

The Visual Artefact As Site for Cross-Cultural Engagement: Making New Connections, Imagining New Possibilities (The International Journal of Interdisciplinary Social Sciences: Annual Review; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18848/1833-1882/CGP/v04i01/52818>, ISSN: 1833-1882). Donna Wright

Abstract: Imagination, aesthetic perception, and the allusionary function of the visual are fundamental to our everyday life experiences. The associative qualities of visual aesthetics particularly, give them interpretive possibilities which enable us to dynamically engage with external environments on multiple semiotic levels. Visual imagery provides a critical link to making sense of the unfamiliar and to extending association to others, therefore providing practical processes to facilitate shared meaning. These fundamental attributes of visual media can provide enormous scope for creative innovation across cultures. Using theories of creativity and cultural semiotics this paper will provide the reader with ideas-spaces where various visual artefacts will be momentarily placed as a way of reaching across time and cultures to interact with our imagination and to provide for possibilities of new intercultural connections and understandings.

Keywords: Cultural Anthropology, Creative Arts Practice, Intercultural Communication

Introduction

ARTISTIC EXPRESSION UTILISES practical creativity, and as a communication tool it has the capability of developing new understandings within and across cultures. Throughout human history arts practice has been instrumental in providing interactive, reflective, analytical contexts in which to make sense of an immediate world, and to extend a worldview by drawing out new knowledge, thereby building new

meaning systems in which to interpret experience. Applying creative processes in this way generates knowledge and understanding that can afford a multiplicity of ways of encountering and representing intercultural experiences. Arts practice has historically enabled cultural boundaries to be crossed to make comment on and about the periphery, by mediating unfamiliar cultural forms and by providing connections between people and their societies, and between past and present. Imagination, aesthetic perception, and the allusionary function of the visual are fundamental to our everyday life experiences. The associative qualities of visual artefacts particularly, give them interpretive possibilities which enable us to dynamically engage with external environments on multiple semiotic levels. Visual culture provides a critical link to making sense of the unfamiliar and to extending association to others, therefore providing practical processes to facilitate a sharing of meaning. These fundamental attributes of the visual can provide enormous scope for creative innovation across cultures. Using theories of creativity and cultural semiotics this paper will provide the reader with ideas-spaces where various visual artefacts will be momentarily placed as a way of reaching across time and cultures to interact with our imagination and to provide for possibilities of new intercultural connections and understandings.

Sharing Meaning

It is generally understood that social groups employ systems of meaning to orient themselves to the world. An individual co-exists in this complex social system through its capacity to learn the signs contained within its conventional value system and to retain this information in order to participate in the society of which it belongs. Socialisation necessitates the ability of humans to learn, retain, reflect on, interpret, and make use of these signs and sign systems in order to reinforce a group mentality that can maintain a communal consciousness. This enhances the chances of both individual and collective survival. Cultural semiotics refers to these human meaning-systems as semiocultural spaces or semiospheres, and positions a culture's centre as the controlling mechanism for a society's myth formation. This centre constructs and organises meaning into an integrated structural model of the world, ordering life into meaningful stability that is highly valued as the normalised condition in which the culture's society operates. A culture's durability is therefore maintained through this conventionality and is supported by transgenerational epigenetics which allows cultural memory to be encoded. The advantage to this is that these cultural memory codes form a patterning of interrelated symbols, ideas and behaviours which are easily learned and shared cross-generationally.

A hierarchy of meaning-systems is built over time and imbedded through evolution and epigenetics so that each preceding level of meaning is taken for granted and integrated into, and thereby contained within the levels of meaning-systems that follow. This forms the ontogenetic development of the human being and is factored into the evolutionary process. In this way culture is shared as implicit and learned human behavior. Bloom describes this phenomenon as 'conformity enforcement' and has identified it as one of five essential elements of a 'collective learning machine'. As a society becomes more complex so does the conventional value systems that support its continuity. This also allows for inference to take place during interpretation. Eco proposes that every text will describe or presuppose a possible world that can be inferred by comparing it to the lifeworld of the interpreter. The interpreter will then try to bring a sense of order to its meaning.

Because individuals exist inside these larger socio-cultural contexts, immersed in an interdependent world of knowledge, the capacity to adapt new information and share ideas becomes essential for connecting us to other human beings and to other realities beyond our periphery. Over time meaning-systems come into contact with other cultures; other meaning systems, and these incursions have an effect on the internal structure of the worldview of each, providing a process of collision, interaction, transaction, transition and renewal. The innovative quality of the system lies in its ability to allow each generation to integrate new information from the periphery, and to build into the system new ideas and new values. Through memory and our imagination we can recall, reassemble and replay images and ideas, restructuring old information and combining new information we encounter to create novel representations of our world. This process of reconstruction helps us fit the unfamiliar into our stable perception of the world making similar but different patterns, and through this process, we can build images which can be re-presented in new ways. Sometimes this practice produces misinterpretations and other times it draws out approximate equivalences

that can assist in building a bridge towards mutual understanding. The creative function has the inherent capacity to support these innovative, intertextual processes by linking spatial conceptions to semiotic mediations for the production and reception of new information.

This in turn provides a context in which to support knowledge discovery which may facilitate intercultural awareness and understanding.

Images as Cultural Carriers Vision is a cultural construction that has to be learned and it entails both affective and cognitive activity which provides us with shared aesthetic experience. Because images are cultural carriers they can effectively facilitate efficient representations of specific cultural viewpoints and identities. Congleton suggests that 'art does not exist in a vacuum, but rests on human experience, both the artist's and viewer's cultural, historical, and psychological contexts'. Therefore visual culture reflects knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes that are stimulated by an overlapping array of images we might have seen in the past. The work of art or the practice of making art carries semiotic peculiarities which can both serve the function of its society because it is constrained by particular cultural values, and it can also serve as a cultural creator in that it has the power to mediate difference, shifting our thinking and thereby changing the way we view ourselves, our world and our reactions and interactions with it. The creative aspect of the visual image is that the same object can be interpreted by different focalizers, which allows for complex readings that can mediate between what a culture suggests and what experiences are really actuated. We are constantly cross-referencing visual experiences in the process of making meaning and in doing so we continually reshape personal and cultural meaning.

This is an interpretivist worldview which suggests that all knowledge is socially constructed from subjective experience and inference, and therefore while meaning is sought and made within a context, the subjectively experiential process also allows for multiple meanings to be accommodated. Sullivan notes that 'meaning is made rather

than found as human knowing is transacted, mediated, and constructed in social contexts'. A dialectic method within an interpretivist domain of inquiry will place art practice as a change dimension between agency and action. This means that the discursive nature of interpretivist inquiry positions arts practice as the production of subjectivist meaning within a making-meaning dimension. As a change agent, meaning made through making art is both constructivist and transformative, and as the knowledge is grounded in the practice of making through knowledge that is culturally contextualised it 'enters into communities of users whose interests apply new understandings from different personal, educational, social, and cultural perspectives'.

A successful function of artistic expression is that it operates as a modality through which we can better understand the conscious mind and the familiar, and come to terms with the unfamiliar through an imaginative expression of uncertainty. The generative capacity of creative practice positions visual artefacts as dynamic sites or 'ideas spaces' which can cultivate innovation towards the creation of new meaning across cultures. Visual artefacts can reflect novel meaning-making processes brought about through intercultural exchange. Therefore creative arts practice has the ability to reach across generations and cultures by offering a distinctive communicative language which connects us in ways that can give rise to the formation of shared meaning

systems. This creative practice can evolve meaning- systems which has enormous scope for cross-cultural sharing.

Novel Representations Emerge

The emergence and impact of new information via cultural artefacts integrally shapes our co-evolutionary future. The artefact gives us access to the conceptual worlds of peoples so that we can, in an extended sense of the term, converse with them across space and time. This access can also trigger a discord between the familiar and the unfamiliar. The shock of the unfamiliar particularly an unfamiliar human experience, a culture different from our own for instance, radically reorganises and reshapes our conceptions and perceptions of reality. An unfamiliar aesthetic with a completely different logic for form and function can repel or attract; but both play a significant part in the emergence of an entirely new meaning; a meaning that is neither of the former nor the latter symbolic system, but that nonetheless irrecoverably changes that affected culture. Encountering new ideas-spaces can increase clarity for representing either an existing problem, or for approaching a fresh direction in thought, facilitating new pathways to inspiration and understanding. For instance, new information communicated through an artist's response to cultural difference has historically provided insights into both continuity and transformation of social and individual identity.

This correlates with the experience of visual dissonance which is a type of psychological tension that occurs when we experience a discrepancy between what we expect to see and what we actually see. When our expectations are not fulfilled a resolution to the tension is required either through reduction, reinterpretation or change. This also corresponds with Waldrop's ideas concerning complexity and emergence in that we engage in spontaneous self-organisation and adaptive behaviour in an effort to bring chaos and order into balance (1994). His notion that 'the edge of chaos is where life has enough stability to sustain itself and enough creativity to deserve the name of life' supports Lotman's engagement with a culture's periphery as a site for semiotic innovation (1994 pi2). Arts practice, responding or reacting to dissonance can compel us to consider the ways in which culture influences the transmission of messages.

Cultural semiotics posits that untranslatability increases as we move from the centre of a

culture to its periphery. Tension builds up on the boundaries of these semicultural spaces because of confrontation and interaction between different socio-cultural codings and this activates semiotic dynamism. The peripheries are the frontier areas where semiotic activity is intensified because there are constant incursions from the outside. These disruptive encounters draw out creativity facilitating new meaning-systems. A culture's periphery is the area that provides the most innovative semiotic activity. Transcultural engagements provide a shift in focus from the centre's conventionality to the boundary's instability. Unfamiliarity precipitates an uncertainty that cannot be fully perceived through conventional codified meaning-systems. An untranslatable phenomenon activates the creative function, thus generating new information, creating innovation in the communication process. Semiotic mediation, acting as a bridge between the human being and the immediate environment, provides

a space for imagination, reflection, adaptation and the construction of new signs and sign

systems. The innovative potentiality of this communication process draws out creative resolutions which can take the form of new ideas, new artefacts and even new languages.

Meaning-making is inherently adaptive and cooperative, and as a consequence, is flexible and open. This allows disruptive encounters with the unfamiliar or the untranslatable to draw out creativity and it is in this way that new ideas and new languages can emerge and be gradually absorbed into a culture's centre. It is this generative process that is so vital to cultural change and diversity. Intercultural communication exploits this dynamism by providing experiential spaces for sharing meaning, while respecting the various collective and individual identities between cultures. This allows for a reconstitution of information, ideas and values which can produce new contexts. These new contexts can then provide us with spaces for making sense of uncertainties in new environments through the opportunity to interact and negotiate. They also provide underlying conceptions that anchor and stabilize meaning, allowing the imagination to create, enhance and enrich our knowledge about the world.

Individuals who have access to belief systems on a culture's periphery might also respond and represent an illusion of knowing that has little real understanding of the wider history and body of beliefs that constitutes the larger community of the encountered 'other'. While this new information is at odds with traditional cultural forms it sets up challenges for one to adopt new perspectives and identities, allowing the individual to make superficial commitments to a new identity. For instance, ancient artefacts provide us with insights into past societies and cultural norms. Our exposure to them produces new ideas, and new ways of seeing ourselves in relation to our own culture's history and in relation to other, less familiar cultures. Human history reveals this continuous cross-cultural fertilisation of ideas.

Intercultural Exchanges

On the slopes of Monte Pelligrino in Sicily is an extraordinary, engraved wall panel, part of which depicts a group of thirteen figures in some form of dance or ritual. The engravings on limestone cave walls are variously dated between 8,000 and 11,000BC. The figures are drawn in a naturalistic style with exceptional skill and an assuredness and understanding of perspective, foreshortening and anatomy. The small Mediterranean island of Sicily has been continually influenced by contact with many cultures. Sicilians have one of the most interesting and diverse genetic heritages which reflect a very early, common ancestry with Middle East, North Africa and the Caucasus region of west-central Asia, and this dates back at least 8,000BC coinciding with the development of agriculture (Oppenheimer and Bradshaw Foundation 2008). While a number of interpretations have been put forward these engravings are clearly representative of the community's cultural beliefs and customs, and as

a language, forms an overarching narrative that is familiar to most cultures around world.

In the late 1800s, post-impressionist artists held a fascination with all things 'primitive' in art and cultural practice. This had a profound impact on the language of art in Europe in the early years of the 20th century. It provided new ways to communicate the complexities of a culture rapidly moving into modernity. Henri Matisse frequented the Mediterranean region, including its islands, from as early as the late 1890's. Could it be that during his travels in and around Sicily he was privy to local knowledge about the Epipaleolithic caves on the slopes of Monte Pellegrino? The central dance circle in Matisse's *Joy of Live* (1905-6) and his famous wall mural, *The Dance* (1910) show a striking resemblance to the form, composition and fluidic style of the primitive carvings found in the Addaura caves. In 1906, Henri Matisse introduced fellow artist, Pablo Picasso to an African head sculpture, similar to the one shown in figure 4. Matisse and Picasso reportedly had long discussions concerning African art, which ignited both artists' ongoing interest in the art of these cultures. In 1907 Picasso visited the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro where he was confronted with what he described as 'all these objects that people had created with a sacred, magical purpose, to serve as intermediaries between them and the unknown, hostile forces surrounding them, attempting in that way to overcome their fears by giving them colour and form'. He

immediately began reworking a painting he had titled 'Les Femmes d'Alger' (O.J. no. 114v). Picasso never actually visited Africa, so his experience with African cultures was limited to selected encounters through dealers, collectors, and other artists influenced by African artefacts arriving from the newly formed French colonies. These cross-cultural encounters profoundly inspired early Cubism which is arguably one of the most influential movements in the history of modern art. This superficial identification with another culture can also disrupt the social cohesion of the interpreter's local society. Removed from any sources of social support or contextual reality the centre will initially rage against the chaos of the new. Picasso's subject matter was not novel; European artists had long been representing prostitution and female sexuality. His use of strong, bold colour and flattened surface had already been formally introduced and was at that time indicative of the Fauvist art movement. Nonetheless, the public was outraged by *Les Femmes d'Alger*. The public was confronted with an image so culturally unfamiliar as to render it grotesque in the conventional sensibilities of a European imagination. Freedman suggests that because our perceptions and interpretations are formed out

of defined cultural identities and viewpoints, physical features of visual culture are 'quickly analysed and organised into meaningful relationships'. The eye scans for familiar stimulus based on our memory store, and when we see an unexpected and alien form often focus our attention on it, attaching it to our related knowledge of form, in order to make meaning'. Freedman observes:

Our first response to visual form is to determine whether it is familiar and whether and how we will engage with it [...] We tend to look longest at things that are intriguing, but not overwhelming [therefore] people who view a work of art that is apparently unrelated to anything they have seen before might respond as if it is threatening [...] Unfamiliar images can result in misunderstanding and discomfort at the same time that it can enhance and enrich.

Visual features that are viewed out of context require deeper levels of information gathering for satisfactory recognition. This processing of visual dissonance can prompt us to find a more complex meaning or construct a new message. Sullivan notes that when our 'perspectives are radically disrupted existing frames of reference are unable to account for the new experience'. This activates a reflexive response that in turn encourages reflective deliberation on the unfamiliar in order to make it familiar, and thereby building on conscious self-knowledge. Art practice acts as an agency for creating and constructing interpretations as inquiries take place, and the flexible, performative quality of making art can generate new ideas while embracing a diversity of positions and perspectives. Post-impressionist painter Paul Gauguin's life history reads like a true intercultural narrative with his artistic practices and styles mirroring this intriguing dialogue. Born in Paris to French and Peruvian parents, he spent his childhood in both countries, travelled the French colonies and beyond as a merchant and Navy marine, married a Dane, lived with his family in Denmark, returned to France, spent time in Martinique, then moved to Tahiti. He lived out the

rest of his life in the Marquesas Islands. Similarly the place in which he felt most comfortable, the French Polynesian island group, was subject to continuous European contact and occupation from the 1500s, first by the Portuguese, then the Dutch, British, French and Spanish. The islands came increasingly under French 'protection' finally becoming a full colony in 1842. Gauguin's cultural influences are therefore extremely diverse, almost random in their visual expression. There is a sense that through Gauguin's rejection of European social norms and conventions he was attempting to bring together, not only an intercultural aesthetic experience, but a visual ideas-space which could allow for creative explorations into how our meaning systems, and therefore our world views, might be constructed. The title of one of his major works, *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* (1897)

perhaps best describes this lifelong inquiry which he clearly facilitates through arts-practice based research. His work directly and openly provides us with cross-cultural experience. *Figó: Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* Gauguin [France]

Gauguin's *Cruel Tales* is interesting because the male figure is represented in a seated Buddha position. However, while Gauguin was influenced by the popular adaptation of Japanese aesthetics, known as Japonism, the Japanese Buddha tends to be squat and is clothed. The male in *Cruel Tales* is more representative of the robust body of the Tibetan and North Asian post-Gupta Buddhas, as seen in figure 3. To expand this further, the Tibetan Buddha of this particular period draws influences from the art of the North Indian period of the seventh to eighth century with what the MET then suggests is 'an eclectic synthesis of elements drawn from the artistic traditions of Central Asia, India, Nepal, and China.'

Conclusion

Images have the expressive capacity to give vision and form to thoughts, ideas and feelings, and the practical creativity of the visual arts has the ability to construct intercultural ideas-spaces to facilitate the sharing of ideas towards the development of new understandings.

Visual culture provides us with interactive, reflective, analytical contexts in which to create and share this knowledge. Arts practice therefore continues to provide collaborative spaces for intercultural negotiation creating multiple, interconnected mediums for the production and reception of new information. Visual artefacts encourage a continuing discourse that can promote deeper understandings about our contemporary global community. As is the case throughout human history, the experience of art-making and visual-imaging will continue to facilitate creative dialogue across cultures, providing an opportunity to broaden our expressive range of meaning systems. This in turn will provide a context in which to support knowledge discovery which can enhance intercultural understanding. Creative practice expands our awareness of differences and similarities in existing cultural lifeworlds and with this comes the opportunity to break down cultural barriers. fresh and innovative approaches to our continuing investigations into the human communicative process and its complex systems of mutual understanding.