Art Education and Technology: These are the Days of Miracles and Wonder

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Abstract

This paper examines the impact on human consciousness of the exponential proliferation of electronic images, and offers suggestions concerning how educators should respond. A postmodern critique includes the ideas of an inverted Kantian aesthetics which embraces the everyday, a dramatic compression of space and time, and personal disorientation. A further critique grounds these views of consciousness in new economic arrangements and the rapaciousness of capitalism. I argue that the only viable educational response to this new consciousness is a critical examination of mass media imagery. Basic components of media education in schools are signposts of an appropriate response.

The secondary title of this paper is adapted from a line in the Paul Simon song, "The Boy in the Bubble," which appears on the Graceland disc of 1986. The song is about contrasts; between the distant and the immediate, illusion and reality, terror and the wonder of new technology. His images are kaleidoscopic, seemingly random, certainly fragmented. Babies are bombed, and we follow the action on television in slow motion, medical science has seemingly magical powers, and with "lasers in the jungle," even the wilderness is colonised by technology. Everywhere there are "staccato signals of constant information."

Paul Simon sings:

These are the days of miracles and wonder

And don't cry baby, don't cry

In other words: as surprising as it might seem, this is our condition and there is no point in being distraught. The lyrics are a fitting focus for this paper.

I will begin with a sketch of the proliferation of images that has resulted from the new and emerging technologies. This sketch is followed by an examination of the effects on consciousness which some postmodern critics claim is due to the proliferation of images. This analysis is, in turn, grounded in an argument about capitalist circulation that suggests the proliferation of imagery is likely to continue. Finally, I will argue that educators are able to intervene to create a critical consciousness, and I will offer suggestions drawn from media studies on how to proceed.

The Empire of the Image

The late 20th century is characterised by the image (Jenks, 1995). As Baudrillard (1987) said in a lecture delivered in 1983, images are multiplying in an irresistible epidemic process which no one today can control. He argued that the world has become infinite or rather exponential in terms of imagery and is caught up in a mad pursuit of images (p. 29). Similarly, Guinness (1994) writes of "the humiliation of the word" and "the triumph of the image" (pp. 94-95).

Presently, for example, the dominance of television as a cultural form is under challenge from more recent technologies. By 1996 there will be 45 million CD ROM players in the world (Australian Commonwealth Government, 1994, p. 56). This technology allows for an exponential number of images stored and retrieved. But already CD is seen as a hinge technology, a turning point between print media and the Internet, which is likely to be superseded by the year 2000. Already millions of people, including students, are surfing on the Internet, riding the waves of information. It is possible to gain access from one's home to thousands to international databases which contain millions of images. From January 1994 until October 1994 world traffic on the World Wide Web doubled every 11 weeks, and in Australia, from September 1994 to February 1995, traffic doubled every five to six weeks (O'Callaghan, 1995). While such exponential growth cannot be sustained, it is impossible to predict when usage will begin to taper off.

Interactive multi-media will become the basis of an economy based on the exchange not of goods but of information. It is already changing "the way we communicate, the way we learn, the way we access information, the way we create, the way we live our daily lives" (Australian Commonwealth Government, 1994, p. 57). For example, with readily available, inexpensive software, school students are already "morphing" images, that is, turning one image into another. Numerous other computer programs exist for altering images, and the creation of entirely new images is now commonplace (Ritchin, 1990). Meanwhile, statistics on television viewing in North America (Gannaway, 1994) and Great Britain (Morley, 1995) suggest that all social

groups watched at least three to four hours a day. For many people, switching on the television is synonymous with being at home, so that "television belongs to the everyday, to the normal backdrop of expectations and mundane pleasures" (Ellis, cited in Morley, 1995, p. 172).

The Aesthetics of the Everyday

Some critics maintain that the proliferation of imagery have given rise to a new aesthetic, a postmodern aesthetic of the everyday (Baudrillard, 1988; Featherstone, 1991; Harvey, 1989; Jameson, 1991). McRobbie (1994) argues that the "single, richly coded image" gives way to one's experience of a busy everyday life where "a slow, even languid" examination is "out of tempo with the times" (p. 13). The aesthetics of the everyday "deflect attention away from the singular scrutinising gaze . . . and asks that this be replaced by a multiplicity of fragmented, and frequently interrupted "looks" (p. 13). The paradigm is not concerned with an artwork in a gallery, but involves theme parks, shopping malls, streetscapes (Gottdiener, 1995), glossy magazines, pinball alleys, television, and computer interfaces.

McRobbie sees opportunities in this shift of focus, and later in this paper I will show how art educators can begin to respond positively. However, the critique of postmodern, everyday aesthetics has been mostly framed in pessimistic terms. Where McRobbie sees a "textural thickness and visual density" (p. 20) in everyday life, pessimists like Baudrillard (1987) and Jameson (1991) see surface appearance and meaninglessness. Where some see television as a mundane pleasure that is under the control of the viewer, pessimists see a disorientating plethora of images and a lack of discrimination on the part of audiences.

One way of understanding the aesthetics of the everyday is to consider it as an inversion or switching about of Kantian aesthetics (Featherstone, 1991). Kant conceived aesthetic experience mostly in terms of disinterestedness, but also interestedness to the extent that one took serious note (Mundt, 1959). The aesthetics of the everyday stresses Kant's interestedness and excludes his disinterestedness. The new

aesthetics involves participation, sensuousness and desire (Featherstone, 1991). It stresses interestedness, it represents the triumph of the popular, and includes the celebration of the ephemeral and trivial.

Kantian aesthetics involves both the beautiful and the sublime, and the aesthetics of the everyday reflects Kant's notion of the sublime. Yet the Kantian sublime and the new sublime are very different. For Kant, the sublime was found in raging oceans and boundless skies. It involved a sense of separation from the world. In discovering this separation, this distance, one also discovers a sense of autonomy from one's surroundings and experiences one's freedom from the world. The sublime is "an experience of what overwhelms us, of what cannot be taken in - and, nearly simultaneously, of our ability nonetheless to rise or stand above such things" (Melville & Reading, 1995, p. 13). It is linked "to the human ability to recognise something as 'too big'; the capacity to make excess count and not simply exceed" (p. 13).

On the other hand, the postmodern aesthetic of the everyday is to be found not in nature but in the humanmade environment, in flashing neon lights, discordant sounds, and continual, hurried, and abrupt movement. According to pessimistic critics like Baudrillard (1987, 1988) and Jameson (1991), the aesthetics of the everyday represents excess which does exceed and which counts for nothing. It overwhelms us but is not an experience one can easily "rise or stand above." Recognising that it is "too big," we succumb to it. There can be neither a sense of separation from the experience nor any actual autonomy. Rather, we are surrounded by the experience; it flows about us, immersing us. Instead of depth, there is surface. Instead of imagery referring to reality images are now so seamless, so seemingly all-encompassing, that according to Baudrillard (1988), reality and its images have imploded. Virtual reality is seen as a technological expression of this implosion. Meaning is reduced to endless symbolic exchanges which are entirely self-referential. As Porter (1993) explains, "...a sexy woman is used to sell a car; a car sells cigarettes; cigarettes sell machismo; machismo is used to sell jeans; and so the symbolic magic circle is sealed" (p. 2).

Thus, sex, youth, health, speed, power, and so on all transvalue and interpenetrate in a mesmerising dreamworld of floating signifiers. Nothing seems anchored. The images are so prolific that we become overloaded and desensitised. The "staccato signals of constant information" are so meaningless that we have become hermetically sealed from reality. For example, in "The Evil Demon of Images" Baudrillard (1987) claims that the Vietnam war never took place because for most people it was just a show on television. The boy in the bubble is a wonder, but such insulation carries a price.

For Baudrillard (1987) it is no longer possible to maintain a distinction between truth and representation. He calls television "telefission" and writes of it as

> not merely of an exponential linear unfolding of images and messages but ... an exponential enfolding of the medium around itself. This fatality lies in this endless enwrapping of images (literally: without end, without destination) which leaves no other destiny than images. (p. 30)

While the technologies of communication are more evident than ever, communication has died, and paradoxically, it has died precisely because it is so prevalent. Baudrillard likens communication today to a close up in a pornographic film which is so intimate with detail and so lacking in context that its erotic purpose is voided. In the same way, the technologies of communication are evident everywhere and information is offered about innumerable topics, but the information is so fragmented and disconnected, that context and meaning disperse.

Similarly, Jameson (1991) views depthlessness as the single most important formal feature of postmodern cultural production. Perpetual change has already led to the disappearance of a sense of the real. Cultural production is characterised by blank parody and consciousness by schizophrenia. Unlike parody, where some norm exists that can be burlesqued, blank parody is about nothing but other forms of cultural production. A schizophrenic consciousness, is pervasive

where the normal signifiers of temporal existence, a past, a present, and a future, have broken down and are reduced to perpetual present events untainted by the past or thought for the future. The signifiers which once made communication possible have been destroyed. In place of the Kantian sublime, Jameson sees only hysteria, or the "hysterical sublime" (Bertens, 1995).

Capitalist Circulation

Jameson (1991) suggests that the proliferation of imagery will continue. Jameson and other neo-Marxists (Harvey, 1989; Hall, & Jacques, 1991) ground their description of the postmodern condition in the economic arrangements which characterise our time. They cite Marx's prophesy that capital would become ever more rapacious, ever more pervasive, and in the process continuously revolutionise social structures and human relationships (Harvey, 1989; Hebdige, 1991; Jameson, 1991; Murray, 1991). The greatly increased production and consumption of images is paralleled in an intense acceleration in many sectors of production, exchange and consumption. New systems of communication and information flow make it possible to circulate commodities through the marketplace with ever greater speed. To manage the pace of change, and often to force it, financial services and markets have speeded up to the extent that 24 hours on the global stock markets is now a long time.

The mobilisation of fashion in mass markets now ensures that consumption is fast-paced. To drive the ever greater turnover in production and consumption there is the need for ever more marketing, which in turn means more and more imagery. Many observers note (e.g., Gannaway, 1994; Harvey, 1989; Jameson, 1991) that television is a product of late capitalism which promotes the culture of consumption. Television mobilises needs and wants, desires and fantasies, as part of the urge to sustain sufficient buoyancy of demand in consumer markets and thus keep capitalist production profitable. The proliferation of imagery through television has merely kept pace with the acceleration of production and consumption of products and services.

Advertising is the most obvious form of imagery designed for fast track consumption. In mobilising desire for money, sex, status, and fashion, advertising promotes consumption, and thus promotes the foundation value upon which capitalism depends. The alleged virtues of instantaneity and disposability have become the particular foci of the message of consumption so eloquently put by one of Barbara Kruger's images, "I shop, therefore I am" (see Gannaway, 1994).

The kaleidoscope of television imagery, however elevated or educational, is mobilised to ensure the smooth operations of an economy which depends upon an ever increasing growth in consumption, including an increased imagery production and consumption. And the turnover of imagery is now very fast indeed (Harvey, 1989). For Jameson (1991), the global spread of capital means that all progressive movements have been appropriated. The demand for ever more production and consumption destroys everything once considered authentic and oppositional. For Baudrillard (1988), people are merely sponges, a manipulated and apathetic mass.

Some educators have echoed Baudrillard's and Jameson's condemnation of postmodern times. From both the political left and right, educators have identified a serious decline in rationale thought as a consequence of a visual culture (Holbrook, 1994; Gannaway, 1994; Guinness, 1994). In particular, literacy educators link an alleged decline in rational thought with the decline of a literate culture. Their particular target is television.

Negotiating the New Aesthetics

However, what this critique ignores is that popular aesthetics has an ancestry (Schroeder, 1980) which predates Kant, for example, by a long time. The critique relies on an historical perspective in which the aesthetics of the everyday marks a cultural decline. But the argument is ahistorical since the popular has always embraced the spectacular, the ephemeral, and the trivial.

Baudrillard's critique of the impact of imagery merely represents the last in a long line of critiques that condemns popular culture and its users (Duncum, 1994). The tendency to see present conditions as a fall from previous times, or as a loss of innocence, is age-old, and has had its nostalgic expressions in the notion of a biblical Eden, a golden age, or an organic society. Previously, the targets have been the popular press, comics, and popular magazines. The present attack on television use, theme parks, shopping malls, the Internet and so on, represents only the latest rerun of familiar themes. Unwittingly, such critiques betray continuities with high modernism.

Baudrillard's (1987, 1988) revulsion at postmodern experience and his attack on ordinary people as sponges merely echoes his intellectual predecessor Nietzsche who wrote of ordinary human beings as the "bungled and botched" (cited in Russell, 1961 p. 729). Finding no revolutionary zeal among the working class or contemporary fine artist, the critics of the new technologies ignore the numerous progressive movements that now demand attention, the voices of women, gays, blacks, the Third World, and so on (Bertens, 1995; McRobbie, 1994).

Selective examples and forced distinctions are hallmarks of these critiques (Duncum, 1990). Some postmodernisms are practically synonymous with hyperbole and of totalising from the particular (Bertens, 1995). For example, many cultural observers speak of postmodern times as if time and space have imploded or have been annihilated (Baudrillard, 1987, 1988; Jameson, 1991). Harvey (1989) argues, with less rhetoric and more analysis, that what we are experiencing is not an implosion or annihilation of time and space but rather their sudden, dramatic compression. He argues that since the 1960s there has been a rapid contraction of space and time that, while new in its intensity, is part of a long historical process. Thus the current preoccupation with the compression of space and time is merely the latest compression. It seems like an implosion or annihilation because we are simply not psychologically equipped to handle it. We do not possess the perceptual habits required of the new technologies. Since the fundamental parameters of our existence appear to have dissolved or imploded, we experience dislocation and disorientation.

However, it is useful to consider that a sense of disorientation, dislocation and meaninglessness is characteristic of paradigm shifts in cultural life (Abbs, 1995). Many cultural critics expressed the same kind of confusion and despair over characteristically Modernist developments as critics express today over Postmodern thought. This suggests that a postmodern consciousness is neither better nor worse than the habitual, modernist ways of thinking used by most mature adults today. It suggests that a postmodern consciousness is simply different. Perhaps a proliferation of electronic imagery is leading —if it has not already done so for most young people—not to deficient modes of thought, but to altered modes of cognition.

Some critics have observed that the age of the image marks a sea change no less momentous than the invention of writing or the printing press (Gannaway, 1994; Spender, 1994). But not everyone welcomed these technological innovations. Socrates argued that human thought and communication were fluid, dynamic, and that understanding was based on constant interchange between people which writing denied. Writing, he argued, forced you to follow an argument rather than engage in one (Spender, 1994). His paradigms were conversation and the oral tradition. Another paradigm became dominant, and for more than two millennia the principal media for communication have been the book and the still image. Significantly, the new technologies are likened to oracy rather than literacy (Spender, 1994).

Such scenarios may alarm those of us who feel comfortable with less ephemeral images and text. To literacy educators they suggest, as Holbrook (1994) says, that "consciousness itself has become corrupted" (p. 21). But to young people these are the ordinary conditions of their lives. These conditions are not currents to be railed against, but the realities of their social world, the material from which they make meaning. We need to view students as free-floating agents who fashion narratives, images, objects and practices from the multitudinous bits and pieces of prior cultural productions (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1994). On this reading, postmodern times do not necessarily herald the deterioration of cognition or communication. Rather, we are the participants, not the victims,

of a paradigm shift, not only from modern to postmodern times, but from those forms of communication that have prevailed for millennia, the book and the still image. The death of communication itself, as prophesied by Baudrillard and Jameson for example, seems greatly exaggerated.

Perhaps some theorists are already adjusting to these new realities (Bertens, 1995). Woolley (1992), for example, argues that virtual reality, far from eroding a sense of the real only reinforces what is veridical. Already, we seem to have made adjustments to the proliferation of images. Morley (1995) argues that while research statistics on television watching are impressive, the notion of watching television is problematic. Viewing a program with specific and prolonged attention is confined to only nuclear, middle class, and higher educated households. Most people have the television on as a background accompaniment to social life, to playing, cooking, working, and even engaging in conversation. It should be recalled that when television was introduced, the doomsayers predicted that television would destroy the common culture and threaten the family unit, but now as the information highway looms, television is seen as the major factor in promoting a common culture (*Glued to the Telly*, 1995). The information highway will undoubtedly change social life significantly, but the likelihood is that with its eventual passing, doomsayers will point to it as the basis of their threatened social cohesion.

Education and the New Technologies

Educators have often denied both the complexity and challenge of the new technologies, and have offered standards which were established in a pre-electronic age of imagery. For language educators the threat is seen as the production of knowledge through imagery rather than the written word (e.g., Gannaway, 1994; Holbrook, 1994; Guinness; Giroux, 1994). Some acknowledge the need to address imagery; others seek to reestablish a literate culture. Some art educators also seek to reinvent the past. Greer's (1984) formulation of Discipline-based Art Education (DBAE), Smith's (1994) advocacy of excellence in art education, and Abbs (1995) continuing espousal of the

intrinsic value of the high arts is a retreat into a ghetto approach to the visual arts (Duncum, 1993). Here one is blind to the plurality of practices from which most people derive meaning in ordinary, everyday life. It is a closed off, defensive, even reactionary, minority view of visual culture which is restricted to modernity. It continues to celebrate high art rather than seriously engage with the plurality of imagery practices through which most people live their daily lives. Their approach is as futile as the calls from some literacy educators to return to a culture based on books.

Instead we should engage students' needs by acknowledging the significance of the new technologies and devising curricula in partnership with students' use of them. Freedman (1995) claims that "Television has become the national curriculum," and she argues that schools are one of the few places where students can try to make sense, face to face with others, of their exposure to the media. She argues that media experiences are largely monological, insofar as engagement is limited to offering a response. The great advantage of schools is that they allow opportunities for generating meaning, including critical critique, through dialogue. Schools offer one of the few dialogical environments in which students can try to make sense of their many monological experiences.

The discipline of media education offers a number of pointers for art educators who wish to explore the new and emerging technologies in a socially critical way. This is not surprising since media education has sought to develop social awareness of mass media products (e.g., Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1994; Lusted, 1991; Materson, 1990). Media education has always been focused on electronic media, especially television. While not insensitive to sensory delight, its primary focus has been with meaning. It has never been burdened with a high culture view; instead, it has adopted a socially levelled, semiotic view of culture. It informs students that cultural products offer selective representations that serve the interests of their makers. Instead of concentrating almost exclusively on the visual, media education has dealt with images in the context of written and spoken text. Socially critical theory, with issues of race, gender, and class, has been the dominant force within

media studies. Media education has also adopted a far more economically and politically grounded view of social context than has art education.

Broad comparisons with media education and art education informs us of what is missing in art education. Since the impact of DBAE, art education has sought the meaning of art objects by studying them through historical accounts of their significance, and the theory and practice of art criticism. But typically, the professional role models for these activities—art historians, art critics, and art theorists—do not make the kind of specific connections between cultural products and economic or political pressures that media educators do. Among the disciplines of art history, art criticism and art theory, only very general social conditions are taken into account. Consequently, art education largely exists without extensive considerations of political or economic pressures. This is at once apparent when we examine the components of media education.

Media study involves the production and criticism of media products in similar ways to the production and criticism of art objects in art education. But it also involves two components that are totally lacking from art education: a study of audiences and a study of cultural production as an industry. Some art theorists would deny that the production of art is an industry, seeing it primarily as an individualistic expression. Equally, since the fine art world largely operates within a highly specialised market, there is no tradition of research on audience response to particular cultural products. The interpretation of meaning is left to professional critics, curators and historians. The tradition of grounding the multilayered meanings of a cultural product in the multitudinous interpretations of a mass audience, is completely absent from the disciplines of fine art, but is an inherent part of mass media operations and its study. Similarly, the custodians of fine art, through the rarefaction of personal expression and individual taste, deny an understanding of cultural production as an industrial operation. Yet mass production and distribution is fundamental to mass media and its study.

In media studies it is common to undertake audience survey

research, even involving primary aged children. Audience research surveys set out to determine, for example, the target audience for a cultural product, the range of pleasures that an audience derives from the product, what values that an audience brings to a cultural product, and what range of meanings that they take from a product. Differences are usually examined in terms of gender, age, class, or ethnic background. Often, where the target audience consist of students, debates about the values of a product are fine tuned, differentiating, for example, between a television program for an audience of 13 or 14 year olds as opposed to 15 or 16 year olds (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1994). By conducting their own survey research and by debating among themselves, students learn that audiences hold complex, and often deeply ambiguous values, which make them both prone to and resistant to the influence of the media.

When cultural production is studied as an industrial process, students learn about the collective nature of cultural creation and dissemination, the legislative framework to which cultural producers must conform, and the constraints imposed by financial investors and advertisers. Students learn that media products are the outcome of complex and ever shifting interactions between audience, technology, social pressure groups, legal requirements, and a balance sheet between financial commitment and return. Thus, students are provided with a far more complex picture of how cultural production operates than is usual in art education. The difference can be summed up in one word: context. Media education sets out to provide students with a greater context than art education. This is a crucial difference since it is a lack of context for cultural production that so worries critics like Baudrillard and Jameson. Their concern over the proliferation of images is not really about the number of images, although it is often presented as such, but concerns the lack of context for understanding images. They are troubled that it is only other images which give context to images and that understanding is not grounded in other considerations. Education can provide a broad social context, and it is our responsibility as educators to provide the opportunity for students to acquire contexts for the pleasures they seek through the new and emerging technologies.

Critique and resistance are still possible, despite Baudrillard, Jameson, and others, since the distinction between partial truths and illusion remains an ongoing negotiation (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1994). Critique is still possible, as Baudrillard's and Jameson's work itself demonstrates (Bertens, 1995). And it is still possible to resist dominant meanings and to forge new progressive movements as evidenced by the numerous, once marginal, voices. A socially critical education would draw upon student's negotiations and resistances to cultural products, make them explicit, and promote opportunities to develop a critical consciousness.

Conclusion

We are undoubtedly living in days of miracles and wonder, but "don't cry baby," since a defensive position is totally inadequate to the challenges we face. Keeping abreast of developments is necessary, but it is only through an active, critical engagement with the wonders and miracles of our time that we can hope to engage with the future.

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