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Visual culture in art teacher education: A Turkish case

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Abstract

As globalization impacts Turkish culture, the training and preparation of art teachers is increasingly important because these individuals will play a key role in teaching children how to become visually literate in a quickly changing world. This paper explores the concept of visual culture in Turkey as perceived by eight art teacher instructors teaching at various public universities' educational faculties in Turkey. A phenomenological human science approach was employed in order to develop a description of the perception of visual culture, and to predict the possibility of including visual culture studies in pre-service art education in Turkish universities.

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Keywords: Visual culture; art education; teacher education; art teacher education; visual culture art education.

1. Introduction

This study grew out of a concern about the state of art teacher education in Turkey and the potential of visual culture to produce a change in the way art is taught. There is a need for extensive reflection on and debate about the meaning of art teacher education and its expected outcomes in contemporary Turkish society. Thus, it is important to identify best practices as they relate to visual culture to move toward change at a national level.

This study aimed to shed light on the need for re-educating teacher educator, with an indication that there is value in teacher educators' getting multiple perspectives in a changing world. The part of the significance of the study is for teacher educators to change their perceptions of visual culture in a positive light. This paper will focus on the meaning of visual culture in general followed by the definition and observations of the participants' viewpoints on visual culture in the context of Turkey and necessary means to incorporate it in art teacher education.

1.1. What is visual culture?

Visual culture is a field of study that involves a combination of art history, cultural studies, art education, anthropology, and critical theory. It recognizes the predominance of visual forms of media, communication, and information in the postmodern world.

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Visual culture in its simplest definition is everything we see; television, sculptures, photographs, movies, paintings, gardens, buildings, artifacts, toys, advertising, jewelry, maps, graphs, websites, landscapes which are communicated through visual means. Therefore, visual culture is all encompassing, and a prominent human experience that is now more visual and visualized than ever before (Mirzoeff, 1999). The foremost advocate of visual culture, Paul Duncum asserts, the sites of all the visual objects, places and events that are about meaning making are everywhere such as shopping malls, theme parks, television, the Internet, virtual reality, and tourist attractions (Duncum, 2001). Therefore, in today's world, meaning is made through an interaction of these visual sites, visual artifacts, music, sound effects, pictures, and etc. Duncum (2000) also puts an emphasis on the importance of the whole context of viewing saying, "how we view artifacts is as important as what we view" (p.32).

Charles R Garoian and Yvonne M Gaudelius (2004) characterize "visual culture as 'spectacle pedagogy' in that images teach us what and how to see and think and, in doing so, they mediate the ways in which we interact with one another as social beings" (p.298). As Kevin Tavin (2003) makes the point, "visual culture attempts to interpret how visual experience and the visualized subject are constructed within social systems, practices, and structures" (p. 209). Therefore visual events can inextricably be linked to ongoing social, political, psychological, and cultural realities mutually modifying one another. These modifications occur as a result of cultural and social struggles and are evidenced in the visual media present in every section of the society.

In education, Duncum (2001) believes it is necessary to reconceptualize art education and to expand the field to include everyday images, ideas, and practices in the light of visual culture. He says, as the range of visual elements studied get extended, art education will put more emphasis on the social worlds of visual imagery as they constitute beliefs, attitudes, and values (Duncum, 2000). Through this approach, visual culture studies are aimed to serve as a way to promote "critical understanding for the purpose of empowerment" (Anderson and Milbrandt, 2003, p.53). In Anderson and Milbrandt's (2003) view, "empowerment means that students explore their own meanings rather than passively accepting meaning from a book or a teacher" (p.53). An exploration of meanings of visual objects, then, can be achieved through critical inquiry as expressed by Nancy Pauly (2003); "the study of visual culture is not about the object studied, but the questions asked about visual images, objects, environments, and the phenomena of seeing and being seen" (p.3).

2. Method

I conducted a qualitative research because it was based on a non-statistical method of inquiry guided by research and analysis of social phenomena. I chose phenomenological inquiry as the appropriate method of qualitative research for this study, because it was concerned with the study of experience from the perspective of individual interpretation. I used semi-structured interviews that employed open-ended questions to gather information about the following; the participants' educational and professional background; their definitions of art education and art teacher education and what it means for them to teach pre-service art education; critical reflections on the educational system of Turkey; perceptions of visual and popular culture; and finally individual approaches to teaching art education.

2.1. Participants and locations

Selecting respondents was based on what they could contribute to the development of insight and to the researcher's understanding of the phenomenon. Eight art teacher education instructors who teach pedagogical courses such as art pedagogy, philosophy of art, and/or teaching methods as well as studio within art education departments of various universities in different locations in Turkey were interviewed in the Spring of 2007. In order to identify the sample group, I found initial informants through personal contacts and through universities' online databases. Early interviews that led to identifying key informants were carried out in-person or via e-mails. Upon their responses, a time was set and interview locations were established.

Purposive sampling was chosen in order to identify the primary participants in the research project. As commonly used in qualitative research, the researcher selected the information-rich cases for intensive study. In purposive sampling, subjects are selected based on the researcher's judgment and the purpose of the research. The purpose was to find out what the university art teacher education instructors thought about overall quality of art teacher education and how they taught the subject. This required the researcher to think about the criteria which would distinguish

appropriate informants from those who would be less useful for research purposes. Other criteria included the amount of experience related to the research questions held by potential respondents, and their capacity to express that experience in words (Wengraf, 2001). The thoughtfulness and reflectivity of the respondents were also important in selecting the sample.

2.2. Data analysis

The analytical procedure in a phenomenological data analysis typically involves clustering of themes, typically formed by grouping units of meaning together (Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994). It involves a rigorous examination of the list of units of meaning as the researcher tries to elicit the essence of meaning. In the analysis of the research method, I transcribed all the interviews verbatim and then read several times to begin the formulation of important themes and /or meanings. Then, I extracted statements from each interview that related to how the individual experienced the topic and then grouped these statements into main and subthemes (Creswell 1998). I then finalized the data analysis with a composite description of each participant (Creswell, 1998). In an attempt to increase objectivity, I bracketed my conventional knowledge in order to avoid making judgments while maintaining perspective. This process helped remind me to listen and learn from the informants without bias from my own experiences. All the participants' names were given pseudonyms.

3. Results (Findings)

3.1. What is the meaning of visual culture in participants' views?

Because the term visual culture pertains two familiar words, 'visual' and 'culture', some of the responses were shaped by personal interpretations based on that pre-knowledge. For instance, for Yonca, visual culture meant traditional arts and the culture of the society and how they are perceived by the young generation. For Oguz and Mustafa, visual culture was about the education of the tastes, and teaching students the aesthetic aspects of things that are conceived ugly or mundane. For instance, Oguz said,

Everybody has a visual culture. This visual culture can be trained. There is a proverb in Turkey: 'Colors and tastes cannot be discussed'! No! Colors and tastes can be discussed! It is because now colors and tastes started to question the beautiful, and the beauty has become a discipline. Visual culture is the reflection of the knowledge of beauty or the aesthetic values of the specific country's region or groups.

Aysen, Ismet, and Latife perceived visual culture as everything we see with our eyes. It is about everything related to the visual; any kind of cultural types that are based on vision and understanding of the vision; cinema, folk dance, architecture, city culture, television, computer, and etc. Ismet said,

Everything that we see with our eyes, everything that comes to us through our eyes, and everything we comprehend through eyes is visual culture. From the cloth we wear to the street we walk; from the commercial image to a cartoon movie; from the cartoon move to Mona Lisa; from Mona Lisa to the different versions of Mona Lisa; to the logos...everything is visual culture.

For another respondent, Fehmi, visual culture was a visual experience. In his words,

Visual culture...is very simple... visual experience. A person is constantly loading images to himself or herself like a computer under the bombardment of images. There is television, video, Internet. Visual culture is a thing that is least suspected for its truthfulness, because it's the most plentiful and richest in the world. It is an eye conception, and eyes are the most important senses and are the ones that you believe most. So you believe the truthfulness of the visuals right away. Visual culture also means different visual forms that are like social alphabets shaped by different societies.

3.2. What is visual culture in the context of Turkey?

When participants were asked about their perception of what visual culture means in the context of Turkey, four of the respondents related visual culture to the cultural decadence that has resulted from cultural globalization. For them, the Westernization efforts of the country and the strong impact of globalization has caused the Turkish people, especially the younger generation, to lose their own cultural realities while adapting foreign values. There was a

strong consensus that the young generation is no longer interested in their own cultural values and easily affected and even spiritually demolished by the strong and inescapable impact of the Western originated life styles such as fast food, fashion, video games, shopping malls, consumerism, music, movies, and so on. Bahri strongly pointed out that because everybody receives the same information and dresses identically in a globalized world, it is likely that people will lose their spiritual richness and eventually turn into robots. He said, “When the foreign systems are not aligned with local social structures, it results in confusion of concepts such as essence and form.”

For Latife, the purpose of this cultural globalization is to establish a dominant culture through creating people who do not question, yet continuously consume what is offered. She said,

The dominant culture is unfortunately the American culture. For instance, the American style of eating, fast-food, and fashion are now in our daily lives. Fashion is one of the most prevalent forms of capitalism. Some day, everybody will wear the same type of thing. The dominant culture is the fashion culture at the moment. Hence, ethnic cultures will disappear; and as the cultures decrease in importance, cultural diversities will die too. People will no longer need to travel elsewhere to see the differences, because it all will be the same.

As Aysen also argued,

We traditionally are a multicultural society. We surely need to examine other cultures and their arts, but I am against putting them on like outfits. I am against globalism in regards to copying Western styles from fashion to commercials like cinema, television, art, music, and so on. We feel the effects of globalism everywhere...in music, in literature, in food...We are becoming a superficial society which is to my dislike. We must teach our students about other cultures and their arts. We should try to adapt some styles or philosophies, but we should do it without losing our own values.

For Aysen and Oguz, visual culture in Turkey is weak as a result of the lack of aesthetic consciousness in peoples’ mind-sets. Indicative of their understanding of visual culture as the aesthetic awareness, they thought that construction of beautiful visual culture can be enriched through aesthetic education.

Similarly, Yonca stated, students are extremely influenced by media technologies. However, she then argued whether tastes are improved aesthetically by the elements of visual culture; “Shopping malls or television don’t improve people’s aesthetic tastes in Turkey. They are not channeled toward elevating people’s tastes. Rather, they increase a sense of consumerism instead of aesthetic tastes.”

3.3. How can visual culture be reflected in art teacher education?

The respondents were asked about how visual culture can be reflected in art teacher education. The majority of them approached the study of visual culture in art teacher education positively. However, due to the concept confusion, 6 of the respondents, Aysen, Oguz, Yonca, Bahri, Fehmi, and Mustafa were either unsure about how visual culture can be practiced in education or simply gave tangential comments. For instance, Latife approached it from a political standpoint and emphasized that students need to be educated about environmental, political and social, and economic issues before anything else because the country is inundated with serious concerns such as illiteracy, economic, and other social problems. For Aysen and Oguz, the majority of students exhibit characteristics resulting from their upbringing and education that would create challenges to the study of visual culture in art teacher education. In Oguz’s words

We do a lot of things to change this so-called deterioration that results from the fast-paced popular and modern culture with more intellectual structures. All is good, but what you try to tell them here is limited to the student’s capability to understand what he or she is told. Because the social culture is deeply rooted and established, the formation of the intellectual culture that we imported from outside (West) is taking a long time. Actually, our youngsters are open to renovations, but social and traditional dogmas prevent them from behaving more freely. This is reflected in education, in art, in science, and in business.

Another informant, Bahri, used the metaphor of a jacket which is put on using an enforceable manner, even though it looks odd and loose on us, as he means the foreign systems like the ongoing visual culture and popular culture becomes part of our culture, we are bound to suffer from the disharmony between our culture and the imported cultures. That is why; he says that it is important to be conscious of what is going on in the society, and so be aware of our important duties such as constantly discussing these issues with students.

Fehmi did not specifically answer the question except saying that everything we see educates us, and that learning is shaped by the environment. He said, “If the environment in which people live is limited, then learning is

limited too. The life of a child is important in art education. The child's imagination might be limited to what he is seeing and experiencing in his life." Mustafa also only said that it is very important to increase students' awareness about simple things that could be utilized as art forms, and it would be useless to be limited to canvas painting.

Ismet, whose knowledge of visual culture was vast, said,

We, as art educators, must include all types of visual culture in order to enhance our students' critical approach to the things around them', and one of the basic reasons for this is that capitalism now is of such a dimension that people buy without even questioning whether they really have a need, with the encouragement of the commercials. They keep working harder and harder and spending more and more money to increase the level of desire in people. That's why, it is an obligation to include visual culture in art education...not even extending the scope of art education...it is an obligation!

4. Discussion

4.1. Implications for visual culture studies in Turkish art teacher preparation

Visual culture merges the study of popular and low cultural forms, media and communications with the study of high cultural forms and fine art, design, and architecture. This aspect of visual culture may seem to threaten the elitist definition of art. Opponents of visual culture often put forward the concern that the essence of art education will be destroyed by indulging in the low popular forms that are enjoyed and consumed by the general population. Along the similar line of thought, some of the participants perceived visual culture as solely the daily indulgence of degenerated visual forms caused by the Globalization. However, according to the proponents of visual culture, a vast arena of images including low and mundane as well as high art forms should be examined toward a more holistic approach in art education.

In the Turkish case, visual culture is mostly exemplified by the vast array of images that are conjoined in very unprecedented ways due to the cosmopolite structure, such as Western values adopted for the purpose of Westernization, while conditioned by Islamic values. Even though some visual forms may persist worldwide, some are unique to the local cultures. People's understanding of the social and ritual meanings of visual forms may vary greatly from one culture to another. As the proponents of visual culture advocate, regardless of the different form and characteristics that visual culture takes in social and cultural contexts, the discourse of visual culture is based on promoting students' critical understanding. Its focal objective is to enable students to explore their own meanings instead of passively accepting meaning from a book or a teacher.

Therefore, I believe, within art teacher education in Turkey, visual culture could be a means to break from the traditional approaches that are primarily based on design principles and techniques, and formalistic ideals of art. Visual culture pedagogy could be an excellent alternative, allowing art education to move away from these traditions. As suggested by Hermann (2005), an understanding of multiple viewpoints can be discussed in the classroom and students can be encouraged to think critically about the visual culture of which they are a part.

The data in the study showed a need to train pre-service art teachers about visual culture in their own social context as part of their program requirements. These efforts can focus on increasing art teacher education candidates' competence and confidence to execute practices required to produce visually literate students. In doing so, pre-service instructors can integrate on-going cultural transformations exemplified as visual culture or popular culture into existing and new courses.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

The current paper showed that respondents reported a diverse array of outcomes from their key experiences in higher education. The perceptions and experiences of respondents have had strong and diverse impact on their teaching practices. However, these key experiences were neither arranged in a linear, sequential manner, nor were they predicted by a pre-planned scheme. Given their strong effects, however, future studies would benefit from paying more attention to key experiences and to their ubiquity in different tasks and courses. Furthermore, By expanding this empirical basis, future discussions of key experiences in higher education may also engage more fully with the concept of visual culture in art teacher education practice.

Because visual culture as a concept and as a discipline is new and adherents in Turkey are very few, there is a need for a conscious concern for visual culture in pre-service art education. An examination of the existing complex social realities that find their expression in the visual culture in Turkey may create a new consciousness in students. Therefore, visual culture can be a bridge of understanding the whole dynamics of what it means to live in Turkey, and what it means to live in a globalized world.

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