

# Visual Phenomena and Visual Events

## - Some reflections around the curriculum of visual culture pedagogy

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### Introduction

Since 2000 visual culture has become a well-established area of research within art education and across art education and other subjects. In Denmark this can be seen both from the substantial number of publications on visual culture pedagogy (see for example Buhl, Flensburg and Illeris 2004 a,b; Arvedsen and Illeris 2005; Christensen and Illeris 2009; Buhl and Flensburg 2011) and from the fact that the word ‘visual culture’ occasionally appears in national curricula for primary and secondary school and teacher education.

Nevertheless ‘visual culture pedagogy’ seems to be a contested term. In many texts ‘visual culture’ is first and foremost used to define an extended *content* within art education covering not only works, techniques and understandings from the fine arts, but all forms of images and objects. The particular focus is often images and objects from popular culture and digital images (e.g. Meyer 2009).

In Scandinavia this understanding of visual culture appears to be less of a novelty than in most other countries. In Denmark, for example, critical art educators in the 1970s used the similar concept of ‘the culture of images’ to propose a new and broader content for art education, a content that was made official in the 1991 national curriculum: “The concept ‘the culture of images’ covers: Images and pictures made by children and young people, ‘cultures for children and young people’ made by adults and concerning the visual domain, and pictures and images from the worlds of fine arts and mass media” (Danish Ministry of Education 1991:21)<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> This curriculum lasted only until 1995 where it was followed by the introduction of a new national curriculum. Both the 1995-curriculum and today’s 2009-curriculum are based on many of the concepts and values from the 1991-curriculum, but unfortunately they both leave out the strong critical perspective.

The first Danish researcher appointed in art education, Kristian Pedersen, emphasized the importance of making the pupils active and critical participants in the visual worlds of the surrounding society, both through analysis of all kinds of visual language and through their own visual productions. Furthermore the concept of *socialization* was introduced as a challenge to developmental psychology as the central concept for the understanding of subjectivity and learning. The central approach to socialization came from the Marxist inspired activity theory developed by the Russian Culture- historical School and emphasized human interaction between people and cultural tools such as traditions and symbol systems as decisive in how we learn and what we become. In this perspective socialization was not understood as a passive reception of cultural codes and norms, but as an active process of interchange in which we are changed but also have the potential to change the world around us (Pedersen 1998:86).

Having our background in the Danish critical tradition, in this article we wish to take the question of the curriculum of visual culture pedagogy further by introducing a differentiated understanding that has been developed by Danish researchers during the last decade.

The framing of the article is the distinction between two notions within visual culture:

-*Visual phenomena* include everything we consciously choose to relate to through vision, e.g. images, objects, landscapes, public and private spaces etc. Even if some artifacts, especially works of fine art, do have a privileged position in regard to visual attention in Western cultures, these are only seen as a minor part of the visual phenomena relevant to the curriculum of visual culture pedagogy<sup>2</sup>.

-*Visual events* denote the complex interactions that take place between the viewer and the viewed. Visual events are always geographically, historically, socially, and culturally situated, and they always imply certain specific ways of looking (gazes). Working with visual events in educational settings therefore means being aware of questions like “who is looking at what? when?, how?, and why?”, “who has the right to look at whom?”, “how does the image/object/site look back at the viewer(s)?”, etc. The notion of visual events can be unfolded educationally by employing meta-reflective strategies that challenge students’ preconceptions about ‘natural’ ways of seeing. (See also Buhl, Flensburg and Illeris 2004a:10).

In this article we try to deal more systematically with the curriculum of visual culture pedagogy by taking a closer look at the notions of visual phenomena and visual events.

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<sup>2</sup> In this sense the concept of visual phenomena is close to the ‘culture of images’ in critical art education, but with the important exception that many critical art educators saw images from the commercial field of mass media as being per se ‘superficial’ and sometimes even ‘dangerous’, because they served commercial interests of capitalism, while, in spite of their critical position, they tended to see fine art as being more ‘authentic’.

In the first section we look at images and all other kinds of visual phenomena as a basic subject within the curriculum of visual culture pedagogy. We discuss the differences between the understandings of visual phenomena in ‘art education’ and ‘visual culture pedagogy’ and we introduce five central concepts for the use of visual phenomena within a pedagogical approach: *visual orders*, *content*, *genre and style*, *seduction/fascination* and *modality*.

In the second section we look at visual events, examining how the whole situation of looking contributes to our experience and understanding of visual phenomena. We introduce approaches from visual culture studies, visual anthropology and contemporary imagery and we construct a model that emphasizes *positioning* as central to the creation and understanding of visual events. Finally give some examples from our own teaching of master students and student teachers in Denmark and Norway.

## Section I: Visual Phenomena

The term *visual phenomena* is central to this article. While the term *image* indicates a representation of something, generally in two dimensions, we use the term visual phenomena in order to grasp the variety of phenomena that we can relate to through vision including things as diverse as for example a firework display, a mountain view, a lecture in a class, body language and decoration, rituals like marriage and fan performance at sport events, tourist campaigns etc. In this way images become sub-category among others of visual phenomena.

According to the child-centered understandings of art education that dominated in Denmark in the 1960s and 1970s the natural growth of the child was thought to be central to the reception and production of images. In contrast, our position, inspired by critical theory and social constructivism, is that the use of both images and other forms of visual phenomena is a cultural learning process similar to the ways the child acquire the spoken and written language. As a consequence we think that the content, the visual characteristics of the images and the way we relate to images and visual phenomena are socially and culturally situated. By imitating, practicing, being taught in different social and cultural contexts (family, kindergarten, school, friends etc.), children learn how to ‘read’ and produce visual phenomena, for example that fireworks are used for certain occasions, or how to act visually in the role of a ‘pupil’ in a classroom situation.

This perspective results in a change from ‘art education’ to ‘visual culture pedagogy’ where no kind of visual phenomena is excluded, valued or ranked in advance according to normative concepts such as good quality, good taste, good form etc. In visual culture pedagogy all kinds of visual narratives are seen as equally relevant, even the ‘smallest’:

*Through the work with small narratives about different forms of pictures in different contexts one can reduce e.g. the general Western narrative ‘Art History’ to one ‘small’*

*narrative among others - e.g. the narratives of 'Islamic Decoration' or 'the Pokemons'. In this way pupils learn that there are many parallel cultures of images and that these cannot be embraced within one dominating narrative (Illeris 2003:53)<sup>3</sup>.*

This does not mean that fine art in museums and galleries is of no value or importance in the curriculum of visual culture pedagogy. What it *does* mean is that knowledge, sensuousness, aesthetical experience, analytical qualities or other possible potentials are equally available from other forms of visual phenomena as that traditionally ascribed to the fine arts. The context provided by the museum, the gallery, or the art book implies (mostly) a special gaze and attention: a focused, curious, dwelling, examining and open gaze. If you transfer this kind of 'aesthetic gaze' to the field of popular and commercial culture, instead of immediately turning to a critical and analytic gaze like some critical art educators would prefer, you will see and comprehend these visual orders in a completely different way. In the words of the Danish visual culture scholar Niels Marup Jensen:

*... by crossing the different fields, we make it possible to keep the chosen frames through which we view the images. In this way the frames can be moved across genres and fields. Visual surprises, shocks and spectacular images demanding intellectual and affective participation from the spectator can be moved across the different fields (Jensen 1999:337).*

Visual phenomena are made on the basis of other visual phenomena and well-known visual signs are used over and over again in ever-shifting contexts. In order to communicate visually, it is necessary to use visual signs and references that can make you understood within the visual order you refer to. If there are no hooks of understanding/interpretation at all, if there are no connections at all to other visual phenomena in our (visual) culture, the work becomes unable to communicate, it becomes non sense(-d)!

One also has to be aware that different premises or 'rules' constitute different types of images and visual phenomena. There is not one visual 'language'. A firework display is working on very different premises than a traffic sign and they cannot be dealt with in the same way. To criticize the traffic sign for having boring colors or for not paying attention to fascinating contrasts compared to the firework display makes very little sense. This means that visual phenomena work on a wide range of different premises, which can be conscious or subconscious to the image maker. In the perspective of visual culture pedagogy it is important to be aware of these premises and to be able to work with them in a reflective manner.

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<sup>3</sup> All translations from Danish by the authors.

Following this line of thought different kinds of visual media, genres and categories of images and visual phenomena with their specific conventions, codes, styles and modal affordances are central themes within the curriculum of visual culture pedagogy. To be aware of, and to reflect on, these themes is a necessary qualification, both when you work on established cultural premises and when the premises are challenged, contradicted and/or broken. As a consequence it is important to introduce some kind of comprehensive views, systems, concepts and methods into a field that might seem overwhelmingly large, fluent and without fixed values.

In the next part of this section we draw attention to some of the concepts that we find important to use within the curriculum of visual culture pedagogy, trying to trace and discuss cultural influences when dealing with visual phenomena.

### Central concepts

Discourse, ideology, power, function, context and gaze are factors determining visual phenomena, in content as well as in form. (Mathiesen 2007: 20-21; Duncum 2010: 7-9). Exploring how these factors are woven into our visual world and experiences is an important aspect of dealing with visual phenomena. In this section, however, our primary focus will be on the visual phenomena themselves and less on the society around them. We will introduce five concepts that can be used for the understanding of contemporary visual phenomena, trying to suggest possible alternatives to ‘traditional’ models of picture analysis, such as the ones inspired by formal analysis, iconology, and semiotics. The five concepts are: *visual orders*, *content*, *genre and style*, *seduction/fascination*, and *modality*

### Visual orders

When the restricted field ‘art education’ is turned into the enlarged field of ‘visual culture pedagogy’ the curriculum expands in principle to cover all visual phenomena within our visual worlds. Therefore the concept ‘visual order’ can be used as a taxonomy.

The term *visual order* was introduced by the Finnish researcher Janni Seppänen in his book *The Power of the Gaze*, where he defines visual order as “ .. regularities and structures of visual reality as well as meanings connected to them” (Seppänen 2006: 3). Visual orders is the way visual phenomena are *structured*. Simple examples of visual orders could be the cultural history and meaning of eyebrows (Duedahl 2007), of the smile, of certain kinds of cars, of Danish stamps, of animals in baroque painting etc. Other times the visual order could be a genre, e.g. music video or a style, e.g. Feng Shui in interior decoration. A visual order might also be made up for the moment and/or for a special purpose, e.g. when a child is travelling during his holidays, counting red cars to avoid the boredom of sitting in the car over a long distance. In practice, visual phenomena will move from one order to another according to the perspective, the

context, the discursive and theoretical understanding of pictures they are a part of, as well as their function and use.

As we have discussed earlier, in a traditional art education context categories of images are often chosen according to some kind of ‘taste hierarchy’ according to what is perceived as good form, good art, or according to kinds of images that are supposed to contain special knowledge and to have a special kind of effect on the mind. In contemporary Danish art education the dominant visual orders are still the orders of (‘good’) fine art on the one hand and of (‘dangerous’) media and commercial images on the other. This categorization is based on a main understanding of art as forms of self-expression where the children use special materials, techniques, genres and media, while commercial images are understood in terms of visual communication with a clear convincing and seductive intention towards the ‘users’. In Denmark this dichotomy seems to be so ‘classical’ that it is setting up an untenable discursive framing of the curriculum of art education (Arvedsen 2002:42-46). Within the curriculum of visual culture pedagogy we think that the teachers’ reflected intentions, and not the traditional dichotomy, should decide the selection of visual orders to be introduced to the students. If the teacher is open-minded about the visual orders that actually exist in the students’ visual worlds and make these part of the curriculum, she will introduce a reflective approach to visual phenomena which students need when dealing with contemporary forms of visibility.

### Content

The *content* of visual phenomena concerns the issues, themes and problems that they represent, refer to, or ‘speak about’. This content is never fixed. What is regarded as important, what it is legitimate and fashionable to make pictures about, changes with time and context. For example at the end of the 19th century the *realist* painters introduced social critique as a theme in their pictures, describing the poor living conditions and suppression of the working class. Women’s liberation movement introduced a new theme in the 1970s, that can be traced visually e.g. in magazines and commercials. Reality and lifestyle programs in TV are relatively new visual phenomena which open up contents and themes from everyday lives that until now have been considered part of the private spheres (of our ‘back stage lives’). Earlier the display of the naked female body was legitimated by portraying it in biblical and mythological scenes. Now for many people this kind of content has been taken over by erotic videos downloaded from the internet.

Within the curriculum of visual culture pedagogy it is worth considering which themes to choose, sometimes before choosing what kind of visual phenomena to work with. Should the students work with well-established themes from the fine art scene, e.g. love, portraits, body, landscapes? Should they work with themes from the personal field, e.g. friendship, my family, dreams, emotions? Or should they rather work with themes from the field of popular culture, e.g. commercialism, eroticism, politics, racism etc? As

teachers we should ask ourselves if a certain kind of content dominates the visual phenomena we introduce in our teaching and why?

Often the theme can be a springboard for image production, but it is of great importance to choose the content of visual phenomena very deliberately and be aware of what is included and excluded in the classroom. It is also important to consider the connection between what is going on in the contemporary visual world and what you teach, to avoid teaching art just as a historical subject. In order to challenge many art students' dominant fine art orientation one can introduce content-based visual phenomena such as tourism, football and transport. Being familiar with a large variety of themes might also help future art teachers to make art interesting for boys as well as girls.

### Seduction/fascination

What entertains us, what holds our attention, what makes us think and reflect, what gives a feeling of beauty, of intense depth or a good laugh? Fascination and seduction can be sought as well in the content as in the form of visual phenomena - and of course in a combination.

Curiosity and interest can attract us to the study of all kinds of visual phenomena. If I am not well off, I will probably be seduced by the offers of supermarket commercials without even considering the visual formalities of the commercial. A devoted fan of one of the teams in a soccer match might be so excited during the game that she holds her visual focus and attention until the last minute, even if the playing is incompetent, defensive and the match ends in a 0-0 score. A neutral spectator would probably be bored.

Special formal qualities and aesthetics as a sensuously mediated experience are often seen as central points in art education. Within the curriculum of visual culture pedagogy, however, it would be appropriate to take a wider view on how visual phenomena create fascination and seduction while being aware that there are no objective criteria. Factors of social and personal differentiation such as culture, class, age, gender, sub-cultural belonging, contexts and circumstances influence what is experienced as seductive and fascinating.

*Images are also seductive because they are sensory. Many images are beautiful or sublime - two traditional aesthetic qualities - but many other sensory qualities are celebrated today. Some people are drawn in by the grotesque, by Goth, by kitsch, or by camp (Langman, 2008). Perhaps some people have always been drawn to the sentimental and the cute. Harris (2000) argues that today's consumer aesthetics include the cool, the quaint and the romantic (Duncum 2010:8).*

In the curriculum of visual culture pedagogy it is of great importance to keep an open and exploring mind towards how we are attracted visually, trying to understand why

some people are fascinated and seduced by certain images and visual phenomena while others are not and to avoid letting a certain conception of good taste and aesthetics dominate the classroom.

### Genre and style

Visual phenomena are always based on and communicated through certain patterns, that we can identify as *genre*. On the one hand genre is a pattern embedded in the production of images or other visual phenomena and on the other a pattern for expectations and interpretations of the receiver (Agger 2010: 85). Genres are based on norms and conventions developed within a community. They are a result of communicative practices in a certain culture at a certain time and they are constantly changing and new genres are established. In many ways genre conventions are linked to specific cultural communities (Strunck 2005).

The genre characteristics can be a platform for working with images, providing scaffolding, helping the students and teacher to avoid the question of immanent qualities and instead relate the discussion to the question of genre patterns. Being aware of genre characteristics is a condition for playing with them, contradicting them, mixing and crossing them and in this way working with them in a reflected way. (Mathiesen 2007: 21)

*Style* is a pattern of visual expression, recognizable traits for a group of visual phenomena concerning their appearance. In clothing it is common to discuss style: classic, sporty, baggy, gothic, post punk, trashy, neo hippie etc. Baroque painting had special patterns for describing space, light, composition, use of colour that makes baroque style recognizable and distinguishes it from e.g. Expressionism. TV news are stylistically characterized by a host at the front of the setting looking at the viewer, and a back screen where images, videos, texts and graphs concerning the actual news are shown. Unlike in film a score is still not used in news programs, but is becoming still more common in documentaries, emphasizing their non-fiction or fictional genre characteristics

Style is closely connected to genre and seduction/fascination. Sometimes a genre is defined by a style. *Manga* can be described as a special style, occurring in many genres beside comics: in commercials, games, films, learning materials etc. *Manga* as comics can also be described as a special style among other comics styles, but can also be described as a subgenre of comics, depending on the context. Games can be divided into genres, for example card games and board games, defined by the character of the objects involved and the way they are played. Choosing a game to play on your computer will usually result in different style options for cards, boards, pieces etc.. Mostly it is a coherent recognizable look that clearly differs from other style options (Fig. 1 and 2).





Fig. 1 and 2: Example of two different style options in a computer mahjong game: A 'classic' and a 'childish'.

Mapping stylistic traits makes the students aware of how visual phenomena get their actual look, what makes the style recognizable and how do special aesthetics and seductive grips work. This awareness will enable students to use visual phenomena in ways that are conscious and reflected.

### Modality

Modality is the medium of representation, e.g. text, images, sound. *Multimodality* in the form of image and text/speak, music/sounds is the most common combination today. Almost all visual phenomena come with words and/or music. So mostly we have to study visual phenomena as multimodal statements.

Different modalities offer different opportunities and limitations in terms of what is possible to represent and communicate via this or that modality. That is called *modal affordance*. For example it is more convenient to describe rhythm and melody via the modality of note system than in a written text. (Løvland 2003: 110). Media and materials are closely connected to modal affordance. It is possible to make a shopping list in the form of a painting on canvas, but it takes time to paint all the products to buy and it is inconvenient to carry around in the supermarket. A shopping list on a post-it note seems more convenient. In another context and with another function, e.g. as a work of pop art, the painting would probably be possible. New media give new variations of multimodality and offer new affordances: video phoning on Skype offers telephone conversations where you see your partner. Such conversations limit your possibilities of doing other things, like walking around while talking or writing shoppinglists, ignore your appearance and expressions, using gestures with people in the room during the conversation etc. while, on the other hand, provide new opportunities for extending the intensity and focus, reading facial expressions etc. like in a physical conversation.

To be aware of modalities, multimodality and modal affordance can promote variety in the curriculum of visual culture pedagogy and help students focus on the possibilities and the potentials in the media and materials they choose in connection with a theme and content. But most importantly, as almost no visual phenomena stand alone, it supports knowledge concerning interaction between modalities and its effects.

## Section II: Visual Events

The notion *visual event* includes the whole situation of vision as it occurs in the interaction between the viewer, the visual phenomenon, the context of viewing and the act of looking itself. Visual events are always situated geographically, historically, socially and culturally, and they always include a certain interaction or *positioning* between the viewer, the watched phenomenon, the context and the gaze.

In fact if we look at our everyday lives, viewing situations are always complex. For example watching the news on television might be considered a simple situation: a viewer watches an object (the television screen) that reproduces a representation (the broadcast) within a spatial context (the room). As long as we look at the situation as an abstract archetype this might be true, but visual events are not abstract situations, they are situated, and real situated events are much more complex than abstract models: I can watch the news in different surroundings, with different people, on different channels, using different types of apparatuses and screens, and with different forms of attention. Usually one factor will dominate the others: If for example I watch the news with my family in our living room with my sister loudly commenting the hairstyle of the speaker, this social context will dominate the event, hindering me from hearing what the speaker is saying. Following the same program alone in my room I will probably be less distracted and thereby focus more on the content of the programme, but still my watching will be part of a more complex situation including my body posture, my thoughts, associations, and memories, sounds around me etc. The dominant positions will constantly shift. Sometimes I might even experience that the ‘gaze’ of the television dominates the event, something that can happen if for example the speaker addresses me in a way that feels very personal.

### Visual stereotypes and the power of looking

In their important article *Semiotics and Art History* (1991), Norman Bryson and Mieke Bal use a poststructuralist semiotic perspective both to analyze and to challenge our fixed ideas of visual events. In the article they portray ‘the visual field’ as a socially constructed stereotype that the individual acquires through visual socialization according to the conventions of his or her society or culture:

*[..] once the subject learns to ‘see’ it is obliged to orchestrate its personal visual experience with the socially agreed descriptions of the world around it; thereafter, deviation from this social construction of visuality can be named and dealt with*

*variously, as hallucination, misrecognition, or 'visual disturbance'. What is seen is formed by paths or networks that exist before the subject and continue to operate long after the individual's demise. The visual field therefore has the character of a 'readymade' (Bal and Bryson 1991: 199).*

In their analyses Bal and Bryson use semiotic theories to show how processes of ongoing semiosis<sup>4</sup> and continuous displacement can destabilize the idea of fixed categories in the field of vision and thereby challenge the 'readymade' construction. In this way they help the readers to understand that looking is a social construction constituted by games of positioning and that in order to deal with visibility we need different strategies of reflection from those developed by traditional academic disciplines such as art history or media studies.

Returning to the example of watching television, when I look at the news on the screen, according to the visual conventions of my culture I can allow myself to make the speaker the object of my gaze and freely stare at her hair style, comment on her fancy jacket or show my dislike about her way of speaking. If, on the contrary, I relate to someone who is physically present in the room, the situation is quite different. Now I am part of a visual event that has the character of interchange and I have to relate and react to other social rules for looking and being watched. For example when I look at a person sitting close to me, I can do it with affection, patronizing him, distancing him etc., according to how I try to position myself and the other person in the situation. In this way looking is a relational event which also include questions concerning power and domination for example: Who has the right to look at whom and when? What kind of gazes can one adopt when looking at others and with what effect? Who has to downcast his or her eyes in which situations? Also gestures, mime, body language etc. are important elements in relational visual events as well as feelings of affection, interest, happiness, anger etc.

### Challenges to visual stereotypes

During the last 10-15 years traditional viewing positions, e.g. stereotyped male and female positions, have been challenged from many sides: by visual culture researchers, by visual anthropologists and by new generations of visual phenomena within the dominating culture of images.

In the field of *visual culture studies* Mieke Bal's texts have challenged our way of looking at paintings and other images by introducing the concept of 'the friendly eye'. When

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<sup>4</sup> The expression "ongoing semiosis" indicates the process where signs endlessly generate new signs without ever getting back to, or touching upon, the "reality behind signs". Poststructuralist thinkers in fact think that our reality as human beings is made up by signs, and that therefore we have no access to a reality outside representation. Following this line of thought Bal and Bryson start their article by declaring that "The basic tenet of semiotics, the theory of signs and sign-use, is antirealist. Human culture is made up of signs, each of which stands for something other than itself, and the people inhabiting culture busy themselves making sense of those signs" (Bal and Bryson 1991:174)

studying paintings of famous painters like Rembrandt or Caravaggio, Bal engages with the depicted characters (mainly women) as active participants in an exchange with the viewer and the surroundings (the museum and the exhibition). In these exchanges the use of the friendly eye means that the painting is positioned as an interlocutor instead of as an object (Bal 1996, Illeris 2009a). Another visual culture researcher, Irit Rogoff, has proposed a similar strategy that she calls ‘the curious eye’. In contrast with ‘the good eye’ of connoisseurship, the curious eye is a strategy of vision which relates to visual events in a way which is direct, personal, partial and curious:

*Curiosity implies a certain unsettling; a notion of things outside the realm of the known, of things not yet quite understood or articulated; the pleasures of the forbidden or the hidden or the unthought; the optimism of finding out one had not known or been able to conceive before (Rogoff 1998:18).*

In another field of research, the field of anthropology, *visual ethnography* has been established as a way of engaging with cultures or communities (within or outside the researchers own culture) through a collaborative use of visual media such as photo, film or artistic production. Instead of ‘documenting’ other cultures through an objectifying gaze, the boundaries between researcher and researched are blurred and a third space is established around visual productions (Pink 2006, 2007). As one example the Spanish anthropologist Ana Martínez Pérez together with *A Buen Común*, a multidisciplinary group of social researchers and film-makers, produced a film in collaboration with the social workers on one of the poorest areas of the city of Córdoba. As the result of a joint and collaborative experience of intervention over a long period the film became a visual statement about the sensory, bodily experience of being ‘excluded’ including a polyphony of visual ‘voices’ from the inhabitants and the social workers (Martínez Pérez 2007)

Also within *contemporary cultures of images* themselves fixed viewing positions are being challenged in many and often very surprising ways. Within the field of fine arts socially engaged relational and collaborative projects are launched as alternatives to the idea of the art work as an object for visual pleasure (Bourriaud 2002, Illeris 2005). Within the field of commercial images fixed object and viewer positions seem to become interchangeable through complex and highly ambivalent positioning of the subjects of representation (Sturken and Cartwright 2001). For example stereotypes of gender are often replaced with inverted positioning or parodies where men and women challenge each other’s positions in a sort of power and/or erotic game that also includes the viewer and the context of viewing (Eriksson and Göthlund 2004). In addition an increasing number of images are constructed as parts of complex visual narratives consisting in a number of interrelated images, locations, figures, and objects that form never-ending stories mixing reality and fiction in a sort of reality-based fantasy-world. One example of this kind of visual phenomena could be the highly staged and edited ‘reality programs’ on TV where everyday people enter an apparently real world just to

play ‘themselves’ within a framing of productplacement, psychological power games and a well-organized striving for ‘scandals’ at whatever cost. Watching this kind of program the traditional voyeur-position is both enforced and challenged. *Enforced* because most probably my interaction with the images will be not only passive but diffuse because the ‘plots’ in the show are so predictable. *Challenged* because the world of fiction is intersected by reality, destabilizing the separation between private and public, fiction and real.

Inspired by visual culture studies, visual anthropology and contemporary cultures of images the task of visual culture pedagogy concerning visual events must be twofold: 1) to help the students or pupils understand the dynamics of ‘traditional’ visual events and 2) to actively experiment with the construction of alternative forms of visual events e.g. through the use of the ‘friendly’ or ‘curious’ eye, through collaborative projects inspired by visual anthropology, or through the active ‘staging’ of visual situations that actively challenge viewer positions.

### POSITIONING - understanding and creating visual events in pedagogy

As we have seen, a central pedagogical concept for working with visual events is the concept of *positioning*. In fact in order to challenge more traditional categories like persons, rooms, and pictures. it can be helpful to stimulate reflection by redescribing these physical ‘objects in a more abstract manner as dynamic ‘roles’ or *positions* which contribute to complex reciprocal and relational processes. ‘The object position’, ‘the image position’, ‘the subject position’, and ‘the context position’ are all possible terms for the most important positions which are involved in visual events as shown in fig. 3 (see also Illeris 2004).

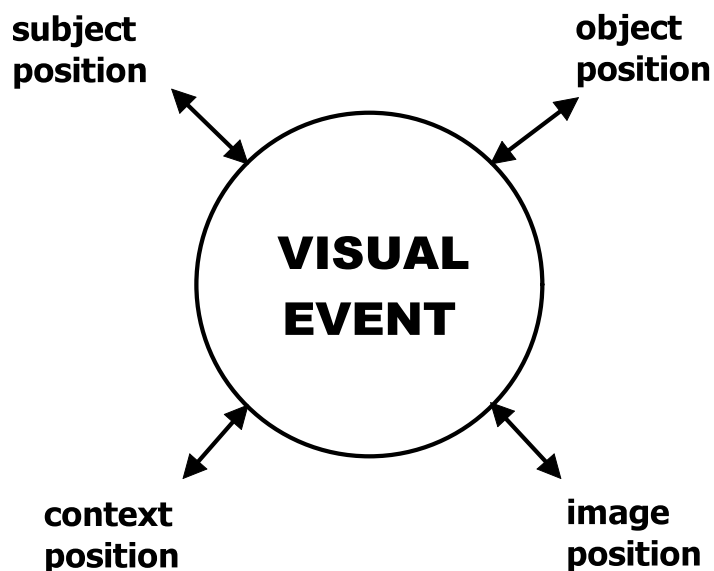


Fig. 3

In this model the use of the word 'position' indicates that we deal with interchangeable, relational roles and that particular positions cannot always be connected to fixed types of phenomena. In situated visual events each and every one of the four positions can be occupied by a person, an object, a place, a picture etc. and the positioning can shift rapidly. From a constructivist perspective on visual culture a position is not something you 'are' but a role that is relationally constructed within every single event. For example a physically existing human being can occupy all of the four positions dependent on the actual situation: she can position herself or be positioned as a viewer in the subject position, as an object of viewing in the object position, as a passive withdrawn 'surrounding' in the context position, and as a representation of something (e.g. 'a nice girl') in the image position. In more or less the same manner a picture, e.g. a photo, can occupy both a referential role as a representation of something else in the image position, a physical item in the object position, a 'frame' in the context position and, as mentioned by Bal, as an active 'speaking' and 'viewing' interlocutor in the subject position.

Returning to the example of watching the news on TV we saw that traditionally the viewer will occupy the subject position, the room will occupy the context position, the TV apparatus will occupy the object position, and the actual broadcast (the news) will occupy the image position. When my sister interferes these positionings change slightly because she becomes the object of my attention instead of the TV and thereby transforms my subject position in relationship to the image position of the broadcast.

Even if we admit that such abstract terms and models can be difficult to use directly within educational practices, we believe that they can function as 'eye openers' for the possibilities of working with visual events in transformative visual culture pedagogy. In fact the practically-oriented importance of the introduction of the term visual events lies in the possibility of creating more playful and meaningful visual relationships than usually allowed in traditional subject-object relationships. Thinking of visual events as open 'situations' made up by shifting positionalities where 'anything might happen' helps us a step along the way both to understand and to challenge the fixed positioning of classical Western strategies of vision.

### **Examples: Exploration and creation of visual events in education**

To give concrete examples of the ideas outlined above we will briefly discuss a couple of our own experimental educational projects with student art teachers.

*Example 1 - 'visual environments':* In 2004-2005 we carried out a research-based development project at the Copenhagen College of Teacher-Education (Arvedsen and Illeris 2005), inspired by visual culture studies and by visual ethnography. The goal of the project was to let the students experiment with active constructions of visual positionings through the use of the camera. In small groups of 2-3 participants the students were asked to explore and visually create or illustrate a 'visual environment' of



their own choice from different viewing positions. As their visual environments most of the student groups chose concrete places such as a bar, a hospital, a railway station, and a youth house. The different viewing positions they were asked to adopt were: 1) an ‘aesthetic eye’ concerned with shapes, line and color of the environment, and 2) an ‘anthropological eye’ concerned with the collaborative involvement within the lived life of the regular users of the environment.

What we saw from this experiment was that while the use of the ‘aesthetic eye’ was very natural to the student art teachers, who found it easy to use their cameras in the role of aesthetic voyeurs catching formally beautiful images of interesting or appealing lines, colors and ‘compositions’ within their chosen physical environment, the use of the anthropological eye was very challenging. To engage with people in ‘the field’ and try to construct collaborative visual events through the camera was both socially and sometimes emotionally difficult for the students. It was time- and energy- consuming, and it was complicated because of the objectifying nature of the camera itself. In fact photography tends to turn everything into some kind of detached image, leaving out the social nature of the act itself. Consequently the students who were most successful with the second task typically employed some kind of narrative photographic approach either through filming or through making compositions of more images either as collages or PowerPoint sequences (Fig. 4 and 5).



Fig. 4 and 5: *Examples of student work employing an aesthetic eye (left) and an anthropological eye (right). In this example the group of students had chosen a hospital as their visual environment and was presenting the photographic results in a PowerPoint. The photo to the left doesn't tell anything about the hospital but explores formal qualities and possibilities of the chosen 'abstract' photo and of the software. The photo to the right intends to tell a story about the employees pausing room. Thus an example of the use of an anthropological eye, because the image refers to the insight the students acquired through interaction with the employees about aspects of their daily life at the hospital.*

*Example II - 'photographing or filming soccer stadiums':* In spring 2011 a group of student art teachers worked with a soccer theme. The task for the students was formulated in the following terms:

*Photograph or film your local stadium. Consider which gaze to use? What kind of story do you want to tell? Are you for example:*

- *a photographer of architecture whose aim is to present the stadium as an innovative and cool building?*
- *an artist tracing special angles, a special kind of aesthetics etc.?*
- *an anthropologist who tries to understand and show the 'strange' and 'unfamiliar' life, that is going on and the people using this stadium (players, coaches, employees, audience etc.)?*
- *a documentarist/historian whose aim is to record this stadium for coming generations?*
- *an engineer checking and recording the stadium with a focus on security and defects?*
- *a fan who wishes to share his experiences from a match with other fans on YouTube?*
- *an elderly upper class woman who never meant to go to the stadium in the first place?*

*... or make your own choice*

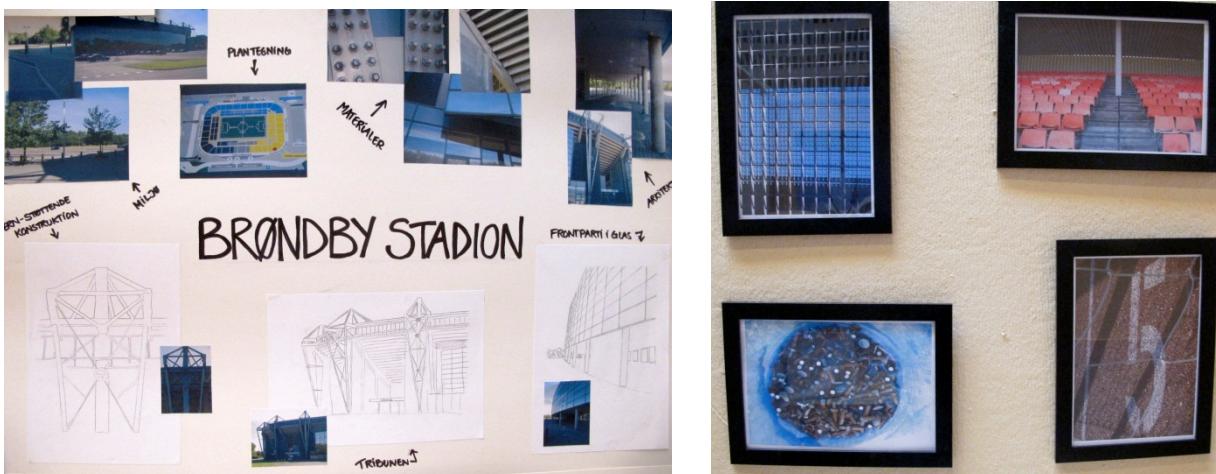


Fig. 6 and 7: To the left a group of students has chosen an architecture gaze, mounting their photos on a wall sheet, pointing out materials, structures etc. and making architectural drawings, of course based on the photos, but pretending that these drawings are made at first hand, resulting in the building parts photographed. To the right a student has consciously chosen an aesthetic gaze, focusing on 'abstract' lines, patterns and structures at the soccer stadium. The photos are arranged within broad black frames with a white line on the inside and hung up with attention to formal qualities of the exhibition format.

Like in *Example I* the purpose of this task is, in a pedagogical way, to 'force' the students to adopt different positionings and thereby to make them become aware, that the way they relate to the stadium, the players and/or the audience changes according



to the gaze they use, and thereby creates different kinds of visual events. In this example the different positions of the photographer changes from classical positions, a subject studying an object, to positions of a personally involved and active participant in the event, depending on the choice of eye. It also becomes very clear to them, that the sample of photos they present at the end of the task will be very different according to their choice.

Another task within the soccer theme was to study the choreography and chorus that dedicated fan groups use when they support their team during a soccer match. The students were asked to choose one of these ritual performances, learn it by heart, and then try to perform it by themselves in another context (e.g. a classroom) and film their own performance. As a second part of the task they were asked to make up an alternative ritual or performance that they found to be suitable for the fans.

The purpose of this task was to make the students practice new relational and involving ways to work with visual culture, focusing on the visual phenomena of body language and the visualization of ritualized behavior. Through the re-enactment of the fan rituals they worked with the embodiment of everyday gestures in the creation of new visual events with changed subject-, object-, context-, and image positions. Furthermore by filming the enacted performance they opened the possibility for the creation of more visual events, for example by showing the film on YouTube.

These experimental projects show how students might come to a deeper understanding of the way positionings work in visual events and about the role of the camera and photography/film for such positioning. A challenge for the teacher is to design the tasks in such a way that they will work as intended. The greatest difficulty here seems to be to make students overcome the aesthetic eye of the 'nice' or 'interesting' picture, that is so deeply embedded in art education, and allow themselves to experiment with all kinds of visual framings of the visuality of their everyday experiences.

### **Conclusive notes**

In this article we have proposed possible contents and categories for further curricular developments of visual culture pedagogy. In line with other curriculum theorists within visual culture (in particular Freedman 2003:106) we agree that curriculum is a form of *social action* where our knowledge, hope and dreams are connected to everyday social practices of teaching and learning. The aim of our reflections is to create dynamic forms of visual culture pedagogy that will support and develop students' understanding of the ways in which visual phenomena and events work within our daily life. In a recent chapter Helene gave the following definition of visual literacy: "Reflected use of visual qualifications understood as strategic approaches to visual complexity" (Illeris 2009b:

140). In the article we have tried to provide some conceptual tools and practical examples from our own teaching and research that we think can contribute in this direction. We hope this can be of inspiration to teachers, students and colleagues.

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