

Poučevanje likovne umetnosti – od nedolžnega očesa do potopitve in obratno

MARIJAN RICHTER

Povzetek Sredi 19. stoletja je John Ruskin, apologet poetike nedolžnega očesa, zagovarjal prelom z akademskim realizmom. Stoletje kasneje sta Gombrich in Goodman kritizirala Ruskinov romantični subjektivizem s pozicije visokega modernizma. Posledično se je okrepil »razsvetljenski« pristop v poučevanju likovne umetnosti. V zadnjem času si nekateri didaktični specialisti za namen uvajanja sodobne umetnosti v učni načrt namesto jezika likovne umetnosti prizadevajo uveljaviti izraz *potopitev*.

Prispevek proučuje razmerje med »mitom o nedolžnem očesu« ter aktualno »potopitvijo« v okviru vzgojno-izobraževalnih ciljev in metod v sodobnem poučevanju.

Ključne besede: • nedolžno oko • potopitev • likovnost • otrokov likovni izraz • motivacija za ustvarjanje likovnih del •

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DOI 10.18690/1855-4431.10.2-3.251-260(2017), UDC: 37.015.31:73/76

ISSN 1855-4431 tiskana izdaja / 2350-4803 spletna izdaja © Revija za elementarno izobraževanje
Dostopno na: <http://journals.um.si> in <http://rei.pef.um.si>

Teaching Visual Arts - From the Innocent Eye to Immersiveness and Vice Versa

MARIJAN RICHTER

Abstract In the mid-19th century, John Ruskin, apologist for the poetics of the innocent eye, advocated a break with academic Realism. A century later, Gombrich and Goodman criticized Ruskin's Romantic subjectivism from the position of High Modernism. Consequently, the "Enlightenment" approach in teaching visual arts became stronger. Recently, some teaching specialists have been trying to inaugurate the term, immersiveness, in place of visual arts language for the purpose of introducing contemporary art into the syllabus.

This paper examines the relation between "the innocent eye myth" and topical approach of "immersiveness" within the framework of educational objectives and methods in contemporary teaching.

Keywords: • Innocent eye • immersiveness • visuality • child's artistic expression • motivation for creating artwork •

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DOI 10.18690/1855-4431.10.2-3.251-260(2017), UDC: 37.015.31:73/76
ISSN 1855-4431 Print / 2350-4803 On-line © 2017 The Journal of Elementary Education
Available at: <http://journals.um.si> and <http://rei.pef.um.si>

Teaching Methods in Visual Arts

Until the 1980s, visual arts teaching relied on the pupil's innate ability to create his or her own visual arts expression by engaging in the motif. This approach was advocated by teaching specialists who had been artistically formed in the tradition of modernity. Motivation and motif were implicitly equated, which favoured the more talented pupils. To be successful, a pupil had to "be able to execute a drawing". Pupils with average skills experienced problems with the lack of "similarity" and/or schematic products, which resulted in children doubting their abilities and, frequently, feeling inferior.

Even though the title of the school subject was Visual Arts Education, educational achievements such as self-confidence and self-respect resulting from successful realization were more accessible to the talented, while the majority remained deprived of such vital experience. The pupils' artwork was graded on the level of success in representing the motif, with representational skills being most highly valued. Only once the focus was moved from the motif to the visual arts problem in the new syllabus in the 1980s did every pupil have the opportunity to create quality artwork.

While redirection from the iconic to the structural led to elimination of some previous problems, new ones emerged. Awareness and use of elements of visual arts language make it possible for every pupil to adequately solve a problem, regardless of his or her natural predisposition, but even though the main educational objective was achieved by way of encouraging individuality, the problem of outcome remained. Practice showed that forcing visual arts language frequently led to teaching units appearing to be illustrations of concepts such as line by flow and character, warm and cold colour contrasts, and so on. The direction towards visual arts language generally precludes figurative schematism, but abstract formalism becomes more frequent. Children's artwork displayed in schools often shows more "visual arts language" than it does creativity.

The resolving of the problem of rigid "visual artistry" should begin at colleges for future visual arts teachers rather than through introduction of new syllabi and curricula in schools, as has been the case so far. Future teachers should primarily be made aware that the freeing of children's expression and creativity cannot be achieved by merely following the instructions in teachers' handbooks, regardless of whether the program involved is old or new. Unless properly guided, children do not know how to use the offered creative freedom and thus rely on familiar patterns, their "honesty" resulting in schematic products and a low level of originality. It is normal for a pupil who is asked to be creative but receives no methodological guidance to resort to typified forms and previously seen solutions. Without adequate motivation, artwork is reduced to illustrating the concepts outlined in the syllabus.

Only a teacher who has personal experience in resolving visual arts problems can articulate teaching units. Motivation that is methodologically and educationally well prepared requires an art teacher's own education as well as their practical work in the field. Sometimes it is possible to obtain a high level of visual artistry in the work of every pupil by using an effective metaphor, if the metaphor is a result of the experience of the

teacher's own visual artistic reflection (Richter, 2015). Assigning a free topic commonly leads to the most problematic results. If a teacher lets a child draw or paint "the way he or she sees it" or "the way he or she imagines it", the result will most frequently be a stereotypical artwork, regardless of how much the child is encouraged to be creative, original, inventive or honest.

Even though teachers are expected to display a high level of creativity and inventiveness, what prevails in practice is the use of "tested" teaching units, which indicates insufficient consideration and preparation. While teachers with years of work experience can hardly be expected to change, coordinated improvements in the teaching of visual arts subjects at university level can result in good quality teachers. Student trainee-teachers should be able to acquire as much direct visual arts and creative experience through practical work as possible. Preparation of students for their future work as teachers primarily involves analyses of works of art by way of varied interpretations, in which students analyse and interpret a selected work of art, considering potential changes in motif, technique or format. Comparative analysis of students' varied interpretations in collaboration with a mentor also contributes to an understanding of the visual arts problem.

The incentive for creating an artwork need not come from art, but it is important to note how individual, stylistically different artists approached a specific visual arts issue and how they learned from the examples of their contemporaries and close or distant predecessors. The most productive way of conducting comparative analysis is to have students and their mentor research the author's predecessors and sources, in parallel with practical creative work on a given subject. Practical visual arts research does not involve the art historians' iconic, symbolic and formal *context* -- instead, the focus is on the visual *text* -- expression in material. The student trainee-teacher should consider works of art comparatively, by interpreting them, that is, exploiting them for educational purposes. It is necessary to draw, paint, combine, disassemble and redefine the formational content of the work of art, which means practically exercising all the options from which themes, motifs and visual arts problems can be obtained for teaching purposes. A work of art should in no way be a mere illustration or tag for a teaching unit but instead the core of study preparation.

A teacher who has had the positive experience of visual art creation during his or her university studies will be able to transfer to his or her pupils the enthusiasm for discovering the world of visual arts creation, which is a prerequisite for results in visual arts expression. This experience is acquired at university. It is therefore important that university students receive lectures from an active visual artist with an inclination toward exploration and experimentation. The teaching of visual arts subjects to future art teachers should in no way be reduced to *ex cathedra* lectures and examinations, as is the case with the so-called "exact subjects". The methodology of visual arts culture taught to future visual arts teachers should primarily involve practical research work, and only secondarily the academic subject (though one does not preclude the other -- instead, they complement each other). The most important competence of the student trainee-teacher is his or her own visual arts experience acquired through exploration carried out together

with his or her mentor. Teaching visual arts is not a "lesser art" or "lesser science" but instead a special academic-artistic discipline based on practical exercise.

Immersion

Introduction of the new media into the teaching process inaugurated the term *immersion* (Vuk, 2014), which designates a different approach to visual arts teaching. The intention behind immersion in the world of images, as opposed to certain formalism in the prescribed programs, was to offer "more freedom and creativity," which implies that the existing program had exerted a limiting effect in that respect. Even though the incentive for "greater creativity" is always topical, the proclaimed *immersion* in media-facilitated images is characteristic of all types of historical illusionism. Contemporary immersion poetics proposes an "image of reality" following the rules of postmodern iconodules, but this "going back to images" is nothing but an inauguration of *visuality*, with a simultaneous cancellation of the mandate of *visual artistry*.

The similarity between *immersion* and the Romantic concept of *identification* is not entirely coincidental. As the Romantic sensibility and day dreaming developed from resistance to Enlightenment and academicism, so the present-day call for immersiveness is a consequence of resistance to a certain rigidity in the Enlightenment interpretation of visual artistry.

The objectives and potential consequences of the proposed changes should be carefully considered. Immersion is a term that has so far been linked primarily to the media, specifically to the consumerist process rather than the creative one. Immersion means surrendering to the illusion facilitated by the medium, and illusion reduces critical distance and increases the observer's emotional participation (Grau, 2003). Immersion involves a feeling of being surrounded and a moving point of view (while in fact the recipient is fixed in the centre of the visual spectacle), as well as isolation of the senses from external reality, while being transferred to another space. It is reception, not perception that is relied upon. We are invited to enter the virtual space as a better, privileged world--the world of art. Art aside, we must ask ourselves the following: if the objective is indeed to reduce the critical position, are we thus not questioning the main postulates of education?

The power of images and imagery was present in the time 'before art', that is, in the time in which representation was used in rituals with trance as the goal. At present, art projects not only address the eye but also the other senses, through a media-generated interface: simulated sound settings, tactile, optical and kinaesthetic sensations are combined in creating the illusion of the "natural" world. At present, even sound installations (*sound art*, *sound sculpture* and *luminoacoustics*) are classified as "visual" arts, except that we no longer speak of "trance" or "identification" but of "immersion" (Grau, 2003).

The term immersion can also be applied in the context of the creation of a work of art. In that case, it invokes the artist as the 'genius', 'prophet' or 'shaman'. For certain creators, such as Abstract Expressionist painters, 'immersion' in the act of creation was the

precondition for artistic expression and at times appeared to approach the state of trance. In performance music practice, immersion is almost inevitable, especially in certain styles of rock music. Such 'immersion' is often enhanced by additional stimulation of experience by way of consumption of opiates.

The Innocent Eye

The advocates of the visual arts education program based on the visual arts language (Huzjak, 2003) refer to Gombrich and Goodman, specifically to their critical approach to the poetics of the *innocent eye*. The purpose and goal of visual arts education would be to cultivate children's views and visual arts literacy, which are at least as important as mastering the written and spoken language. At a time of universal visibility, visual literacy is indeed crucial. However, the efforts to disclaim the 'innocent eye' led in the direction opposite to the one advocated in the same programs.

In the 1960s, Ernst Hans Gombrich presented, in his book entitled, *Art and Illusion*, a critique of the Romantic idea of the *innocent eye*, which originated from John Ruskin, the most influential English art writer in the Victorian era. Ruskin was an apologist for Turner's painting, in which he sought sources for theoretical-philosophical considerations of the "poetics of the blot", from which the Impressionists later profited (though the Impressionist doctrine, despite its ostensible fidelity to 'optical truth' is just as distant from objective representation as it is from the naiveté of direct observation). Thus, the Impressionist doctrine, while advocating 'naturalness' and 'directness' both in the choice of motifs and in the execution of paintings, is in fact an extension of the conscious approach to optical phenomena and mechanisms of representation, from Brunelleschi's *perspectiva artificialis* and Descartes' experiment with the eye of a dead ox (Arsić, 2000), to Newton's and Goethe's research into the phenomenon of light and colour and to Michel Chevreul's and Herman von Helmholtz's research in the field of physiology of sight. The Impressionists' 'innocent eye' is in no way a 'naïve eye'.

On the other hand, the thesis saying, "the innocent eye is blind" is plausible because observation as a mechanical process 'unpolluted' by imagination, intention, desire or expectations, and knowledge is inconceivable to begin with. As a concept of pure visualisation, that is, demonstration, the innocent eye can be directly linked to geometrical perspective. A blind person, as shown by Diderot in *Letter on the Blind* (Diderot, 1950), is capable of imagining and reconstructing the space of geometrical perspective. Geometrical space, that is, the monocular Cartesian mode of perception of space in which the observer is at the point from which the space is measured, is susceptible to reconstruction without the sense of sight, which equates it with the 'innocent eye' of the realist theories of perception.

Gombrich describes the *innocent eye* as a "myth" (1956), but on the very next page he says, "Representation really does seem to advance through the suppression of conceptual knowledge" (Gombrich, 1956:298), and begins the next chapter almost penitently: "When a discussion has become tangled, it is always useful to trace one's steps back to its origins and see where the misunderstanding occurred" (Ibid: 299). Then follows Gombrich's

exposé on the beginnings of pictorial illusionism that he finds in the Renaissance. Such discussions, while offering material for consideration of perception mechanisms, can hardly be used as theoretical bases in the methodology for teaching the Visual Arts.

Goodman follows this theory in his *The Languages of Art - An Approach to the Theory of Symbols*: "The myth of the innocent eye and of the absolute given are unholy accomplices. Both derive from and foster the idea of knowing as a processing of raw material received from the senses, and of this raw material as being discoverable either through purification rites or by methodical disinterpretation. But reception and interpretation are not separable operations; they are thoroughly interdependent" (Goodman, 1968:8). Having established that "Nothing is seen nakedly or naked," Goodman begins the next paragraph with a sentence that is reminiscent of the change in the stance of his predecessor, who was quoted above: "All the same, an artist may often do well to strive for innocence of eye. The effort sometimes rescues him from the tired patterns of everyday seeing, and results in fresh insight" (Ibid: 8).

Visual arts teachers, if methodologically competent, do not need such elaborations on *immersion* and/or the *innocent eye* to know how and to what extent they can count on children's spontaneity and how to encourage the directness of their visual expression. Moreover, they are capable of motivating their pupils to speak the visual arts language that comes naturally. Good motivation using a metaphor (Richter, 2015) surpasses literal meaning, which Goodman defines as "the absolute given" and "raw material". If a visual arts problem is methodologically set as a creative challenge, every pupil's work will result in a high level of visual literacy, in which their personal visual artistic expression need not be conditional upon previously learned concepts, conscious use of elements of visual arts language, or an insistence on immersion. Children will find their own work surprising if the creative process was an adventure, an exploration and a discovery. Visual artistic interpretation and formation leads to the discovery that things do not look the way we assumed they should look. This is a case of the *innocent eye* in the positive sense.

As opposed to this, motivation that does not manage to find an adequate motif or metaphor to surpass the literal appearance of a motif and/or visual arts concept cannot result in creation, but possibly only in completed tasks; the visual arts tools remain on the level of general symbolization, and there is no transformation into visual artistic expression. Without provoked perception, there is no interpretation, there is no visual artistic play, and there is no wonder of creation. Children work the way they think they should work rather than the way they could have worked had they been given adequate creative and exploratory incentives. The results are stereotypical, conventional depictions. Forcing visual arts language, on the one hand, and immersion, on the other, yields rigid and uninventive abstractions, merely at the level of concept linked to the theme, motif or visual arts problem. Thus, we come to the *innocent eye* in the negative sense.

Depending on the visual arts teacher's methodological approach and creativity, the 'innocent eye' may be a problem, though it should be the objective in every teaching unit - not as a *tabula rasa*, the impotence of ignorance, but as a *rasura tabulae*, the elimination

of prejudice and previous "knowledge". In that sense, proficiency in visual arts language does not contribute to the quality of the artwork even on the level of visual artistic practice in the absence of methodology-facilitated primary experience, which does not come from an authority or institution or from myths such as the myth of the innocent eye, which is what immersiveness may become if programmatically imposed.

Conclusion

Since Gombrich and Goodman, the state of the matters regarding the *myth of the innocent eye* has remained more or less the same, at least as far as teaching visual arts is concerned. The situation with *immersion* is similar. We know that observation can and should be educated and cultivated, but the question of methods and end goals remains. The intention of the existing programs was to place the emphasis on visual arts language (rather than primarily on the motif, as was the case in the old program) and thus make it possible for every pupil to visually express himself or herself with approximately the same degree of success. The old program was more focused on the motif, which to some extent favoured the more talented pupils, that is, those with innocent or "more innocent" eyes. The goal of the recent redundant warnings about the importance of adopting visual arts paradigms and syntagmata, as opposed to the 'innocent eye', appears to be to consolidate the existing program. On the other hand, there is a faction that advocates the idea of increased creativity in the wake of lifting the burden of 'visual arts grammar'.

While creativity has never been limited in any way - quite the contrary, the goal has always been to achieve greater creativity and more freedom in visual expression - practice has shown that insistence on the adoption of 'visual arts language' and awareness of visual arts tools before and during work frequently represents a burden on both the teacher and the pupils. Each new approach to the problems in visual arts education that deserves to be called methodological has good aspects as well as bad. What is good concerns primarily the encouragement of creativity, which also means overcoming various stereotypes. What is less good is the fact that the defined nature of the tasks and the suggestiveness in the execution sooner or later result in rigid execution of the tasks, with stereotypes again being the consequence.

Quality teaching depends more on competent teachers than it does on programs. Therefore, the most we can do for visual arts (or visual?) culture classes is to train students teacher-trainees to provide quality education to pupils in the spheres of visuality and visual arts primarily by providing them with creative experience in practical visual arts exercises at the university.

Recent history has taught us that changes coming from the 'relevant institutions', that is, 'from above', often create more problems than they resolve. The decree on one instead of two Visual Arts Culture classes per week has caused immense damage. Until the number of weekly visual arts and visual language classes at least approaches the number of weekly Croatian and/or English Language classes, our theoretical considerations will be of little use. Discussions of the *innocent eye* and *immersiveness* will only rehash the old problems. That does not mean that issues concerning visual arts, visuality and creativity

within the education system should not be discussed - quite the contrary, it means that competent, creative teachers and visual artists-lecturers, that is, people involved in practical work, should be involved in the discussions. Introducing new content and methods into the programs works best when taken from the best visual arts educators who manage, under impossible conditions of one class per week, to find space for exploration and to modernize the process of teaching Visual Arts Culture.

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