Media, Art & Design

Intercultural Education Strategies

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MEDIA, ART AND DESIGN. INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION STRATEGIES

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5
EDUCATIONAL STRATEGIES FOR VISUAL LANGUAGES

Giuseppe Capriotti, Isabella Crespi, Rosita Deluigi, Marta Scocco, Flavia Stara[22]

5.1
Contextual knowledge: Contextual investigation, identification of visual languages within specific cultural frames

This paragraph contains some remarks and indications on how to use visual methodologies and analysis in order to improve and implement some practices during context analysis in multicultural environments.

The development of intercultural awareness continues to gain importance within the panorama of educational studies. The changes in contemporary societies and, in particular, migrations have made communities increasingly multicultural (Crespi 2015; Camozzi 2019). Believing that intercultural awareness is the only way for contemporary multicultural societies to function well means being aware of the richness inherent in a multicultural environment and being willing to find and appreciate opportunities to discover minority, majority, and different cultures.

The fundamental aim of intercultural education is to develop the ability to live with people of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Scholars in various disciplines have provided countless definitions of the term 'culture'. The definitions usually follow a precise semantic core and therefore two aspects of culture can be distinguished: Culture (with a capital C), understood as a set of highly valued and valuable products of a cultural context, and culture, which refers to a particular group of people and their way of life. Intercultural education deals mainly with the latter. The attention of intercultural scholars tends to concentrate on subjective cultures in their less tangible, sometimes invisible expressions. They focus therefore on the worldview shared among the members of a society, on a set of distinctions and concepts that can be described as cultural values, beliefs, attitudes, and lifestyles.

It is necessary to stress that what we are going to describe is not a static system, but one that is constantly changing and open to the regulation of relationships between individuals and groups. Intercultural educational strategies take

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into account this dynamic concept of culture so that greater variability becomes the essence of the daily culture of the individual and society. Thus, it is clear that, given the changing conditions in the system and the living environment, there are shifts in the subjective culture and also the need to readjust the methods and techniques of observation and analysis.

Knowledge and learning about the subjective culture of others – temporarily looking at the world through other eyes – is the backbone of the development of intercultural competence. Therefore, a new capacity for observation integrated into everyday culture will lead us to the change of perspective we expect. This also applies to contacts between cultures, which inevitably leave traces in each other (Gobo 2018).

Studies in the field of interculturality recognise four moments in the development of intercultural competence: knowledge of the culture of the environment in which we live and of the foreign culture, comparison between our own culture and that of the environment/foreign culture, the awareness of differences, and the acceptance of differences.

The first moment in particular, the analysis of contexts and the identification of different languages within specific cultures, leads us to pay attention to some specific aspects:

• *Occurrence of different cultures and points of view*

A first important aspect is to recognise and observe the presence of different cultures within the same social space and in a fabric of social relations that can give a different interpretation and a different meaning to the same images that are observed from different cultural assumptions (a colour or a form, for example, has different meanings in different cultures). Moreover, each culture has its own peculiarity in the way it observes and gives importance to visual elements that also depend on the prevailing symbolic codes of interpretation (iconic, textual cultures, etc.) and this differentiation can also change across generations (think of the digital native generations compared to their teachers).

• *The relationship between cultures*

In this growing differentiation, the relationship between cultures should never be taken for granted. In particular, an accurate analysis of the context can detect the presence of cultures considered dominant or the majority and other residual cultures that may have relationships of coexistence, power asymmetry, or integration/inclusion. Starting with this information, educational strategies can be more effective and better understand how an image can reflect the relational configuration existing between the observed cultures.

• *The meaning of images in visual studies across cultures*

This meaning includes the awareness of the multiplication of visual culture, understood as a set of different images but united by being produced and reproduced socially, and the relevance of the visual, understood as a set of ways of seeing. Ways of seeing always accompany vision because they inevitably contribute to the production of visual culture, which are inscribed in it and through it are suggested, reproduced, or resisted.

• *What significance images take on within different cultures*

It is very important to pay attention to the function that an image can play within a society at a specific historical moment and in a specific culture, i.e. its capacity to act within the socio-cultural fabric that welcomes it (and of which it can – in some cases – be representative).

• *Using the visual during context analysis in educational practices*

How can context analysis strategies that are based on the visual in educational practice, in a learning situation, be relevant? The objective is more and more to consider images – drawings, maps, decorative elements, and, above all, photos – as something more than attractive illustrations or decorative elements to enrich a text.

The introduction of new technologies, visual in particular, in educational and pedagogical research has not only changed how research is conducted in the educational field but has also brought about significant changes in teacher training (Knoblauch 2012; Cescato 2017). The advent of digitalisation, along with the miniaturisation of both video cameras and storage media, has led to a dramatic increase in the use of video, particularly in terms of video production. This has led to the introduction of new teaching practices and new training initiatives derived from the analysis of these practices. The use of video, at an educational and didactic level on the one hand, and as an instrument for field observation on the other, offers a variety of benefits along with some critical issues. One of the advantages is the capacity to allow for an analytical vision of complex actions, which may be reviewed at different times by a variety of interlocutors (Falcinelli & Gaggioli 2016).

Knowledge of the context is very useful when using visual images as a teaching method because it improves critical thinking skills through teacher-facilitated discussions of visual images (D'Alessandro & Sciarra 2005). This strategy encourages participation through a group problem-solving process. It uses art/everyday images/symbols to teach thinking, communication skills, and visual literacy. Students can contribute to the discussion by presenting their own observations and ideas to the class. All contributions are accepted and considered neutrally by the teacher and class so that students can learn from the perspectives of others.

Using visual languages to analyse cultural differences emphasizes the learning process, individually and in conjunction with others, rather than the instructor's dissemination of knowledge. Therefore, this process is learner-driven, places the power under the learners' control, and the focus is the product. Learners are not given a right answer because the process of learning and discussing is the answer.

5.2

Visual Literacy: Ability to decode images

For "visual literacy" we intend the ability to decode, interpret, and give meaning to images for their value of information or message. The language we use to express this concept is meaningful because it denounces a gap: we use "literacy", a word connected to literature and the ability to read texts and written documentation after having learned the alphabet, the morphology, and the syntax of a language, that is, the grammar; at the same time we use the verb "to read" to express the intention of decoding an image because the verb "to see" or "to look at" the image does not have the same meaning of decrypting the style and content of a visual message. For this reason, as we will see, Paul Martin Lester wrote a handbook for students explicitly delivering a grammar with which to "read" visual communication with images.

"Visual literacy" is a core theme not only for experts of visual communication, but also for educators and art historians. Between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the development of visual skills started to be considered as fundamental for human learning (Avgerinou, Ericson 1997; Vezzoli 2017; Farné 2019). In effect, visual competencies help people scrutinise and discern the meaning of the objects, symbols, gestures, and expressions in the images, comprehending advertisements and works of art (Elkins 2010). Nowadays, these visual skills are considered very important because of the centrality of images and the visual media in the contemporary world. Nevertheless, we also need to have these competences to read an image of the past, produced according to a different code in a different context. The knowledge of the historical context is in effect the first step to correctly reading each image and visual message from the past in the present. I will give two particular examples: the first one is an advertisement by a brand called Mombasa in Kenya; the second is a meme spread online by a famous Italian archaeological museum.

In the middle of the label the word "Farasi" is written; that is, a company which produces barbed wire. In effect, the panel is nicely framed by the fence posts. On the left is written "Best Quality" in a white spot, underlining the loyalty of the company, while on the other side there is a white Pegasus, the mythological winged horse, about to fly. The combination of these elements is very meaningful. Normally we associate barbed wire with negative situations, like a prison or a war trench. The designer of the advertisement inverts this common place and perception by using blue, the colour of the sky, and adding the figure of a winged horse, which can fly over the fence to freedom. In this way, the barbed wire is not the image of a prison but a symbol of the freedom that you can obtain in your property, from which you can leave like Pegasus. To correctly read this advertisement: 1) you need to know the symbology of the colours, the traditional meaning of barbed wire in the common sense, and the mythological value of Pegasus as an image of freedom; 2) you need to recognise the inversion of polarity created by the advertiser; and 3) you must grasp the need of the brand to free itself from the negative perception of a barbed wire fence.

The first image is depicted on a blue panel attached to a fence bordering a private property in Kilifi (fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Mombasa advertisement (Kilifi, Kenya)

The second image is an Internet meme spread on the occasion of Mother's Day by the official Facebook page of the Archeological Museum of Venice (fig. 2).

Fig. 2. Sample of a meme, Archeological Museum of Venice (Italy)

In the contemporary world, a meme is a "unit of information that succeeds within a given social and cultural context, to become a model for textual production" (Marino 2015). A meme is an "atomic" element of a culture, a concentrate of meaning, able to become viral online thanks to sharing, and continuously changing sense. The meme I am analysing is a highly cultivated image produced by a museum from an important work of art, a statue of Demeter. Demeter is the Greek goddess of wheat, famous in mythology for having desperately looked for her daughter Kore, who was kidnapped and raped by Hades. In the image, the statue of the goddess is accompanied by the phrase "I figli so piezz' 'e Kore". This is a parody of the title of a popular and "trashy" Neapolitan movie in Neapolitan dialect, "I figli so piezz' 'e core" (1981); that is "Children are pieces of our heart". Substituting the spelling "core" with "Kore", we have the same pronunciation but "core" is the heart whereas "Kore" is the name of the daughter of Demeter. In this way, the meme alludes to the fact that the goddess looked for her piece of heart, her daughter, desperately. To understand the game, you must be very familiar with Greek art and mythology as well as popular movies of the '80s, and you have to be part of a culture that celebrates Mother's Day.

These two examples show how strongly visual literacy is connected to the historical and cultural context in which the visual message is spread.

5.3

Intercultural interaction with visual literacy: Subjective and collective narrations

Contemporary reflection on art education faces issues relating to the complexity of contemporary social, political, cultural, and economic processes conveyed by multicultural and multidisciplinary languages. Measuring oneself in visual languages implies analysing anthropological, cultural, and linguistic horizons in which individuals grow and express themselves. This kind of analysis translates into an intercultural interaction that requires literacy of the different symbolic-linguistic categories that underlie visual languages. Just like the grammar of each verbal language has unique differences, the visual language of each culture has a unique visual grammar.

As we have also seen in the previous paragraphs, visual language and visual grammar are culture-related elements. Over the centuries, images have conveyed the evolution of the collective gaze that is an expression of a specific social attitude and the narration of a cultural curvature. The visual perspective, by producing displacement, contaminations, and intercultural exchanges, creates spaces of interpretation, aesthetic-emotional participation, and production of meaning. Each individual thus takes on multiple dimensions, becoming the crossroads of different glances, behaviours, and social belonging.

From an educational point of view, we can define intercultural interaction as a bridge between several perspectives but the heterogeneity of the context must be taken into consideration. In order to develop a transcultural framework, we need to improve the capacity of critical thinking while experiencing situations of cultural displacement. This is extremely important if we wish to increase creativity and facilitate dialogue and solidarity.

Visual education should move towards a cross-cultural understanding approach, which requires that concepts and issues are viewed from the multiple perspectives of diverse ethnic groups. True intercultural understanding should allow individuals to respond to the properties and qualities that exist in many visual forms across cultures.

Recent European postcolonial studies stressed the importance of "decolonising" institutions, public spaces, curricula, and private and public narrations. Decolonisation, therefore, is not merely an event that took place when and where formal colonial rules came to an end but rather a process of challenging the cultural and epistemic legacies of colonialism in broader domains such as history, aesthetics, art, literature, and philosophy (Andersen 2018).

We should challenge the ability to "decolonise the mind" (Ngũgĩ 1981) to avoid creating new patterns of oppression and cultural flattening. For Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, one of the strongest strategies of domination in colonialism was to control cultures as well as one's self-perception and role in the world. The creation and diffusion of a framework in which different cultural elements are underestimated and identified as subordinate alienated people's trust in their name, identity, language, abilities, and, ultimately, in themselves (Ngũgĩ 1981). As Paulo Freire (1987; 1997) observed, decolonisation is a mutual process between colonisers/colonised and oppressed/oppressors which weakens the conditioning and representations that undermine a unique vision of authenticity.

In order to enhance, experiment, and narrate the complexity of perceptions, interpretations, and cultural challenges, it is appropriate to develop interdisciplinary action-research frameworks (educators, teachers, artists, communication experts, human scientists, politicians, stakeholders, local communities, etc.). In this way, we can consolidate a relevant revision of those paradigms of superficial and stereotyped understanding.

To develop intercultural interaction in visual literacy, we must take the risk of inhabiting the contradictions of complexity. In this regard, awareness of historical and geo-political processes in which problems and resolutions are articulated allows us to analyse contexts and understand present and past internal community dynamics (Ahmed 2000). As everyone is a bearer of visual narrations, the subjective and collective frames of reference confront each other in the construction of identities where the local and global dimensions intertwine, triggering processes of shared and mixed knowledge.

Focusing on cultural innovation means enhancing the use of different languages through which processes of mutual appreciation of individual and collective hybrid features are initiated. This process requires new theoretical frameworks along with postcolonial educational strategies (Aman 2018; Andreotti 2011) oriented toward the recognition of oneself as the other, locally contextualised and, at the same time, globally 'contaminated'. Visuality evolves as the space for this articulated transition thanks to the number of explorative canons on which the heterogeneity of communication messages is based.

5.4

Critical approach and recognition of different cultural perspectives: Cultural appreciation of plurality

We live in a visual age that reshapes social processes and ways of communication, perception, and interpretation. Perceiving and interpreting the world through visuals rather than words has a direct effect on cultural structure and processes, and "visuals" are the carriers of cultures throughout the modern world. Each culture has unique properties in the context of "values". Cultural values contain invisible moral elements and therefore they are not clearly and obviously visible and tangible structures. However, reflections of the moral side of culture can be observed in artefacts as visible culture elements. The fact that visible culture elements include cultural values indicates that globalisation can affect visual language only to a certain extent. In our visual age, there are differences in intercultural visual languages despite the rule of dominant cultures. An educative approach must take into account that the culture of the place in which the visual message is generated interacts with the visual perspective of the observer. In this context, it is inevitable that the generated images would reflect the visual language of the culture they belong to as well as the visual culture of the observer. An intercultural approach to visual languages means appreciating their multiple social uses; for instance, urging social change and improvement through visuals that range from graffiti to paintings and prints. Related activities might involve filmmaking and video, or more traditional media such as painting and sculpture. Or when visuals are used to enhance and enrich the environment through decorations and embellishment in the built habitat – for example, decorative elements in facades, clothing, and other cross-cultural artefacts or to celebrate and give meaning to key events in people's lives.

In order to prevent the risk of homologation or closure in some localisms, we must consider the multitude of cultural phenomena that transmigrate, interface, and mix. This attitude can be very effective if we are able to create an interaction with plurality by deconstructing a monolithic concept of culture. Such a process can be implemented through a dialogue between the individual and collective meanings of images that coexist and describe trajectories of interdependence.

It is essential to understand how, in the encounter among different identities, knowledge and traditions that belong to hybrid roots can be rediscovered and enhanced by promoting creative reinterpretations (Hannerz 1996; Geertz 1999).

The research field of intercultural communication could profit from a larger interaction with the diverse fashions of visual languages, such as helping to overcome linguistic barriers, offering double cues for understanding (textual and visual elements), supporting seeing the big picture and the relationships among the concepts (Bresciani 2014).

> To maximize the benefits of visualisation for supporting intercultural communication, it seems essential to investigate how cultural differences affect the encoding and decoding of visual inputs. […] Colour and aesthetic preferences are not innate, they are learned. The meaning of symbols and the understanding of metaphors is inextricably linked to the culture. Even more remarkably, the environment in which we live has the power to shape the way we look at the world. (Bresciani 2014, pp. 83–84)

The recognition of different cultural perspectives can be supported by reciprocity and decentralisation, describing an approach in which coexistence with

otherness is crucial. In this regard, we can mention the paradigm of creolisation (Cohen 2010), from which we can outline interesting educational paths and outcomes.

> Creolization is cultural creativity in process. When cultures come into contact, expressive forms and performances emerge from their encounter, embodying the sources that shape them yet constituting new and different entities. Fluid in their adaptation to changing circumstances and open to multiple meanings, Creole forms are expressions of culture in transition and transformation. Even as these emergent forms persist and become institutionalized after initial culture contact, they continue to embody multiplicity, render multivocality, and negotiate contestation while also serving as means of national identity and creative expression. (Baron, Cara 2011, p. 7)

Overcoming stereotypes allows the promotion of a cultural appreciation of plurality, with unexpected effects. Decentralisation requires an identity reformulation (Chambers, 2018), which can be facilitated by an intercultural approach aimed at capturing the dynamics and the effects generated by very distant yet not untranslatable and incomparable codes (Fabietti et al. 2012).

As educators in the field of visual communication, it is important to take into consideration the different narratives and biographies promoting mutual interpretations and understanding. The challenge is to become part of a global context with several heterogeneous and hybrid cultural roots, while running the risk of considering visuality an easy way of understanding.

> Mindful intercultural communicators will be sensitive to the ways that members of other cultures perceive the world differently from the way that they do, and place different interpretations on what they perceive. […] we must strive to use visual communication with the same level of awareness and sensitivity that we bring to our use of verbal and non-verbal communication. (Sadri, Flammia 2011, p. 209)

5.5
Creative experiences: Design, production, and mastery of visual languages

> Visual art education encourages individuals to be more innovative in their thinking. Artworks often: address universal human concerns and conditions; bridge cultural and economic divides; are open to a variety of interpretations; can trigger emotional responses due to their expressive content; and contain complex layers of meaning, symbols and metaphor. (Alter 2010, p. 3)

Designing creative experiences allows social actors to negotiate different ideas and overcome individual cultural models. The skills of the subjects are redefined within participative dynamics, especially when they carry out activities based on the paradigm of bottom-up democracy and participatory planning (Mayo 2013).

This process of awareness is a way to prevent an “ethnocentric spiral” limited only to the assimilation or rejection of otherness. Ethnocentrism reinforces the perspective of the dominant group by amplifying the gaps between two or more interlocutors (individual or collective). This approach generates in-group and out-group situations in which the members try to protect their own boundaries of thinking, feeling, and responding (Ting-Toomey 2012). If the dialogue is based on a mono-cultural and self-referential approach, one can only create inequalities and exclusion on a cultural basis, producing inhospitable living spaces (Cadei, Deluigi 2019) where the relationship with otherness is a mere expression of tolerance.

It is better to promote creativity by changing conditions in the environment than by trying to make people think more creatively (Csikszentmihalyi 1996); if we establish a learning context that encourages displacement, curiosity, complexity, dialogue, and imagination, we can have a greater impact on the learning process.

Therefore, in a learning situation, we must promote creative thinking as a way of understanding and interaction and look for different components to support this approach: *fluency* (generating many ideas), *flexibility* (shifting perspective easily), *originality* (conceiving of something new), and *elaboration* (building on other ideas) (Torrance, in Alvino 1990). In order to create an appropriate educational setting, it is important not to design operative spaces and times in a static structured way, so as not to "trap" creative expressions. It is necessary and useful to have a reference plan linked to educational, artistic, and expressive objectives and purposes, but, at the same time, it is good to foresee a flexible course of activities, accepting the solicitations and feedback of the participants during the experience.

In this frame, we can see artistry as

> a valuable in-process, intrinsic, transformational experience in which each individual has rights to creative self-expression and creating bodies of work based on his or her own abilities and concerns with emphasis on increasingly global relationships among culture, people, and economic activity. (Bastos, Zimmerman 2017, p. 387)

The organisation of inventive contexts and activities open to plurality facilitates the expression of the subjects as both individuals and members of a community. Through visual communication we can mediate a cross-culture interaction because the development of the visual language serves as a universal form of communication bridging linguistic and cultural gaps (Nawar, Gabr 2013). The creative use of visual language allows us to establish a dialogue, even in the absence of linguistic mediations, paying attention to the meanings that each subject attributes to the images. The visual communication system is one of the media that works like a supplement to languages to create better and faster understanding (ibid.). We can consider it one of the first levels of contact and impact among differences, with nonverbal language, body expression, gestures, sounds, and all the sensory dimensions that can be involved in the interaction.

> The multicultural experiences have a significant promoting effect on the creativity of the subject, but such promoting effect depends on: (1) whether the subject really obtains the multicultural experience; only when the subject has a certain understanding of the new culture can the multicultural experience be formed; (2) the participants acquired the prototype characteristics contained in the multicultural experience. If the multicultural experience included the prototype that had a promoting effect on the creative work, the multicultural experience had a promoting effect on the creativity. (Tan, Wang, Guo, Zeng, Zhou, & Cao 2019, p. 9)

The multicultural dimension of creativity can guarantee the right of expression through plural languages that give dignity and value to plural voices and diverse paradigms of communication. Creative research and practice in art education should go beyond the comparative method and move toward models of interdependence and hybridisation. This process is effective when we are aware of plural contexts and work in a situated way.

> Arts-informed research can provide opportunities to problematize research methodologies and practices generating inclusive designs that allow all who participate to be respected and recognised. Therefore, arts-informed research has potential for not only disturbing narrow understandings of creativity, but also of shaping connective and socially-responsive approaches to research design that may have a significant impact on many lives. (Bastos, Zimmerman 2017, pp. 393–394)

5.6

Transcultural validation of experience: Verification and corroboration of visual languages within meaningful interactions

The concept and the project of transculturalism were originally defined by Fernando Ortiz in 1940 in his book *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar* [Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar]:

> to describe this process, the Latinate word transcultural provides us with a term that does not suggest the idea of one culture having to lean toward another, but of a transition between two cultures, both active and participating parties, both contributing in their own ways, cooperating in the advent of a new civilization reality.

The prefix "trans" here refers to continuities across borders and the permeability of borders. We want to attract attention at the interpersonal and community levels so as to promote a process of transformation within human interactions.

> Transculturality means mobility in space, circulation or flow, but it is neither synonymous with them nor reducible to them. Transculturality goes beyond the flows, focuses the processes within exchange circuits in local contexts in which various forms emerge. (Gasparini 2013, p. 12)

One meaningful creative practice is the one recognised as "learning by doing" (Bruce, Bloch 2012; Gibbs 2013) in which it is possible to connect attitudes, ways of perception, and interpretations to create deeper mutual understandings.

Knowing oneself and the other through elements of proximity and commonality opens up the opportunity to imagine and put in action new opportunities of coexistence and hybridisation on personal, relational, educational, and artistic levels. Using this approach in an art-educational framework (according to the paradigm developed in TICASS) might give space to transcultural scenarios for the implementation of new dialogic practices.

> The reinventing of new common culture is therefore based on the meeting and the intermingling of the different peoples and cultures. In other words one's identity is not strictly one dimensional (the self) but is now defined and more importantly recognised in rapport with the other. In other words, one's identity is not singular but multiple. (Cuccioletta 2001/2002, p. 8)

Hybridisation, as the interaction of people and media from different cultures, is a communication-based phenomenon crucial for finding scenarios for understanding the importance of the dynamics of history, politics, and economies. We can call this approach "critical transculturalism" (Kraidy 2005) and it can be used to validate the experience of using visual languages as meaningful media.

Dialogue through images allows the exchange of messages, understanding backgrounds, and discovering different ways of representing the plurality of realities. Although we know that this process is partial and refers to personal categories, we can still search for elements of comprehension. The intersubjective relationship produces knowledge, memory, and projects, not to be understood as parallel dimensions but as interconnected components in terms of reciprocity, cooperation, and active participation.

On one hand, we can value the paradigm of «transcultural memory» considering remembrance as a process in which the representation of diverse events flows beyond national or cultural boundaries, transcending, without negating them,

spatial, temporal, and ideational differences (Bond, Rapson 2014). On the other hand, we can refer to a "transcultural visual communication system" (Nawar 2020) to discuss the future of communication and the possibility of developing a standardised universal pictographic communication system that fosters mutual understanding and bridges diverse cultures in a post human era. In both cases, we must focus on contextualisation and the realisation of associated practices in which people can discover the multiple paths on which diversity is negotiated through appropriation, mediation, translation, "re-historicisation," and the reinterpretation of signs.

> A transcultural perspective [...] is a means and a perspective that helps us understand how that culture that we call ours was formed in history and is formed in the present. [...] We become sensitive to the ways in which some cultures are formed through interactive relationships with other cultures, and not as a "pure" product of a nation or locality. (Gasparini 2013, p. 13)

In the search for the connections between visuality, current global processes, and transcultural negotiations, it is possible to reconsider visual studies from the perspective of the transcultural approach in order to overcome ideological pluralism and liberal multiculturalism. In this frame, "cultural differences, representation of otherness, recognition of alterities as well as diverse processes of identification and subjectivism, cannot become obstacles for the expansion, legitimisation and concretion of visual extra-disciplinarity" (AGI 2007).

5.7
Subjective and collective skills empowerment: Successful and sustainable visual competences – knowledge and abilities – within mutual and social understanding

The process and the categories indicated above allow the empowerment of critical reading, interpretation, use, and production of images. The mastery of visual grammar and lexicon is as productive for the individual (as a communicating subject-identity) as for the development of collective narratives (produced by the métissage of categories, currents, thoughts, and plural cultures). The contextual knowledge and identification of visual languages within specific cultural frames allow subjects to interrogate reality by acknowledging uncertainty and plurality as dimensions to be considered and valued in the specificity of the existential situation. The ability to decode images enables reading the contents and interpreting the intentionality of communication by using interdisciplinary categories.

The intercultural interaction on visual literacy, between subjective and collective narrations, can open new horizons of meanings and understanding:

> researchers from different cultures are inclined to study different creative processes or processing modes and assign different degrees of importance to the same aspect of the creative process. [...] An exposure to a foreign culture could help expand the conceptual boundaries established in the individual's culture, providing inspiration to break free from his/her culture's limiting sets and initiating the creative re-appropriation/synthesis of diverse ideas. [...] Individuals exposed to different cultures have a great likelihood of generating novel or new things through combining different elements from the experienced cultures, which would be perceived as novel by individuals who have experience with only one or some of those cultures. (Shao, Zhang, Zhou, Gu, & Yuan 2019, p. 4)

An interpretative approach to different cultural messages encourages a greater appreciation of plurality and, more consciously, sharper communication skills. The use of visual analysis promotes a responsible relativisation of one's point of view, an orientation toward a non-generalising and superficial glimpse of reality.

> The greatest danger in using visuals for intercultural communication is the mistaken perception that there is an external world that is seen in exactly the same way by members of all cultures around the world. […] Mindful intercultural communications will be sensitive to the ways that members of other cultures perceive the world differently from the way that they do, and place different interpretations on what they perceive. […] As mindful intercultural communicators, we must strive to use visual communication with the same level of awareness and sensitivity that we bring to our use of verbal and non-verbal communication. (Sadri, Flammia, 2011, p. 209)

Creative experiences allow participants to interconnect their skills, increasing knowledge and empathy. Through the comprehension of visual culture, we can better understand multicultural social fabrics.

> The great power of the visual arts is their ability to have various and profound effects on our lives; but that power can also make them manipulative, colonizing, and disenfranchizing. Visual culture that is considered good for one group may hurts others and the complexity of this relationship needs to be considered as part of educational experience. (Freedman 2003, p. 53)

An open dialogue within the plurality of cultural productions empowers people with a "nomadic" identity and innovative codes useful to prevent an ethnocentric perspective.

> This process is important because it creates possibilities for the critique of visual culture at all levels to achieve democratic educational goals intended to guide the preparation of reflective and responsible citizens, consequently leading to a more socially conscious and equitable society. From a visual culture perspective, production empowers makers and viewers by promoting critique through the process of making, encouraging analysis during viewing, and enabling makers and viewers to claim ownership of images and designed objects. (Freedman, Stuhr 2004, p. 826)

Finally, the transcultural validation of the experience enhances more authentic expressions of *métissage* from the perspectives of engagement and consciousness as a significant educational process. We can agree with Paulo Freire when he describes

> the practice of freedom, as the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with their reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. The development of an educational methodology that facilitates this process, will inevitably lead to tension and conflict within our society. But it could also contribute to the formation of a new man and mark the beginning of a new era in Western history. (Freire 1987, p. 15)

In order not to remain inactive on the "Western bank of the river of the world," we can design research hypotheses and creative experiences which, through interdisciplinary and intercultural practice of visual languages, intercept original paths of comprehension. Through collaborative research in the field of art education, we can empower subjective and collective relations and narrations, promote social justice, and prevent inequalities by proposing accessible scenarios of mutual responsibility and social transformation.

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