BOOK REVIEW

Teaching in Spectacular Times: Spectacle Pedagogy: Art, Politics, and Visual Culture


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In Spectacle Pedagogy: Art, Politics, and Visual Culture (2008), Charles Garoian and Yvonne Gaudelius explore and expose, but do not entirely explicate, the complex and nuanced relationships among art, politics, and visual culture through a concept they describe as “spectacle pedagogy” (p. 1). Organized as a non-linear collection of essays, the book reflects the artistic strategies of collage, montage, assemblage, and installation as “spaces” through which “students can learn to create immanent critiques of the spectacle of visual culture through art-making” (p. 1). I have chosen three essays that articulate what I believe to be foundational concepts for this book: essay one, “The Embodied Pedagogy of War;” essay two, “The Spectacle of Visual Culture;” and essay six, “Curriculum and Pedagogy as Collage Narrative.”

Reading the book requires that readers actively contribute to the collaborative text begun by Garoian and Gaudelius—a process approximating one of the text’s central themes regarding our experience of a visually pervasive mediated culture, here, termed spectacle. Ubiquitous imagery alone does not suggest the importance of visual culture study. Living and teaching in a visually saturated environment requires pedagogical approaches that correspond to the effects of the spectacle. Accordingly, “spectacle pedagogy” must be “theorized and practiced as collage, a disjunctive, stuttering process where art teachers’ personal and academic understandings” (Garoian & Gaudelius, 2008, p. 118) are considered always in relation to the experiences and cultural histories of their students.

Providing us with a working concept of spectacle, Guy Debord’s (1994) text, The Society of the Spectacle, claimed that the spectacle represented a substitute for experience and alienated individuals from lived reality by turning them into consumers of both images.
and experiences as commodities. The *Society of the Spectacle* (originally written in 1967) came to prominence in the wake of the student uprisings in Paris universities during May of 1968 while Garoian and Gaudelius (2008) remark that their book was written in the "shadow of 9/11" (p. 1). In both cases, the commodification and distribution of information and visual media raised skepticism regarding the origins, purposes, and uses of images. It is this condition of the spectacle that Garoian and Gaudelius explore in the first essay, "The Embodied Pedagogy of War."

Presented as a transcription of a performance, the first essay is constructed as a series of fragmented texts alternately spoken by each author. Passages in this essay range from the mundane—"The Sunbeam toaster requires your body to push down a lever after it places the slices in its slots" (Garoian & Gaudelius, 2008, p. 12)—to the provocative: "an electrode embedded in a nerve in the neck activates a generator every few seconds, preventing epileptic seizures and alleviating depression (Harper, 2002, p. 54 quoted in Garoian and Gaudelius, p. 15). The juxtaposition and integration of these passages, both literally on the page and in the mind of the reader, replicate one's experience of the spectacle. Through the interchange among ordinary bodily actions, snippets of news reports about the war in Iraq, and biomedical information, this text performs the effect of the spectacle's inscription on the body. The reader experiences information not only as data transmission received through the eyes and ears, but also as a bodily experience conceived by and through the mediated distribution of images and sounds.

This essay illustrates two opposing notions of spectacle pedagogy. On the one hand, the spectacle represents an "ever-present form of propaganda in the service of cultural imperialism" (Garoian & Gaudelius, 2008, p. 24) and, on the other, it "represents a form of critical citizenship which aspires toward cultural democracy" (p. 24). In order to mitigate the power of the spectacle, which presumes a passive consumer, Garoian and Gaudelius emphasize the "transformative and transgressive power of artmaking" (p. 28) as an active and essential component of the second form of spectacle pedagogy described above.

In the second essay, "The Spectacle of Visual Culture," Garoian and Gaudelius engage Elizabeth Ellsworth's (1997) description of visual culture as a "mode of address" suggesting that "the objectives of the mass media are to construct audience members' subject positions as consumers of visual culture" (Garoian & Gaudelius, 2008, p. 37). The spectacle produces inequitable power relationship between producers, who construct and disseminate visual images, and consumers, whose subjectivity is produced by these images. Yet, how images are consumed is not predictable. The unique and idiosyncratic response to these images disrupts a unidirectional mode of address particular to the spectacle and holds the possibility of transformation through the active production of critical response: "[t]he undecidable conditions that are created by the imperfect mode of address of visual culture and students' performances of subjectivity enable them to learn about and challenge the... spectacle of visual culture" (p. 38). In short, it is the elusive rather than concrete nature of images and the unpredictable rather than anticipated reception of these images that allows the student to critique the spectacle in a manner consistent with his or her subjective response.

In essay six, "Curriculum and Pedagogy as Collage Narrative," the authors ask, "What is the epistemology of collage and how does it function pedagogically?" (Garoian & Gaudelius, 2008, p. 91). Contemporary visual culture contradicts comprehensive understandings by denying the possibility of a linear narrative of dissimilar imagery and by employing what the authors refer to as "collage pedagogy" (p. 91). Knowledge produced through collage pedagogy is mutable and indeterminate and exists in the gaps among and between fragmented images. These gaps present opportunities for "creative and political intervention and production" (p. 92). Thus, while the spectacle is conceived...
as a collage of images that demand "the same passive acceptance that it has already secured by… its monopolization of the realm of appearances" (Debord, 1994, p. 15), it also produces the conditions for its own critique with gaps and in-between spaces providing openings for interruption. Collage pedagogy positions the student and teacher not as consumers, external to the imagery under examination, but as producers within and among the spaces between the visual information, effectively shifting the focus away from the interpretation of imagery to the production of meaning. From this vantage, students learn not simply to decipher the spectacle, but "to participate in the democratic process as critical citizens" (p. 97).

**Conclusion: Collage and Critical Response within the Spectacle**

The book is illustrated with images of both student and professional sculptures, installations, and performance pieces each representing a form of counter spectacle. While effective as illustrations for the concepts presented, the inclusion of artworks raises a basic question: can any form of cultural production function sufficiently beyond the spectacle in order to successfully critique its all-encompassing effects? Indeed, Debord (1994) suggested that art can become spectacle as it engages a dominant discourse to which it conforms. This slippage can alienate both viewer and artist from the potentially counter-oppressive effects of art. Though the images in the book alone do not represent effective challenges to the spectacle, when understood in concert with the use of varied font styles in the text and the non-linear nature of the book’s construction, they become merely one component of the textual collage of the book.

Viewed in this manner, the book does not explicate ideas and offer models for teaching, but rather exposes more spaces for critical investigation and participation. As such, this book will most likely appeal to scholars, students, and teachers seeking to further investigate the tangled and fluid aspects of visual culture and its pedagogical possibilities. The authors present theories and images not simply as content for study, but as conceptual foundations for articulating pedagogical approaches that effectively engage the unpredictable, imprecise, and complex nature of the spectacle of visual culture.

*Spectacle Pedagogy: Art, Politics, and Visual Culture* is a significant addition to the growing number of books that have addressed the subject of visual culture and related art practices (such as Crouch & Lübbren, 2003; Dikovitskaya, 2005; Freedman, 2003; Mirzoeff, 1999; Rogoff, 2000; Sturken & Cartwright, 2001). Garoian and Gaudelius enhance the discussion of the content and context of images by theorizing the effects of cultural, political, and personal interactions with images. Rather than arguing for the inclusion of visual culture alongside other artistic practices and forms, the authors accept the spectacle as a precondition of both visual experience and artistic production and offer a foundation for rethinking pedagogical approaches that might provide the basis for a critical response.
REFERENCES