

International Journal of Education & the Arts

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<http://www.ijea.org/>

ISSN 1529-8094

Volume 9 Review 2

November 3, 2008

Spectacle Pedagogy: Art, Politics, and Visual Culture A Review Essay

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Book Reviewed: Garoian, C. R. & Gaudelius, Y. M. (2008) *Spectacle pedagogy: Art, politics, and visual culture*. New York: State University of New York Press.
ISBN 978-0-7914-7386-3

Citation: Beudert, L. (2008). Spectacle pedagogy: Art, politics, and visual culture: A review essay. *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, 9(Review 2). Retrieved [date] from <http://www.ijea.org/v9r2/>.

Abstract

The collection of essays within *Spectacle Pedagogy: Art, Politics, and Visual Culture*, written following the 9/11 attacks and war in Iraq, make a case for the broadening of art and visual culture education to include critiques and art making related to the mass-mediated spectacle of visual culture. The art making strategies of collage, montage, assemblage, and installation and performance art are promoted as significant curricular and pedagogical approaches through which students and teachers can question and critique the complexity of political and visual cultural codes and ideologies inherent within visual culture, and so involve themselves meaningfully as critical and cultural citizens within a democracy.

Introduction

We claim that contemporary artists use the strategies of collage, montage, assemblage, installation, and performance art to create volatile spaces within their artwork. As critical approaches these genres represent significant means through which art students can learn to create immanent critiques of the spectacle of visual culture through art making. (Garoian & Gaudelius, 2008, p. 1)

In the field of art education, the study of visual culture has developed into an integral component of the curriculum, particularly within North America (Freedman, 2003). Teachers and students are urged to query and study everyday cultural imagery, alongside traditional forms of art and art making, in order to help students become knowledgeable and active participants within the political and democratic process (Freedman & Stuhr, 2004; Tavin, 2003). In their book, *Spectacle Pedagogy: Art, Politics, and Visual Culture*, which takes its form as a collection of collaborative essays, Charles R. Garoian and Yvonne M. Gaudelius expand on these ideas further. They share the task of conceptualizing and examining what they term as *spectacle pedagogy* within the contexts of art, politics, and visual culture.

By scrutinizing how the mass media depict national or global events such as the war in Iraq and terrorism, or how advertising and corporate capitalism serve as powerful authorities within the post -9/11 world, Garoian and Gaudelius explore how teachers, students, and the general public can question and critique the complexity of political, social, and ethical interrelationships that exist within today's mass-mediated culture. They contend that the art making and critical approaches implicit within the art forms of collage, montage, assemblage, and installation and performance art offer artists and art students strategies with which to examine the media's depictions of the visual spectacle, discern the hype from the real within visual culture, and foster concerns for social justice rather than injustice. It is essential, from the authors' point of view, that students are provided with opportunities to involve themselves meaningfully as critical and cultural citizens within a democracy.

Garoian and Gaudelius, who are both on the faculty at Penn State University, are well known within the fields of art and art and visual culture education not only for their research and scholarship related to art and visual culture education, the body, and performance and installation art, but also for their collaborative and inventive ways of presenting their research and ideas within their joint writings and their performances in public settings. Hence, in this timely and thought-provoking book, by arguing for the broadening of visual culture content to include critiques and art making related to the spectacle of visual culture, Garoian and Gaudelius pose stimulating questions and present novel ideas regarding the enrichment, presentation, and transformation of curriculum and pedagogy within art and visual culture education.

My intention in the rest of this paper is to provide an overview of Garoian and Gaudelius' views about the nature of spectacle pedagogy, provide short sketches of the individual essays, and examine some of the authors' conceptions of curricula and pedagogy.

Spectacle Pedagogy

As the title of the essay collection implies, Garoian and Gaudelius believe that visual culture can be conceptualized as "spectacle pedagogy" (p. 24); a premise robustly supported by references to cultural critics Guy Debord (1994), Herbert Marcuse (1972), Christopher Lasch (1991), and Siegfried Kracauer (1963/1995), and media critics, Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky (1988), to name a few. From Garoian and Gaudelius' standpoint, visual images are "ideological, they teach us what to see and think" (p. 24). The authors suggest further that the normalization of the spectacle of visual culture by the mass media, which they characterize, for example, as television, the Internet, films, and advertising, facilitates the consumption of images and information within today's society. Moreover, in some cases, this fabrication, orchestration, and manipulation of "the essentialized and immutable codes of mass mediated delivery systems" (p. 23) foster tacit beliefs within society that these codes are real, and even truthful representations of everyday life. Garoian and Gaudelius write:

We characterize the spectacle pedagogy of visual culture in two opposing ways: First, as a ubiquitous form of representation, which constitutes the pedagogical objectives of mass mediated culture and corporate capitalism to manufacture our desires and determine our choices: the second, as a democratic form of practice that enables a critical examination of visual cultural codes and ideologies to resist social injustice. As the former spectacle pedagogy functions as an insidious, ever-present form of propaganda in the service of cultural imperialism, the latter represents critical citizenship, which aspires to cultural democracy. (p. 24)

The excerpt above discloses Garoian and Gaudelius' desire to advance and model ways in which visual culture imagery can be critiqued artistically and pedagogically, in order that teachers and students can begin to formulate their own opinions and become thoughtful and informed adherents of the practices of social justice.

Eight Essays: A Series of Collage Fragments

The book consists of eight essays, which Garoian and Gaudelius note in the Introduction were "written in the shadow of 9/11 and the ongoing war in Iraq" (p. 1). They frame the essays as "Collage Fragments" (p. 1) and propose that these fragments may be read in any order because "collage, montage, assemblage, installation, and performance art are constituted by disjunctive yet

coexisting fragments of cultural memory and history, so too these collage fragments represent our thoughts on culture, politics, spectacle, and pedagogy in our post-9/11 world" (p. 1).

Garoian and Gaudelius began writing essay one, *The Embodied Body of War*, in March 2003 when a war on Iraq was ominous. The authors stress how a probable invasion of Iraq, together with what politicians touted as a short-lived war, became a visual and political spectacle. Completing the essay after the Iraq war had begun, it evolved into Garoian and Gaudelius' response not only to the horrendous accounts of loss of life and suicide bombings, but also to the propaganda and rhetoric surrounding the war found within the mass media. The embodied body is a key entity in this first essay, which is written as a performance piece. A performance narrative about the daily physical, emotional, and psychological routines of the body is juxtaposed with the latest news reports of the casualties in the war *and* accounts of medical advances that have resulted in the encroachment on and "colonization of the body" (p. 7). In addition, the omnipresent adage - planned obsolescence - loiters within the text. As one reads the dialogue, which is shaped using capital letters and distinctive typographical fonts and extraordinarily descriptive and repetitive prose, one is steadily drawn into the performance. The reader's own body - your body, my body - begins to recite the text out loud; therefore becoming an active participant - a collage fragment - within this emotive, thoughtful, and telling portrayal of such a deadly and media-driven visual spectacle.

Essay two, *The Spectacle of Visual Culture*, is an essential fragment within the book. Within this essay Garoian and Gaudelius provide a thoroughly researched explanation of their characterization of visual culture as spectacle pedagogy. In the essay's opening, they pose several thorny, but apt questions about how art educators think and teach about visual culture. For instance, they ask if "the critique of visual culture by art educators is a legitimized form of voyeurism?" or "What distinguishes between pleasure and criticism in the study of visual culture within art education (p. 23). These queries not only set the stage for Garoian and Gaudelius' academic discussion of spectacle pedagogy, but the authors also let art educators know that they as, teachers, have a social and ethical responsibility to engage others as critical citizens in the classroom. Additionally, the authors clarify their belief that, "The potential of collage, montage, assemblage, installation, and performance art as critical pedagogy for visual culture in art education lies in their dissonant spaces, at the contested borders that exist between their dissociative remnants" (p. 37). Referring to the writings of media educator Elizabeth Ellsworth (1997), Garoian and Gaudelius maintain that these dissonant spaces, or "in-between spaces" (p. 37), are "conceptually and emotionally charged" (p. 37), in that they become places where "meaning is continually negotiated and teaching as a position of absolute authority is rendered impossible" (p. 37).

In essay three, *The Impossible Task as the Ecological Imperative*, Garoian and Gaudelius, explore and question aspects of the "ecological devastation" (p. 41) caused by the 9/11 terrorist attack on the United States in 2001. Written a week after the tragedy, the authors not only respond to the

sheer physical and emotional horror of the attack and its "round-the-clock" (p. 42) depiction by the mass-media, which "reinforced our collective desire for retaliation and retribution regardless of the consequences" (p. 42), but they also draw attention to how the mass-media dismissed the immense ecological and environmental devastation that took place. Citing the work of cultural critic Andrew Ross (1994), who defined the ecological devastation of previous Gulf War as "ecoterrorism" (p. 42), Garoian and Gaudelius sensitively compare and contrast the ecological concerns of the Chicago-based art collective, Goat Island's performance, *The Sea & Poison*, with the ideas underscoring ecoterrorism. For instance, in *The Sea & Poison*, Goat Island artists bring together a series of "disjunctive images, ideas, and actions whose conjunctions insinuate the poisoning of the body, the environment, and the soul" (p. 49) in contrast to the "fanatical images, ideas, and actions" (p. 60) of terrorism, such as those evidenced on 9/11. Unequivocally, it is within the underlying social and ethical reflexivity implicit within Goat Island's performance that the authors find solace and contend that performance art, such as *The Sea & Poison*, can challenge prevailing conceptions of the nature of democracy itself.

Garoian and Gaudelius focus on issues related to art education curriculum and pedagogy in their fourth essay, *Art Education in the Silent Gaps of Visual Culture*. They forward a persuasive and well-researched rationale for the historical importance of collage in the visual arts during the 20th century. Its significance, they argue, is present in the postmodern world, given the ability of collage "to entice consumption" (p. 63) as "the prevailing mode of address by the mass mediated systems of television, advertising, the news, the movies, and the Internet" (p. 63). Garoian and Gaudelius also address issues related to the narrative potential of collage as a form of critical pedagogy (Giroux, 1988). This concept is skillfully illustrated and modeled by the authors in essay five, *Misfit Pedagogy of Visual Culture: A Depraved Obsession with Pictures*. Here, Garoian and Gaudelius examine the collation of images associated with the abusive and humiliating military rituals on Iraqi prisoners in the Abu Ghraib prison; a global visual spectacle that many believe was a repulsive, yet objectified, and sanctioned weapon within the war. Through the use performance narratives and the work of contemporary artists, such as Iraqi artist, Salah Edine Sallat, and the graphic artists of Forkscrew.com, Garoian and Gaudelius demonstrate the strength of the narrative structure of art as a means of critiquing the media's exploitation of images, no matter how immoral or prejudiced, in their pursuit of entertainment.

In their sixth essay, *Curriculum and Pedagogy as Collage Narrative*, Garoian and Gaudelius present a convincing portrayal of how collage has been developed in the art classroom. They emphasize how, "Unlike artists who use ready-made cultural materials to critique the hegemony of visual culture, the ready-made narratives found in art classrooms consist of the stereotypical tropes that reinforce the dominant narrative of the mass media" (p. 90). By asking a set of significant questions about the epistemological nature and artistic strengths of collage as narrative, the authors take the field of art education to task for not giving it the necessary critical attention it warrants.

The Spectre of Visual Culture and the Hauntology of Collage is the penultimate essay. Garoian and Gaudelius revisit the narrative process of collage and its "pedagogical significance in the education of artists as public intellectuals" (p. 100), which they believe is imperative in the 21st century. Acknowledging that the in-between spaces of collage are haunted by the ghosts of historical and social ideologies, often constructed by the media, governments, and other political agencies, the authors provide a lengthy and constructive critique of how students are often indoctrinated into the beliefs and expectations of our "mass mediated and mass intellectualized culture" (p. 118), which is epitomized in the institutionalization of schooling, and in particular, the *No Child Left Behind* legislation.

In the eighth and final essay, *The Dis-eased Pedagogy of Disaster Tourism*, Garoian and Gaudelius conceptualize society's fixation with developing and maintaining spectacle culture as "disaster tourism" (p. 119). They tackle, for instance, the media's portrayal of disasters, such as the 2004 tsunami and Hurricane Katrina's destruction of New Orleans. They comment on the global media's ability to send correspondents immediately to a disaster area; thereby we, as viewers, unfortunately become accomplices and voyeurs as we are coaxed into observing the spectacle. The authors also return to the body as metaphor and subject matter, they argue against "pathologizing pedagogies such as art therapy that merely objectify and represent the body as the "disaster tourism" site/sight of medical science in favor of art performance that enables the body's critical and creative expressions of subjectivity through art for both healing and attaining political agency within contemporary cultural life" (p. 128).

Curricula and Pedagogical Fragments

Throughout the essay collection, Garoian and Gaudelius question, supported by examples of 21st century visual spectacles juxtaposed with contemporary art works and performances, the deliberate staging of dominant myths by the mass media. They contend that students must come into contact with curricular content and teaching methods that allow them to unearth and reveal their personal visual worlds, histories, and memories, and so acknowledge the meaningful, yet complex political, social, and ethical interrelationships that exist within a democracy, and the world at large.

If the aforementioned is to occur, then art teachers must be critical practitioners (Kincheloe, 2004) who are able to facilitate thoughtful and receptive student-teacher *and* teacher-student teaching and learning relationships. What then are some of the curricular ideas and pedagogical practices that Garoian and Gaudelius propose as a means by which teachers can foster their own and students' deeper understandings (Darling-Hammond, Bransford, & LePage, 2005) about the complex nature of the spectacles implicit within visual culture, as well as promote "education for

social justice where the rights and privileges of democracy are available for all" (Garber, 2005, p. 16).

The essay collection reveals Garoian and Gaudelius' desire to conceptualize pedagogy in diverse and innovative ways; for instance, they employ such terms as "anamorphic pedagogy" (pp. 131), "the pedagogy of collage" (p. 38), "dis-eased pedagogy" (p. 130), "ecological pedagogy" (p. 58), "pedagogy of possibility" (p. 117), "transgressive pedagogy" (p. 27), to list a few. Within each individual essay, differing pedagogical constructs offer the reader an alternative perspective(s) from which to envision, theorize, critically assess, and teach about visual culture imagery within teaching and learning settings. However, it is Garoian and Gaudelius' conception of collage as a form of pedagogy that interweaves itself throughout the essay collection; thus, linking together the various pedagogical constructs forwarded by the authors.

Garoian and Gaudelius write, "Our purpose in theorizing collage is to examine its narrative structure as a form of critical pedagogy in art education" (p. 91). This is not a recommendation for the replication of cut-and-paste collages seen within classrooms, rather by conceptualizing collage as pedagogy and curriculum, the authors proffer literal and authentic forms of art making and approaches to critically examining visual culture. They put it this way:

A complex of visual metaphors, the narrative of collage comprises fragmentary images and ideas appropriated from visual culture whose contradictory meanings are in opposition with each other. As such, collage narrative enables a critical examination of its fragments, namely their contrasting socially and historically constructed assumptions. In the in-between spaces of the fragments of collage, where knowledge is mutable and undecidable, opportunities exist for creative and political intervention and production - a kind of educational research that exposes, examines, and critiques the academic knowledge of institutional school knowledge. (p. 92)

Garoian and Gaudelius' concept of collage is fitting and opportune as it metaphorically conjures up a myriad of associations about curricular content and teaching and learning relationships. They believe that the art making approaches of collage, montage, assemblage, and performance and installation art allow for the possibility and plurality of ideas and interpretations, as well as the critique of familiar imagery and viewpoints. Drawing again on the Ellsworth's work (1997), the authors note that "the dissociation afforded by the disjunctive narrative of collage serves as pedagogical necessity in fostering critical thinking in students" (p. 67). What is more, stepping metaphorically outside the collage fragments into the spaces in-between them, may lead to the revelation of new associations and understandings related to the political and social structures of visual culture. In addition, students and teachers can take a step back (Kincheloe, 2004) within these spaces and so confront and reflect on their own learning, especially if they are given

opportunities to interrogate their own beliefs and assumptions about the role of visual culture in their own lives (Garber, 2005). Consequently, according to Garoian and Gaudelius, it is within the unpredictable in-between spaces of collage that the teacher's power and authority are relinquished, and the reciprocity of teaching and learning can take place as teachers and students work together as collaborators and partners.

Nieto (2007) notes that the qualities desired in today's teachers must manifest some of the traits that the arts share, like empathy and solidarity. And arguably, these qualities must also be nurtured in students. Garoian and Gaudelius elevate these ideas further as they promote critical pedagogical practices that aim to nurture compassionate and caring teaching and learning. The Goat Island's artists' "radical teaching practices" (p. 44) evidenced in their performance, *The Sea and Poison*, for instance, are perceived by the authors as sensitive, concerned, and humane responses to the social, ecological, and ethical issues inherent within the global environment. The artists work together as trusting partners within their shared performance; thus, not only contributing to the message and meaningfulness of the oeuvre, but also illuminating the values of moral purpose and political awareness and resistance (Hargreaves, 1996) pedagogical thoughtfulness (Van Manen, 1991), and respect for persons (Garber, 2005).

The performance dialogues, confidently and eloquently delivered in several of the essays, demonstrate tangible ways of teaching others. The body, itself, is regarded as a performing, sensory, and pedagogical means of publicly disclosing and analyzing political, social, and cultural constructions of the spectacle of visual culture. The essays illustrate how contemporary artists bring their bodies into play as they challenge and strive to alter existing beliefs about the contemporary world seen through visual culture. Likewise, the reader becomes familiar with the passion, risks, and courage that Garoian and Gaudelius' own bodies transparently impart, as they - as persons, artists, researchers, social activists, authors, and teachers - confront and weigh the impact of the spectacle on their own lives and ways of being. The authors, through their own embodiments, bring to life their insights about how teachers can engage their students, and themselves, in representing and contrasting their own experiences, memories, and thoughts in their art making or as informed critics within the visual world. Moreover, such interactive performance strategies suggest that teaching is clearly about enactment and is akin to a performing art (Schonman, 2005).

Within the essays Garoian and Gaudelius discuss the art works of a number of contemporary artists, including John Cage, Cristin Millet, Bill Viola, Salah Edine Sallat, Nam June Paik, as well as art students in university-level art courses. These art works constitute authentic exemplars of how contemporary artists use the distinctive qualities of collage, assemblage, montage, and installation and performance art to challenge societal norms and patterns. And, combined with the authors' research on, commentaries about, and pictures of selected art works, these exemplars form a valuable curricular resource for teachers and teacher educators who wish to explore and

deconstruct the nature of the spectacle with their students. For example, in essay six, Garoian and Gaudelius discuss and critique Nam Juan Paik's installation, *TV Buddha*, (1974), a picture of which is squarely featured on the cover of the book. Paik's installation is a symbolic and visual reminder of the media's presence and dominance in our lives. The authors raise a series of questions related to Paik's installation, which are complemented with constructive suggestions for helping "students learn to challenge the academic assumptions of schooling and to create images and ideas based on their differing cultural perspectives" (p. 97). As the authors note, Paik's art work provides an excellent "curriculum of the *TV Buddha*, and how we teach it" (p. 97).

Liora Bresler (2007) reminds us that the boundaries between the various arts disciplines are becoming less distinct in terms of subject matter content. Moreover, by associating with the arts, artists and students have the ability to engage in and meet head-on political and social issues, such as gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, oppression, social justice, and the environment. Therefore, Garoian and Gaudelius' approaches to curriculum and pedagogy are extremely pertinent within other subject disciplines, such as drama and theatre education (Garcia, 2004) and media arts education (Kubey, 1998). The critiquing of visual culture imagery through art making, film making, critical and creative writing, and plays and performances makes it possible for teachers and students to explore "the images and ideas of visual culture so that the dialectic tension between them yield multiple critiques, interpretations, understanding, and applications" (p. 71).

Conclusion

Spectacle Pedagogy: Art, Politics, and Visual Culture refines and extends the boundaries of art education theories, curricula, and pedagogy in innovative, intellectual, and significant ways. Furthermore, each one of the eight essays reflects the authors' voices, passions, and purposes. Charles Garoian and Yvonne Gaudelius rightly heed us to question and examine the political, social, ethical, environmental, and human interrelationships that exist within the spectacle of visual culture. In a world where the accessibility and influence of visual culture is within easy reach, the contemporary and critical art making strategies of collage, montage, assemblage, assemblage, and performance and installation art provide practical ways in which to critique it. All of us within the field of art and visual culture education are in need of this timely, forward-thinking, and noteworthy book.

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Then, visual culture art education is investigated as the latest New thing in North American art education literature that has a particular focus on the Now with an inherent promise for the New. Last, post-Internet art is discussed as a possible example of a Now without a perpetual recourse to the New. The collection of essays within *Spectacle Pedagogy: Art, Politics, and Visual Culture*, written following the 9/11 attacks and war in Iraq, make a case for the broadening of art and visual culture education to include critiques and art making related to the mass-mediated spectacle of visual culture. The art making strategies of collage, montage, assemblage, and installation and performance art are