

Narrative and Artistic Research in Visual Art Education Teacher's Training

Investigación Narrativa y Artística en la Formación de Profesores de Artes Visuales

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Abstract:

This paper focuses on the concept of narrative and analyzes a visual narrative as artistic research and educative experience. Firstly, it examines the transformations of the concept of narrative in the last decades and its predominance in contemporary culture, research and teaching. Following, it discusses the relation between visuality and visual experience emphasizing the way images create associations, evoke contexts and are shaped by subjective and cultural practices in learning experiences. Following, we look the interaction between image, narrative and action through the analyses of a visual narrative of a student of the Visual Arts Teacher Training Program of the Visual Arts College of the Federal University of Goiás – Brazil. The paper concludes pointing to implications for the utilization of this pedagogical resource emphasizing its relevance in teacher training and research in order to attract students to knowledge and to problems related to the social and cultural context where they live. Visual narratives are a form of investigating and understanding experience, a performative process of doing or telling a history, or yet, a narration of visual events or images sequentially. The value of a personal account may determinate what a narrative provokes or evokes on individuals, because they are the ones who can consider an experience authentic, believable or possible. To understand teacher training as an initiation, but, especially, as a knowledge process, presupposes the creation of connections with meaningful moments of the experiences that are built throughout life and that may reflect a way in their educative trajectory.

Keywords: narrative, image, research, teaching, educative experience.

Resumen Expandido:

Este trabajo tiene su enfoque en el concepto de narrativa y en el análisis de la narración visual como un abordaje de investigación artística vinculada a la experiencia educativa. En la primera parte, el texto examina de manera sucinta las transformaciones del concepto de narrativa en las últimas décadas y su predominio en la cultura contemporánea, la investigación y la docencia. Propone una definición de narrativa como manifestación oral, escrita, sonora y visual que cuenta algo acerca del mundo de la existencia, del otro y de si mismo. En seguida el texto analiza la relación entre la visualidad y la experiencia visual haciendo hincapié en relación a las formas en las cuales imágenes crean asociaciones, evocan contextos y están conformadas por las prácticas culturales que ocurren en las experiencias subjetivas y de aprendizaje. El trabajo trata de visualidades refiriéndose a un proceso de seducción, rechazo y cooptación que se desarrolla a partir de imágenes. Este proceso tiene su origen en la experiencia visual que construida con nuestros repertorios individuales. Imágenes de infancia, de familia, de amores, conflictos, acasos, azares y desabores son parte de éstos repertorios. La interacción entre la imagen, la narración y la acción es vista en la tercera parte del trabajo a través de el análisis de

la narrativa visual de un estudiante del Programa de Formación de Maestros de Artes Visuales de la Escuela de Artes Visuales de la Universidad Federal de Goiás - Brasil. La creación de una narrativa hace parte del programa de la asignatura denominada “Arte, percepción y aprendizaje I” ofrecida en el quinto semestre del dicho curso. Cada alumno presenta y comenta con los colegas su narrativa que debe tener duración mínima de tres minutos. En este texto, destaco cuatro momentos de la narrativa “Pieza de agua” de la alumna Terumi Okada. El primero describe el espacio donde acontecen las secuencias de acciones/imágenes llamando atención para los objetos de la escena y la el posicionamiento de la estudiante. El segundo momento es marcado por gestos repetitivos y acelerados que la alumna utiliza intentando retirar el agua de la bañera donde se refleje su imagen de niña. El momento siguiente muestra un como, en un impulso dramático, la alumna casi se juega en la bañera, imágenes que son aun mismo tiempo, de obsesión por la imagen y destrucción de la imagen. En el ultimo momento, la bañera aparece casi vacía y, lentamente, la imagen se recompone y se reconfigura. El texto concluye señalando algunas implicaciones para la utilización de este recurso – narrativas visuales - subrayando su importancia pedagógica en la formación del profesorado y la investigación con el fin de aproximar los estudiantes al conocimiento y a los problemas relacionados con el contexto social y cultural en el que viven. De esta manera, las narrativas visuales son una forma de investigar y comprender la experiencia vivida, el proceso performativo de hacer o contar una historia y, sin embargo, la narración de una serie de eventos o imágenes visuales de forma secuencial. El trabajo refuerza el valor que las trayectorias de vida pueden acrecentar determinando lo que provoca o evoca un relato sobre los individuos, porque son ellos los que pueden considerar una experiencia auténtica, creíble o posible. Para entender la formación docente como una iniciación, pero, sobre todo, como un proceso de conocimiento, es necesaria la creación de conexiones con momentos significativos o aspectos de las experiencias que se construyen durante toda la vida tomando como referencia situaciones que pueden reflejar de manera sorprendente la subjetividad en la trayectoria educativa de los estudiantes.

Palabras clave: narrativa, imagen , investigación, enseñanza, la experiencia educativa.

Narratives

Narratives are oral, written, sonorous, visual manifestations organized through a succession of episodes or occurrences of human interest, which integrate a same action. A sequence of ideas articulated through spoken or written words and/or through sounds and images, is a condition that makes a manifestation be recognized as a narrative. Sequence and organization are elements that give some kind of unity to ideas, talks, sentences, sounds and images that complement each other as narrative.

In this way, we can say that to narrate is to tell something about the world, about existence, about the ‘other’ or about myself. It is a way to describe sceneries, to reinvent life, to recreate histories, but, mainly, to retell events, realities, conflicts, problems, doubts and feelings that reveal different versions and perspectives of human beings. Romances, chronicles, soap operas, comics, family photographs, films, songs, ballads, jokes and even facts in the crime pages of newspapers are ways of telling, actions or happenings in which the narrator, registering, may transform them in something of interest for posterity.

From the second half of the XX century on, especially in the last three decades, narratives became a dynamic space for intellectual discussion and theoretical thinking gaining predominance in contemporary culture. As source of interest and provocation, they destabilized the literary system and at the same time generated noise in relation to the systems' generic classification. Narratives, also, challenged the conventional limits of literature as a type of manifestation accessible to common people who aspire to tell part or moments of their trajectory designing ways and ruptures of their particular history. In this sense, one can say that narratives created a new aesthetic, a peculiar way to individuals to express their experiences about life, memories, and intimacy.

Narratives do not follow a structure. They are not dependent on only one critical perspective, on established models, condition that, frequently, irritate and perturb individuals inter actors. As a paradox, narratives mobilize the intellectual, ideological and psychological sensibility of people impelling them to think or experiment multiples ways of perceiving and interpreting. So, narratives have the potential to provoke semantic fissures in the ways of organizing and interpreting discourses, texts, signs and images, rupturing the limits of "languages" and destabilizing conventions by mixing figurations of the voice, body, life or death.

Making an analogy with Maristany's ideas and focusing the images as raw material for visual narratives, we can say that "[...] the (images) can't be read, are cut as if they were figures, one recognizes its materiality, its apparent beauty" (2005: 67). Also, according to Maristany, it is necessary to treat the words – in the case of this analogy, the images – with a sensibility that values the "prominence of its materiality [...] to deprive them of their meaning [atavistic] to address them as mere pieces of a set of drawings" [or doodles] (67). Thus, may be we can escape from the trap and from the "mistake of believing in the [image] itself" to build a displaced reflection – multi centric – and critical.

From images to visualities

Postmodern culture intensifies the distance between richness and the amplitude of the visual experience and the ability or resources to understand this experience. The speed and volume of images that invade and questions us daily are a kind of avalanche that drenches us and consumes us without having time to reflect, analyze or perform any sort of critical evaluation about them.

Besides that, digital technology contributed not only to expand the production of images, but, mainly, to transport them in real time through cell phones, cameras photographic, computers creating links and making them publics in the internet, sites as the You tube, internet portals, blogs, Facebook etc. Achutti (2004: 101) details the implications of this process commenting that in the digital era, " any person ceases to be a mere image consumer to become an image creator and to dedicate to reproduce daily life en video or photograph by a low price and without having advance technical knowledge ".

When we talk about visualities, we refer to a process of seduction, rejection and cooptation that develops from images. This process has its origin in the visual experience. We can characterize visual experience as a kind of imagistic cosmos that surrounds us while besetting, suggesting and generating links with our individual repertoires. These individuals' repertoires include images from childhood, family, loves, conflicts, accidents, misfortunes and disappointments. Images associated with striking situations that, for various reasons, we preserve to protect us from the emotions they trigger, or images we keep with affection and we reserve the right to relive the emotions in times or special moments. The visual experience and their repertoires are responsible for synapses between objective and subjective knowledge configured for cultural references that somehow influence the ways and practices of seeing of the individuals.

It is noteworthy that this tracking, location and retrieval of images from visual experience is not always spontaneous or common. Often this screening is characterized as a complex, sensitive operation somewhat nebulous, protected by fears, doubts, insecurities and even threats of us, and emotions that such images can reactivate. Moreover, the images and their synapses are permeated by references or cultural practices that help us to understand the social world, i.e., ways to make it intelligible (Silva, 2003). Put another way, we are talking about actions, activities, experiences and other ways to produce meanings that constitute and establish what we know as culture.

From an educational standpoint, the visual dimension goes beyond a repertoire of visible objects or events because it presupposes an understanding of their processes, how they operate, their implications, and especially their contexts. So we can say that the visual experience is a dynamic and gradual process, constantly changing, time consuming and, therefore, more comprehensive than the instantaneity of the experience of seeing.

The visual experience and its repertoire also includes "representations and images [that] flow by daily life enhancing forms such as film and television, creating a sort of fog that covers border regions between images of art and non-art "(Becker, 2009: 26). Richard (2006: 98), deepens the discussion proposed by Becker stating that the "[...] difference between art and non-art now lost its value hierarchy dropping submerged in a new expanded constellation that involves all forms of seeing, to be seen and of showing. In this understanding that develops from the imaging process, visualities gain meaning as representations that transit and emerge from visual repertoires creating associations, triggering references and evoking contexts. Thus, we can say that visual representations are shaped by subjective and cultural practices that transform them into visualities.

According to Rolnik (1997: 1) subjectivity is "a way of being – of thinking, of acting, of dreaming, of loving, etc. - that cuts the space forming an inner and an outer part". This way of being give individuals the possibility to articulate a "subjective and inter subjective practice in the formation process based in the experiences and learning constructed during life time [...]", reuniting and articulating " different and diverse experiences through the

proper choices, the dynamics and singularities of each life” (Souza, 2006: 57). The approximation between subjective and inter subjective practice points to an interdependence or an interaction between culture and cultural practices. In this sense we can consider subjectivities as printings or traces of culture in our ways of being, thinking, acting and feeling (Becker, 2009).

Hernandez (2007: 73), while scrutinizing, also details this discussion highlighting differences between subjectivity and identity. According to the author,

Each individual has a perception of self that may or may not coincide with the perception other individuals or different groups have. The discrepancies between subjectivity and group identity is the cause of concern and anxiety in young people. Often it leads to situations in which group identity take precedence over individual experience. So, boys and girls devote much time, too much energy and effort trying to see and act the same way group members do. [...] This conception holds that the construction of identity is articulated, not in a deterministic and natural way, but from multiple commitments, alliances, loyalties and rejections each one builds upon a series of strategies.

Silva (2001: 61) makes a synthesis of the relation subjectivity-identity arguing that who detains knowledge detains the power to represent because it is “ in the representation that the power of looking and the looking of power materialize”. Thus, it becomes evident that visualities are cultural constructions that operate as magnet, as reference points to where converge different looks that meet and intersect attracting “the look of who represents, who has the power to represent; the look of who is represented, whose lack of power prevents to representing him/herself, the look of someone who looks representation; crossed looks of individuals situated in the representation, located in different positions of power (Silva, 2001: 61-62).

In the Western world, based on Descartes’ premise - I think, therefore I am - "thinking" became the trace that distinguishes humans from other animals. However, I follow the boldness of Kehl (2005) to oppose the scientific body/mind dualism, conception that for three centuries has become an epistemological consensus in the West. The author argues that

It is not the thought that distinguishes primarily a human being from another. The subjective certainty that assures us, very early, that "I am," does not come from our ability to think, but from our identification with an image, the body image. It is not thought that ensures the uniqueness of being; [...] what guarantees the being is its visibility - to another subject (2005: 148).

Based on this argument we can say that to exist is, first of all, to be present and be recognized in a public and symbolic instance that presupposes the interaction between image, narrative and action (Arendt, 2005). It's sharing images and visualities as social and cultural practices that are established and destabilize in the web of human relationships and meanings where each individual is present and participates in its own way.

Interactions between image, narrative and action

All human knowledge is somehow a kind of interpretation. In culture, nearly everything has

a narrative aspect and therefore can be perceived and interpreted as narrative. Clandinin and Connelly (2000: 17) explain, "[...] life - as it comes to ourselves and others - is constructed by narrative fragments lived in times told in time and space on which we reflect and understand as units and narrative discontinuities".

So, we can say that narratives may change the ways of cultural and social production because narrating images and visualities, individuals reorganize their experience giving them coherence and meaning, giving sense to significant events in their trajectories. The subtleties of seeing, looking, peeking, observing, monitoring, and also the visual pleasure, are as deep a problem as various forms of reading - decipherment, decoding, interpretation, etc. These subtleties and specificities point to the fact that the visual experience is not explicable through the model of textuality.

Expression, meaning, and interpretation are always present in narratives based on four elements: character, time, space and action. Thus visual narratives offer the possibility to work problems related to the formative experience or individuals that, in general, are constituted by images or imagistic experiences isolated, disperse. These images are, in a way, marks of the trajectory and the experiences of individuals. Culturally processed as visualities and transformed in experiences, these images have strong emotional components that express feelings of joy, satisfaction, fear, insecurity, shame, shyness, sadness, disappointment, etc.

For this reason, the experience of producing visual narratives give to students the opportunity to identify meaningful situations in their formative trajectory, to create links with subjective questions, but, mainly, to search for an understanding of themselves having as references images and information chosen as important and institutive of their personal and social living. Constructing visual narratives, students have space to revisit, to review critically aspects, moments of their experiences narrating representations of their trajectories as individuals and students in a contextual dimension.

The subject Art, Perception and Learning I, offered in the fifth semester of the Visual Arts Teacher Training Course at the School of Visual Arts of the Federal University of Goiás (Brazil), culminates with the construction, presentation and evaluation of a visual narrative with a minimum duration of three minutes. Each student presents and comments the narrative with the colleagues. The narratives can be presented in power point, video, film, using fixed and/or moving images. The four movements/scenes presented and analyzed below are part of the visual narrative "Peça de água" (Piece of water) presented by a student of the 2008 class. (Figure 1)



Figure 1. Visual Narrative – Piece of Water
Terumi Okada

The setting of the story is simple and lugubrious (Figure 1). The space suggests a bathroom, small and closed, with dim lighting kind of blue (detail not observable in the images in this text). A plastic tub, inflatable, occupies the left side of the image filled with water. The photo of the student, as a child, is projected in a way that we can see it as in water in the bottom of the tub. To the right of the tub, sitting on her legs, is the student, bare feet, dark shorts and white T-shirt, loose hair. In his hand a bucket of aluminum. The scenario seems to announce her intention: to get rid of the image, throw it out of the tub with the water. The image is volatile and vulnerable but, at the same time, persistent and inquiring, apparently able to be eliminated.

The initial gestures confirm the previously announced intention. The student plunges the bucket and carefully captures the image and a quantity of water where the image is reflected shooting them, water and image, out of the tub. For a few moments, there is dissimulated perception of dismemberment or disappearance of the image. (Figure 2)



Figure 2. Visual Narrative – Piece of Water
Terumi Okada

Gradually, the wave displacements generated by the movement of the bucket ceases and slowly, refracted image fragments are recomposed on the liquid surface, retracing again its projection. The absence of a palpable materiality gives the image an enigmatic character suggesting a confrontation student-image, i.e., the student and herself, although we recognize the photograph is only a record from childhood. However, a record that reactivates other images, times and circumstances, symbolic footprints of emotions experienced that mark her trajectory so far. It is as if the image silently screamed many questions: who am I for you? What you say about me, or even, what you want from me?

The art of evoking, narrating and attributing meaning to experiences as a strangeness of the self allows the subject to interpret his/her memories in two dimensions. First, as a stage connected to the formation of the uniqueness of each life history, and second, as a process of knowledge about self that the narrative favors. The process of formation and knowledge enables the subject to question the knowledge of him/her self from the knowing how to be – an interior diving and knowing of self - and the know-how-to think about what life has taught. (Souza, 2006: 62)

Thus, we can say that by identifying, choosing and building meaningful visual experiences, students create a space to interpret moments or aspects of their trajectory seeking for an

understanding of themselves and of lived experiences that through challenge, suffering or deceptions can be transformed into learning. (Figure 3)

The flow of the images maintains the visual perception of motion and the narrative continues. Character, space and action remain the same. The time of the action retains its slow rhythm punctuated by pauses that are repeated as if requesting prudence and reflection: water and image collected by the bucket, are thrown out of the tub, then, a pause, a waiting time. Gradually the water movement decreases and the image, in a slow and artful way, reappears on the liquid surface staring, provoking its matrix, its origin - the student.

The obsession for the image or, put another way, for the destruction of the image, you gains a dramatic boost. The confrontation student-image provided by the construction of visual narrative, presents clashes as result of the trajectory and lived experiences in the student's itinerary as daughter, woman, sister and student. These experiences, "marked by historical aspects", evolves a " subjective continuum in relation to reflections and analyzes built by each subject on the act of remembering, narrating and writing about the self ". (Souza, 2006: 79)

Returning to the narrative, the action accelerates the pace and the movement of the bucket intensifies the expectation that image, water, or both, be exhausted. But the effort proves futile. Taken by the fatigue and irritation, the student launches herself to the tub, but this time, without the bucket. With frenetic movements of hands and arms, she makes her last attempt to get rid of the water, the tub and the image. (Figure 3)



Figure 3. Visual Narrative – Piece of Water

Terumi Okada

Quick and sudden movements move the tub, now almost empty, while denouncing a hate feeling. The energy and effort spent are useless and the feeling of lust and hate seem to lead to exhaustion. With wet hair and shirt, the student uses the last resource left: to open the valve and remove the air from the tub. The air pressure and the slippery tub offer resistance turning difficult to open the valve by hand. So, rests only a possibility, to pull the air lid with the teeth. The student merges the head in the tub and opens the air lid. A small amount of water flows out of the tub. With timid steps, the student leaves, withdraws from the narrative's scene.

In the rest of water left in the bottom of the tub, as if by magic, slowly but audacious and in a surprising way, the image is recomposed and reconfigured. In the almost empty tub, the image can be seen partially, the lower half of the face covered by the edge of the tub. (Figure 4)



Figure 4. Visual Narrative – Piece of Water
Terumi Okada

Image, narrative, and education

Visual narratives are a way of understanding the experience, a performative process of doing or telling a history or the narration of a series of visual events or images in sequence. As Tomm (1993:12) argues “(...) we as humans not only give meaning to our experiences through narrating our lives but also we have the power to represent ‘our reports given the

knowledge we have about them.’’

In this sense, it is important to highlight that the validity of a report may be determined through which the narrative provokes or evokes in individuals, because they are who can consider a experience authentic, believable or possible. In the society in where we live the dominant narratives not only influences powerfully, but, many times, determine how and what is told/historicized.

Thus, to understand student teacher training as an initiation, but especially as a process of knowledge, presupposes the creation of ties and connections with aspects or meaningful moments of the experiences that are built during lifetime. Such experiences may also reflect themselves in a surprisingly way during the students educational journey. The visual narratives can mark different meanings given to educational training and to research attracting the students to knowledge and to issues related to the social and cultural context in which they live.

Speaking from a postmodern and poststructuralist perspective, we dare to say that it is necessary to assume the commitment of constructing visual narratives about people or groups that have their lives in danger, that are taking risks as a consequence of the place where they are in the world and from what the world brings or offers to them. In this way we cannot lose our sight that what we know, what we are and what we dream are, in a certain way, the things that motivate us and give meaning to our life; those are the things we want to understand and interpret.

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