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EDUCATIONAL STRATEGIES FOR VISUAL LANGUAGES

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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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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)



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

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).

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.