

## Visual Culture and the Politics of Edutainment

**Dr. Lee Rodney**  
**Assistant Professor, Art History and Visual Culture**  
**School of Visual Arts, University of Windsor**  
**Canada**

Edutainment is a neologism that came into use with a genre of educational television programming in the 1980s and 1990s, a sector which has grown exponentially into specialty channels too numerous to mention. More recently, the term has been appropriated to criticize the shifts within higher education that have taken place as universities re-cast themselves as major players in global economy where knowledge production is one commodity among many (Hearn, p. 110). Douglas Kellner's book *Media Spectacle* (2003) charts the transformation of spectacle into a globalized "infotainment society" (Kellner 2003, p.11). In this context, edutainment is a part of the generalized expansion of the economy of spectacle; it is spectacle's encounter with higher education.

While I remain enthusiastic about visual culture in teaching and research, I have become skeptical about the way that visual culture courses have become integrated within undergraduate education. In spite of the spirited debates between art history and visual culture that have taken place in the past decade, visual culture remains a side show to the establishment of art history, integrated piecemeal into existing art history programs for convenience rather than as an integrated pedagogical approach to images that differs fundamentally from art historical convention. There are a handful of dedicated visual culture and visual studies programs in the US and UK. However, visual culture is mostly taught through established art history, studio or communications departments. From an administrative standpoint, visual culture is a supplement to art history programs that often serves as a means to gain student numbers where the old standard,

"Introduction to Art History", has ceased to draw the crowds it once did. While visual culture has been successful as a first year arts option at my institution and numerous others, it brings with it a host of pedagogical issues that are rarely addressed in the critical literature on the discipline.

There has been a great deal of reflection on visual culture's short history, its territorial battles with art history and film studies, as well as its potential for interdisciplinarity and critique. The set of questions I've brought together in this essay are mundane by comparison, though essential to the task of navigating a path for the continued development of visual culture courses and programs in an educational climate that is increasingly business oriented, thus presenting additional contradictions and challenges to this emergent field.

As a field of research, visual culture initially developed from the blind spots of institutionalized art history and aesthetics. While it has borrowed much from art historians such as Irwin Panofsky and Aby Warburg, as well as from the social history of art that has developed more recently, visual culture encompasses a far wider range of concerns than art history typically has in the past. Like cultural studies, visual culture is interdisciplinary in its orientation. Interdisciplinarity means one thing in research and quite another in terms of academic bureaucracy. In the translation from research to pedagogy, visual culture's tremendous range has attracted criticism that it has contributed to the de-skilling of a generation of scholars, that visual culture lacks historical specificity and intellectual rigor. (Crow cited in Mitchell, p. 168). These criticisms are typical complaints when the status-quo is challenged, however, in its move toward the center of an undergraduate curriculum, visual culture has come to represent a subject that is better adapted than its precursor, art history, to the mandates of a corporatized university where an introductory course in visual culture comes to represent edutainment, the option that is both flexible and fun.

The issues raised by a critique of edutainment are complex and are by no means resolved by

guarding against it. The turn toward infotainment culture that Kellner and others speak of is more than a passing phenomenon, it is not a force that can be resisted or shut out of higher education even as there has been a call to return to disciplinarity in a climate of educational cutbacks. In academic disciplines like visual culture and cultural studies, which evidently take high and low culture on equal footing, there is no productive distinction to be made between edutainment and academic rigor. However there are two major shifts within university teaching as visual culture has become established as an academic subject in the last five to ten years. These pedagogical shifts have emerged as byproducts or symptoms of infotainment culture, where education is seen to be in competition for market share with the entertainment sector. The first is a shift in attitude toward the convention of lecturing and its effectiveness as a mode of teaching. Ironically, as digital technologies of the lecture proliferate, there has been a fair degree of skepticism emerging toward the convention of lecturing in general. According to this logic the current generation of students raised on gaming and instant messaging cannot endure lectures. Hence flexible learning, or interactive schemes have emerged in response to the shifting attention spans of students: in place of the lecture, teaching approaches must now stress multiple group activities and fast paced discussion to compete for students' attention where the possibility of being online and in class is increasing for students with laptops in wireless classrooms. This newer approach to teaching in many cases seems to work to relatively well in terms of yielding immediate results; however, in setting up a competition for students' attention in the classroom, we risk losing the opportunity to reinvent what it means to listen or reflect in a culture geared toward constant self-expression.

The second shift in university teaching is at base technological. The digital classroom, the technologically perfected lecture hall, has emerged as slide projectors become extinct. Furthermore, the lecture is no longer a singular event, but rather one that can hypothetically be uploaded and replayed. While the image-based lecture emerged with the development of art history during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, visual culture is emerging concurrent with major changes in standard systems for classroom presentation. These changes are more than

cosmetic and this is where visual culture, as a field of research can be put to the task of reflecting upon the shifts in pedagogy that result from these generational and technological changes.

In light of these shifts I would like to consider what spectatorship currently means within the context of pedagogy and visual culture. Initially there would appear to be a disparity between the set of theoretical ideas that are central to the study of visual culture (hyperreality, spectacle, and the gaze, for example) and the modes of delivery that repeat and potentially reinforce the visual regimes that are critiqued within visual culture. As a range of image types (film, television, art, advertisement, fashion, architecture etc.) are central to the subject, teaching visual culture means at least flirting with media spectacle (and hence edutainment) even if to demonstrate the mechanics of spectacle itself. If we are to take Guy Debord on his word however, it would make sense to shun power point and related technologies, and fully embrace interactivity as kind of *dérive* from the routine of the lecture hall, a means to counter the alienation and apathy produced by media spectacle of all kinds, down to and including the visual culture lecture as an assemblage of visual media.

The odd thing is that the very concept of interactivity that has been promoted as essential for teaching (and entertaining) in a culture of diminishing attention spans has much in common with Berthold Brecht's conception of epic theatre, as well as Guy Debord's strategies of countering media spectacle. These theories are based on the idea that watching a play or listening to a lecture is a fundamentally passive activity, that the spectators or students are lulled into the duplicity of spectacle, on the one hand, or bored to the point of distraction; either way the audience is alienated and incapable of engagement. Although these two theories are equally suspicious of the position of the spectator, they could not be further apart in terms of their ideological underpinnings: one set of ideas emanates from neo-liberal approaches to education where the spectator is a consumer-student who must be engaged in order to ensure brand loyalty, and the older leftist ideas stem from the goal of community action. Teaching visual culture on a large scale

is a part of the seismic shifts of the neo-liberal institution, however, it also involves paying lip service to these venerable Marxist traditions, even if the potential for Situationist-style political action remains a remote abstraction for most students.

Now that Jean Baudrillard has passed on, it seems essential to step back and look critically at the legacy of concepts that his career was based upon. Although these concepts are not always central to visual culture, they are often implicitly written into the discourse itself. While Baudrillard was by no means a political revolutionary bent on abolishing spectacle, or even an advocate for interactivity, he did nonetheless build up one of his signature concepts, hyperreality, from Debord's critique of spectacle culture, even if the two part ways on whether it can be resisted. Baudrillard, and by extension Debord, inherited a deep-seated philosophical skepticism about theatre and its distribution of power, according to which the speaker/actor is granted power over the spectator who occupies a position of passivity.

Martin Jay has cogently argued that history of French philosophy, of which Debord and Baudrillard are ostensibly a part, has been dogged by its mistrust of the visual and that the tendency to grant primacy to the visual in the modern western world is misguided (Jay 2003, p. 6). Images in this context are duplicitous, and viewers become docile recipients manipulated by the subtle and not so subtle messages that they carry. Images are indeed powerful, yet I would like to dispute the widely held conception that power resides within the image/theatre and that the viewer/spectator remains an unwitting victim of image culture. There has been a fair amount of philosophical work on cinema dedicated to loosening the stranglehold of representation and its logic in recent years. For example, Gilles Deleuze's two volumes on cinema resurrect a Bergsonian equivalence between image and matter, and Vivian Sobchak's work on synaesthesia and embodiment suggest that our inherited notions of spectatorship are impoverished at best. However, I would like to explore further the discourse of interactivity as peculiar stumbling block that is facing the development of visual culture.

The Marxist critique of spectacle in the work of Debord, Baudrillard and Kellner, and the neo-liberal critique of the lecture both rest on similar cultural assumptions about looking most famously set out in Plato's parable of the cave and long since repeated in both religious and secular contexts. And while this is a familiar story, it bears repeating that looking is positioned opposite knowledge. Jacques Ranciere refers to this set of relations, one that places theatre opposite experience, as a "tricky dramaturgy of guilt and redemption." (Ranciere 2007, p. 272) In his short text, "The Emancipated Spectator" he analyses the longstanding bias against the viewer that is written into our received notions of spectatorship. In this critique of the discourse of interactivity (particularly as it is articulated in the work of Brecht and somewhat differently in Artaud), he summarizes its biases accordingly: "...theatre in general is a bad thing, that is the stage of illusion and passivity which has to be dismissed in favor of what it forbids: knowledge and action; the action of knowing and the action led by knowledge..." (Ranciere 2007, p. 272). Ranciere suggests that this theory of theatricality has ossified into a division between looking and acting, or observation and action that privileges action without recognizing that one is a precondition for the effectiveness of the other.

This commonplace suspicion of theatre haunts *Society of the Spectacle* (1957) as well as *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981). We also hear its echoes somewhat differently in many ideas about interactivity, which, more often than not, solicit participation through false choice, rather than inviting it. In the attempt to erase the distinction between the screen and the spectator, the actor and the audience, or teacher and the student we may indeed arrive upon new forms of theatre, media or pedagogy; however, before this happens, we need to recognize (even if we inherently already know) that looking, listening or observing is never passive. Although we may strive to develop our conceptual, technological and practical variants of interactivity, what remains in the margins is a philosophical bias against looking which has become further entrenched as media culture evolves.

Ranciere calls upon us to reconsider spectatorship, and to reassess the repeated attempts to turn spectators into actors within the model of theatre as ceremony and catharsis. The "Emancipated Spectator" is not one who has been transformed into an actor, but one who understands that there is an equality of intelligences in the relations between acting and observing, speaking and listening. "Emancipation... begins", according to Ranciere,

when we dismiss the opposition between looking and acting and understand that the distribution of the visible itself is part of the configuration of domination and subjection. It starts when we realize that looking also is an action which confirms or modifies that distribution, and that "interpreting the world" is already a means of transforming it, of reconfiguring it. " (Ranciere 2007, p.275)

In visual culture and cultural studies Ranciere's idea has been articulated somewhat differently in the work of Michel De Certeau, Dick Hebdige and Lisa Cartwright, for example, theorists who variously sought to rescue the figure of the worker, youth or spectator or the from the oblivion of victimhood. The seemingly intransigent patterns of dominance and control at work in an infotainment culture almost never work according to plan. In this way we should not see today's students as victims of the lecture tradition that need to be liberated through discussion and group work, but rather as people capable of navigating, appropriating and assimilating ideas even if they are presented in a way that runs antithetical to our culture of immediate gratification. Cultural Studies has long recognized the that learning takes place in that moment of recognition (often outside of the classroom) when we are able to link up a concept with an experience of the world that makes our knowledge resonant.

It now seems imperative to assert once more that vision is always active not acted upon, and to translate these ideas outside the boundaries of our own disciplines in an educational climate that would prefer to marginalize visual culture and cultural studies as merely supplementary

edutainment.

## **Works Cited:**

Cartwright, L. 2005, *Practices of Looking*, Oxford University Press, New York.

Hearn, A. 2006, "Money on the Brain: Narratives of 'corporate u'", *Topia*, no. 15, pp. 109-123.

Jay, M. 1993, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth Century French Thought*, University of California Press, Berkeley.

Kellner, D. 2003, *Media Spectacle*, Routledge, New York.

Mitchell, W.J.T. 2002, "Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture" *Journal of Visual Culture* Vol. 1:2 pp. 165-181.

Nelson, R. 2000, "The Slide Lecture or the work of Art History in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" *Critical Inquiry* 26:3.

Ranciere, J. 2007, "The Emancipated Spectator" *Artforum* March, pp. 271-277.

Sobchack, V. 1991, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*: Princeton University Press, Princeton.

## **Biographical Note:**

Dr. Lee Rodney is a Visiting Fulbright Research Fellow at Arizona State University. She is Assistant Professor of Art History and Visual Culture in the School of Visual Arts, University of Windsor, Canada. She has published articles on the changing cultural perceptions of time and identity in media culture, and has written on contemporary art, cultural theory and visual culture in several publications including *Parallax*, *Canadian Art*, *Parachute*, *VISIO* and the *Journal of Visual Culture*.

