeen, University of Otago and University of

California to name but a few. Visual culture has seen a recent resurgence, in the past two decades, as numerous educators and researches try to articulate its essence and pin point where and how it can be integrated in education (Tavin, 2010, 2005, 2003; Tavin and Anderson, 2001; Duncum, 2004, 2001; Bolin and Blandy, 2003).

Visual culture is inherently connected with popular culture and has therefore always received intensive scrutiny, 'Although visual culture and popular culture are not one in the same, arguments against the shift towards visual culture in art education are often based on the same arguments against the inclusion of popular culture in art education curricula' (Tavin, 2005, p.101). Tavin points out that many, such as Kamhi (2003), feel that the inclusion of visual culture in art education opposes the traditional skills and practices that have been the foundation of fine arts training. Still despite the long standing debate, often reduced to high vs. low art, the discourse on visual culture and its place within art education still rages.

Tavin's (2005) arguments deal directly with the issue of visual culture using the antecedents of some of the pioneers of art education to support its resurgence and justify the continued discourse taking place in the field today. Visual culture touches on many interesting and important issues within education including visual literacy, information technology and new media. Its implications for art education and education in general are, in my opinion, a very worthy (possibly crucial) area of study. I believe that in the light of our exponentially increasing technological society (Kurzweil, 2009) delivering vast quantities of visual information many times greater than was realized even a few decades ago and its influence and potential for either epiphanic discovery or reinforcement of falsities and stereotypes make it a key element in our development as a society and certainly in the development of the next generation of thinkers and educators.

Tavin, building upon the past work of art educators, asserts that calls for inclusion of popular and visual culture have a long history of support dating back to the 1960s, propagated by some of the pioneers of art education. Tavin claims that there is and always has been support for the inclusion of the essentials of student's everyday lives to be reflected in their education. One reason for their inclusion is that students can make tangible connections between art and their lived experience. This in turn enhances their world view and makes art education more relevant and motivating for them. Art education and visual culture researchers/educators need to look at all aspects of popular visual culture; food, clothes, adverts, technology etc. because these visual objects all play a role in student's perceptions and understanding of the world and influence how they learn.

Tavin further asserts, supported with Chapman's work, that not only should art education and visual culture include the objects of daily life but also the visual

environments (Chapman, 1967) in which these objects and students reside. This idea could easily be expanded to include online and virtual environments today. In this sense more attention needs to focus on training art educators so they can engage their students (Chapman, 2003) about mass media and youth culture. I contend that this idea should be advanced even further; that it is central for today's educators to familiarize themselves with the popular new media and technologies or become digitally illiterate (Prensky, 2001).

Lastly Tavin points to making students aware of how the fine arts have influenced society beyond galleries, museums and other traditional settings of the arts. Tavin suggests that art educators consider how much of what they teach of the traditional arts is actually put into practice in a student's real life? Tavin emphasizes that the ideas from the past need to be reassessed, rewritten, reused and unified to make them fresh in the context of contemporary art education, supporting new forms of knowledge construction and critical understanding. Tavin supports his claims by revisiting the pleas and works from some of the more prominent art educators and researchers from the past 40 years, building upon and reinterpreting their claims in a post-modern context.

Lanier (1966) noticed that as adults we often impress upon (or even force) the principles of our world view on our students largely ignoring the cultural milieu in which these students function and are passionate about. In Lanier's time the things which constituted this milieu were rock and roll, comics, movies and TV. Today we find ourselves in much the same situation. Although music genres vary and are plentiful the same basic elements exist that comprise the world of our youth and their interests, the biggest difference being that all of these things can be accessed simultaneously in one place, the internet. The World Wide Web allows these elements of popular culture to be ubiquitous and their almost omnipresence makes them that much more relevant to education. Even almost half a century ago Lanier (1966) saw the potential for the use of technology in the classroom; envisioning a classroom full of interactive media which made the study of art more intimate, immediate and individualized.

Around the same time June King McFee (1968) stressed that the best reason for the inclusion of mainstream and popular culture was exactly what many critics, such as Postman (1981), have argued against. This is the potentially harmful influence on society, when looked upon uncritically, these bastions of public infatuation can have on students and the general public if they are not taught how to properly discriminate between the valuable and worthless (McFee, 1968;Tavin, 2005). Tavin claims that McFee's inventory of popular objects of study pointed towards an opening up of the field of art education to include visual culture. McFee (1968) was also interested in the relationship between humans and built and natural environments, built environments today could be expanded

to include online or virtual environments created with new media, which I do not think McFee or Tavin would object to.

Laura Chapman expressed the need for art education to reflect the changing dynamic of the society in which it was taught or become relegated to the back benches (2003). Chapman like McFee also called for the analysis of student's visual environment (among other environmental aspects) in the classroom in order to deconstruct the walls which housed their understanding of the world. According to Chapman (2003) the role that arts plays in society outside the walls of galleries and museums needs to be showcased in the classroom so that students can more readily recognize the traditions of art and its use in contemporary culture and commercialism.

The collective works of Wilson and Wilson are used by Tavin (2005) to further support the ideas of Chapman and question just how much of what is learned in the classroom is then taken by students and assimilated into their cultural milieu? According to Tavin (2005) Wilson and Wilson's works drew on cross-cultural examples of student's graphic representations showed more complexity and more of a definite popular cultural influence than previously thought or believed. This challenges tried and true ideas of self-expression and development for closer analysis of popular culture and makes room for the pursuit of visual culture.

Personal interest in visual culture was rekindled after having read Tavin and Anderson's (2003) *Deconstructing Disney*. I had briefly touched upon Giroux's (1996) critical analysis of Disney in the past and I found it very intriguing but at the time had no further opportunities to explore the topic in depth. Deconstructing Disney touches upon some very important issues facing not only art education but society and the education of students, teachers and parents. If even a handful of the claims put forward by Tavin and Anderson (2003) are accepted at face value, educators, school administrators, politicians, media giants and parents need to take a much closer, much more critical look at what visual information students are consuming and the media they use. Ultimately we need to consider what effects these purveyors of popular visual culture are having and begin to deconstruct the messages contained within them. Tavin's (2005) article provides an excellent jumping off point to explore both issues of visual culture and technology.

One of the most prolific examples of visual culture that transcends global and cultural boundaries is the film and television industry and in cases like that of Disney, dominant culturally biased world views are constructed, commoditized and sold to an international audience, while alternative representations and voices in opposition to the status quos depicted are relegated to the wayside (Tavin and Anderson, 2003).

Mickey Mouse Monopoly (2001) by Chyng Feng Sun and Miguel Picker

This documentary was chosen because it is a prime example of how popular visual culture, distributed via mass media, has entranced generations of young learners (and even adults) for almost 90 years with re-told fairy tales and animated histories bringing us stories of triumph, fantasy, sadness and love. As noted by Tavin and Anderson (2003) 'Knowledge of self and the world is often constructed, in part, through particular forms of popular visual culture, from animated films to television programs' (p.21). The messages and ideologies constructed within Disney's stories have gone virtually unexamined (during most of their 90 years) by educators due to their persistent resistance to popular and visual culture in school. There are many reasons for closer scrutiny of Disney films (and other mainstream media producers) two prominent reasons being their representation of women and gender roles and their representation of other races placed within a deceptively constructed, yet convincing, historical backdrop.

Are youth becoming a new class of faceless consumers? Do corporations have an obligation to educate and provide us with tools and opportunities to help critically evaluate and understand our world? Are kids being manipulated by popular cultural icons like Disney, seduced by vivid visual imagery into believing a false reality and world view skewed by corporate culture and consumerism? These are just some of the issues which underlie the Mickey Mouse Monopoly (MMM). Determining the answers to these questions and the extent to which corporate powers help to form our identities and cultural beliefs is a role that should be filled by art education.

One of the main premises of MMM is that kids are influenced by the underlying meanings presented in Disney films both consciously and unconsciously through the dialogue and visual materials presented. This process is not immediately evident and is strengthened over years of exposure to these messages. This issue relates directly with Tavin's (2005) argument for the inclusion of popular visual culture in art education as it expressly demonstrates the power and potential influence these forms of visual media can have on young learners if not given proper attention and analysis. Kellner (2000) also advocates media education in schools:

> … for schooling and the media play a key role in enabling individuals to be informed, taught to seek information, and, if effectively educated, to critically assess and appraise information, to transform information into knowledge and understanding, and thus to make citizens capable of participating in democratic discussion and deliberation" (p.11).

At the onset of the film one mother recounts a question from her child, who expressed not wanting to be racist but asked (with reference to Disney films); why are dark people always doing bad things? At this point supporters of 'active audience' may chime in, progressing a concept that people, like this astute little boy, are usually able to, 'actively interpret and make sense of them [media texts] using the resources available to us in the social worlds in which we are located' (Gober, 2010, p312). Still would this situation have garnered the same reaction in a household without any interaction with ethnicities other than western European? Whose parents view news reports of gang violence and crime attributed to blacks or Hispanics not as disproportionately biased but as the general state of affairs of their social world. So even if audiences were able to actively interpret visual culture, and make a conscious effort to do so on a day to day basis, where have they learned the skills to meaningfully engage these media with visual culture's absence from education? The complexity of this issue is compounded further when producers, like Disney, mask callous and unbalanced views under the veil of family fun.

Giroux (in MMM, 2001) states that, 'Disney makes a spectacle of innocence, it hides behind it, separating corporate power from corporate culture which creates a fantasy that never needs to be questioned' (1/5- 4:55). Children grow up watching these films without ever realizing the leading and supporting characters portray various cultural stereotypes; a typical example is of the French chef singing in the Little Mermaid in a distinctly archetypal (North Americanized) French accent complete with croaking laugh and is cross cut with a young man who happily sings along with the catchy tune and iconized imagery. Even Gober (2010) points out that media are a part of our cultural framework and cannot be segregated from it, stating, 'The processes by which we give meaning and depth to the experiences of fictional characters are not different from the processes we use to give meaning to experiences of personal significance' (p 313).

Disney is one of 6~7 media giants who own most of the media we consume (MMM, 2001). What impact does this have on decision making and democracy in society when they can control the images we are exposed to on TV, the internet and in the news? They have the power to alter our world views by limiting what we see and how we see it through content filtering which presents us with a cleaned up version of the world that adheres to their corporate ideologies and capitalist based consumer biases. Disney sits atop the head of a massive media conglomerate owning TV (ABC), cable, internet, music studios, media production companies, magazines, sports teams theatres and of course theme parks. Just writing out the inventory of media outlets Disney has at its disposal and the inherent influence contained within them only begins to describe how vast Disney is and how far reaching their business and ideals are. As observed by MMM, Disney 'exerts a tremendous

influence on national and international popular culture' (MMM, 2001, 1/5- 5:40). This begs the question just what is it that Disney is trying to say and why is it so important?

Giroux (2010) claims that with increased access to personal media devices Disney is seminal in the day to day routines of many children and not only warps the goals and wishes of younger generations but actively counters attempts at public discourse, weakening the maintenance of the fundamentals of democracy for future generations. Giroux (in MMM, 2001) calls what Disney does *the merger of corporate power, entertainment and public pedagogy*. He recalled that in about 80% of the interviews he gave on public radio and television that the reactions from the general public were quite hostile. Giroux remarked that people were vehemently opposed to anyone even suggesting that Disney is anything but wholesome family fun. Besides the fact that much of the public is enamoured with Disney another one of the reasons few people challenge or examine these corporate ideologies, according to Giroux (in MMM, 2001), is because of the fear that surrounds critiquing giants like Disney and he gave the example of his publisher rejecting the image of a mouse (like Mickey) caught in a mousetrap because they were afraid of being sued by Disney. He goes on to mention other authors whose book titles were changed or photos edited because Disney does not allow 3rd parties to use their names or images, stating that Disneyland is the first copyrighted urban environment in history. This shows how well and to what lengths Disney will go to police its image(s) and keep its ideologies intact which sets a dangerous precedent for other corporations to follow and join in the suppression of dissent.

Duncum (2004) contends that although these leaders of global culture are not as imminently dangerous as were fascists, who used similar tactics to control public image, they posses a much greater assortment of multimodal media than ever before, 'and their primary interest lies in profits not the public good. The cultural forms of global capital combine images, words and sound to produce highly seductive experiences that are not in everyone's best interests' (p.262). This does not mean that corporate ideology is inherently evil; however it does illustrate similarities in the ways in which these organizations chose to manage and deliver information. The potential Disney has for influence over popular visual culture relates directly to the mass media outlets it owns. Due to its power and authority as a children's storyteller MMM asks; what kind of stories is Disney really telling that might shape our children's opinions?

Women and gender

Sun and Picker's (2001) MMM documentary draws an explicit visual analogy between female characters (such as Jessica Rabbit) and little girls imitating her by dressing up and acting like her (an audacious singer) this links with some of Postman's (1981) ideas

of the media negatively influencing children by stripping them of their childhood and rushing them into an adulthood for which they are not prepared. The question of gender representation is also raised and when a child begins to form notions exactly of how to act like a boy or a girl.

Gail Dines (in MMM, 2001) points out how little the image of women has changed in Disney cartoons since Fantasia in 1940. She claims that they are represented as highly sexualized, voluptuous, demure, flirty, coy and seductive even in animal form. An example of a female rabbit batting her thick eyelashes at Thumper in Disney's Bambi clearly makes this point. Dines insists that these representations present a stereotypical notion of the female persona which is not reflective of contemporary society. Disney may not have created the stereotypes but they perpetrate them over and over, says Dines.

Bearing this early image of the fairer sex in mind, is it far fetched to connect what these little boys saw growing up in cartoons with the idealistic (often unrealistic) proportions of hourglass figured women men see (or seek) portrayed in popular cinema today? Diane Levin (in MMM, 2001) comments that when kids are young and trying to deconstruct what it means to be a girl or a boy they focus on the most prominent images or examples of men and women and identify with them, no matter how unrealistic they may be. Carolyn Newberger (in MMM, 2001) uses the example of Beauty and the Beast; the candlestick and the duster portraying male/female roles where the women is coquettish saying no but really meaning yes and the males persistence eventually pays off. Elizabeth Hadley (in MMM, 2001) then adds the example of Jasmine in Aladdin; they show a scene where she seduces the evil villain in order to sneak Aladdin into the palace. This type of scenario, claims Hadley, tells girls and young women that they can use their bodies to get what they want, a dangerous message for impressionable minds.

The documentary proceeds to cite one of the most prominent themes throughout Disney's portrayal of women is the idea of the 'damsel in distress'. Women are often shown getting themselves into predicaments or creating problems which they cannot solve without the aid of a man. Opponents of the preceding critiques might say that none of these messages have any immediate impact on children but Justin Lewis argues that,

> It is a mistake for us to imagine that the only way that media affects us is an immediate impact on how we think. The way the media influences the way we think is much less immediate and much less a sort of straight forward impact on the way we think, much more of a question of creating a certain environment of images that we grow up in, that we become used to and after a while those images will begin to shape what we know (in MMM, 2001, 1/5- 8:30).

One teacher also remarked how children quickly adapt these themes and said they can be seen acting them out on the playground.

In contrast to the heroines flaunting their bodies and getting into trouble all the time the strong female characters (often villains) are usually shown as bitchy, cruel, heartless and unbalanced. Examples include the witch in Little Mermaid, Cruella Deville in 101 Dalmatians or the step-mother and step-sisters in Cinderella. Sometimes female heroines are shown as strong but it is in a helpless context. Take Belle in Beauty and the Beast, she is a very strong character but her strength lies in her ability to take abuse from the Beast and a naïve acceptance of her situation and that she can change the Beast or that underneath he is really a good soul (MMM, 2001). Newberger (in MMM, 2001) says that this sends a message to young girls that if they look beyond the abuse there is a prince inside and some of the children interviewed exemplified this concern saying that while the situation is sad if Belle were their friend they would tell her to stick with it. These are the types of embedded messages McFee was talking about;

> Considering the impact of television, motion pictures, and all other visual means of learning about the culture, it seems important for children to realize that all this visual learning is going on, so that they can learn to be discriminating about what they accept.... Critical analysis is necessary if a realistic, rather than exaggerated, version of our culture is to be maintained (1961, p.23).

Without a critical contingent in schools to analyze and reveal the messages within these visual narratives where else can students have an opportunity to challenge or question the beliefs and status quo circulated in society's cultural collective around the world by companies like Disney? And who better to do this than art educators? Those whose field has been concerned with the world of the visual and its narratives since it became a field of study. Although one may argue that dialogue about these subjects can occur between friends and with parents, yet if these are the same adults who chastised Giroux for critiquing Disney's motifs what hope is there of young minds critically deconstructing these themes? Philo (2008) admits that although there is a capacity for audiences to react actively or critically to media there is still a plethora of evidence out there, 'which shows the influence of media messages on the construction of public knowledge as well as the manner in which evaluations are made about social action and what is seen as necessary, possible and desirable in our world' (p.542).

Race and History

MMM also takes a close look at how different races are presented in Disney. Alvin Poussant (in MMM, 2001) claims that writers of these scripts draw on stereotypes of races because they have no real world experiences or associations with other cultures. Levin insists that it does not matter whether the writers do this intentionally or not because the effects are the same. Here the stereotypes of popular culture are syndicated to a global audience re-enforcing ignorant or preconceived notions about cultures within the west and the rest of the world. For many young viewers Disney films may be the first time they see cultures represented other than their own. So what kinds of visual imagery does Disney provide them with?

In Aladdin the Arab world is portrayed as a brutal place and all the evil characters are dark skinned. The film also points out that Latinos are often portrayed as Chihuahuas, messy (or grimy) in appearance and getting into trouble, equating them with illegality. Africans or blacks are represented by crows, monkeys, orangutans or hyenas; jiving talking, misbehaving, simpletons and outsiders (MMM, 2001; Giroux, 1996). Poussant (in MMM, 2001) uses the example of the newest version of Tarzan which, as we all know, is set in Africa but features no black people leaving no one for young African children to readily identify with. He claims that this promotes white supremacy, especially when viewed by kids in an African movie theatre. It certainly does raise the question, just what is Disney trying to say here? Could this be a second 'visual colonization' of Africa through animated features? Giroux (in MMM, 2001) makes an important point about the public nature of Disney's creations, stating that when discourse is as public as these films are then Disney has a responsibility to provide relevant information and examples which kids can question.

A final way in which Disney creates false realities or generates misleading information is in its portrayal of historical events (MMM, 2001). Giroux (in MMM, 2001) claims that Disney re-writes history omitting the most controversial, political and significant social aspects which end up trivializing important historical events such as the relations between the pilgrims and the Native Americans. Giroux sets Pocahontas as a prime example, overlooking the poignant details of colonialism and genocide in favour of a kind of propaganda or whitewashed history from a singular Eurocentric perspective. Children in turn tend to believe this film as factual because it uses the names of real people they recognize from history books.

These falsified histories which foster bogus worldviews are then marketed to kids through games, toys, school supplies and more, re-enforcing the stereotypes and scenarios so that they can gain acceptance in the real world. In the case of Disney's version of the ancient Greek tale of Hercules, Disney makes no efforts in hiding its primary motive (consumerism) as they show the characters in the film frantically buying up merchandise (toys and figurines) which does not represent any factual depiction of consumer behaviour in or provide historically relevant (or accurate) examples of consumer culture in ancient Greece.

Gender misrepresentation, sexual promiscuity, racial stereotyping and historical inaccuracies are all messages, delivered via popular visual culture, that are not so hard to recognize or uncover when we look at media giants like Disney with a critical eye. So why is it so difficult to allow this critical eye to have a place in art education? Disney is only one example, but a potent one, of the kind of lasting imagery and persuasive power one form of popular visual culture can have, it is our job (as educators) to keep raising questions, hold visual cultural producers like Disney accountable, and not suspend 'our critical judgment' of children's film or other forms of visual media (Breaux, 2010, p.398).

Technology and Society (Questioning the Media) (1998) by Neil Postman:

'Children are the living messages we send to a time we will not see' (Postman, 1982, x). If we are to accept this poignant statement at face value then what kinds of messages are we sending into the future without vigilant examination within our educational institutions? The fundamentals of deconstruction visual culture and the critical use and interpretation of new media are largely left to capitalists of consumer culture to dictate the terms and norms with which we should abide; proficiency in decoding and critically imbibing the embedded messages in these media not being atop of the list of skills corporate business wish us to acquire. Giroux (2010) cites that the impact of new technologies as 'teaching machines' are illustrated in the statistics that over six hours per day is spent by the average American engaged in visual entertainment and in just a years time 'watching television and videos will match the numbers of hours spent sleeping' (p.2).

This lecture was chosen because technology and new media provide the systems of dissemination for visual culture. One of the reasons Disney has been able to market their ideologies so well is the variety of media technology they own (Tavin and Anderson, 2003) and channels through which they can distribute, advertise and negotiate with consumers, convincing them of the value of what Disney is selling. It is precisely these kinds of technologies that popular visual culture now flows through and was just beginning to gather momentum when deconstructed and critiqued by Postman in his presentation.

Postman begins his lecture with a series of quotes by well known scholars of the past, first quoting Henry David Thoreau, 'All our inventions are but improved means of an unimproved end,' then quoting Goethe, saying 'One should each day try to hear a little song, read a good poem, see a fine picture and if possible speak a few reasonable words.' The latter is an admirable remark and desirable way to approach each day of ones life, yet it has nothing to do with whether or not one wishes to embrace current and emerging technologies and popular culture. All these things could be accomplished with 'traditional' media (cds, library books) or one could also, flicking through their smart phone, choose from a multitude of songs online, have a poem a day delivered by email, surf online

libraries and tweet some short but reasonable words or if feeling a bit long winded post an entire poem on Facebook and share it with friends. Postman might comment, when faced with the latter series of options, that we are spoiled for choice and that there is simply a glut of information to sift through that we end up wallowing in the triviality of searching. Yet I see it as freedom, freedom of choice without confinement. You can achieve all those goals mentioned above without leaving the comforts of home or in a park under the shade of a tree.

Postman proclaims that, 'There is no escaping from ourselves…the human dilemma is as it has always been and it is a delusion to believe that the technological changes of our era have rendered irrelevant the wisdom of the ages and the sages' (1999, 1/7- 3:23). Postman's rather antiquated views citing trusted old words from past scholars and distant time sound lovely but what do they really offer? Many of these 'sages' spouted just as much nonsense as they dispensed wisdom, such as Confucius, 'One hundred women are not worth a single testicle' or Pythagoras, 'There is a good principle that created order, light and man and an evil principle that created chaos, darkness and women' (as cited by the Guerrilla Girls, 2009, installation). Then what of Thoreau? He was a lackadaisical recluse who lived on the outskirts of his home town and, despite his love of nature, set fire to a 100 acre section of forest due to his carelessness while trying to fry fish yet never even helped extinguish it (Alexander, preface in Thoreau, 1962). That is not to say that none of these wise men do not have anything to offer rather it shows the dichotomous nature of these men which is the same dichotomy we find in the technologies that Postman criticizes, they are neither inherently great nor can they be dismissed due to the instances of negativity which can emanate from them. This is, in essence, why the technologies that now deliver our popular visual culture should bear equal consideration as the content that they contribute.

Yet forty-six years after Lanier (1966) articulated art education's reluctance to embrace new media, technology still receives a frigid welcome. As noted by Jagodzinski, technologies need to be addressed and accounted for both in the classroom and in published research:

> One of the problems with visual art education is that it has not caught up to the changes of perception enabled by the new technologies; nor has its established main stream journals remotely begun to explore the theoretical ground so as to understand the virtual world that is unfolding (2005, p.129).

There is no questioning Postman's (1998) claim that technology intrudes into our society and popular culture, but we manage to prevail over time until the technology becomes merely background to the astounding feats it has unleashed. Take the

introduction of electricity for example. As Tesla, Westinghouse and Edison battled behind the scenes for their own version of current, voltage and delivery method it must have appeared quite perplexing to the general public as household appliances had different prongs and plugs and different areas of the country operated on different currents both AC and DC (Biscoe**,** 2011). Still it was a turning point in human history; we were no longer confined by daylight to complete tasks nor were artists restricted by what they could produce by day or dim candlelight; much to the chagrin of hardworking candlestick makers. There is always resistance, confusion and of course fear of the future, quickly unravelling. However these once strange and cumbrous wires of buzzing electrons fuelling metal monsters were mastered eventually gave way to the sleek, silent and almost infinitely more powerful devices that now sit contentedly in our palms.

An excellent example of popular culture and technology positively influencing education is in the cell phone; once a cumbersome luxury, now seemingly a necessity of contemporary life. In Africa even in countries where access to the internet is scarce people can still venture into towns and cities and though they may not find intact or comprehensive libraries they will likely find internet cafes as well as mobile connectivity which can stretch outside the main cities and towns and some have found this connectivity to be very useful in educational contexts, particularly distance education (Kwapong, 2007; Pierce, 2007; Ibara, 2008). Examples of new media's capabilities are not restricted to distance learning; 'distance art' recently created by Daivd Hockney as he used his ipad to continuously update a digital exhibition at the Royal Academy each time he was inspired to sketch a new drawing (Makarechi, 2012).

That is not to say that Postman (1998) does not pose relevant questions such as, 'What is the problem to which this technology is the solution' (2/7- 2:23)? In posing this question Postman is critical of VP Al Gore's support of an information super highway, reducing IT and new media in its entirety to just more satellite TV, asking; why on earth do people need 1000 TV channels? Here Postman would have a valid point if the expansion of IT and new media were merely limited to delivering TV, but they include; communications, weather, GPS and the majority being used to expand the fast exponentially expanding internet, the epicentre of the information superhighway. Expansion and upgrading of the internet brings to new media the visual culture of the world providing us access to it anywhere wherever we can find a connection. Postman (1998) further claims that TV, dubious of its popularity, has made socializing children almost impossible. However this point actually supports, rather than refutes, those pleas made by Tavin (2005) and other art educators for the inclusion of popular visual culture featured on TV (and the web) as a component in educational curricula. If TV has had the kind of impact Postman claims then what of films from Disney? What of the internet?

The online and virtual worlds heralded by technology and new media connect us even more intimately with popular visual culture. Peer to peer file sharing networks and sites like Youtube, Flickr and Google Earth make the access and sharing of visual cultural materials, not to mention archives from the past, easy and abundant. New forms of visual and cultural representation are challenging the way we learn, share and collaborate and can intensify our connections to the medium we interact with. Other examples of visual culture and technologies used for artistic means are in the works of Aaron Kolbin (2009), who has used commercial entities like Amazon to make a collaborative art piece 'The Sheep Market', with 10,000 drawings from 10,000 participants as well as teaming up with Google to deliver a personalized art experience by using mapping (Google street views/maps) to integrate a person's home town into the artwork in 'The Wilderness Downtown' (2009). These examples show how technology can connect art with people using visual culture and new media technologies to collaborate and make visual works which draw upon personal lived experience and elucidate the fundamentals of art with the everyday viewer in the outside world.

Postman later speaks of winners and losers, using Bill Gates as an example of a 'winner' and states that Gates claims that computers have no ill effects. He then asserts that this is what winners want us to think, for us to never realize that we are losers for embracing technology. Postman then uses an example of teachers as losers because they are overworked and underpaid, meanwhile schools are prepared to spend billions to wire classrooms to the web and teachers welcomed the upgrades and the technology instead of demanding more staff and pay increases. Postman (1998) claims that there is no compelling evidence that computers in schools or the internet can do what teachers are capable of doing, and he has a valid point, however none of the advocates of technology in schools are suggesting they can somehow replace teachers with software rather that technology can supplement and support teachers and students by using the tools which are now a part of their everyday lives. The ubiquity of these new media in student's everyday lives and the endless stream of popular visual culture make their inclusion as a component of learning in school all the more relevant.

Many educators believe technology can play an empowering role in developing student's independent and constructive cognitive abilities through the variety of analytical and organizational tools they offer, 'Cognitive tools [via computer] empower learners to design their own representations of knowledge rather than absorbing knowledge representations by others' (Reeves, 1998, p4). As far as other supporting evidence, there are far too many articles and studies to list that have shown that computers in fact can benefit students and teachers appreciably (Bloom and Hanych, 2002; Reeves, 1998; Jonassen, Carr & Yueh, 1998). So are we 'losers' for embracing technology or visual culture

in the classroom? Not in my view, the views of Tavin (2005), Duncum (2004) and others such as Lanier who did not really have a chance to see what has become of the internet today but still remarked, '…art education has been one of the least successful in exploiting the newer instructional media appearing on the educational scene' (1966, p.5). Those words were true then and have even more resonance today. How many art classrooms actually make the integration of new media and technology a priority or even have the means to do so?

At the very end of his lecture(literally the very last moment) Postman fields some questions from the audience and it is with the last question, one about media literacy (inaudible in the video), that Postman makes his most significant contribution to the topic, more or less contradicting his previous arguments in opposition to technology in education. Here he suggests the importance of viewing media giants, like Rupert Murdoch's FOX and Ted Turner's Time Warner, with a critical eye and scrutinizing how they control information.

This statement takes us right back to the issues raised in MMM (2001) as well as the importance of not only examining the messages delivered to us via popular culture but also the ownership, authorship and methods used. Postman finally concedes that if taught at a young age media culture and technology could have benefits for society and lessen the likelihood of 'dreadful' corporations (as Postman infers) dictating what information we receive. He concludes by stating that if we took these issues seriously and made the study of them a component of what young people talk about and do in school we could get a very sophisticated population and would not need to worry so much, otherwise we turn our national civic life over to those like Murdoch and Turner (1998, 7/7-4:25). My posthumous question to Postman would be; how on earth are we to create this sophisticated next generation without the inclusion of popular visual culture and the use of technology?

Conclusion

The argument made for the inclusion of popular visual culture by Tavin (2005) supported by some of the pillars of art education's past are given credence with prominent examples of sites of popular culture like Disney's films. Technologies and new media, briefly touched on by Tavin (2005) are then proposed as an equally important site of inclusion and exploration as they provide the access and manage the information we are capable of assimilating. Disney and its multimedia empire are but one example of the power, authority and circulation of corporate ideology which requires careful examination, particularly in the visual forms of culture they distribute. Although work such as Philo and Berry's (2004) study of media interpretations of adults did show that audiences are sometimes able to be active or critical they also found 'strong evidence pointing to the

power and influence of media,' and noted that, 'this dimension of media power is often neglected in current scholarship,' and by logical extension schools as well (Philo, 2008, p. 535). This makes it painfully apparent that if adults are only partially aware of media's visual manipulations some of the time then hope for younger minds to actively engage visual culture and media is loathsome when its study remains absent from their education.

Once further consideration is given to the issues raised by integration of visual culture study in education we can then diversify and focus on the multitude of other visually based media that have become so entrenched in our everyday lives that we fail to recognize their intrusion let alone see their relevance. After we have accepted visual culture's role as necessary for our general education, aptly situated within art education, whether casual, formal or inseparable, then the big question is; how do we make it work for us?

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