

From Bucktown to Niketown: Doing Visual Cultural Studies (Chicago Style)

**Kevin Tavin, Lea Lovelace, Albert Stabler &
Jason Maxam**

We begin this article with an epigrammatic manifesto: Art education should be a political project that engages visual representations, cultural sites, and public spheres through the language of critique, possibility, and production. Art educators should help students understand, critique, and challenge how individuals, institutions, and social practices are inscribed in power differently, to expand the possibilities for freedom, equality, and radical democracy, through relevant and meaningful production. These are the elements and principles of a politically engaged and socially just art education. This is art education as visual cultural studies.

This article attempts to take-up these elements and principles through the exploration of a graduate art education course at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago: *Art Education 5020: Critical Pedagogy, Cultural Studies, and the Making of the Cultural Worker*. The article examines the general focus of the course, provides brief examples of past projects, and presents three narratives by former graduate students that focus on investigations of popular-cultural texts and public sites. These individual voices represent three stories of imagination and intervention which took place within and beyond the classroom. The student projects provide a set of considerations to help mediate the transformation of art education K-12 practice towards visual cultural studies.

Doing Visual Cultural Studies

Students in *Art Education 5020* investigate articulations between critical pedagogy, cultural studies, and visual culture, as sites of convergence and contention in order to address issues of representation, knowledge, and power. Central to this course is the issue of how individuals and groups are affected by forms of discourse (visual and other) that either constrain or enable various forms of agency.¹ The course combines theoretical inquiry, dialogic exchange, and social action. Participants read and respond to selected texts on critical pedagogy, cultural studies, and visual culture.²

At one point in the semester, individual students present their critical response to the readings and engage the class in a dialogic seminar that encourages discussion, debate, and exchange. Through this seminar, students link theoretical issues with wider practical and pedagogical concerns through personal narrative and intertextuality. Students are encouraged to position themselves as reader and author and critic and participant by situating the selected texts within a field of other texts and knowledge in the context of other knowledge. In this sense, students respond to the articles through their own experiences and concerns, discovering and sharing “the connections between the text and the context of the text [and] the context of the reader” (Freire as cited in Shor & Freire, 1987, pp. 10-11). At the end of the semester, each participant in the class analyzes and interprets a site, text, image, and/or set of images through critical theories that investigate what, when, and how discourses are produced, consumed, and regulated. The final project culminates with an in-class presentation, outside field trip, or other critical activity led by an individual student.

During the past few semesters, students have focused their attention on specific popular visual texts and public and corporate sites in and around the city of Chicago for their final project. For example, a returning graduate student who is a mother of two teenage

daughters decided to explore magazines targeted at young women. After researching scholarship on representations of women in the media she engaged the class in inter-individual interpretations of images from a variety of teen magazines. She focused on the commodification of sexuality, the construction of identity, ideals of beauty, and codes of romance by distributing magazines and asking students to place images on the wall under various headings. Students compared images, wrote commentary, and created counter-collages. Through her project, she facilitated oppositional and decentered readings of the images—interpretations that flowed alongside other complex and often contradictory narratives.

During another final project, a student led the class to the *Hard Rock Café* in Chicago. Participants were guided through the restaurant and asked to explore the visual narratives and artifacts deployed on the walls. The class took note of who was represented and how their story was conveyed. Subsequently, the class spent hours, over mediocre food and drink, discussing the corporate construction of cultural memories—where ideology, belonging, pleasure, and passion anchor into hyperreality. Maintaining the melodic theme, another student escorted the class to Chicago's *Rock and Roll McDonald's*, a site crowded with American icons and images from the 1950s and 1960s, for her final presentation (see Figure 1). The student provided the class with a fifteen page self-produced guidebook, complete with articles, essays, and questions to consider. The readings included critiques of McDonald's by Kincheloe (1997, 2002) and Ritzer (1996), and other articles from www.mcspotlight.org. In addition, the packet contained promotional material from McDonald's and other pro-McDonald's essays from business journals and magazines. After reading the material, students were asked to consider the following questions:

Figure 1. *Rock and Roll McDonald's*

“How does McDonald’s link patriotism and so-called family values to consumption?” “What do the representations in *Rock and Roll McDonald’s* teach us about our history, gender rolls, diversity, and



innocence?” and “What are the working conditions and labor practices of McDonald’s in the United States and abroad?”

Another graduate student led the class to *Niketown*, a corporate mega-complex replete with swirling shoes, video rooms, museum cases, and thousands of retail products (see Figure 2). The student divided the class into 5 sections, asking each group to focus on one element from *The Circuit of Culture: Identity, Representation, Production, Consumption, and Regulation* (Du Gay, P, Hall, S., Janes, L., Mackay, H., & Negus, K., 1997). Participants were asked to analyze and interpret representations of athletes (their gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, nationality, age, etc.), promotional material, architecture, consumers, and the placement, type, and cost of Nike products. Students inspected product labels to determine the country of origin and then contextualized the materials

Bucktown-Niketown

within the discursive space of Nike's self-promotion as innovative, youthful, irreverent, authentic, fun, and all-American.

Figure 2. *Niketown* (Chicago)

A third project involved "peeking into the past" at *American Girl Place* in Chicago, where corporate culture celebrates "Girls of Yesterday and Today." The participants in the class wanted to know what girls were being celebrated and at what cost (financially and ideologically). Once again, the class was divided into teams to cover all four floors of



the superstore. One group of students investigated the lower level of the complex where large dioramas of each doll's life are displayed (see Figure 3). Students were asked to consider what and whose history was being exhibited. The group concluded that all the dolls, regardless of the temporal context (1774, 1854, 1864, 1904, or 1994), were represented in a safe, one-dimensional ontological zone—living a simple, wholesome, innocent, and privileged life, free from the struggles, conflict, and atrocities of the past. The only possible exception was Addy Walker, an African-American doll whose life takes place during the civil-war era.



Figure 3. *American Girl Place* dioramas (Chicago)

opportunity to name the experience of oppression and then identify structures of dominance that function to cause the oppression?" "Do [these products] erase America's shameful character?" and "How does

American Girl Place "legitimate diversity as a marketing strategy" (pp. 219-226)?

Other participants in the class re-searched different areas of the mega-store, including the café, theatre, clothing, and other retail sections. Students explored *American Girl* books, toys, computer games, accessories, make-up, beach towels, and blankets. The class acts of interpretation through visual cultural studies. In this sense, performativity

problematized the line of products and the company's philosophy using a set of questions from Brady's (1997) article, *Multiculturalism and the American Dream*. These questions included: "Do these texts provide the

Bucktown-Niketown

provides an articulating principle that signals the importance of translating theory into practice while reclaiming cultural texts as an important site in which theory is used to think politics in the face of a pedagogy of representation that has implications for how to strategize and engage broader public issues. (Giroux & Shannon, 1997, p. 2)

Students analyzed, interpreted, and critiqued specific popular visual texts and corporate sites in and around the city of Chicago through the lens of critical social theories. Students operated on and through these theories in order to set their world and themselves in question. Students challenged participants in the class to become politically engaged by confronting specific and substantive historical, social, and /or economic issues “drawing upon provided cultural signs [and] resignifying them to address the local politics of home” (Morgan, 1998, p. 126).

The following brings together the voices of three former students from *Art Education 5020*. The students describe their final projects, which took place during the spring 2002 semester. The first piece addresses the representations (or lack thereof) of persons with disabilities in mass media, specifically, within the film genre of comedy. This project interrogates how particular representations have the potential to shape the way disability is understood in and through culture. The second essay presents a thoughtful investigation of the phenomenon of gentrification and its impact on a particular section of Chicago known as Bucktown. The essay outlines the history of Bucktown and then provides a summary of the aesthetic and cultural factors that serve as a basis for pedagogical intervention. The third piece takes a critical look at violence in the media, specifically in and through movies and video games. This essay explores the connections between representations of violence and the responsibilities of artists and cultural workers. By challenging how individuals, institutions, and

social practices are inscribed in power differently, these former students attempt, in their own ways, to chart a course for reconceptualizing art education as visual cultural studies.

(Dis)Missing Representations: Persons with Disabilities in Mass Media

Lea Lovelace

Recently, my classmates and I embarked on a semester of questioning as we took a critical look at mass media and popular culture through a graduate art education course. Throughout the semester we learned to recognize hegemonic practices and power structures reflected in examples of popular culture. This was facilitated by reading and responding to texts on critical pedagogy and cultural studies and deconstructing images in films, television programs, videos, print media, and advertisements. We engaged these images through a critical pedagogical process to reveal social inequalities present in dominant culture and discourse. We analyzed not only who is represented, but also who is missing and what messages are being sent through those absences.

For my final presentation I focused on representations of persons with disabilities in media, specifically, the film genre of comedy. I was interested in this topic for several reasons. Recent statistics reported by the National Organization on Disability in Washington D.C. show that 1 in 5 Americans has a disability and these figures are expected to increase as people live longer. It is projected that by 2010, 1 in 3 persons will have a disability. I reveal these statistics to problematize disability in relation to societal construction of normalcy. Over the past two decades, as civil rights legislation for persons with disabilities such as Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) have been passed and as

Bucktown-Niketown

disability awareness has increased, television programs and films have taken up story lines regarding disability.³ Although there have been some films in the recent past that have addressed the topic of disability through the genre of drama, most recently, there has been an increasing number of representations of persons with disabilities within the genre of comedy.⁴ Many of these comedic films are box office hits, grossing over a hundred million dollars. I was interested in digging deeper into this topic to find out if these films help bring about awareness and understanding of disability and/or further perpetuate discrimination and negative stereotypes. To find out I screened segments from *Happy Gilmore* (1996) and *There's Something About Mary* (1998) and facilitated a dialogic discussion with my classmates on this topic.

To introduce the topic of my presentation I had the class read several articles regarding disabilities studies, including Hahn's (1997) *Advertising the Acceptably Employable Image: Disability and Capitalism* and Berube's (1997) *On the Cultural Representation of People with Disabilities*, which I distributed a week before my presentation. On the day of my final project I presented information on the definition and history of disability and provided listings of movies and television programs featuring characters with disabilities. I distributed essays and reviews regarding the Farrelly brothers and their films, as well as biographic information about the actors who played characters with disabilities in some of their films (Cagle, 1998; Reiss, 2002). Numerous films directed or produced by the Farrelly brothers such as *Me, Myself, and Irene*, *Say It Isn't So*, and *There's Something About Mary* include characters with different physical or mental disabilities in comic scenes.

After distributing the information on the Farrelly brothers, I displayed scenes from *There's Something About Mary* (see Figure 4). I led a discussion by asking a series of questions related to the film and the readings. I focused most of the discussion around the character of

Warren. This character, played by actor, W. Earl Brown, is the mentally challenged brother of the main female character, Mary, played by Cameron Diaz. Warren is known for being especially sensitive to persons touching his ears and can be recognized throughout the movie wearing earmuffs and constantly fidgeting.

During one of the first scenes of the movie, Ted, played by Ben Stiller, comes to pick up Mary, his date for the prom. As a kind gesture he proceeds to do a magic trick for Warren and pretends to pull a baseball out from behind Warren's ear. Alarmed by someone coming near his ears, Warren's response is to violently scream and attack Ted with physical force resembling a series of pro-wrestling moves. I revealed this portrayal of Warren to the class as well as several less violent scenes featuring his character. I then asked several questions such as: Does the portrayal of Warren advance our understanding of persons with disabilities? Would you categorize the character of Warren as a sympathetic representation of a person with mental retardation? Why or why not? The Farrelly Brothers compare the character of Warren to the character of Forest Gump; do you agree that they are similar representations? The Farrelly Brothers argue that they are pushing the envelope for the sake of hilarity; do you feel that they are successful? Do they go too far?

Figure 4. Cameron Diaz and W. Earl Brown in
There's Something About Mary.

During this discussion, I read a segment from Berube's (1997) article that states "Every representation of disability has the potential to shape the way 'disability' is understood in the general culture, and some of those representations can in fact do extraordinarily powerful-or harmful-cultural political work" (p. 2). I asked my classmates to describe what impact, if any, they feel representations of persons with disabilities



in the Farrelly Brothers' films and other comedic films have on cultural or political work. We then addressed the following questions: Do you feel that it is problematic to have representations of persons with disabilities in a comedy film? What about a drama film or television show? What impact do representations of persons with disabilities in other (less comedic) movies like *Rain Man* or television shows such as *Life Goes On* have on cultural work or cultural awareness?

During my presentation I also asked the class what their thoughts were on having actors *without* disabilities play characters *with* disabilities in films and television (W. Earl Brown, the actor that portrays Warren, for example). We discussed this topic in relation to Hahn's (1997) essay, which explores the history of disability and employment in relation to advertising and the media. Hahn writes:

Without exception, the so-called "stars" of these new commercial productions, who became role models for entire generations, have displayed anatomical characteristics that, while they

might shift slightly according to the latest fads, exemplify an appearance that others are encouraged to strive to emulate. In fact, given the prevalence of these ideals the suggestion that anyone who embodies a significant departure from these normative prescriptions—such as a visibly disabled person—might become a movie or television idol seems almost incongruous and incomprehensible. (p. 183).

To make the argument more complicated, I revealed that I had watched the DVD version of *There's Something About Mary* with the director's comments and I learned that the character of Warren was modeled after someone the Farrelly Brothers knew when they were growing up. I learned that during a scene in the middle of the film, the "real" Warren from their hometown has a cameo appearance in a short scene that takes place in a group home for persons with developmental disabilities. Although that scene features at least five actors representing persons with disabilities, I learned from the directors' commentary that only one of them had a disability—the real Warren. Although I appreciated that the Directors included Warren in their casting, I wondered why they had chosen to use actors without disabilities playing characters with disabilities for the small non-speaking appearances.

As Hahn (1997) points out, although there are programs and films taking up issues of disability either through drama or comedy, that doesn't necessarily mean that actors with those disabilities play those roles. So the problem continues to exist that has always existed with employment for persons with disabilities. Actors with disabilities are seldom cast in roles unless disability is the topic of the film or program, and even then, there is likelihood that an actor without a disability will be cast in those character roles also. Persons with disabilities are not often cast to play themselves and so the marginalization of this population continues.

Bucktown-Niketown

At the end of the class we proposed ways that this topic could be used with K-12 art students. One classmate felt that it would be interesting for art educators to lead a discussion or research project regarding persons with disabilities in popular culture and media in conjunction with a critical look at how persons with disabilities have been represented by artists throughout the course of history. There are many paintings and photographs that feature persons who are blind or have mobility impairments.⁵ Perhaps middle school or high school students could address this topic in the context of an art education classroom. Students could work collaboratively in small groups to research the definition of disability, history of disability, and disability statistics and facts (and fictions). Students may research this topic by doing Internet searches for disability statistics pulled from websites of activist groups or disability awareness organizations. Then the class could brainstorm representations of disability in popular culture or media by suggesting different commercials, television programs, or films featuring actors with disabilities or actors playing characters with disabilities. Students could form small groups and choose one of the examples brainstormed by the class (some groups could choose comedy films and others could choose drama films) to further research. Each group may screen the film and formulate questions about how disability is addressed and what message is conveyed about disability. Students may choose to show clips from the film to the rest of the class followed by a discussion about these representations. Then, art educators could facilitate a discussion about the topic of disability and how persons with disabilities are represented in visual culture including how the societal construction of normalcy and consumer culture has affected persons with disabilities. Students may choose to create a video, collage, or hypertext by juxtaposing still images from films and television series representing persons with disabilities with information about disability / ability.

By engaging students in dialogic discussion regarding popular culture images, art educators help students to become critically aware of how images are created and how media representations such as film and television programs often promote hegemonic beliefs about persons with disabilities and other marginalized populations. By having students deconstruct images from media and popular culture and recreate their own images they are empowered to convey their own messages and influence the thinking of others—in this case, offering new perspectives to social constructions of normalcy, ability, and disability.

Nouveau Nowhere: Gentrification and the Uses of Culture

Albert Stabler

In the name of making neighborhoods safer and more attractive, public and private interests in cities have recently caused manufacturing industries, working-class neighborhoods, low-income immigrant communities, and housing projects to be priced out of existence or just entirely leveled and uprooted. In their place have arisen artists' lofts, art galleries, trendy boutiques, live/work spaces, and funky bistros.

Bucktown-Niketown

The very success of these merchants of uniqueness force them to eventually give way to upscale condominiums, high-end restaurants, and franchise retail stores, in keeping with city development goals. In neighborhood after neighborhood in city after city over the last thirty years or so, similar trends can be seen. This phenomenon is known as gentrification.

Gentrification provides not only an object of debate for urban activists and policymakers, but also an excellent lesson for art education as well. There may be no more clear example of fine art in particular, and “high culture” generally, being deployed with far-reaching social and economic consequences, all of which can be considered under this heading of “quality of life.” While the economic changes in cities may seem merely a matter of generally improving conditions for the majority of urban citizens, the divergence between local grass-roots experience and City Hall development politics in gentrifying areas has been documented (Brand, 1995; Ley, 1996). Life in a neighborhood imbued with cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) improves the quality of life for some, but undoubtedly degrades it for others.

Researched for my final project, my discussion of gentrification attempts to connect phenomena in the realm of culture to social and economic factors.⁶ Urban politics is a wonderful contemporary example of how this can happen. I’ll begin with some history of a local gentrified area, the Bucktown area on Chicago’s near northwest side.

Bucktown just received its own write-up in the Travel section of the Sunday *New York Times* (Fowler, 2002) as well as continuously being featured in local publications on food, fashion, and nightlife. After some more background on Bucktown, I’ll sketch out some theoretical viewpoints on development politics and some pedagogical strategies. From an art education perspective, my interest is in aesthetic issues of

gentrification in relation to their social and economic context.

With Chicago's boom in industry and transportation in the 1860s, Russian Jews, Polish, and Italians started flooding into the Bucktown area. In 1871, the Chicago Fire burned down much of the area, which took some time to be restored, as downtown commercial buildings were rebuilt first. Nearly all the buildings in Bucktown to this day, nearly 80% as of 1987, were built in the period from 1871-1905, mostly on land owned by the Wicker brothers of Boston, for whom the local Wicker Park is named. The heart of Bucktown proper, the areas surrounding intersection of Milwaukee with Damen and North Avenues was developed at this time. Approximately 400 buildings in this part of town are on the U.S. National Historic Register.

The working class and lower middle-class Polish and Ukrainian residents of the Bucktown area appeared relatively non-threatening to wealthier whites, despite the activist history of those local groups. They maintained a superior reputation for being a hardworking and trustworthy group, versus more recent and poorer Latino immigrants in surrounding areas. As a result, young professionals had started buying up Bucktown's architectural treasures as early as the 1970s, and middle-class artists had begun moving into area warehouse spaces. Once enough artists and white landlords had colonized the area, it could be promoted as a tourist destination to middle-class people throughout and beyond Chicago. Various studies (Jager, 1986; Ley, 1996; Warren, 1993) cite a distinct trend wherein gentrification takes root most particularly in areas with the odd mix of architectural significance, a fair amount of absentee-landlordism, and a lower-income white population inoffensive to more prosperous whites. So it was in Bucktown. And with the inception of neighborhood arts festivals such as *Around the Coyote*, based in a landmark building, culture played a key role in changing the neighborhood.

Bucktown-Niketown

Many theoretical approaches exist to describe the confusing moral and philosophical terrain of cities today, though they may not stray far from traditional descriptions: a secular utopia vision of a cosmopolitan Mecca of diversity and culture versus (but often combined with) a grim religious vision of a doomed, depraved Babylon. Opposing “white flight” to the suburbs, “New Urbanism” is a more utopian view that dates back to liberal urban renewal policy agendas from the 1940s through the 1960s. It also recalls influential architect and planner Daniel Burnham’s vision of Chicago as a “City Beautiful,” in his 1909 “Chicago Plan” (Foglesong, 1986). Articulated in recent years by many writers, notably James Howard Kunstler (1993), New Urbanism posits the city as a place where individuals of all different backgrounds can live and work alongside each other, owning the property they use, and where dense populations can utilize efficiently and thus conserve scarce resources through fostering smart growth.

Advocates of this view generally favor “mixed-use” zoning, where business and residential purposes can be integrated in a single area, and “mixed-income” communities, in which class segregation can be discouraged through proper planning—an idea now being attempted rather stumblingly in Chicago as a replacement for public housing. Convenience and accessibility are desirable byproducts of a dense, mixed-use urban situation with good streets and public transportation, often given a real-estate spin with the term “livability” (Mills, 1993). Versus the economic advantages of suburbs, urban boosters like Richard Florida (2002) note the importance of “culture” in spurring the revival of blighted areas and the upgrading of public services in cities. But as Kleiman (2002) points out in her critique of Florida, “you disdain mere economic reasons for choosing a location—if you’re a prosperous white man under 40” (p. 12).

With the exception of traditional city-haters and manifest-destiny

suburban boosters like *Edge City* author Joel Garreau (1991), many urban critics resistant to the New Urbanists may admire the ideal vision they seek to bring about. But such writers deplore the stark difference between the New Urbanist ideal and the state of affairs now seen in cities. These are the decriers of gentrification, angered by the replacement of local ownership by chain stores, the displacement of working renters, homeowners, and small businesses for condominium development, and the colonization of a perhaps economically low-end, but perhaps socially stable, culturally thriving area by an oblivious group of sybaritic hyperconsuming professionals—otherwise known as the ever-scapegoated “yuppies.”

Cultural-studies writers (Deutsche, 1996; Rosler, 1991) closest in optimistic spirit to the urban boosters, have a statist nostalgia for a public space without private interference, equating this public space with access to citizenship in a true democracy. A more critical materialist-Marxist element (Jameson, 1984; Jager, 1986; Ley, 1996) see the recent urban shifts as related to a bourgeois ethos of lifestyle derived from a colonizing habit of class appropriation. In the terms of Bordieu (1984), the central city is cast as a *habitus* of hidden cachet and lost authenticity, in which both higher- and lower-class imagery is deployed to individuals wanting to display and accrue cultural capital. Jager (1986) describes this appropriation as clearly visible in the fetishization of restoring, rehabilitating, and augmenting older architecture. I would extend this as well to the fabrication in such areas of ultra-slick new architecture based on bygone styles. Jencks (1981) refers to such contemporary phenomena as “double coding.” Lastly, post-Situationist urbanism writers and performers (Miles, 1988; Reverend Billy, 2002) deplore the oppressive commercial homogeneity of city space and the hypnotic distraction of the ubiquitous urban spectacle.

There are a number of ways to critically interpret gentrification.

Bucktown-Niketown

But how can all this be discussed with children and youth? For starters, some useful ideas may be to imagine and create ideal, historical, predictive, or fantastic urban spaces, in any variety or number of media. In these cities various groups with different needs can be discussed and role-played, and new structures can be planned accordingly. Many projects can also be developed on the various kinds of double coding. Projects such as these can strike any balance between research and imagination, and between collaborative and individual work.

While my biases are evident, many students in Chicago see and face the consequences of gentrification-related changes, and often are more aware of the issues than teachers who live outside the area. Art teachers need to be patient and imaginative in presenting material such as this, to solicit student contributions and ideas, and to encourage open-mindedness from both themselves and the students. It is possible to show students how economic and historic realities that shape their lives are materially related to fine, popular, and retail culture. The excitement and beauty of culture, which kids certainly understand, can, in turn, be meaningfully connected to the life of cities and to the people who try to coexist in them.

Fighting Representations: Violence in Mass Media

Jason Maxam

Recently, I was walking down the street and saw a nice sports car. The keys were in it, so I went for a joyride. Along the way, I bumped into other cars because I was going too fast. At one point, I ended up on the sidewalk and killed a few people that were jogging by. Someone started shooting at me, so I got out of the car and returned fire with my M-16 machine gun. When I heard the police sirens, I pulled an elderly woman out of her car and drove away. This is a typical occurrence for

me when I play *Grand Theft Auto 3* on my *Playstation 2* game system. The goal of the game is to steal cars and murder people while performing various missions for criminals. You can use your fists, weapons, and even vehicles to harm and kill your targets and also any innocent bystanders.

For my final project, I decided to take a critical look at violence in the media—specifically in and through movies and video games. I wanted to explore comparisons of increased violence in society and increased violence in media. My research yielded convincing statements against violence in the media, yet some contradictory arguments were also found. I also discovered that this is by no means a new issue; in 1952 the first of a series of congressional hearings took place in the House of Representatives before the Commerce Committee to discuss violence in the media. Since then, a debate has been going on among politicians, parents, teachers, and television executives. Many have testified at congressional hearings and spoken out on their concerns about television violence. As recent as February 2, 1995, the Children’s Media Protection Act was introduced by Senator Kent Conrad (North Dakota). According to the American Psychological Association (2002), “Children who watch a lot of TV are less aroused by violent scenes than are those who only watch a little; in other words, they’re less bothered by violence in general, and less likely to see anything wrong with it.” The American Academy of Pediatrics (1998) simply states that “media violence can lead to aggressive behavior in children.” Of course, there are many people who disagree with these statements.

Figure 5. Video presentation, Maxam (2002).



In *The Media Violence Myth*, Richard Rhodes (2002) attempts to discredit many activists and politicians who are against violence in the media. Rhodes states “one way we in the United States avoid accepting responsibility for the violence in our society is to pretend “the media” inflict it on our children.” One of the reasons for the ongoing debates is that there has always been violence in the world, long before television and video games. It seems there is no end in sight for more studies being conducted to determine if exposure to violence in the media increases one’s chances of becoming violent.

As an art educator, I want to engage students in discussions and projects that deal with violence in the media. I created a twelve-minute

video that consists of violent imagery found in movies that I own (see Figure 5). I used footage from cartoons, sports, video games, action movies, comedies, and dramas. Students could create similar projects based on imagery found in their own environments, games, action figures, comic books, posters, movies, and so on.

My video presentation contained a wide variety of clips and two voiceovers. The first voiceover is a description of the events of Columbine High School combined with a scene from *The Matrix*. The scene depicts two characters entering a building carrying black duffel bags filled with weapons and explosives, wearing black trench coats concealing more weapons. The two characters proceed to walk down a hallway and shoot everyone in their path. I chose to juxtapose this scene with the shootings at Columbine because *The Matrix* opened in theatres three weeks before two high school students proceeded to follow the same course of action. This is the text for the first voiceover:

Littleton, Colorado, April 20, 1999, 11:14 a.m.

Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold arrive at Columbine high school.

They walk into the school's cafeteria wearing black trench coats and carrying two large duffel bags filled with explosives. The gunmen place the bags on the floor beside two lunch tables and walk back out to the parking lot and wait for the bombs to explode. They planned to shoot any surviving students attempting to escape after the bombs explode. Klebold and Harris also have bombs constructed with timers in their cars, set to go off once they go back inside the school. With 9-mm semi-automatic weapons hidden under their coats and carrying shotguns, Klebold and Harris begin shooting at students in the area. Thus begins what is now known as the worst U.S. school

Bucktown-Niketown

shooting in history.

The second voiceover contains my final thoughts. It can be heard while a scene from the *Outsiders* shows teenage boys in a 'rumble.' This is the text:

From the beginning of time, people have experienced many forms of violence. Domestic disputes, war, abuse. These are all part of our human existence. But through the glorification of violence through various forms of media, we are being exposed to more violence than ever. I watch the news and I see road rage, school shootings, disgruntled employees shooting their bosses and coworkers, small children killed after re-enacting wrestling moves seen on TV. Countless forms of abuse and violence occur every day. We are absorbing mass quantities of violence through television, film, and video games. With so much exposure, we are becoming desensitized to violence. It becomes part of our daily lives.

After showing the movie to the class, we had a discussion about our own views on violence in the media. We discussed censorship, political agendas, responsibilities of moviemakers, and various personal experiences with viewing violence in media. My goal was to make people aware of what we are seeing and how it may or may not be affecting our actions and society in general.

Conclusion

In the winter 2001 edition of *Studies in Art Education*, Michael Parsons, in an editorial titled, *Change, Again*, argues that “art education is not the same as cultural studies” (p. 99). Unlike Parsons, we believe art education *is* cultural studies, and much more—Art education is a political project of visual cultural studies. As visual cultural studies, art educators and their students should engage visual representations, cultural sites, and public spheres through the language of critique, possibility, and production. Art educators and their students should examine, understand, and challenge how individuals, institutions, and social practices are inscribed in power differently, to expand the conditions for freedom, and equality, and social justice. Through this project, art educators and their students should embrace the impure—cannibalizing the useful tools and methodologies of a wide variety of other disciplines and fields while recognizing the indeterminacy of outcomes.

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Bucktown-Niketown

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Notes

1. In this sense, agency is understood, in part, as access to discursive, personal, and social resources that facilitate informed decision making and active participation in the world (Davies, 1990).

2. Selected texts for the course include works by Buckingham (1998); Freire (1970); Giroux (1994); Grossberg (1992); Hall, S. (1992); hooks (1994); Mirzoeff (1999); Mitchell (2002); Steinberg & Kincheloe (1997); Weiler (2001) and many others.

3. Examples include, *L.A. Law*/NBC 1986-1993; *Malcom in the Middle*/FOX/ 2000; *Life Goes On*/ABC/1989-1993; *Sling Blade* (1996); *Rain Man* (1988); *Who's Eating Gilbert Grape* (1993).

4. Examples include, *Forrest Gump* (1994); *There's Something About Mary* (1998); *Say It Isn't So* (2001); *Me, Myself, and Irene* (2000); *Happy Gilmore* (1996).

5. Examples include, Frida Kahlo's numerous self-portraits with her in a wheelchair; Paul Strand's photograph, *Blind Woman* (1916);

Bucktown-Niketown

John Everett Millais's painting, *The Blind Girl* (1854-6).

6. A good deal of my research was conducted through informal surveys and interviews with area residents and proprietors. I conducted interviews at a performance by Reverend Billy (2002) at the A-Zone, in the Logan Square area, and received a great deal of assistance from Laura Weathered, executive director of the Near Northwest Arts Council, and manager of the Acme Artists Community artists' affordable housing initiative. I also utilized newspaper archives and neighborhood information resources of the Chicago Historical Society.