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Education on Sexual Diversity through Cinema

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Abstract

Our proposal raises the urgency to include the defense of sexual diversity in the curriculum of Art Education. We provide visibility mechanisms to sexual minorities in personal and social order, and propose an approach to the subject, especially in training teachers. From aesthetic reflection we must foster a new critical look at Media Education. We should encourage future teachers to address these issues in their classes, appropriating the use and content of images. A topical issue such as the promotion of respect for sexual diversity has on films perfect ally. Suggest ideas about educational processes through a series of examples. From cinema and visual art can introduce reflections to discuss the rights of sexual minorities. With these measures we can preserve the health of many people, and involve students in a creative process while we claim the protection of sexual diversity and the welfare of minorities.

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1. Introduction

*“Social death is also the characteristics of suicide.”
Sangre como la mía, Jorge Marchant Lazcano*

The use of images as an educational mechanism with a social and cultural slant takes its references from different fields as Media Education (Chung, 2007; Fedorov, 2013; Moritz, 2003), History (Navarro, 2011), Aesthetics (Errázuriz, 2006), Semiotics (Barthes, 1982), Teaching Theory (Ambrós & Breu, 2007), Art Education

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(Freedman 1994; Duncum, 2002; Hernández 2007), Anthropology (Godelier, 2010), Art (Aliaga, 2004; Lord & Meyer, 2013) and Sociology (Briggs & Burke, 2002). Here we are interested in highlighting those pieces which emphasize on stimulating critical spirit in the public, especially when dealing with training students in all educational courses. Walter Benjamin reveals the political power of the images and thus has become one of the principle historical exponents of what it means to reflect critically from a philosophical and Marxist point of view as to the social impact that film discourse produces (Benjamin, 2008). On the other hand, the fight for the rights of sexual diversity is currently turning into a significant example of the change towards a greater respect for minority groups. Art and Art Education cannot remain apart from these social advances, from this reality which is developing and expanding rapidly at an international level; these cultural, social and political advances should suppose for us a greater influence in Art Education (Even-Zohar, 1990). This may be one of the best ways to face changing realities, giving pedagogic support from the point of view of identity and the freedom of the individual, encouraging minority groups to decide for themselves their own life options.

2. Educational innovation and health habits in training teacher

The experience EspaiCinema (www.uv.es/cinemag) was started with the idea of bringing future teachers closer to cinema during their initial training through theoretical reflexion. This educationally innovative project has allowed teaching students and university teaching staff to share their passion for cinema and its educative potential. In 2012 programmed a cycle called “Invisibilities and Education” in which the presence of sexual diversity in films with a clearly educational slant was analysed. Before showing a film someone poses certain questions and gives a brief analysis of content of what is about to be seen, emphasising certain aspects in order to focus the debate (Huerta 2011). The approach of this experience is to introduce the students to the concept of focussing on a single theme. In the case in hand, the proposal is that of sexual diversity, a question which covers aspects of personal, social, cultural and educational order. The traditional lack of clarity on approaching aspects such as same-sex partnerships, sexuality or questions of gender has affected the naturalness with which these themes should be dealt with in the classroom; this maybe occasionally producing tense situations, due above all to the obscurantism with which certain concepts are dealt with in specific spheres of discussion. Reaching beyond fears and clichés (Contardo 2011), we believe that we should speak openly about these questions, if not we become the victims of an obstinate denial of reality. We need to give space in our classes to key questions which have to do with human rights. Workshop techniques make up a positive element in Art Education classes, thus we recommend that within each project students are encouraged to produce their own graphic representation of results (through a poster, collage, photograph or video) in order to set down their results through artistic production, stimulating future teachers to conceive their projects from the point of view of projects (Giroux, 2013). Film can become the ideal point of reference as a source of ideas and creative stimulus, making the classroom into a space for negotiation, while permitting the students to participate actively in a collaborative construction of knowledge.

3. Health and happiness, reason to openly defend sexual diversity

The film *Milk* deals with the life of an American gay activist, the first politician to be openly gay man to achieve a public post by democratic vote in the United States. The film by Gus van Sant received many awards, among these being an academy Oscar for the actor Sean Penn. It is a high quality commercial product. *Philadelphia* was also made by a prestigious director and a cast of great actors which support this narrative. *Milk* has become a product which may raise awareness on a large scale on a new question: the image of political activists representing sexual minorities on the public and media scene of democracy.

There are various question which are addressed by *Milk*, among which we may highlight: the presence of minority leaders in politics; the concept of “coming out” as social activism; the pressure of the power groups to stop personal and collective positions at deviance with certain fixed customs; fear of rejection and the choice of difference as a life option; panic when faced with discrimination by those who feel different in their choices; taboo themes as areas of dangerous isolation; as well as the visibility and role model of leaders. These themes should be dealt with in Art Education as they address aspects coming from a changing and enriching social reality. One could

opt for highlighting the compositional qualities of the work: costume design, lighting and sets from the 1970s: the music of the film or the role which each person is playing. James Franco may be well known by the students. We can take the aesthetic elements part by part and organize them in order to understand it as an artistic work. After the screening we can encourage the students to give an opinion on what has most interested them. The debate then serves to choose a moment or theme (photography, video, painting, etc.). We suggest group work as a valid option, given for enrichment of the debate. Another attractive option would be the producing of an advertising campaign for forthcoming elections (posters, party political broadcasts for television, web design and blogs).

Harvey Milk was assassinated in November 1978. The historical figure has become one of the icons for cause of LGBT rights. In reality Harvey Milk, born in New York in 1930, is the fruit of an entire more general movement which crystallised in the acts of Stonewall Inn. In this bar in the neighbourhood of Greenwich Village in New York, the disturbances of 1969 gave way to the movement for LGBT rights, an act which has had transcendence on world level: the annual celebration of Gay Pride coincide with the disturbances in Stonewall. New York as well as San Francisco are key cities in the cinema industry, and have also been mythical cities in the fight for the rights of LGBT groups (initials for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender). At 16' of the film Sean Penn helps James Franco, his partner, who has been injured in a confrontation with the police. This visual moment seems to me to be transcendent, given that it talks about the care, to attend with delicacy those who have been hit, to look after those who suffer. Art History is full of visual moments like this one, so we may be able to find parallels, or better to encourage the students to find them (Balló, 2002; Walker & Chaplin, 1997). The attention to those who suffer discrimination may be a good initial approach in an artistic workshop on human rights.

4. Childhood and adolescence: key moments for personal and social development

The freely chosen sexual option shouldn't be an impediment to the development of an enriching and full life. This problem has a social determiner comes from customs supported by stereotypes and prohibitions (Dyer, 1977). More conservative positions have traditionally impeded the healthy exercise of sexual differences (Bosswell, 1980). From those in power the politics of repression have been stimulated which end up creating a breeding ground of intransigence and negation (Foucault, 2011). If there has been a negative response to sexual differences this is because there has been a desire to marginalise certain the life options of individuals and groups. The cultures of difference have necessarily had to assume risks, and this is why on many occasions they have been made invisible, especially when it comes to the sphere of educational curriculum. In the *Akal Dictionary of Homophobia* the entry for *prison* covers three pages, in which we can read that the representations for feminine and masculine genders "*act as educational models that have been spread by different institutions and social authorities –the family, school, armed forces, work and prison- which the philosopher described as the prison continuum in the sphere of a society of discipline*" (Tin, 2012: 387). The real prison normally appears convulsively in the individual him or herself who doesn't accept his or her sexual condition.

C.R.A.Z.Y is an ironic and fun film (as the word game of the title itself suggests), while talking about misunderstandings, rejection, dissatisfaction and prejudice. At 6' we hear the father's phrase when he blurts out "*They're going to laugh at you with this. Dad doesn't want that*", when the child asks him to give him a pram for Christmas (the day coinciding with his birthday). The same father shouts at the mother "*you're going to turn him into a queer*". At which the child replies "*What is a queer?*" The weight of family relations is overwhelming in the film. Conventions sacrifice any symptom of normality, obscuring feelings and desires. Silence creates echoes which end up infecting the slightest glimmer of visibility. The talent of director is to achieve an ironic environment creating something stimulating where others would only find pain and sadness. The life of the young gay man takes place between a sense of unease and the desire to be accepted. At 12' we find a scene which may help us to revise the concepts of sex and gender: the character at six years old, after the arrival of his new born brother, dresses up in his mother's dressing gown putting on her necklaces and earrings, imitating the maternal attitude towards the baby. The father "catches" him at that moment, and from then on a "war" is declared between them.

In *C.R.A.Z.Y*. various different moments appear which invite analysis from the point of view of Art Education: the need to accept one's own sexual condition on the part of the individual; the role which institutions such as the church and family play in the repression of certain options of sexual condition, the educational and affective

exchanges between the father, mother and brothers; or the complexes and taboos of a personal and social nature in relation to forms of behaviour and to self-image. We may start up a project in which we use fashion as aesthetic reference. The question of visibility and gender can be approached through the resources proposed by visual culture (Storey, 2002), producing graphic material (Pavlou, 2013) or also activating *a/r/tographic* mechanisms (Agra & Mesías, 2011). Elements in the rhythm of the film are the constant arguments between the macho father and gay son. We may suggest to the students that they create an artistic project on social conventions as impositions. Artists like Gilbert & George have represented double authorship in their works at the same time as defending their personal and artistic partnership. From the point of view of Art Education we have the possibility and the obligation to approach this new cultural, legal and social panorama.

5. Half-truths, deceptions and lies, closet as shielding, and dire consequences for teachers

Hiding, persecution, punishment, and lack of visibility have created from the marginalization of same-sex partnerships which have been cornered and hidden systematically. Lesbianism has always been more hidden than masculine homosexuality, but homophobia has affected both cases with the same virulence, determining an identical social incomprehension (Fone, 2008). Relations between women have been kept at a different status to those between men, and the examples in the cinema are less common, even if we can highlight the presence of great titles such as *Antonia's Line* or *The Kids Are All Right*. Visibility sometimes has a significant side connected to the subject of gender, which in the case of men is visualised through ways of dressing and behaviour understood as feminine, while in the case of women it is conceived as a way of approaching traditionally masculine stereotypes. The film *Orlando* talks about this: the main character passes with ease between masculine and feminine genders. This piece is an example of how ambiguity can be the source of inspiration for authors. The interplay of insinuations is an interesting source of material for the creative mind. These role plays make up our cultural environment which assigns roles for each gender, from extreme characterisations of gender systems. This model is institutionalised especially at school, as a curricular extension which the student experience and assume not only in their respective families but also in the media.

The students should be motivated by a film like *The Children's Hour*. William Wyler opted for black and white in this masterpiece, played by extraordinary actors. Karen and Martha (Audrey Hepburn and Shirley Maclaine) are teachers and directors of the Wright-Dobie School – a girls' school for high society children. In order to take vengeance for a punishment, one of the students accuses them of lesbianism. The consequences of the revelation are terrible for the teachers and the college, especially because of the virulence of the parents' response (Borrillo, 2009: 85). This film with a tragic approach has parallels with other films, for example *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005). Terenci Moix testified to this in his memoirs: "*In any case, I felt that I was at a crossroads where I had to decide which road I would take*" (Moix, 2003: 303).

A social convention prevents us from getting over the prejudices which for centuries has negated any unacceptable expression of alternative behaviour: "*in order to orientate the sexual impulses which manifest themselves spontaneously and take form in our very subconscious where there becomes established, there is generated, the thousands of direct and indirect, repressive or persuasive ways, the task of domestication, of socialisation of the child's sexuality aimed at conveniently orientating people to adopt convenient attitudes*" (Godelier, 2010: 603). Art Education should permit the opening up of dialogue, granting from Art itself a new strategy (Chung, 2007). There is needed a new perspective as to the problem of sexual minorities, using creative criteria and dealing openly with red-hot topics and worries of a personal and social type. We can consider questions and exercises from workshop practices through artistic creation. This was defended by Amelia Lee in an attractive photo-essay (2007) created from students' work. Women and men from a broad range of sexualities should take on board the richness of diversity. We need to motivate the students by imbibing a critical way of looking in order to establish a system of doubts which provoke artistic expression and empowerment processes. As Nicolas Addison says: "*This identity, a co-product of classical citizenry, theological notions of the soul and bourgeois notions of autonomy and self-actualization, coalesces and solidifies into the figure of the unique and self-affirming individual, a concept that even today, in a mature capitalist, liberal democracy, seems to many entirely 'natural' and positive*" (Addison, 2007: 11). From the point of view of visual culture we can assume that a

notion like that of identity is constructed from the birth of the person, and as such it is a construction based on social practices, a series of semiotic processes which negotiate and become visible in the actions between individuals. Thus, a celebration of diversity and of identity is impregnated by respect towards multiculturalism and differences. In this way, we welcome diversity in the plural context of Art Education (Agra 2010; Huerta 2009).

6. Conclusions: discovering new ways to respect for sexual diversity

The defence of diversity and sexual minorities can become valuable material for Art Education. In order to achieve progress in this field we suggest cinema as creative stimulus. Here we have introduced some examples of films which deal with these themes, a group of works which may help us approach this in class. Great directors and excellent actors have taken part in production which rigorously and respectfully to the question. With a good film as a starting point the teaching staff can introduce a reflection from the point of view of visual culture references. We also recommend the projects experience to deal with these stimulating social questions in the art classroom. Prejudice has been a part of the absurd and constant rejection of sexual diversity. Social stereotypes have been used as ad hoc condemnation of divergent attitudes. Now is the time to get involved in a new appreciation of diversity, supporting sexual minorities and educating citizens on the democratic references of freedom of choice, far from rejection, injustice, marginalisation and repression.

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