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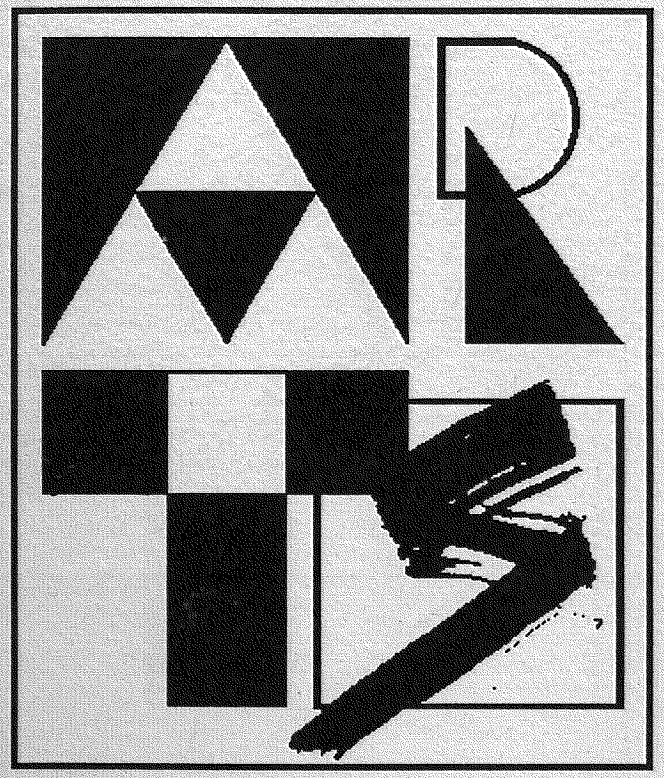
# BEYOND THE FINE ART GHETTO:

# WHY THE VISUAL ARTS ARE IMPORTANT IN EDUCATION

by

Paul Duncum






*Studies in Education and the Arts — No. 2*

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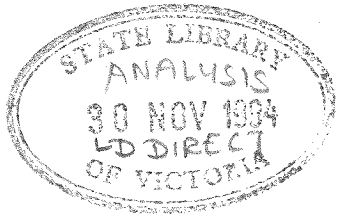






## CONTENTS

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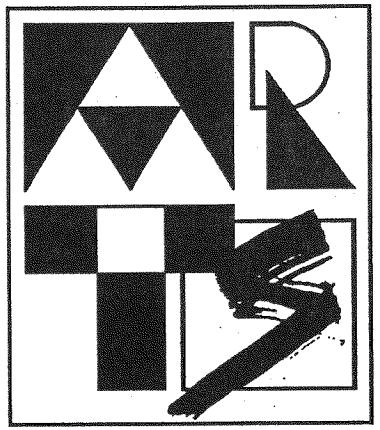

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## EDITORS' PREFACE

This is the second in the series 'Studies in Education and the Arts'. The focus in this edition is upon the visual arts in education. Paul Duncum argues the primacy of the visual arts in our everyday lives and posits the need for critical exploration of the visual arts as a central part of students' education. Arts educators have always felt the need to justify the role of their discipline in the curriculum. Duncum probes the place of the visual arts in the curriculum and suggests new alliances which focus on different ways of conceptualising visual experiences in relation to other spheres of knowledge. The arts are complex fields of communication, expression and knowledge. We each define our field as we see it. Duncum's view is contentious; it challenges the conventions of curriculum arrangements in schools and it seeks to redefine current definitions of 'the arts' in the curriculum. Others should take up the challenge and respond to the views expressed here. The editors invite contributors to submit theoretical papers which may be considered by the editors for future editions in this monograph series. The views expressed in this series do not necessarily reflect the views of the editors.

# BEYOND THE FINE ART GHETTO:

## Why the Visual Arts are Important in Education

by Paul Duncum
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Faculty of Education
University of Central Queensland
Rockhampton, Australia.

### Abstract

The importance of the visual arts lies not in the reasons why some of them are privileged, but, rather in the fact that as a whole they are such an ordinary part of life. They are to be found in all aspects of modern life, and apart from personal experience they structure much of what we know about the world. They take us to the core of social structures with all their contradictions and moral dilemmas. Yet most people have very little conscious knowledge about how to employ the visual arts in their best interests. No greater gifts can be offered by formal education than to facilitate critical minds that ask which images serve one's own interests and which need to be incorporated so that they do so, and also to encourage people with inquiring minds which ask, "What is not shown?" These arguments are advanced by reference to a range of disciplines, including psychology, evolutionary biology, postmodern cultural studies, media studies, semiotics, and the history of science and technology.

# BEYOND THE FINE ART GHETTO:

## Why the The Visual Arts are Important in Education

For most people, the term visual art conjures up objects housed in art galleries, or found between the covers of books in the library in the 759s. Although celebrated by art educators, it is a view which effectively ensures that most people do not seriously consider the visual arts. Why should most people contemplate the impact of the visual arts on their lives when visual art is defined in this restricted way?

The postmodern critic, Collins (1989), calls this the "Grand Hotel" view of art, where all cultural production and reception is orchestrated according to one master system; and Collins wants to check out. More provocatively, perhaps, I think of this as a ghetto view of art, where one is blind to the plurality of practices from which most people derive meaning in ordinary, everyday life. It is a closed off, often defensive, minority view of visual culture which is restricted to the prison of modernity, content to celebrate high art at the expense of all the forms of picture making and appraisal within society. I want to leave the ghetto to explore the rest of the city, to explore the multiple practices pursued by the great majority of people beyond the ghetto Fine art is privileged in our society, but it is of little concern to most people and, thus, may be thought unimportant in education.

The importance of the visual arts lies elsewhere, beyond the ghetto. It lies not so much in the reasons why some categories of visual art are privileged, but, rather in the fact that as a whole they are such an ordinary part of life. Their significance lies in their ubiquity. The visual arts are to be found in all aspects of modern life and, apart from personal experience, they structure



most of what we know about the world. Apart from language arts they are the most important of the arts. They take us to the core of social structures with all their contradictions and moral dilemmas; they constitute and contest the wide range of beliefs, values and meanings held and applied in societies. Yet within our own society most people have very little conscious knowledge about how to employ the visual arts in their best interests. For all our awareness of the visual arts, even despite a widespread acknowledgment of their significance, we remain largely a visually illiterate society.

No greater gifts can be offered by formal education than to facilitate critical minds that ask which images serve one's own interests and which need to be incorporated so that they do so, and also to encourage people with inquiring minds which ask, "What is not shown?" These are the basic arguments of this paper. I will develop them in a number of ways, drawing upon a range of disciplines.

Most of this monograph demonstrates the extent and the kind of importance the visual arts have in society at large. Their importance in education follows directly from this demonstration. But first, it is necessary to provide a definition of the visual arts.

### An Inclusive View of the Visual Arts

The arguments I will advance here are entirely dependent upon an inclusive view of the visual arts. The view adopted is characteristically postmodern (Featherstone, 1991). It goes beyond the fine arts to include folk, popular, design and indigenous arts as advocated, for example, in the policy statements of the Australian Institute of Art Education (AIAE) (1991). Of course, like the category of fine art, each of these categories has, at best, fuzzy edges, and there also exist various hybrids such as tourist art and the celebrated recent art of Australian Aborigines. In effect, the focus of this paper is the visual arts defined as images, no matter of what kind, from which people derive meaning and which they invest with their beliefs and values. Thus defined, the term visual art is synonymous with pictures, or visual images, or visual representations. All kinds of visual representation are included:

from a Michelangelo sculpture to a garden gnome, a Leonardo wall mural to a billboard advertisement.

It is just this kind of definition which arts funding bodies have sometimes used when arguing that participation in the arts is widespread and the arts industry is vital to the overall economy. Arts funding bodies have used statistics gained from people's use of the visual arts as a whole to argue for funding for the fine arts. It is a common enough slippage, this shift from a socially levelled and inclusive view of the visual arts to a socially privileged and narrowly defined view of the visual arts as fine arts. It is just this slippage which allows those whose mission it is to protect the fine arts in post-market conditions, both to have their cake and to eat it. But it will not do. I refer not only to arts funding bodies, but also to many art educators who have endorsed AIAE or similar pluralist policies, but whose practice remains firmly entrenched within the ghetto of the fine arts.

By contrast, I will attempt in this paper to take on board the implications of a postmodern, inclusive view of the visual arts as synonymous with visual representation, images, or pictures.[1] Of course there are different postmodernisms. Many people who continue to have an investment in the high arts appear to assume that postmodernism involves nothing more adventurous than the fine arts cannibalising itself or appropriating the vernacular in surprising ways. By postmodern I intend a rather more radial position, where distinctions between the fine arts and other traditions which are based on privilege are collapsed. Instead of continuing to proclaim the uniqueness or the "aura" of artworks, I will look to pictures in the context of their mechanical and electronic reproduction and deny that pictures are a different order from life (Lush & Urry, 1987). The reasons I will advocate for the importance of visual arts in education have nothing to do with high culture or refined sensibility. This monograph addresses the question: How are we to justify the visual arts in education in a postmodern, contemporary society?



## A Felt Need for the Visual Arts

One cluster of arguments for the importance of the visual arts involves a felt need for pictures. Included are arguments regarding the longevity of human picture making, the extent of trouble to which people have been prepared to go to make pictures, the universal use of pictures, and the power with which they are frequently invested.

No known society, now or in the discoverable past, is without a variety of ways to picture the beliefs and values integral to it. The archeologists Davidson and Noble (1989) even argue that among homo sapiens visual depiction proceeded the development of language. Be this as it may, involvement in the visual arts is of exceptional longevity. For example, one of the commonly accepted chief functions of the visual arts is to embellish, to make something ordinary into something special (Gombrich, 1984). Now, it is possible that this function actually precedes the full development of our species. Coloured ochre has been found with Neanderthal remains from 125,000 years ago. The ochre may have been used to commemorate the dead through embellishment, just as today we bury our dead in ornamented coffins covered with colourful flowers. Laying wreaths appears also to have been practised by Neanderthals. Around 60,000 years ago in present day Iraq an old man was laid to rest on a litter of evergreen boughs and was then apparently heaped with flowers. Eight species were used, including hollyhocks. Hollyhocks grow in separate strands and cannot be grasped in bunches, so it is possible that sixty thousand years ago, someone ranged the mountainside collecting hollyhocks one by one to embellish the grave of this old Neanderthal man (Campbell, 1983).

The archeological evidence upon which this possibility is based is problematic, but what is not in question is that prehistoric cave art is evidence of a deep and long held commitment to image making. It continued for over 20,000 years and has been found all over the world (Bahn & Vertut, 1988). The extraordinary lengths to which prehistoric people were prepared to go to make pictures testify to the importance ascribed to pictures very early in the development of human

societies. It required considerable effort to traverse difficult rock formations, often over a kilometre inside the earth's surface, and having sometimes to wade through or even duck beneath water. Sometimes prehistoric peoples painted in barely accessible crevices; at other places they painted in huge chambers which required scaffolding. They painted by the light of lamps fuelled by animal fat and bones; the smoke and stench must have been terrible. One archeologist described part of his journey into Les Trois Freres in the Pyrenees:

> The tunnel is not much broader than my shoulders, nor higher. I can hear the others before me groaning and see how very slowly their lamps push on. With our arms pressed close to our sides we wriggle forward on our stomachs, like snakes. The passage, in places, is hardly a foot high, so that you have to lay your face right on the earth. I felt as though I was creeping through a coffin. You cannot lift your head, you cannot breathe. (Herbert Kuhn, cited in Campbell, 1983, p. 73)

A more poignant reminder of the importance to human beings of picture making is difficult to imagine than the numerous drawings produced by Jewish inmates of Nazi concentration camps (Blatter & Milton, 1981). While the number of images produced will never be known, over 30,000 works survive from both adults and children. Images variously served the purposes of providing a powerful link with a former identity, a witness for the future, and a means to transcend the suffering of their authors. Some artists improvised with brushes made from human hair, straw and feathers, and they scavenged officers garbage bins for toothpaste tubes to store and mix paint. Some inmates were even prepared to exchange food for drawings. Of course it was extremely dangerous to produce such images, and great pains were exerted to keep them secret. One artist was later able to retrieve his drawings from cylinders that he had placed inside the bricks of a building he helped to build. Over 4,000 images survive from the 15,000 Jewish children who passed through the Czechoslovakian concentration camp at Terizin between 1942 and 1944, mostly on their way to the gas chambers of Auschwitz. Many of these drawings, typical of spontaneous drawings elsewhere (Duncum, 1986),



are fanciful narratives about detectives, steamboats and warships; others show SS Guards, executions and burials. Most include, carefully recorded on the back, either in their own handwriting or one of their teachers', the child's name, the title, the date, and the barracks in which the child was housed (I Never Saw Another Butterfly, 1978).

Visual images are frequently credited with exceptional authority. For example, the sacred, that most divisive of human apprehensions, has been deeply ambiguous about vision and visual images. But whether seen as a force for good or evil they have been accorded enormous power. While there is a rich tradition of "spiritual optics", there is also, on a more negative note, the fear of being watched by an all seeing God or followed by an "evil eye". Many manifestations of the world's religions include the most spectacular of visual artifacts and monuments. On the other hand, the Jewish prohibition of graven images, the Muslim prohibition of the human figure, and the disfiguring of images by Protestants during the Reformation, also suggests the destructive power accorded to images by religious thought (Jay, 1989).

### The Visual Arts as a Symbol System

However evocative the above examples of a felt need to produce and use images, they remain anecdotal. Educators and practitioners in other arts areas can point to similar material to argue for the importance of their field. A more comprehensive view of the importance of the visual arts in society is necessary if the visual arts in education are to be seen as especially important and not just one of several other ways of knowing. This is conveniently provided by the examination of images as a symbol system. That human intelligence and culture is manifest in a variety of symbol systems is a commonplace in semiotics, cognitive psychology, communications and cultural studies, and arts education (eg. Gill, 1990). By means of symbol systems we think and communicate, and transmit and transform human culture. Symbol systems are extensions of specific, natural human abilities and perceptual systems: music of hearing, language of vocalisation, dance of kinesthesia, and pictures are an extension of human vision.

Language is usually considered our most fundamental symbol system, but there is considerable evidence from diverse fields to suggest that visual images are our second most important system of symbols. Evidence is offered here from cognitive psychology, biology, the history of science and technology, contemporary science, and postmodern cultural studies. So compelling is this evidence that it is worth beginning with reference to various arguments which have been proposed for the primacy of vision rather than the primacy of language.

**The Primacy of Vision**

That vision is more important than language is argued by some in both psychology and the sociology of culture. The arguments variously involve mental imagery, visual perception, and visual images. Arnheim (1969) claims that "truly productive thinking in whatever area of cognition takes place in the realm of imagery" (p. v). Evidence for the primacy of visual mental imagery include comments by Albert Einstein and the chemist Kekule. Einstein wrote:

> The words or the language, as they are written or spoken, do not seem to play any role in my mechanism of thought. The psychical entities which seem to serve as elements in thought are certain signs and more or less clear images which can be voluntarily reproduced and combined.... Conventional words or other sights have to be sought for laboriously in a secondary stage... (In McKim, 1972, p. 9).

Similarly, Kekule arrived at the structure of the benzene ring through a dream. He dreamt of snakes twining and twisting and one of them seizing hold of its own tail. On waking he realised that the snake biting its own tail suggested that organic compounds such as benzene are not open structures but closed (McKim, 1972). These examples address the primacy of mental images over language.

Other arguments concern the primacy of visual perception. In his classic cognitive psychology text, Neisser (1976) writes that "perceiving is the basic cognitive activity out of which all others emerge" (p. 9); and Arnheim (1969) argues that vision is the perceptual system which contributes most to cognitive



processes. According to Foucault (In Jay, 1989) vision has long been accounted the "noblest" of the senses. Since the Ancient Greeks, sight has been privileged in Western epistemology as the most discriminating and trustworthy of the sensuous mediators between humans and the world. While often more metaphorical than literal, vision has often been credited with making a greater contribution to knowledge than any other sense.

An impressionistic glance at such common English words as insight, far-sighted, overview, survey, perspective, demonstration, synopsis, and shows, reveals that there is more than an arbitrary choice of images in the statement, I see what you mean (Jay, 1989).

Drawing on evolutionary biology, Sless (1986) examines our genetic inheritance. He claims that the eye is actually part of the brain. In the development of the embryo, the eyes are the first to appear. The rest of the brain is a subsequent outgrowth, as if the brain recedes from the eyes. And this process, he says, may replicate the development of our species.

Vision is the instigator of thought, not its handmaiden. Neural tissue developed in order to make use of incoming visual information. The evolutionary catalyst for the development of the brain was the need to process visual information. Vision is the seat of intellect. (p. 16) [Emphasis added]

Others have viewed linguistic and spatial intelligence as equally important. In developing a theory of multiple intelligences - seven in all - Gardner (1983) adopts a more catholic view, but admits that, for most tests performed by experimental psychologists the principal sources of storage and solution are linguistic and spatial intelligence. With respect to linguistic intelligence, he regards spatial intelligence as "the other intelligence" (p. 17).

This debate within psychology about the primacy of visual mental imagery and vision is paralleled by a similar debate within the sociology of culture about the primacy of vision and visual images. Some cultural critics argue that the modern period was characterised by the dominance of vision over language, while others argue that it is the postmodern period

which is characteristically visual. Foucault argues that with the breakdown of the medieval unity between words and pictures during the classical age, vision became the sole means of ascertaining reliable knowledge about the external world. Henceforth, manifestations and signs of truth are to be found in evident and distinct perception. It is the task of words to translate the truth if they can; but they no longer have the right to be considered a mark of it. Language has withdrawn from the midst of beings themselves and has entered a period of transparency and neutrality. (In Jay, 1989, p. 63).

The power of words was replaced by "the empire of the gaze". While some postmodern critics, including Foucault, regard postmodernism as challenging the primacy of sight (Jay, 1989), other postmodern critics, "see" visual representation as quintessential to the postmodern condition. Baudrillard argues that the prevalence and self-referential quality of images is now such that our period is characterised by what he calls "simultation" (Featherstone, 1991). Such is the density, and seemingly seamless, all encompassing extent of images, that we live today in a qualitatively new society where the relationship between reality and its infinite number of representations has become effaced. Audiences simulate the media and the media in turn simulate their audiences. According to Baudrillard, images have replaced what was once considered reality: Images have become reality.

Whether or not Baudrillard overstates the case there is no gainsaying that typical, everyday experience involves exposure to television, newspapers magazines, billboards and so forth. Each is a cultural construction, and hence reality is from the outset at least substantially cultural. Further, dominant cultural forms in contemporary society are substantially, even primarily, visual.

Undoubtedly, our dominant cultural form is television, and the dominant style of television, with cinema too, is realism. Macabe (1974, in Wyver, 1989) argues that with realism, it is the pictures which audiences regard as telling the truth and against which they judge other forms of information. As Wyver (1989) points out, this privileging of the image over



other symbol systems is highlighted even in the names given to these cultural forms: cinema, or moving pictures, and tele/vision, which means far/sight.

In examining the relationship between television pictures and text, Wyver (1989) quotes from a handbook called, The Work of the Television Journalist.

Film has its own pace and logic, sometimes faster than words, sometimes slower, and the commentary must follow it. Cutting film to match words is possible, but it never works for long. The picture is naturally dominant. (p. 157)

Other examples will be offered below which support the dominance of images over words; but what really matters in justifying visual arts in education is not whether vision and pictures are more or less significant than language. What counts is that pictures can be "shown" to be of immense and irreplaceable psychological and social significance, and arguably at least as equal in importance to language. [2]

## The Contribution of the Visual Arts

A symbol system that has evolved specifically to take advantage of vision and visual thinking is a symbol system of major significance. I will argue that this is demonstratively the case, in science and technology as much as in cultural forms.

What is it that visual imagery offers that cannot be had nearly so well in other symbol systems? Eisner (1972) stresses the aesthetic contemplation of visual form that vivifies life and often makes for an appraisal of the quality of life. He sees visual art as an articulation of both sublime visions and visions most characteristic of people in the form of metaphors. Gardner (1983) also emphasises the value of visual metaphors, as the seeing of resemblances between seemingly different domains. And are there any verbal metaphors that are not grounded in visual imagery? Metaphors are essentially visual, and this applies to the trivial — pulling one's leg, two faced, kicking the bucket, for example — to the profound. The most significant theories of human knowledge are summarised by visual images; for example, Darwin's "Tree of Man", and Freud's pressure

cooker and iceberg respectively for human emotions and the relationship between the conscious and the unconscious. Currently, chaos theory is focused by the beautiful metaphor of the "butterfly effect".

Equally, there can be little doubt about the contribution of visual images to cultural life, to constituting beliefs, values, and world views. The use of images and visual metaphors in religious and spiritual practices, for example, is well established. Instances include the crucifix, the mandala, the intricate patterns of Muslim art, and the simplicity of Zen gardens of raked pebbles.

The history of fine art is replete with what today are taken as metaphors of their time. In our own time there is no doubting that some photographs and film footage have through constant exposure become icons of generational experience. The amateur footage of President Kennedy's assassination, often shown in slow motion, is for many people a metaphor of dashed hopes. Similarly, the Major of Saigon holding a pistol to the head of a grimacing suspected Vietcong and pulling the trigger became a metaphor for the absurdity and terror that was our involvement in the Vietnamese civil war.

A more poignant metaphor of the 20th century is hardly likely than Erika Taussig's pastel drawing on grey paper which she called Window with Bars (I Never Saw Another Butterfly, 1978). Erika was just one of the 15,000 children interned in Terizin concentration camp. Erika did many pictures in watercolours and pastel between April and June 1944. From her careful inscriptions we learn that she lived in house number CIII and later in Block IV. She died at Aushwitz on October 16, 1944 aged 10 years. What makes Windows with Bars especially poignant is that it combines the bright, cheerful colours and loose handling, which is elsewhere commonly associated with children's picture-making, with dark bars of incarceration. Erika's picture does not feature in any history of art, but perhaps it should, because, in its tensions between hope, innocence and terror, what better way could one of the major experiences of this century be addressed?



Apart from the importance of visual metaphor, Gardner agrees with Eisner on the unique value of formal visual considerations such as tension, balance and composition. He also cites two further important particulars. In asking the question, what constitutes visual intelligence, he stresses the importance of pictures in recognising objects accurately and the ability to transform the visual appearance of objects, to be able to see an object in one's minds eye, so to speak, and change it. The importance of these characteristics of visual images is demonstrated below by highlighting a variety of examples from science and technology.

Many sciences developed only after the introduction of exactly reproducible visual images, which was made possible only after the invention of the printing press (Ivins, 1953). The early history of botanical illustration highlights what, for many scientific purposes, is essential.[3] The Ancient Greeks began by making visual identifications, but they did not have any way to make exactly repeatable images. They had to rely on copyists and they found that successive copyists invariably altered colours or shapes to such an extent that pictures became useless. Instead of first hand witness accounts, copies of copies were akin to rumour and as likely as not to be unreliable. So Greek botanists tried to get along with words, but since in different places the same plants were given different names or the same name was applied to different plants they finally contented themselves with listing all the names they knew for each plant. No scientific endeavour could, or did, proceed on this basis.

The same situation applied in medicine, where for a thousand years, unable to refer to reliable pictures, surgeons relied upon written descriptions. Can you imagine being operated upon by a surgeon who had to rely for reference on a written account of what is meant to be found inside you? Progress had to wait until the invention of the printing press, with images that were drawn from observation and exactly repeated without a loss of information. Foucault firmly ascribes this medical innovation of the Renaissance to an intensified faith in visual evidence. Truth, he says, is based on "an empirical vigilance receptive only to the evidence of visible contents. The eye becomes the

depository and source of clarity" (In Jay, 1989, p. 57). Furthermore, he argues that what he calls "the sovereign power of the empirical gaze" in the limited field of medical science, became the model for all scientific investigations.

The triumph of scientific endeavour is the triumph of vision and visual imagery. Today, sciences as diverse as astronomy and paleoanthropology rely substantially on interpreting visual information.

Without pictures, most modern technology would not exist, neither the tools we have nor the data about which we think. This is because words are very imprecise as descriptive means; the meaning of most words is fuzzy. As Ivins (1953) says, most words are like loose rings thrown around a peg, and only loose rings can be thrown to have any chance of success. We have the impression of describing an object only by tossing a great number of loose rings. For most communication this is all very well, but we come unstuck when we use words to guide the making of even a simple object like a can-opener. It is doubtful that any more complex intellectual process could be imagined than the translation of a linear series of words, arranged in a syntactical time order, into an organisation of materials and shapes and colours simultaneously in three dimensions. Thus, toolmakers want not a verbal description of the thing they are asked to make, but a drawing. If this is true of simple tools, how much more applicable is it to high technology?

In communicating in exact and meaningful ways, properly made pictures are essential. As a symbol system, visual images are second only to language in communicating about the material world, and in fact are often superior in doing so.

### Saturation by the Visual Arts

Today we are exposed to more visual images than any other people in human history. Prevalent cultural forms—notably comic books and television—are as much visual as literary. Around 200 million comic books are sold every year, 100 million people view/read comic strips in their newspapers everyday, and 60% of readers regard the daily comics as the priority feature of newspapers (Inge, 1990). In 1984 in Japan



alone 1.38 billion comic books were purchased. They are viewed/read by all ages and classes of society. Viewer/reader is an appropriate way to describe their users since Japanese comic books contain relatively few words. This allows the average Japanese to complete a 320 page comic book—the typical length—in 20 minutes or just 3.75 seconds per page (Schodt, 1986).

Television use is just as prolific. On graduating from high school North Americans have spent on average more time watching television than in the classroom, and by the time they reach 65 years of age they will have spent 9 years of their lives devotedly watching the box. In the average North American residence a television is on for 7 hours a day and the average individual watches between 2 1/2 and 5 hours per day (Dorr, 1986). These statistics are similar to those available in Australia, where most children start watching television at the age of about 3 months and by 4 years are watching up to 35 hours weekly (Luke, 1990). By the time adolescents leaves school they will have spent about 2,000 more hours watching television than in the classroom. Over 98% of Australian households own at least one television set, nearly 40% own two or more sets, and by April 1992 about 78% of households owned video cassette recorders. In examining who watches - preschoolers, children, adolescents, academics, working class, middle class, high and low income groups, and so forth - Luke (1990) concludes, "TV is everywhere and everyone is watching" (p. 9).

In addition, picture magazines are now available on what appears almost every conceivable subject, and every newspaper, including the quality broadsheets, include several photographs on each page. According to Baudrillard it is this prevalence of imagery that most characterises the postmodern condition (Featherstone, 1991). In contemporary consumer society, images rather than products have become the principal object of consumption. We live, he says, in a world where an ever continuous flow of images increasingly refer more to each other than to reality. Such is their prevalence, plus their self-referentiality, that images have come to replace reality. He argues that while once images were thought to reflect reality, and later to mask or pervert reality, images now bear no

relationship to reality at all. Images are their own referents, and the environment we inhabit has become simultational (Newman, 1989). While Baudrillard probably exaggerates there is no denying either the increasing number of images or their increasing self-reference. Evidence for cultural forms being increasingly self-referential is suggested by Eco's observation that early television referred to the external world, but that television now refers more to other images and its relationship with its audience (in McRobbie, 1989). Even long established cultural forms have become more visual. A good example is provided by the history of advertising over the past century. The use of text has markedly declined and there has been a concomitant rise in the use of visual imagery. There has also been a related decline in the arguments offered for the purchase of a product based on such rational, functional considerations as efficiency, durability and reliability. In their place, iconic representations, for example, of youth and family cohesion, have come to be juxtaposed with the product. Images of fun loving teenagers or smiling mums act like adjectives to a product. The appeal is now more typically through visual associations than arguments offered in text (Jhally, 1990).

However the prevalence of images is gauged, there is no gainsaying that we live in a visually saturated society, the like of which is unprecedented in human history. In one form or another, the visual arts are omnipresent.

### The Visual Arts are Commonplace

The prevalence of images points to their ordinariness. The unavoidable and simple truth is that the visual arts are commonplace. Their very special importance lies in the fact that they are ubiquitous.

To understand how ordinary they are in our society it is useful to make two comparisons: one with language and the other with the visual arts of indigenous peoples. First, literature is privileged, but language itself is not. It is inconceivable that anything so plainly central to how we think and communicate could be socially elevated. As Williams (1977) says, "A definition of language is always, implicitly or explicitly, a definition of human beings in the world" (p. 21). We live



embedded within language; it structures our thoughts and actions, how we understand the world and how we reflect upon our experiences of it. We are born into language and thereafter live within the space provided by language. We grasp reality through language: it saturates and is saturated by all social activity. By comparison, literature as great works plays a central role in the lives of only a relatively few people; at best it plays an important role for many people, but it is clearly peripheral or nonexistent for most of us. The same importance applies to the visual arts if they are defined as the fine arts. The fine arts are as socially marginalised as literature, possibly more so. An expanded view of the visual arts as synonymous with pictures or images, however, is similar to language. With the saturation of images, it is no exaggeration to say that our lives today are embedded in the visual arts and that we live in the space provided by the visual arts. To paraphrase Williams, "A definition of the visual arts today is always, implicitly or explicitly, a definition of human beings active within the world".

It is equally useful to think of indigenous arts and their place within the societies in which they are produced and used. Most texts on indigenous arts begin by stressing the difference between the arts of indigenous peoples and those of people in the West (eg Sutton, 1988). We are told that for indigenous people visual art is an integral part of their lives, notably of their religious beliefs and kinship networks, whereas, by contrast, our visual arts are confined to objects of expressive and aesthetic value. The message seems to be that indigenous peoples are unlike us, for even the way they view art is fundamentally different. Indeed, they do not even have a conceptual category for art as we do.

This is a strikingly ahistorical view, and far too accepting of conventional ideas about what constitutes the visual arts in our society. The differentiation between our society and that of indigenous peoples on the basis of conceptions or lack of conceptions of art highlights the fact that ours underwent the Industrial Revolution and theirs did not, and as a consequence we have a fragmented view of visual arts, whereas indigenous peoples do not. Prior to the late 1700s European society used

the word art to refer to the human attribute of skill, of skilled achievement. Art referred to skill in any human endeavour, in painting and sculpture, but also in fishing, philosophy, cooking and so forth. Only during the early to mid 1800s did art acquire the range of meanings now associated with fine art. This was as a direct response and contribution to the new social dynamics created by the Industrial Revolution (Williams, 1983). A tradition of picture-making, especially of painting and sculpture, had previously contained many popular elements and consciously served utilitarian purposes. Under the pressure of industrialisation, rampant utilitarianism, and the emergence of popular social movements, this tradition expunged popular elements and sought to serve no purpose other than that dictated by artists (Gowans, 1981). The design arts become an umbrella for the utilitarian practices from which fine artists sought to distance themselves, and, with the advent of mass printing processes, popular art flourished as a largely separate category. Folk art, which was seen as the art of the rural poor, was largely, though not entirely, superseded by the popular and design arts. In this way the concept of art as fine art developed out of a rejection of the driven impetus of a materialistic, utilitarian and technological society. The other arts developed as a result of dividing up the roles previously played by traditional visual forms which were now excluded from the fine arts.

If we once consider how often and for what reasons we use images, it becomes apparent that there is no essential difference between our use and that of indigenous peoples. It is just that art so frequently evokes only the limited category of the fine arts, which for most people is severed from the rest of life. If the other categories of art are included, it becomes clear that our use of imagery is every bit as integral to our lives as is the art of indigenous peoples to theirs. Indigenous peoples see what we call the visual arts as wholly integrated with the rest of their society, not something separated from it. Far from pointing to a major difference between Western society and indigenous societies, the fact that both kinds of society use images as part of everyday existence points to an essential affinity between human societies and, beyond, to similarities of cognitive processes.



Both the above analysis of language and of indigenous arts finds an echo in the postmodern concern with the aesthetisisation of everyday life. In contemporary, consumer society, cultural production saturates the fabric of everyday experience. This is said to lead to an inversion of aesthetic experience. In place of the Kantian aesthetic of the disinterested gaze and the transcendental, there has emerged an aesthetics of a consumer society, an aesthetics of desire, sensuousness and immediacy. Instead of a delayed satisfaction via careful scrutiny, the aesthetics of the everyday involves an immediate impact, an economy of pleasure. Instead of emphasising substance, it is an aesthetics of the surface. Instead of involving a sense of being disconnected from the image, it emphasises participation with a multiplicity of images; and in the place of a sense of historical context, it stresses the present. The singular, scrutinising, steady gaze of the art critic, is replaced by numerous, fragmented, frequently interrupted glances of ordinary people. Rather than viewing images in a state of contemplation, images are more likely to be viewed in a state of distraction. With the aesthetics of the everyday, the richly coded single object gives way to the richness and density of everyday life, including that of familiar objects (Featherstone, 1991; Lash & Urry, 1987).

### The Visual Arts as Functional, Dynamic and Levelled

The affinity between familiar images and exceptional, privileged images can be seen by examining them all in terms of their shared social and personal functions. An examination of images in terms of function makes inevitable a view of the visual arts as dynamic, highly inclusive, and socially levelled.

I have elaborated elsewhere on a correspondence between social and personal functions of the visual arts (Duncum, 1991a), so I will provide only a general sketch here. The functions of the visual arts can be described in numerous ways and extensive lists and frameworks of functions have been generated (eg. Horowitz, 1985). Any list or framework, however, would include what can conveniently be called embellishment, persuasion, substitution, and narration.[4]

As suggested above, the earliest use of imagery may have been practised by Neaderthals to embellish gravesites. Certainly the

practice is common today, as are many other kinds of embellishment which link our own time and society with past periods and other societies. For example, prehistoric cave paintings and Gothic cathedrals overwhelm the spectator, so large, beautiful and multifaceted are they, but the same applies to big city department stores. One can no longer, I believe, maintain that the aesthetic delight of one cannot be shared by the other. And each, apparently, has served the purpose of persuasion, partly through its ability to disorientate the viewer. Prehistoric caves were probably used to terrify and otherwise mightily impress on initiates the need for social stability (Bahn & Vertut, 1988). Gothic cathedrals deeply impressed the faithful with the power of the church, and department stores successfully entice custom with a kaleidoscope of colour, objects, movement, and so forth.

The earliest extant images are substitutes, and whether one is thinking of a Greek god sculptured in stone, a Chinese god made from mug wort and used for sympathetic magic, or Queensland's Giant Pineapple, substitute images are prevalent. Today, photographs of friends and relatives are amongst our most prized possessions, and often the first thing to be rescued from floods and fire. Most of what we know about the world outside our own experience is from photographic imagery, mostly from television.

Narration plays many important psychological and social functions, including stimulating and entertaining; helping us to work through fears; fantasising about socially disapproved actions; and establishing, passing on, and exploring social norms. Throughout Western history, narration has been one of the principal functions of the visual arts, and so it remains today. From Ancient Greek stone friezes to science fiction magazine illustrations, from medieval book illustrations to 19th century narrative paintings, from the Sistine Chapel ceiling to television soap operas, from Leonardo's The Last Supper to newspaper photographs, narration has been and continues to be commonplace.

These apparent, essential similarities of function across time and place suggest that imagery is central to human societies and human cognition. Still further striking evidence comes



from the remarkable correspondence that exists between the general social functions of images and the motives, at least in our society, of very young children in producing images spontaneously. Each of the general functions of the visual arts mentioned above is to be found in embryonic form in drawing from very young children; some even in the scribbles of children prior to their second birthday.

Substitute images are produced by children as early as 18 months, albeit in a form frequently difficult to discern (eg. Gardner, 1980). Substitution continues to be an important, and probably the major, motivation in producing spontaneous drawings throughout childhood (Duncum, 1986). Narration is also recognised to be manifest in children's drawing prior to their second birthday, albeit in embryonic form (Matthews, 1984). Narration too continues throughout childhood to be a principal reason why children spontaneously make images. And while substitution and narration dominate picture-making throughout middle childhood, many youngsters elaborate their images with all manner of decoration. Children's spontaneous drawings are also persuasive in a number of ways. From the outset they are rooted in as fundamental a human incentive as the effort of asserting will, and once influenced by culture constitute a site, like all cultural products, of cultural beliefs, values and meanings. Children frequently use their spontaneous drawing to make arguments about the way things are or should be, from exhilarating and violent to pretty and nice, from rule-governed to anarchic, and so forth.

Two effects of viewing the visual arts in terms of functions and motivations are that they are viewed as socially dynamic and socially levelled. However, we are more used to viewing visual arts in terms of categories: for example, fine arts or popular art or folk art. We tend to compartmentalise the visual arts on the basis of who produced them, for whom, in what quantities, in which institutional context, and using which media, techniques, and style. Thus conceived they are often regarded as static and also, frequently, they are treated in tendentious terms. Their conception as a collection of categories has reinforced hierarchical social structures involving prejudicial views of some producers and users and reinforced

the privileging of other social groups. We may now be more egalitarian toward previously discredited categories like folk and even popular art. Nevertheless it is difficult to believe that deeply embedded social practices and habits of thought have been entirely overcome. The snobbish putdown is not far from many an art educator's attitude toward popular art. Many remain ghetto bound. The pedestal upon which fine art was mounted has cracked, but many seem determined to cover up the cracks and maintain the modernist position. However useful the categories of art may still be as descriptions of cultural production, their continued use probably assists in the maintenance of a hierarchical social structure from which they originally arose and which they were intended to cement.

Furthermore, viewing the visual arts in terms of categories has the effect of representing the arts as something already accomplished rather than in the process of becoming. Categories, however fuzzy, tend by their nature to set limits. By contrast, a functional view of the visual arts regards them not as products but as practices, not as entities but as activities (Williams, 1977). A functional view captures a sense of the visual arts as active, as something which people do, and as having effects, however indirect, within society. The categories of art, as noted earlier, are products of the nineteenth century when art was variously viewed as imitative, expressive, or revelatory of an otherwise constituted social reality. In both the liberal and Marxist traditions, art was seen as distinct from other social practices (Williams, 1977), and it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that retaining a classificatory view of art continues to assume this original separation of art from society. By contrast, what a functional view does is to see the arts as an integral part of daily existence, as inseparable from personal, social, political and economic life. We need to see the visual arts as entirely embedded within their contexts, drawing upon their context and reflecting it back in ongoing, dynamic, and symbiotic processes. We need to ask of the visual arts, not so much what they are, but what they do.

To view the visual arts as both levelled and active it is useful to regard them as language is commonly conceived. Language is capable of insight and heightened awareness, even wonder,



but mostly it is used for everyday, prosaic cognition and communication, which is no less important for being ordinary and prosaic. Language is also dynamic. It can be cut into stone tablets, like oil applied to canvas, but the meaning of whatever is set down for posterity is always being revised, and spoken and written language is always evolving. Like language, the visual arts are too integral to ordinary human interaction to be especially privileged, put down, or seen as sealed off from the often fragile, always changing affairs of life.

For these reasons it may be that the very term the visual arts should be abandoned. If the term has the effect of conjuring images of a limited number of categories, or of excluding any category, it might be best to replace it in favour of pictures or visual images, or visual cultural artefacts. It is not a step I have taken here, but it may be worth considering.

### The Social Context of the Visual Arts

I have been discussing images as if they functioned benignly to support worthy social structures and gratify our deep and legitimate human needs. But they do much more, because our society is not comprised of benign forces alone. Society is structured in dominance, stratified, unequal and unfair. It is territorial, competitive, materialistic, individualistic, and highly exploitative. To use the spatial metaphor of the sociologists, society is asymmetrical. And it is within such a society that images play the central role that I have argued of communicating and transmitting meanings, values and beliefs. If images are this important, they are key players in the struggles that take place between competing social groups. They are nothing less than sites of ideological struggle. All the visual arts can thus be viewed as adopted, modified, appropriated, censored and otherwise manipulated by competing groups as a part of continual struggles to influence people's thoughts and actions. They are among the most important sites at which wars for people's hearts and minds are won or lost. As alluded to above, the very categories of art, especially popular and fine art, arose from and contributed to a class war that is only now beginning to subside (Williams, 1983).

Pictures are battlegrounds of meaning. For example, television coverage of the carnage and chaos of the Vietnam War has often been credited with changing public opinion in the United States against the war. With the Vietnam experience in mind, the Bush Administration took the utmost care to ensure that no body of a dead United States soldier was shown on television during the Gulf War (Media Watch, ABC, May, 1991). So influential are television images nowadays that what is not shown may seem not to exist.

Through economic necessity most cultural production is closely tied to dominant forms of social and political organisation. The employment of images to establish and maintain power is amongst their most common use in any society. Images of leaders make this clear; and, as always, a comparison between the past and present is instructive. A copper head of an unknown ruler of Ancient Iran from about 2,000 BC shows specific, individual features, large eyes, prominent nose, compressed lips and a wide mouth, but fashioned so that the man appears appropriately grave, thoughtful and dignified, even wise. Through a fusion of observed details and a simplicity of form, an impression of strength of character is imparted (De La Croix, Tansey, & Kirkpatrick, 1991). Photographic images of leaders which combine dignity with humanity have become the norm. Perhaps they date from the time that Abraham Lincoln credited a photograph of him looking like an ordinary man deep in thought with helping him gain the US Presidency (Macdonald, 1979). How many photographs have been taken over the past 50 years of successive US Presidents alone in the oval office, strong but burdened with the responsibility of high office? Similarly, in totalitarian regimes, where cults of personality have frequently been inseparable from political policy, leaders have been painted as wise teachers or scholars. Numerous paintings of Lenin, Stalin, and Mao Tsetung show their subjects as scholars alone in their studies, with an emphasis on their natural, easy sense of command, intelligence, straightforwardness and wisdom (Golomstock, 1988).

Physical or mental frailty must at all costs be hidden. More than half a century ago President Franklin Roosevelt refused to



allow himself to be photographed being lifted in his wheelchair to the podium. However, by far the most carefully stage-managed US President was Ronald Reagan. It did not matter to his aides what people said about him in the press or on television so long as he was shown looking energetic, patriotic, and smiling (Squires, 1990). A press secretary said:

> We're naturally concerned about and interested in generating the most favourable and policy-goal consistent pictures we can. They [the American public] don't always read the story, but they always see the pictures. (p. 124)

Donald Regan, long-time friend and close aide to the President, had this to say about another press secretary:

> [He] was a master of his craft. He saw - and designed - each Presidential action as a one-minute or two minute spot on the evening news, or as pictures on page one of The Washington Post or The New York Times, and conceived every Presidential appearance in terms of camera angles....
>
> Every moment of every public appearance was scheduled, every word was scripted, every place where Reagan was expected to stand was chalked with toe marks. The President was always being prepared for a performance. (p. 125)

Among the many unwritten rules by which photographers have worked with US Presidents for the past 40 years has been the requirement that the President is the main subject of any "photo op". It is forbidden to take photographs of anyone standing in the hallway or on the way to the oval office, and no photographs can be taken until the President arrives. These rules have been internalised by photographers and the photographers regulate each other, fearing that to deviate from them will mean losing future access (Squires, 1990).

The world views presented by images are offered as true, as in the nature of things. For example, much popular art is conformist, which itself conforms to the idea that society is homogeneous and conflict is to be avoided, even pathological. Both popular culture and fine art constantly remind their

audiences of the value of individual mobility and personal achievement. We are told that opportunities exist for anyone with ability and motivation to climb the income and status ladder. Western society is so saturated with these ideas that inequality appears to be differences that are fair and just. Yet this ideology of individualism sanctions economic privilege and social power, ignoring the fact that privilege is often handed down and that the qualities which are rewarded are only those seen as desirable within the market place (Abercrombie, Hill & Turner, 1980). Reality is presented not as a question of issues and positions to be debated but as absolute truth.

What we could be in danger of forgetting is that the worlds of society and culture are produced through human agency. If we lose conscious awareness that the world is a dialogue between ourselves and what we produce, we experience the world as something over which we have no control, rather than as something of our own making.

However, meanings change over time as competing interests change or one group gains ascendancy. Different meanings are imposed upon images; images are co-opted in different ways. And always, even where a dominant view is established, alternative meanings are likely, as different groups negotiate and/or resist prevailing views.

Three examples can serve as illustrative here. A magazine or television advertising image of a smart young housewife praised for looking after her nuclear family by using a certain brand of margarine was only a few decades ago seen as perfectly harmless, merely to be in the nature of things. Today, following the impact of the feminist movement, the image can be seen as sexist. It not only stereotypes women's role as provider, but also contradicts the facts of family life where the nuclear family is no longer the norm. A picture of a refugee child, dying of hunger, was once seen as the straightforward report of a tragic state of affairs and if exploitative was so of our sympathies. Today, at the urging of some agencies in the Third World, such images can also be viewed as highly exploitative of the child, a kind of pornography which strips the child of all dignity. In Disneyland a paddle boat takes passengers past a perpetually burning log cabin while nearby, looking on, a



perpetually nodding native American chief sits on his perpetually nodding horse. The current recorded commentary on this scene states that the fire has been caused by an accident of a foolish settler and the Indian looks on in despair at the unnecessary destruction of the environment. Such a politically correct, yet weak interpretation of these juxtaposed animated images suggests that it is of recent origin and has been made to fit a scene which was devised with a quite different view. It seems highly probable that the "Injun" originally looked on approvingly at his own handiwork. This revision reflects recent environmental awareness and sensitivity to native Americans, including the idea that they were conservationists from whom we should learn. So the meaning of images constantly shifts in response to changed social pressures.

The meaning of an image can always be multifaceted. There are always competing groups co-opting images for their own purposes, and one can never determine the meaning of an image for someone else. What may appear entirely obvious to one person or group is utterly rejected by another; what is viewed as straightforward by one is taken as ironic by another; what is assumed to be serious by some is laughed at by others. Always there is space for the negotiation of meaning, however limited the space and no matter who defines the space.

This is akin to saying, as Williams (1977) does, that we are born into language and yet also actively contribute to it. Language is an instrument both of our socialisation and of our individualisation. While images structure the space in which we live out our lives, that space is always being contested by competing social forces and, importantly, by ourselves. The preferred meaning of images can always be undercut by their audience; images can always be and frequently are read in negotiable and disbelieving ways. In deconstructional terms, we re-invent the meaning of artefacts for our own purposes. Of course this can of itself often be exploited by the makers who with the same image target different audiences with different meanings. For example, images of Madonna can be read in terms of both female submission to patriarchy, and parody and resistance of it (Fiske, 1989). The revisions to images mentioned earlier reflect widespread societal changes, but the original

meanings were presumably always resisted by some of their victims and sympathisers of their victims.

Nevertheless, of the range of cultural artefacts produced, only a small proportion succeed in the market place—as small a number as 10 or 20 per cent—so that what we use can be said, in a sense, to have been produced by ourselves. On this basis, Fiske (1989) argues that mass or dominant culture, the culture produced for commercial gain and tied to other dominant social and political interests, is genuinely popular culture, the culture of the people.

Even so, we can select only from what is produced. The range of preferred meanings, though complex, is always within the horizons of thought deemed acceptable by the gatekeepers of culture. Whatever oppositional ideas manage to be expressed are almost invariably rendered so that they do not threaten the major political and economic institutions. For example, gender equity and multiculturalism, which were once fiercely resisted, have become strategies of domination. Oppositional groups are pacified and the positions of traditional economic stakeholders of power are maintained. What can at first look like the walls falling down can be seen to be merely incorporation.

### The Deleterious Nature of the Visual Arts

Art educators are fond of extolling the benefits of contemplating fine and beautiful objects. But recognising the postmodern concern with all kinds of images, the conditions under which they are used, and the power with which they are invested, means acknowledging that images can have deleterious effects. Images may not have direct effects; this does not mean they have no effect. Their effects are profound. The visual arts can dull and lull as much as heighten the mind and the senses. They can be used to avoid the consideration of moral issues and evade confrontation with injustice. The narratives within which images are placed often aid this process; for example, hardly any histories of fine art are written with an acknowledgment of the extent of political oppression and human misery in which many art works were produced.



Celebrating the human spirit and aesthetic refinement has been the typical approach of the fine art ghetto. A specific and current example involves interest in Aboriginal art. By quoting hard, quantitative data, Willis (1993), makes a persuasive argument that the recent celebration of Aboriginal art is totally severed from the deprivation in which most Aborigines continue to live, including the artists. This process, she shows, is all the more insidious for the manner of its concealment by the splendour and mystery of the artworks.

Also, the aesthetics of the postmodern condition is one of surface experience. For example, the saying watching television captures what we do: we watch a media rather than programs. We often allow television to flow over us, so that distinctions between fact and fiction are often blurred and we become desensitised to real cruelty. Being exposed to so much human suffering may also engender a sense of helplessness.

There now exists considerable evidence that the images of television structure reality in qualitatively different ways from words alone; and, moreover, they are important in framing thought and influencing action. Children who were exposed to narratives in picture book form and others who were exposed to the same narratives in television form experienced the narratives in notably different ways. In interpreting the narratives television viewers tended to rely on the visual information provided, while story book children relied more on their own experiences. Television viewers relied upon the flow of information and tended to collapse time and space rather than to consider what was plausible. They could not recall the plot so readily as the children who read the storybook, and they paraphrased rather than being able to recall exact phrases (Gardner, 1983, pp. 238-240).

What might the above mean for resisting the ideas of others which are against one's interests? What might they mean for the practice of democracy? Extensive evidence is provided from research on political campaigns which shows that people pay much more attention to the pictures than the text of television advertising and news items (Graber, 1989). For their boss to be looking fit, health, alert, concerned but relaxed; this is the aim of media minders. For most people television is their

window on reality; it tells them what is worth knowing about the world beyond their personal experience and how to think about it. For example, Television viewers put a great deal of faith in the truth of the news; audience research makes clear that television news is highly trusted by the public, both for its own sake and in comparison with other news media. But it is a blind faith. (Henningham, 1988, p. 85)

This last comment brings home issues of central importance in understanding the visual arts: We need always to be alert to the selectivity of images and vigilantly on guard about the use of images in serving interests that may not be our own. My point is to consider that everything is open to exploitation. This is elegantly put by Foucault: "My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous" (Quoted in Jay, 1989, p. 73). This raises the question of the role of the visual arts in education.

### The Visual Arts in Education

No greater gift can be offered by formal education than the ability to make informed choices about which images serve one's best interests and which do not, as well as an inquiring mind that asks about what is not shown. This socially critical perspective on the role of the visual arts in education has recently been discussed under the rubric of cultural literacy (see Duncum, 1991b).

Cultural literacy involves a concern with young peoples's own cultural experience, an expansion of young people's limited cultural horizons by considering the wider social and historical underpinnings of their experience, and to further focus understanding, the making of cross-cultural connections. A cluster of understandings is involved. The visual arts are regarded in postmodern terms as constitutive of competing social pressures and processes, an active participant, not a passive reflection or an expression of an otherwise constituted society. The idea of society as a separate domain of which art is expressive or a reflection is rejected. Art mirrors, but only what is selected to mirror. Art opens doors, but it equally establishes the door frame. Always involved is human agency imposing upon us a way of regarding our experience. Cultural



work is linked to economic and political factors, where cultural activity is as much determining of economic and political life as determined by them.

This necessitates, wherever possible, understanding the meaning of images in terms of the wide range of meanings that different people actually form with images. At the same time, it must be remembered that not everything is known at any one time by any individual. In understanding the meaning of images it is also necessary to go beyond how people feel about their experience, to consider the general nature of the society in which their experience is had. Economic and political institutions operate frequently in an entirely different fashion from the understanding available to individuals. Social structures operate behind our backs. What may appear to be common sense and in the nature of things is often ideological and serving someone's interests. Frequently, value and beliefs are presented as simply true, not constructions which can be contested and decided against. Thus, studying visual art takes us to the very core of the social system; it does so because art is constitutive of the complex networks of competing beliefs, values and meanings that prevail in society.

Visually literate people, while taking pleasure in art, are wholly aware of the historical and social pressures that determine their pleasure. Such people are not confined to celebrating their own cultural horizons, but know about alternatives and can determine for themselves whether an artwork serves their interests or whether it needs to be reassessed so that it does so. The issue can be put very succinctly: It is a matter of framing or being framed, of framing reality in one's interests or being framed in someone else's. Only through the possession of such power is it possible to think of restructuring society along fair, just and democratic lines.

### Discipline Alignments

Art education as conceived above is much broader than the commonly assumed view of the visual arts as one of the arts concerned essentially with expressive and aesthetic concerns. It has more in common with the use of the arts as language arts,

that is, as a method of communication, which may include normally privileged forms, but not necessarily and certainly not as a major focus. What this implies for the politics of visual art education is the need to seek different subject or discipline alliances and partnerships. Under the umbrella of NAAE (National Affiliation of Arts Educators) much work has been expended to develop political clout by aligning ourselves with other arts subjects. The implication of this paper is that such effort does not go far enough.

New alliances with subjects beyond the arts need to be formed to ensure our survival. While an alliance with the curriculum subject English is the most important for visual arts to establish, there are other curriculum areas with which visual arts is compatible and with which links should be developed. A short list of subjects with which the visual arts are compatible includes social studies and the environment, health, science, technology, and religion; any subject that requires an empirical examination of visual data and, for other reasons, any subject involving the human social condition. Some of these curriculum areas are moderate size players; others are emerging. Almost all of them appear to have a higher status among educational decision makers than the visual arts. Traditional alliances with other arts should not be abandoned, but unless we are to continue to spiral toward vulnerability, new alliances need to be created to position visual arts education as the major ingredient in the curriculum mix it has the potential to become. It is both a matter of the survival of the visual arts within education, and a realisation of what could be achieved with the reconceptualisation of our discipline in the postmodern terms envisaged above.

## Conclusion

In summary, the visual arts are important in education because in society they are everywhere used and routinely abused. While ubiquitous, they are very nearly nowhere interpreted with the kind of critical knowledge necessary for a fully functioning democracy. The visual arts play indispensable social roles as servants of the powerful. They help dull the senses while beguiling the mind. Used to rarify contestable



views as objective truth, they selectively mirror social reality, crush or marginalise decent, appropriate progressive icons, distort the facts; and otherwise legitimate power. Yet they are also a means to criticise and contest. They represent an ideological battlefield, one that is amongst the most important battlefields in postmodern society; arguably the most important. Perhaps even more crucial than language, the visual arts are the space in which democracy is practised, threatened and triumphant. The true place of the visual arts in education has hardly begun to be realised. Their potential to critique society and contribute to emerging progressive movements remains hardly tapped in education.

## Footnotes

1. The very inclusive view of the visual arts, adopted by the AIAE and endorsed by art educational bodies throughout the country, has much in common with proposals advanced by Sless (1978) under the rubric of visual literacy and by Donald Brook (1981) under the rubric of representation. The scant attention which their proposals drew from art educators, or the outright hostility in the case of Brook's proposal, suggest that many art educators have not grasped the implications of the policy they democratically and enthusiastically developed and overwhelmingly endorsed.
2. What is important to note about this debate is that discussion of the role of arts other than language and the visual has been effectively excluded. It should be of interest, no doubt also of concern, to educators in the performing arts, that their fields are not even part of this debate. While the inclusion of the performing arts is implied, this is only insofar as they rely on language and/or vision.
3. I am indebted to Sless (1981) for the development of the argument derived from Ivins (1953).
4. This has been developed from another five-part model proposed by Gowans (1981).

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