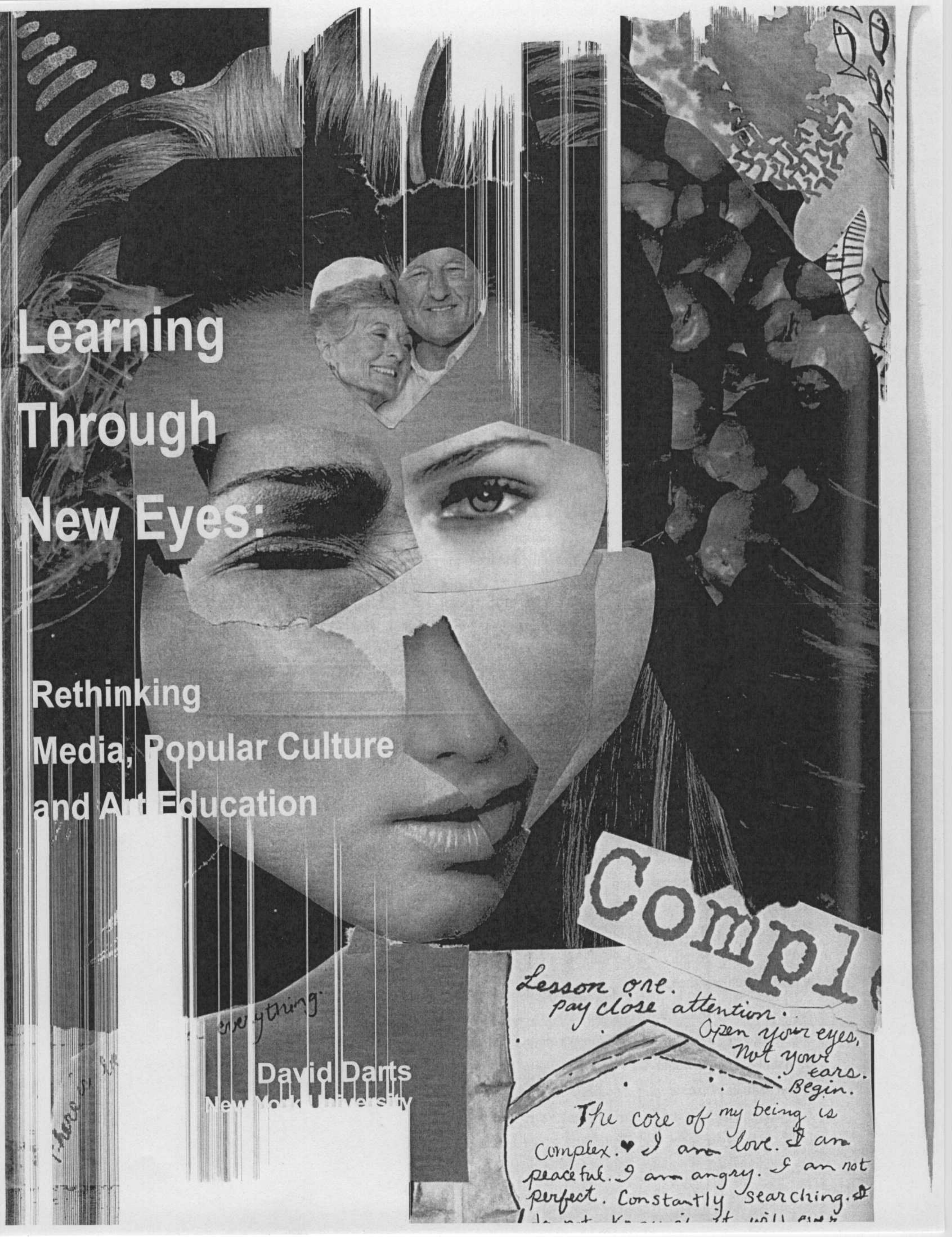
Learning
Through
New Eyes:
Rethinking
Media, Popular Culture
and Art Education
David Darts
New York University
Compl
Lesson one.
pay close attention.
Open your eyes,
Not your
ears.
Begin.
The core of my being is
complex. I am love. I am
peaceful. I am angry. I am not
perfect. Constantly searching.
everything

Moral Panics and Media Constructions

Two years after the worst school shooting in North American history, relatives of the Columbine High School victims went to court seeking five billion dollars. Claiming shooters Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold were addicted to violent computer games and movies, the plaintiffs alleged these forms of entertainment created the conditions that made the school massacre possible. Twenty-five companies, including Sony, Nintendo and AOL/Time Warner, were named in the lawsuit. Ten months later, a U.S. District judge dismissed the suit, firmly rejecting the plaintiffs' claim that the makers and distributors of these products were partly responsible for the shooting. He also rebuffed their demand that video games lose their protection under the first amendment. While this ruling was fully expected by media commentators and those close to the case, popular sentiment clearly rested with the plaintiffs.

Scratch below the surface of negative public conceptions about young people today and you're likely to expose a common theme: The media made them do it. Rising youth violence, decreasing attention spans, increased promiscuity, lowered test scores, epidemic obesity – the list of perceived ills is as depressing as it is long. Not that negative views about the harmful links between popular entertainment and youth culture are particularly new. As John Springhall (1998) has pointed out, 'moral panics' since the nineteenth century have time and again blamed commercial entertainment for corrupting the young. Dime novels in the 1890s, for instance, were deemed by many to encourage obscene and amoral behavior in impressionable young people. Gangster movies were thought to promote lawlessness through their glamorous and exciting cinematic depictions in the 1920s and 1930s. Comic book producers in the 1950s were compelled by threat of government oversight to adopt a self-regulatory code meant to curtail shocking and sensational subject matter. In the 1990s, popular musicians like Tupac Shakur, Snoop Doggy Dog, and Marilyn Manson were blamed for gang violence, youth crime, and schoolyard aggression.

On many levels, explanations portraying media (and our dependence upon it) as the cause of distressing social behavior and perceived moral decline are clearly appealing. They provide easily digestible answers to unsavory questions about our appetites for violence and our cravings for sexualized entertainment. And they divert us from asking harder questions about systemic poverty, social injustices, or our use of violence on a national and global scale to resolve conflicts and respond to perceived threats. As Karen Sternheimer (2003) argues, "[w]e glorify war if the cause is perceived as just, yet somehow we think children only learn about violence through entertainment, and not through families or communities" (p. 88). She wryly contends that focusing so much energy on popular culture as the origin of our social ills is like proposing to repair a patient's x-ray while ignoring the actual tumor.

Despite progressive voices like Sternheimer's, public views about the harmful effects of media on our youth persist - bolstered in part by a steady supply of studies, statistics, and stories that claim to chronicle the corrupting influence of media consumption on youth culture. Media effects research, which examines suspected causal links between media consumption and subsequent behavior, continues to be one of the most popular areas of inquiry within media and communication studies. Receiving healthy research funding and regular press coverage, it's also garnered its fair share of controversy. As some media scholars and others have demonstrated, despite millions of dollars of funding and decades of research, the connections between media consumption and behavior have remained maddeningly elusive. To date, much of the media effects research remains contested and interpreted as methodologically flawed and inconclusive. And this fact in itself may move us closer to the true nature of the effects of media on audiences – mainly that they're variable and unpredictable. As David Gauntlett (1995) explains, "[t]he lack of 'positive' results showing effects in the real world do not constitute an informational void, but have to be taken as a conclusion in themselves" (p. 115). In other words, the true effects of media consumption on audiences are, predictably, unpredictable.

Facing page:
Understanding Complexity
Laura Diekema, 2005

And, in many ways, this unpredictability makes sense. As visual culture scholars and others have demonstrated, media messages and popular culture images and symbols, while ubiquitous, are not uniform and are often confusing and contradictory (Hall, 1997; Mirzoeff, 1999: Osgerby, 2004; Sturken & Cartwright, 2001). Thus, intended and perceived meanings are forever dependent upon historical, cultural, political, and personal contexts and conditions and are perpetually contested and in flux. In practical terms, meanings are not simply placed by producers in media artifacts waiting to be discovered by viewers, but are instead co-created and reconstructed when they are viewed, interpreted and re-circulated by diverse audiences living in numerous social, cultural and historical contexts. In other words, media meanings are co-constructions - generated through and dependent upon complex social relationships between media producers, images, viewers, and social contexts. Paul Du Gay (1997) describes this process as a "circuit of culture" where meanings are produced at multiple sites and circulate through several complex processes and practices (p. 10). He argues the meaning making processes can be understood as an ongoing dialogue between producers and consumers of cultural goods and services and contends it "rarely ends at a preordained place" (p. 10).

A Rationale for Media Education in the Art Classroom

While it may be shortsighted to blame the media for violence and other societal ills, it would be equally myopic to assume media has no influence on the thoughts, values and perceptions of its viewers. With the media and popular culture increasingly embedded within the routines and textures of everyday life, the 'mediascape' has arguably come to provide many of the cultural materials and symbolic resources we use to interpret our relationships and construct and represent our identities. The media disseminate a steady barrage of messages about acceptable forms of behavior, self-expression, sexuality, gender, lifestyle, etc. And accordingly, the media are far from being ideologically inert. Media scholars and activists have revealed how government deregulation of media ownership rules over the last decade has led to dramatic increases in the commercial consolidation and control of the public airwaves. Critics argue the creation of these media oligopolies has had a profound impact on the institution of journalism, the notion of a free press, and by direct association, the public's access to open communication channels, diverse perspectives and reliable information – three of the key requirements of a democratic society (McChesney, 2000). Combined with the increasing confluence of the political and the cultural spheres over the last 40 years (as recognized by postmodern theorists and politicians alike), important political lessons and ideological conflicts are now played out through the visual channels and artifacts (advertising, corporate and political public relations, television, film, video games, websites, etc) of our everyday lives (Jameson, 1991; Trend, 1992).

And thus the media is of central importance to our personal and political existences. So central in fact that we often fail to recognize it as anything but a mundane element of day-to-day living. And this, according to Roger Silverstone (1999), is exactly why we must examine it. He argues the media are central to the complex social, cultural, political and economic dimensions of our contemporary lives. He contends we must study it in its ubiquity and complexity if we are to successfully communicate, live and make sense of the world with one another.

This centrality of media to our daily lives is also why media education must be a key component of formal schooling – a fact that is compounded by the increasing ubiquity of media products and new Media technologies within classrooms. As Goldfarb (2002) has argued, schools in the West and beyond were transformed in the 1980s and 1990s by the widespread introduction of new media technologies, including computers, televisions, and global communications networks. He contends these technologies impacted educational philosophy and practice such that they "transformed what it meant to speak, to write, and to think – and hence to know and have agency" (p. 4). And clearly these transformations are continuing – recent convergences between digital information, communication, and entertainment technologies and platforms, for instance, have served to even further complicate the relationships between young people, schools, and media.

And while addressing the ubiquity, intricacies, and power of the media is necessary across most teaching disciplines[1], art education in particular has an important opportunity – perhaps even a pressing responsibility – to attend to the complexities of mindfully living in a 'mediated' and visualized world. With formal training in visual representation, aesthetics, historical analysis, artistic production and critique, art educators can bring important skills and knowledge to school-based examinations of the media. In fact, many of the strategies used to interpret, evaluate and create 'fine art' images can also be used or modified to successfully engage with popular culture. Not that the two categories are mutually exclusive. While contemporary debates continue to center on the contrasts and continuities between high and low art, elite and popular cultures, it is becoming increasingly clear that each one cross-fertilizes and draws upon the other (Gans, 1999; Stallabrass, 1996). Contemporary artists routinely incorporate popular images and references into their work while popular culture producers regularly draw upon and even focus on 'high culture.' As a result, 'popular' and 'high' art can no longer be understood as neat, autonomous categories but instead must be seen to represent increasingly permeable and blurred distinctions (Dubin, 1992).

Dumbing Down and Smartening Up: Art Education and Popular Culture

As the relationships between popular culture and fine art have evolved and complexified, so have contemporary approaches to art education. As such, examining the popular images, stories, and products that inform, legitimate, glamorize, and communicate our evolving beliefs, values, and understandings is now not only a natural component of contemporary art education but, increasingly, a necessary one. As advocates of visual culture paradigms in art education have argued, the study, creation, and circulation of cultural artifacts and social meanings need to be essential components of the art education curriculum (Darts, 2004; 2006; Duncum, 2002; Freedman, 2003; Tavin, 2005). Accordingly, art educators are increasingly focusing their inquiries and curricula on diverse visual culture sites ranging from shopping malls to advertisements to teenager's bedrooms and beyond (Grauer, 2002; Stokrocki, 2000; Tavin, 2002). Not that calls for widening the scope of art education beyond traditional 'fine art' definitions have been embraced unilaterally. As Tavin (2005) contends, art education continues to be 'haunted' by some in the field who view the examination of popular culture as an ill-fated deviation from more sophisticated and worthwhile areas of study like formalist aesthetics. He explains that their ongoing critiques "represent both individual fears and loathing of popular culture, and are part of an ongoing ideological debate that influences how culture is defined" (p. 114).

In fact, arguments against the inclusion of popular culture in the school curriculum are not restricted to art education and generally reflect high versus low culture debates within education and society at large. According to Herbert Gans (1999), the high low battle is really a struggle about the good life, specifically whose culture should dominate in society. He explains the terms 'high' and 'popular culture' are stereotypes based on the original German distinctions between 'Kultur' and 'Masskultur.' He contends that 'masse' or 'mass' "is an old European sociological and political term [used] to describe the poor and uneducated classes" and claims that negative elitist attitudes about popular culture (and those who consume it) persist today (p. 5). These biases and beliefs about cultural superiority continue to directly impact contemporary education at all levels. As R.K. Simon (1999) explains:

> We know that a tabloid newspaper is tawdry entertainment and a Greek tragedy is great literature, of course, even if both deal with the same basic kinds of material, because one appeals to large numbers of people and the other to a small educated elite. This is a very old bias that has been hard for critics to move beyond. After all, we learn in school that literature is something that we must read very carefully (usually because we will be tested on it), and trash culture is escapist entertainment, rarely worth thinking about for very long. If our appreciation of Greek tragedy is a sign of our membership in the elect, then our interest in the *Enquirer* is a sign of our depravity and lack of education. (p. 5)

Untitled Andy Sandner, 2005

In his influential 1869 treatise on education and culture, *Culture and Anarchy*, Matthew Arnold (1882, p. 31) famously defined culture as "the best that has been thought and said in the world." He railed against the vocational inclinations of Western schooling and argued that public education must introduce students to what we would today call a 'liberal arts' or 'greatest works' curriculum in order to combat instrumentalism and to breed real culture in the minds of the public. Some of Arnold's successors, including Frank Raymond Leavis and Leo Strauss, supported his canonical approach to schooling but argued only a select few individuals were capable of interpreting and truly understanding society's greatest works. They claimed education should nurture and cultivate these 'gifted' minds in order to form a 'cultured elite' that would protect democracy from the anarchic impulses of the uncultured