

Critical Creativity:
On the Convergence of Medium Education and Media Education

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My son, Paul, had the mixed fortune to be the firstborn to ‘older’ parents (we were in our 30’s when he arrived in our lives). He was between 3 and 4 when the Mutant Ninja Turtles were the hot cartoon on TV. As earnest, engaged and peace-loving parents, we redirected our son’s viewing to videotapes of what we judged to be quality ‘educational’ children’s programming and copies of Canadian National Film board animated shorts. Paul had a little playmate who came over to visit and dig in the sandbox almost everyday. This friend wore Ninja turtle costumes and brought little plastic figures with him most of the time. Not surprisingly Paul became fascinated by all of the toys and the stories and began to bug us to let him watch the Ninja Turtles. Well, we were new parents, so our determination to protect our son from everything evil in the world hadn’t developed many cracks yet and for reasons that are not terribly clear to me now, the Turtles TV show was on the other side of our own personal good/evil divide. Paul was persistent but we were resistant and then a funny, wonderful thing happened. I was sitting within earshot of the two boys and heard Paul start to tell a story to his friend. He was describing a heroic little bird who came to the rescue of someone. Of course this was no ordinary bird. This bird had a costume and a personality and powers (all of which were described in great, enthusiastic-4-year-old detail). Over the weeks Paul continued to tell stories to his friend. I came to realize that he was feeding the Ninja turtle stories back to his friend repackaged in the guise of ‘Superbird’! At one point Paul’s friend got so excited by the stories that he asked my son what channel Superbird was on.

Shortly after Superbird came into our lives we moved from the west coast of Canada, on Vancouver Island, to the east coast and Halifax, Nova Scotia. Paul had to leave his sandbox playmate behind, but Superbird made the trip. Over several years Superbird evolved. My son got a stuffed toy of the muppet character Gonzo, who became Superbird, and a nightly bedtime companion. He received a hand-me-down set of pyjamas with the Toronto Bluejays baseball team logo on it that became his Superbird shirt. His recreational drawing often ended up involving elaborate maps of Birdland that would include lengthy, sometimes stream of consciousness explanations of the politics,

crisis and intrigue experienced by the expanding collection of good and evil characters surrounding Superbird. Birdland even became the way that Paul and I talked about death and the idea of an afterlife once he began imagining that Superbird couldn't live forever. (He thought some form of recycling sounded good.). When we moved from coast to coast again this time from Halifax to central Washington state (I was an academic nomad in search of a tenure track oasis!) Paul was old enough to ride with me nearly 6000 kilometres in a rental truck. Photographing water towers with a polaroid camera and telling Superbird stories were the main entertainment for 6 long days of traveling. Superbird developed an alphabet and language (Birdlandish, naturally) and helped Paul to develop interests in government, storytelling and performance that are still important to my son's identity even though Superbird watches the world from a shelf these days.

While we were living in Nova Scotia Paul began lobbying my wife and I to let him see the Simpsons. This was the hot show for Paul and his kindergarten classmates. At first we played a bit dumb and just said that the programme was on after his bedtime (which was true). But by the age of 5 Paul understood all about the potential of videotape. He asked us to tape the Simpsons so he could watch it the next day. Neither my wife nor I had really watched the show. Cracks began to appear in our parental resolve and we (predictably?!) caved in to the pressure of our 5 year old. That was the evening of January 17, 1991. That also turned out to be the beginning of Operation Desert Storm, the invasion of Iraq by US/UN military forces. We had programmed our VCR to tape the Simpsons for 8:30, but the war took over the airwaves at around 8pm in Halifax.

At 6 in the morning on January 18 I felt a tug on my pillow. Standing next to me was an eager face wanting to watch his Simpsons' tape. More than half asleep I had to explain to my son that a war had begun and that all of the channels were showing the war. The Simpsons had been canceled that night. Of course Paul whined and complained and asked for further explanations, but the rhythm of the day soon took our attention.

Now one of the marvelous things about 5 year olds is that the patterns of the day will help them remember and think about ideas. Any primary teacher will tell you that small children derive real joy from knowing that at 12:30 on Tuesday the teacher always reads us a story. At 6 am on January 19 Paul was thinking about some of the ideas we had discussed at 6 am the previous morning. Again I felt a tug on my pillow. Again the same bright face slowly came into focus as I tried to wake up. This time, with a bit of concern etched around his eyes, Paul asked, "Dad? With the war, did they blow up the spaces between the channels?"

I think I need some coffee!

A few days later when Paul was watching (yes we are a TV family) cartoons the programming was interrupted by a newscaster who announced, “Next up, the latest on the war in Iraq.” Paul turned to my wife and asked, “Mom, was that an ad for the war?” Maybe coffee isn’t strong enough! Children study television as they watch it. After the invasions of Kuwait and then Iraq in January 1991, Birdland experienced war. War existed for my son not only as a series of actions, but as a question that became one of the features of his image-making and story telling.

Critical Creativity

Days after the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center in the United States I heard an interview on the radio. The short exchange, with peace educator and activist Johan Galtung, not surprisingly in light of world events, focused on conflict resolution. While I was impressed by professor Galtung’s commitment to peacemaking (<http://www.lende.no/conflict>), and his real experience serving as a mediator in world conflicts, what struck me most was the word he used to describe the key ingredient in conflict resolution. That word was ‘creativity’. As an artist, art educator, academic and parent I suppose it makes sense that creativity, whatever that may mean, would be important to me. After hearing Professor Galtung describe how he has worked with disputants individually to try to move them into the kind of creative mindset that would allow them to imagine beyond the immediate details of violence and conflict, I had a vivid example of something I believe to be true. Creativity isn’t just about personal expression, it is also foundational to the health and survival of society. It takes real risk-taking creativity for adults locked in violent conflict to get beyond the action of war to the challenge of questioning their own actions.

I feel very strongly that our visuality, comprised of the perception and response to the visual world on the one hand, and our processes of visual creation and communication on the other are central ingredients in social development in this new century. I also believe that a centuries-old prejudice that subordinates visual knowing and thinking to the knowing and thinking possible with words and numbers is changing (Stafford 2001). Now, because of work by activist researchers and educators (Fischman, 2001), it is just beginning to be possible for academics to ask, “can I know this moment, analyze this idea, or express this concern better through images?” We are still a long way from being able to answer this question with a strong, “yes!” There are lots of implications embedded in this question because the patterns of analysis, the responding to images, is fundamentally different from the reading of words. I think the patterns of mind involved in perceiving a visual image...not to mention a 3-dimensional experience like the structure that probably surrounds you as you read this, are very closely parallel to the

thinking processes that we recognize as creativity. Whether you conceptualize it as a postmodern affinity to collage (Brockelman, 2001), or as the ‘rediscovery’ of analogy (Stafford, 1999) or even spacial intelligence, (Gardner, 1999) it is clear that educators and the world of academic research are far more comfortable with the nonlinear, complex thinking patterns that might have been derided as ‘mere’ intuition in the recent past.

Medium vs Media?

The art world is divided into categories. Clement Greenburg’s modernism may have asserted the idea that each medium has its meaning 50 years ago, but a quick survey of most contemporary art programmes reveals that we continue to divide art making into distinct processes such as painting, drawing sculpture and photography. Mixed media and multi media education is certainly on the rise, but does not dominate art learning, yet. On the other hand, there is a strong tendency in critical and educational literatures to visualize ‘the media (meaning the mass-media of television and film) as monolithic and monstrous. The banner quotation, “A democratic civilization will save itself only if it makes the language of the image into a stimulus for critical reflection, not an invitation to hypnosis.” (U. Eco as cited on the media literacy web site: www.medialit.org), assumes that the media pacify viewers into an uncritical stupor. While major media education sites and curriculum encourage a media making element, most are strongly inflected by the perceived urgent need to deal with the media as a problem¹.

Those of us who are educators often argue about the need for media ‘literacy’ because the term ‘literacy’ is our only metaphor for controlling communication. In a world filled with monstrous media, teaching control seems essential; the loss of control is a crisis (and as a bonus, educational crises are easier to fund than mundane ‘needs’). Writing about the children of holocaust survivors generally, and focusing specifically on Art Speigleman’s comic book novel *Maus II*, Hirsch describes what he calls ‘postmemory.’

“Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation... Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that precede their birth, whose belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated. (Hirsch, 1997, p. 22)

In the case of Speigleman, Hirsch focuses on the fact that the comic book includes several photographs among the pages of drawings. Hirsch explores the relationship between the aesthetic and the document. Representations aestheticise and thus undermine

documents as evidence. At the same time, representations allow a certain distance in the face of particularly horrific documentary that can allow resistant viewers to approach otherwise overwhelming events. Certainly this approachability is one of the strengths of Speigleman's comics. The balance that Speigleman strikes between fiction and fact, between cartoon and photo document allows the images and narrative to sustain a level of power that Hirsch would argue could easily have been lost through overexposure.

In many ways my son's childhood experiences have no connection with the childhood experiences depicted by Speigleman in his two *Maus* comics. In focusing on the children of victims of trauma, Hirsch identifies a population where the use of creative play in response to the world can have severe restrictions. Arguably any context where children's freedom to respond creatively to world events is surrounded by a dominating adult framework (be it media, parental, educational) is a context where both criticality and self-identity suffer. The role that critical strategies play in media literacy curriculum would seem to demand a degree of creative freedom for students and teachers alike. One of the recurring debates in the literature on media literacy curriculae is the trap, on the part of curriculum developers, of attempting to 'innoculate' students against the media.

In visual arts education the language is much warmer. Even in the most politicized art classes there is still some room for personal expression. Milbrandt's (2002) recent study of art educators engagement with social issues suggests that while many educators recognize and even value the political side of art, fewer than 11% would ultimately choose to break open their modernist cocoon to allow real world concerns to dominate their classes. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that many of the ideas and skills we teach don't generate the sense of urgency that the term literacy conjures. The state of art education is not perceived as a crisis except in the language of documents such as *Visual Arts Education: Setting and Agenda for Improving Student Learning* (Goodwin, 2001) where the crisis is about the marginality to the educational main stream and the response has more to do with accountability than literacy.

Fischman's (2001) recent survey, Reflections About Images, Visual Culture, and Educational Research, is an elegant depiction of the current scope and debate about the use and study of images in educational research. The author traces both the presence of visual research and the ongoing debates about the ways images constitute knowledge in a research environment. He cites Eisner's argument for the role of experiential understanding along with the more dominant "verificationist conception of knowledge" (as cited in Fischman, p.31). Fischman sees the growth of visual research as a process of developing tools that can be used to address the fields current 'blind spot' (p. 32) with regard to the impact of visual culture on teaching and learning. It has been my

position that the field of art education must draw from its strengths as teachers with and about visuality and take those tools and ideas to educational research and practice, rather than trying to turn art education into another academic subject. Having said that, there is a need for art educators to reflect on the difference between medium education and media education.

Convergence

Brockelman (2001) identifies collage as an apt metaphor for the relationship between the modern and the postmodern. He argues for the longstanding coexistence of the attraction to unity in modernism and the repulsion toward fragmentation in postmodernity. His argument echoes Soja's (1989) in replacing historicizing sequence with the geographical complexity of simultaneity. For Brockelman, culture and meaning, like collage, are constantly striving toward unity that reveals itself as fragmented and complex. In reflecting on art education and media studies these impulses can also be discovered. The structures of art as they are taught in public school, art schools and universities are aimed at expressive visual communication. These curricula are still deeply vested in such modernist tropes as Bauhaus design concepts, the study of individual mediums such as painting, drawing or sculpture, and, in art education, the traditional interpretive disciplines as explored by the DBAE movement. Media Education curriculum, as discussed earlier, are built on a foundation of criticality driven by sociological and theoretical interpretations of cultural power that foreground the mass media as potent tools of control. Brockelman's metaphor suggests to me that art education is modern to media studies' postmodern. His argument about the coexistence of these two impulses suggests to me that the intermingling of art education and media studies would represent a more complete visual education that would address the marginality perceived by many art educators. Introducing criticality and a more open engagement with contemporary visual culture in all its forms strikes me as a far more meaningful and appropriate strategy than trying to remodel existing art educational practice to seem more like other curricula through the disciplinary structuring of assessment and accountability plans being promoted in documents such as *Visual Arts Education: Setting and Agenda for Improving Student Learning* (Goodwin, 2001).

This reflection returns me to the several stories of my son I told at the beginning of this paper. His experience allowed me to witness a young, creative mind that was able to play, invent and critique in a media saturated environment. An individual child living with many privileges, comforts and support is not the same as a school or a community. Nonetheless I pass these stories on to you because I continue to learn from them as I

reflect, as an art educator, on the choices we are making regarding the future of children's visual learning.

1. examples of sites.www.media-awareness.ca
<http://interact.uoregon.edu/MediaLit/mlr/home/index.html>
<http://www.adbusters.org/home/>

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