

THE EFFECTS OF VISUAL CULTURE THEORY BASED GRAPHIC DESIGN EDUCATION ON STUDENTS' VISUAL PERCEPTION¹

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to enable graphic design students to improve their visual literacy through visual culture, and to read and critically evaluate images. It also seeks to answer the following question: Were students able to learn about visual culture theory in the course of the study? The design of the study is experimental. The participants of the study were 16 third-year students drawn from Gazi University's Faculties of Education, Fine Arts Education, Art Education, and Graphic Arts during the second semester of the 2014-2015 academic year. Research participants were selected through a purposive sampling method followed by a convenience sampling method. Since the study was conducted without a control group, a quasi-experimental model composed of a single group was used. The students' ability to create a poster was considered when selecting the group of participants for the experiment. Data for the study was collected by means of an achievement test. A t-test was used in the analysis of this achievement test to determine whether there was any significant difference between pre- and post-test results. The study concludes that there was a change in the students' visual perception and their development of points of view.

Key Words: Visual culture, visual perception, critical thinking

Introduction

The reality of our experience seems to be nearly overshadowed by images in today's world (Robins, 2013, s.11). While some display a great interest in new visual and imaging technology, others believe that they are the occasion of a radical transformation of the social and cultural spheres. While it is emphasized that we are living through an unanticipated "image revolution," it is also asserted that this is a product of the postmodern era. (Robins, 2013, s.22). If by *postmodern* we mean a culture separated into categories, then it is best understood and expressed visually. Even if we consider that visual culture stretches all the way back to the stone-age, when combined with the powerful effects of media it gains a new dimension. In order to be able to answer to all requirements of the postmodern era, media is given great precedence in shaping both the products of visual culture and the culture itself (Çitci, 2009).

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Today everyone is a consumer of images. Every day each of us are exposed to images, screens, books, the press, advertisements, posters and billboards by means of mass communications. From an individual perspective these images are usually consumed at face value. If the frequency with which one encounters images while walking down the street or in transit is taken into consideration, this situation seems quite ordinary. In this context many of the visual messages that an individual crosses paths with on a near daily basis remain unseen (Yücel, 2013, s.11). In such a situation our opportunities for visual thinking in our everyday lives increase rapidly, and the decline of literary thinking is one symptom of this. The shaping of our perception by visual occurrences and the visual milieu has become much more important, and its effect on social processes has become more powerful (Çitci, 2009). For this reason it is apparent that, in order to better understand, comment upon, and interpret the use of images both ordinary and extraordinary in our contemporary culture, and in order not to be passively exposed to them, we must read images (Yücel, 2013, s.12).

A certain type of education is necessary in order to recognize an image. In our society this education usually occurs naturally. We interpret, consciously or unconsciously, the images we see on a daily basis. As we drive we generally either talk or listen to the radio at the same time as we perceive advertisements, traffic signals, and still other things. As such, no attempt is made to interpret such images after perceiving them (Yücel, 2013, s.68). As rapid technological development also adds to this, we are confronted with an era of the hegemony of the image. It is in this context that, entering an age of media that presents us with sales campaigns, images, lifestyles, and new perspectives, a new social process has been created. (Çitci, 2009).

When interpreting images, however, memory, stereotype, and the corruption of image quality are also significant. Stereotyping prevents us from making an objective interpretation as it shapes our expectations of images. In addition to this it affects our desires and anticipations of the meanings of visual communications (Yücel, 2013, s.70). In such a situation the question of how visual culture is reflected in the work of graphic design students comes to mind. The abilities of students of graphic design to develop critical perspectives, to recognize images in the context of visual culture, to give meaning to and to be able to use their skills in their designs are all coming to fruition. It is in this context that visual culture theory can be of use in creating a metalanguage for students to think about images.

What Is Visual Culture?

In order to define visual culture it is first necessary to explain what is *visual* and what is *cultural* (Barnard, 2010, s.26). Visual culture, which takes multiple aspects of culture as its subject matter, deals with various cultural elements communicated through images (Soğancı, 2011). As for *visual*, the most comprehensive definition is everything that is capable of being seen (Barnard, 2010, s.26). According to Tavin, there are three overlapping definitions of visual culture: first, it is the profound effect of new technology and the development of imagery on human experience; second, it is the sum total of any imagery with objects and connotations; third, it is defined as experience through culture, of situations that develop as a result of quotidian emotional and cultural practices (Dilli, 2013).

W.J.T. Mitchell provides an interdisciplinary definition of visual culture. In Mitchell's view, visual culture is a social and cultural study of visual experience. It broaches the question of how a person sees what they see and how they interpret what they see. In his book entitled *Picture Theory*, Mitchell coins the term "Pictorial Turn" in order to call attention to a newly arising visual culture. With this concept he defines visual culture as a transformation from literary culture to a culture based on images. The degree of intrusion of television and other audiovisual media on our lives today is historically unprecedented. The hegemony of the image in this change from a literary to visual culture is designated by academics as the turn to images or visual culture. Delineating the start of the "Pictorial Turn" in the post-modern culture of our era, Mitchell

characterizes the importance of the era as follows: “If we ask ourselves why a pictorial turn seems to be happening now, in what is often characterized as a “postmodern” era, the second half of the twentieth century, we encounter a paradox. On the one hand, it seems overwhelmingly obvious that the era of video and cybernetic technology, the age of electronic reproduction, has developed new forms of visual simulation and illusionism with unprecedented powers. On the other hand, the fear of the image, the anxiety that the “power of images” may finally destroy even their creators and manipulators, is as old as image-making itself” (1994, s.11,15).

Visual culture encapsulates everything that expresses itself through visual means, including television, statues, photographs, films, oil paintings, gardens, buildings, handicrafts, toys, advertisements, jewelry, maps, graphics, websites, cityscapes, etc. For this reason visual culture is all-inclusive, creating an unparalleled and ever-increasing amount of visions and visualization in human experience (Balkır-Kuru, 2011).

Signs, symbols, and pictograms are now an inseparable part of our visual world. They are with us on the street, in traffic, at home, on our television remotes, on store packaging, in short at every moment of our lives. Each one is a part of our system of visual communication (Uçar, 2004, s.86). For this reason a “visual pedagogy” can be instructive in expressing what we have seen and how we think about what we have seen in visual culture (Balkır-Kuru, 2011). A great variety of issues are dealt with in the context of the pedagogy of visual culture. This variety is quite healthy in consideration of the nature of visual culture as a field.

Now more than ever culture is dependent on visuals. From one perspective it has become almost entirely visual, as songs without music videos, musicians without fictionalized images, displays, or products, events not advertised on signs or billboards have become inconceivable (Soğancı, 2011). For this reason it is necessary to examine the concept of “culture” and explain as well as possible what is cultural in order to analyze and understand visual culture. The point, however, is not to utilize a pre-existing explanation of “culture” in the context of visual culture. Visual culture must be examined as what Raymond Williams called a “semiotic system.” According to William’s thesis, within a semiotic system there are institutions, objects, actions, values, and beliefs in which the social structure is produced in visual form. In this context visual culture is oriented towards politics and ideology and is concerned with how society comes into being (Barnard, 2010, s.35).

In the 21st century culture has continued to spread by way of imagery. For this reason it can be helpful to look at visual culture from our current system and, at the same time, identify the societal symptoms and effects of global culture. Mass communication devices such as the internet, television, and cell phones have brought about a situation where any type of information is easily accessible within the global visual network. The current system’s visual culture is intensively shown on television, in museums, magazines, theatres, billboard advertisements, computers, and shopping centers. Although the icons of the contemporary system have a short lifespan, their effects should not be underestimated (Aykut, 2013). Cities are the places where these current icons are seen.

In this context the places where the effects of visual culture can be felt most acutely and seen most distinctively are cities. Cities are composed of places that fulfill the physical, social, and psychological needs of individuals. In the emergence of structural order in the cities, cultural structures play a big role in terms of the value judgments and preferences, social lifestyles and traditions of the people who inhabit them (İz-Bölükoğlu, 2003).

The public expansion of visual culture was again brought about by the media. Thus media, as a factor combining mass culture and visual culture, creates the mass consumption of images while focusing on shaping the consumer audience of those images (Atiker, 1998, s.57). Visual culture displays the fastest, most effective and most widely felt cultural characteristics to the people and to the masses. Here the most

important instrument is media and the technology associated with it (Adorno, 2007, s.75). Media, which is the source of visual culture's significant products, also serves as the direct influence in the structuring of visual culture. Media, while shaping visual culture, naturally also shapes the masses. That there is a culture belonging to the media itself can also be seen in this situation. Money, media and popular recreation not only inform us about culture by financing cultural activities, but also shape and even create cultural values. What they claim to be culture in fact becomes the culture (Kuspit, 2006, s.189).

It is a widely accepted idea that mass communication devices continuously send us messages and that these messages play an undeniable role in the economic, cultural and social life of both modern and developing societies. One must look at these messages with a critical eye, as having been produced with their own peculiar discourse, in order to interpret and give meaning to them (Parsa, 2007).

Methodology

Research Model

A quasi-experimental model from a single group without a control was used to arrive at the results in this study.

Participant Group

The study's participant group was composed of 16 third-year students at Gazi University's Graduate School faculties of Education, Fine Arts, Art Teaching, Graphic Design Workshop (RS-301A) during the second semester of the 2014-2015 academic year. Participants were chosen via purposive sampling followed by convenience sampling. When creating the study group, the group's ability to design a poster over the course of the study was taken into consideration.

Data Collection Process

The data for this study was collected over a six-week period during a class that met once a week for 6 hours. A 16-question achievement test (pre- and post-test) was developed. In the first week the pre-test was administered in order to measure the students' level of preparedness. Following the administration of the pre-test a presentation prepared by the researcher in order to inform the students about visual culture theory was shown. Acting as a participant observer, the researcher discussed the following topics: Introduction to Visual Culture: What Is Visual Culture Theory? And What Are Its Effects on Life?, Basic Concepts of Visual Culture Theory: Visual Perception, The Power of Images, Critical Perspectives and Representation. In the second week such topics as Fundamental Factors in the Emergence of Visual Culture Theory: Postmodernism and Globalization, The Effect of Postmodernism on Poster Design, An Examination of Posters in the Context of Visual Culture, and An Interpretation of Messages Transmitted by Images in our Daily Experience were covered. A variety of images concerned with visual culture were also given as examples and discussed. At the end of the course an achievement test (post-test) was administered. The post-test aims to see how the students interpret visual images and measure whether students possess a critical perspective towards them.

Data Analysis

A t-test was used to determine whether there was any significant difference between the participants' pre- and post-test results. The t-test is a widely used method of testing hypotheses. As t-distributions are recognized in small-sample theory, its use is also possible when working with small sample sizes (Baş, 2008, s. 116).

Findings and Interpretation

The students' achievement test results before the course concerning visual culture theory (the pre-test) are given in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of Achievement Test Results Prior to Course of Education (Pre-test)

		n (number)	%
M1	Visual culture, social and cultural examination of visual experience	Incorrect	1 6.3
		Correct	15 93.7
M2	Visual culture, its influence on national culture	Incorrect	1 6.3
		Correct	15 93.7
M3	Objects of visual culture include new meanings and functions to increase aesthetic productions	Incorrect	4 25
		Correct	12 75
M4	Signs, symbols, and pictograms as parts of a system of visual communication	Incorrect	0 0
		Correct	16 100
M5	The importance of understanding the cultural construction of images in our environment	Incorrect	6 37.5
		Correct	10 62.5
M6	Increasing number of visuals obstructs awareness of cultural construction	Incorrect	14 87.5
		Correct	2 12.5
M7	The story characters in magazines, cartoon series etc. show some similarities	Incorrect	1 6.3
		Correct	15 93.7
M8	There are stereotypes in the media represented by visual cultures	Incorrect	2 12.5
		Correct	14 87.5
M9	The same stories repeat themselves on TV, TV series and commercials	Incorrect	1 6.3
		Correct	15 93.7
M10	Visuals (images) affect individuals' identity and lifestyle	Incorrect	2 12.5
		Correct	14 87.5
M11	Visuals (images) help us understand our identity	Incorrect	5 31.3
		Correct	11 68.7
M12	Images surrounding us affect our identity and technological, economic and social life	Incorrect	1 6.3
		Correct	15 93.7
M13	Visuals (images) spread the values and beliefs of powerful companies	Incorrect	1 6.3
		Correct	15 93.7
M14	Visuals (images) are not only used for marketing purposes but also for imposing particular ideas	Incorrect	0 0
		Correct	16 100
M15	In our perception of visuals (images), our life experiences, mental functioning and our level of motivation are important.	Incorrect	1 6.3
		Correct	15 93.7
M16	The meanings visuals (images) creates depend on our cultural background	Incorrect	2 12.5
		Correct	14 87.5

The results of the achievement test after the course about visual culture theory was given (post-test) are given in Table 2.

Table 2. Proportional Distribution of Achievement Test Results Following Course of Education (Post-test)

		n (number)	%	
M1	Visual culture, social and cultural examination of visual experience	Incorrect	1	6.3
		Correct	15	93.7
M2	Visual culture, its influence on national culture	Incorrect	1	6.3
		Correct	15	93.7
M3	Objects of visual culture include new meanings and functions to increase aesthetic productions	Incorrect	0	0
		Correct	16	100
M4	Signs, symbols, and pictograms as parts of a system of visual communication	Incorrect	0	0
		Correct	16	100
M5	The importance of understanding the cultural construction of images in our environment	Incorrect	3	18.8
		Correct	13	81.2
M6	Increasing number of visuals obstructs awareness of cultural construction	Incorrect	10	62.5
		Correct	6	37.5
M7	The story characters in magazines, cartoon series etc. show some similarities	Incorrect	1	6.3
		Correct	15	93.7
M8	There are stereotypes in the media represented by visual cultures	Incorrect	1	6.3
		Correct	15	93.7
M9	The same stories repeat themselves on TV, TV series and commercials	Incorrect	0	0
		Correct	16	100
M10	Visuals (images) affect individuals' identity and lifestyle	Incorrect	2	12.5
		Correct	14	87.5
M11	Visuals (images) help us understand our identity	Incorrect	2	12.5
		Correct	14	87.5
M12	Images surrounding us affect our identity and technological, economic and social life	Incorrect	0	0
		Correct	16	100
M13	Visuals (images) spread the values and beliefs of powerful companies	Incorrect	1	6.3
		Correct	15	93.7
M14	Visuals (images) are not only used for marketing purposes but also for imposing particular ideas	Incorrect	0	0
		Correct	16	100
M15	In our perception of visuals (images), our life experiences, mental functioning and our level of motivation are important.	Incorrect	0	0
		Correct	16	100
M16	The meanings visuals (images) creates depend on our cultural background	Incorrect	0	0
		Correct	16	100

According to the results of the post-test carried out on 16 students, (n=15) 93.7% of the students know that the definition of visual culture involves the social and cultural examination of visual experience.

93.7% (n=15) of the students know that "Visual culture affects national culture."

While 75% (n=12) of the students think that “The objects of visual culture include new meanings and functions to increase aesthetic productions” while (n=4) 25% of the students think the opposite.

All of the participants agree with the statement that “Signs, symbols, and pictograms are parts of a system of visual communication.”

62.5% (n=10) of the students agree with the statement that “The visuals (images) surrounding us are important for understanding cultural structures.” 37.5% (n=4) did not agree.

87.5% (n=14) indicate that “The increasing of visual obstructs awareness of cultural constructions” is a true statement while 12.5 (n=2) do not.

93.7% (n=15) think that “The characters in magazines, cartoon films, series, etc. show similarities”

87.5% (n=14) note that “there are stereotypes in the media represented by visual culture” while 12.5% (n=2) do not.

93.7% (n=15) think that “The same stories repeat themselves on television, TV series, and commercials.” 6.3% (n=1) do not think so.

87.5% (n=14) think that “Visuals (images) affect individual identity and lifestyle” while 12.5% (n=12) do not think so.

68.7% (n=11) agree that “Visuals help us understand our identity” while 31.3% (n=5) do not agree.

93.7% of students (n=15) accept the statement that “Visuals (images) affect our identity, and technological, economic and social lives.”

93.7% (n=15) agree that “Visuals (images) spread the beliefs and values of powerful companies.”

Students unanimously agreed that “Visuals (images) are used not only for marketing but for imposing ideas.”

93.7% (n=15) agree that “Perception of visuals (images) are affected by life experiences, mental functioning and level of motivation.”

87.5% of students (n=14) believe it is true that “Our understanding of visuals (images) is dependent on our cultural background” while 12.5% (n=2) do not.

Significant differences between the pre- and post-test results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Statistical Analysis of Achievement Tests (Pre- and Post-tests)

	Average±S.s	P value*
Pre-test results	13.37±1.50	
Post-test results	14.62±1.02	0.006
Pre-post difference	-1.25±1.57	

*Paired Samples Test

The mean value of the achievement test administered to the participant group is 13.37±1.50. Following the course of education on this subject the achievement test was administered again, this time the mean value being 14.62±1.02. The difference between -1.25±1.57 is statistically significant (p<0.05). Accordingly it can be seen that the education given to the students was effective.

Results

With the application of the achievement test used in this study, students’ awareness of visual culture theory was measured and what can be done to attract them to the field was examined. According to the answers to the 16 questions in the pre- and post-test, the following results were found:

- While most of the students agree that visual culture involves the social and cultural examination of visual experience, some students think that visual experience is not influential in social and cultural life. By giving the same answer in the post-test, students emphasized that visual culture is effective in socio-cultural life.
- Most of the students think that visual culture has its influence on national culture. By giving the same answer in the post-test, students emphasized that visual culture is effective in national culture.
- Generally, students think objects of visual culture include new meanings and functions to increase aesthetic productions and that objects of visual culture motivates individuals to consume more. All of the students have come to this point at the end of the post-test and understood that objects of visual culture have different functions.
- All of the students think signs, symbols, and pictograms are parts of a system of visual communication. The post-test also proves this point.
- Some of the students say visuals (images) surrounding them are important in understanding the cultural construction. Visuals are perceived differently in different time frames by different individuals. This is shaped by beliefs of an individual or an era or the changing cultural structures. An individual -voluntarily or involuntarily- is continuously in a relation with visuals and know each other through cultural signs and images. Thus, images are an important factor in understanding cultural structures. Most of the students agreed on this idea in the post-test.
- Few of the students think that increasing of visuals obstructs the making sense of cultural construction, while most of them think increasing of visuals make their life easier.
- Students realized the similarities between the story characters in magazines, cartoons and series etc. They answered the same way in the post-test.
- Realizing the similarities of the characters in the media, students noted that there are stereotypes in the media represented by visual cultures. In the post-test most of the students, by gaining a greater awareness, were able to point out the stereotypical characters in the visuals.
- Most of the students think that the same stories repeat themselves on television, TV series, and commercials. In the post-test given after the course on visual culture theory, they realized that the images transmitted through mass communication devices repeat themselves.
- In general the students think that visuals (images) affect individual identity and lifestyle. By giving the same answer in the post-test, the students indicate that they still believe that visuals influence both individual identity and life style.
- Some students think that visuals (images) help us understand our identity. Very few of them were aware of this situation, however in the post-test given after the course students indicated that visuals are important tools in the understanding of our identities.
- In general students believe that the visuals (images) surrounding us affect our identity, and our technological, economic, social lives. In the post-test all of the students indicated that they believe the images in their environment affect our identity, and our technological, economic, and social lives.
- Students think that visuals (images) spread the values and beliefs of powerful companies. Only a small number of the students are aware that corporations produce and distribute knowledge about the world and help shape identity encourage consumption of visual culture.
- Students are of the same opinion that visuals (images) are not only used for marketing purposes but also for imposing particular ideas.
- A large majority of students think that our perception of visuals (images) are affected by our life experiences, mental functioning, and level of motivation. Following the course, all of the students gained

awareness of the fact that our perception of visuals (images) are affected by our life experiences, mental functioning and level of motivation.

- In general students think that the meaning of visuals (images) create is dependent on our cultural background. Individual beliefs and values gained by personal experience affect how we create meaning. Dependent on this all students indicated on the post-test that they think our cultural background plays a role in giving meaning to visuals.

As a general evaluation, students increased their awareness of information related to images, representations and visual perception, and the social and cultural functions of these concepts. In particular they gained an understanding of the importance of being aware of images and being able to read images as individuals living in a world so rife with visual stimuli. In this context students acquired information related to the expressions and examples from visual culture theory through the reading of images. As a result, students increased their visual literacy by becoming more aware of the images that surround them.

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