Visual Literacy: A Foundation for Human Communication Art as a Catalyst for Social Change

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Abstract

Humans are inherently storytelling beings. From early childhood, narratives permeate our lives, encompassing a spectrum from imaginary tales and fairy tales to reality-based accounts. Throughout history, the content and modes of storytelling have evolved, reflecting distinctive aspects of each era. Visual narratives, integral to human communication, have manifested across time, from ancient cave drawings, hieroglyphics, and murals to medieval tapestries, modern graphic novels, and virtual interactive reality narratives. Storytelling serves as a crucial vehicle for envisioning diverse realities and imagining alternative futures. In this paper, visual literacy, including the abilities to create, share, understand, use, and analyze visual narratives, is discussed as a profound foundation for human communication. The discussion is framed within McFee's work and her sociocultural approach to visual literacy, and artmaking. One conclusion is that art making can function as a democratic tool for reevaluating values related to equality and justice, thus acting as a catalyst for societal transformation. The content is elucidated through illustrations, crafted by the author.

Keywords: Visual literacy, Visual culture, communication, visual narratives, June King McFee

Introduction

Reflecting on my childhood, vivid memories surface of my two older sisters and me, immersed in drawing and painting all the time and everywhere. Wherever we went, we packed crayons along with drawing and coloring paper pads. Specific drawings linger in my memory. Especially rememberable are those where color combinations stood out as exceptionally beautiful - pink paired with turquoise or orange harmonizing with dark blue. The act of creating these initial artworks invoked feelings of wonder, enchantment, and joy. Making pictures was a social endeavor, rooted in interaction. As Norris (2011) posits, social actions like our collaborative artistic pursuits, shape identity.

Actions acquire a social dimension when communicated (Norris, 2011). Multimodal interaction analysis integrates nonverbal and multimodal communication, such as visual and bodily communication. It is noteworthy to understand that actions are mediated by the specific social context, which vary across families, social groups, cultures, and even within a group over time.

This paper aims to illuminate the interconnection between visual literacy, visual culture, and people's narratives through the lens of June King McFee's comprehensive and multi-faceted theoretical foundation.

A Shared World Filled with Visual Images

People live in a shared world surrounded by visual images, crucial for comprehension, meaning making and communicating perceptions of their environment (McFee, 1961). The rise of visuality is particularly evident in social media, where an abundance photographs, video recordings, memes, and infographics are constantly uploaded and shared globally (Crilley et al., 2020). Over the last four decades, visual culture has gradually emerged as the predominant medium (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001). This shift signifies that human values, attitudes, and views are increasingly shaped by the images encountered in daily life. The drawings and artworks of children and students exemplify the influence of visual culture on their beliefs and opinions (Ivashkevich, 2009; Kukkonen, & Chang-Kredl, 2017). Thus, active participation in a culture involves both creating and being shaped by it. Cultural influences, whether local, national, or global, impact how children adapt to and engage with visual culture and the world. Visual images and storytelling play influential roles in the routines of children (Bakar et al., 2020).

Homo Narrans

Storytelling has always been essential to human beings, transcending cultural background and era (Benjamin, 2006). It serves as an inherent means of sharing experiences, exchanging ideas, and exploring dreams. As humans use stories to navigate the complexities of the world and interpersonal relationships, visual communication consistently plays a role. It is posited by Kress (2010), who emphasizes the inherently multimodal nature of communication. For instance, in verbal communication, individuals utilize elements such as eye gaze, facial expressions, gestures, and overall body language, all of which constitute visual communication. The nuances of these expressions are culturally contextualized. This visual dimension implies that even as small children, individuals learn to interpret body language as signals. This forms a foundation for communication that transcends the need for verbal expression.

People continually weave narratives, both explicitly through conversations recounting events or incidents and implicitly by navigating their daily lives. Presently, numerous global narratives unfold, ranging from issues like global warming and pandemics to other crises. People find themselves positioned within these narratives. Sometimes they are on the periphery, scarcely aware of ongoing events, and occasionally they play minor supporting roles. At times, they take on lead roles in particular narratives. Given their involvement in multiple, sometimes overlapping narratives, individuals may engage in conflicting discussions, especially concerning ethical dilemmas tied to the prevailing narrative. These conflicts often revolve around the narrative itself rather than the underlying dilemma (Frønes, 2001). This concern appears particularly pertinent in the face of contemporary wars, conflicts, and politics (e.g., Bar-On & Molas, 2021; Callahan et al., 2010; Jaworowicz-Zimny, 2023). As a result, it becomes crucial to grasp the social context in which a narrative unfolds and to consider it from various perspectives.

Narratives, whether fictional or based on lived experience, are changeable, allowing for the possibility of steering them in new directions. For example, the narratives of climate change, inequality, and poverty. However, narratives also bear the potential for manipulation, the creation of alternative truths, and even posing threats (Ciovacco, 2020). Throughout history, marginalization and imbalances of power have been outcomes of numerous narratives (Vercher et al., 2020). Narratives assume a pivotal role in the transmission of cultural values and heritage, serving as channels from one generation to the next, primarily through storytelling. Language, as emphasized by Benjamin (2006) has a profound influence on culture. Through storytelling, humans actively create and perpetuate the cultural identity of their society. Visibility of culture, society, and even a nation becomes imperative for securing social acceptance and success (Mariati et al.,2021).

The notion of cultural anchoring implies that language extends beyond the realms of oral and written forms. It involves the visual domain as well. Visual expression serves as a communicative channel, positioning visual art as a form of language. Language, often defined as "a symbol system that conveys complex ideas" (Goodman, 1976, as cited in Eubanks, 1997, p. 31), aligns with the perception of the socio-semiotic theory of language (Halliday, 1978; Hodge & Kress, 1988). Halliday asserts that language is inseparable from society, viewing it as socially situated and utilized by individuals through interaction within a social context. Language and society are intricately interwoven and must be investigated as a unified entity. Social semiotics study the modes of communication that people employ to articulate their comprehension of the world and establish connections with others. Hodge and Kress (1988) stressed that social semiotics studies all kinds of human semiotic systems, which I suggest includes visual semiotics.

June King McFee

This discussion highlights the intricate theoretical groundwork laid by June King McFee, who served as a Professor and Head of the Department of Art Education at the University of Oregon from 1965 to 1983, where she also pioneered the establishment of the doctoral program in art education. At the core of McFee's perspective lies the cultural function of art education. She placed significant emphasis on the communicative dimensions of art and visual literacy. These were intertwined with the principles of democracy, human rights, and citizenship (e.g., McFee, 1961, 1965/2016). McFee was born in 1917 and grew up during a time when marriage was a primary goal and priority for most women, despite the image of the 1920s women as independent and rebellious (Horn, 2010). This societal norm proved challenging

for McFee, who harbored aspirations of becoming a pilot, engineer, or mathematician (McFee, 1975). As depicted in Figure 1—a nod to Tamara de Lempicka, an artist from the art deco period, celebrated for her bold defiance of prevailing social norms and cultural stereotypes surrounding women. However, McFee's aspirations for a future beyond traditional gender roles were thwarted by her father's disapproval. While becoming an artist was deemed more acceptable, it was viewed as a leisure pursuit or amusement. This attitude deeply unsettled McFee, and the sense of discrimination based on her gender persisted throughout her career. She consistently encountered disparate treatment between men and women, an experience that profoundly influenced her trajectory. Consequently, McFee undertook a mission to ensure inclusivity for all students, regardless of cultural background or gender. Her pedagogical approach was rooted in a multicultural perspective, emphasizing the importance of embracing and celebrating diversity.

Figure 1
Brave women in 1920s. Watercolor and gouache (Margaretha Häggström, 2023).

McFee's Pedagogical Approach and Theoretical Foundation

McFee perceived art and artistic expressions as exemplifications of human behavior, serving as channels through which individuals convey feelings, thoughts, beliefs, and narratives, often imbued with cultural and symbolic functions. Her theoretical framework drew inspiration from the anthropologist Herkovits (1972), renowned for his humanistic and relativistic perspectives on culture and cultural identity. Herkovits championed the cause of ethnic equality in the USA, an influence palpable in McFee's commitment to equipping students from diverse cultural backgrounds to navigate society without compromising or devaluing their cultural heritage (e.g., McFee, 1965). This dedication is explicitly articulated in McFee's collaborative work with Rogena Degge, the book *Art, Culture, and Environment: A Catalyst for Teaching*, published in 1977. Over her extensive career, McFee continually refined her theoretical foundations,

incorporating insights from various behavioral sciences such as anthropology, psychology, sociology, and art pedagogy (Eisner, 1963; Häggström, 2023; Jenkins, 1978).

Art as a Catalyst for Change

According to McFee (1999), art possesses the dual capacity to act as a conduit for cultural change and, concurrently, a mechanism to resist change, preserving cultural essence. Thus, art holds the transformative power to reshape narratives. As society evolves, art reflects these changes, with social progress driving artistic development. McFee contends that art serves as a vital symbol of a particular culture, elucidating a shared community identity that deserves preservation. Simultaneously, art possesses the capacity to critically scrutinize and question these identities and symbols. Historical instances, such as art movements advocating against war and for women's rights, underscore the instrumental role of art in challenging societal norms. Art emerges as a democratic force, shaping, expressing, and disseminating human values while also scrutinizing, criticizing, and revising these values to foster social justice (McFee, 1998, p. x). McFee envisions a future where increased communication across perspectives and a revitalized education system position art as a major communication system—a unifying force for mutual understanding in a multicultural society. In today's world, marked by successive global crises, alternative modes of expression gain significance. Creating art can support people's perceptions of their culture and foster the capacity to envision alternative futures. Artistic expressions may function as tools to defend human rights, resist oppression, and amplify the voices of untold narratives recounting experiences of discrimination, violence, and domination. Nevertheless, many of McFee's aspirations remained unfulfilled, depicted in Figure 2, where the once bold woman transforms into a mural painting.

Figure 2
Brave women as a mural painting. Photo montage (Margaretha Häggström, 2023).

Visual Narratives and Sociocultural Perspectives

Visual narration serves as a catalyst for intercultural dialogue, fostering a sense of belonging to a global community. It creates a feeling of being a part of a larger collective "we" (Wilson & Snæbjörnsdóttir, 2022). Visual narratives encompass various forms of storytelling using visual media. These include still photography, photo essays (Davies, 2022), video, animation (Blazer, 2019), comics, graphic novels (Eisner, 2008), as well as drawings, paintings, and mixed media. A visual narrator, or storyteller, captivates an audience, guiding them into an imaginative world. The ability to create visual narratives traces back to cave paintings and rock engravings, among the earliest forms of human expression. These depictions portray scenes of hunting, rituals, and offer insights into ancient civilizations, human life, and spiritual experiences. They function not only as a means of communication but also as a reflection of a culture's collective values. Furthermore, they indicate that visual culture evolves alongside societal changes, influenced by specific places, traditions, themes, and conventions (Robb, 2020). Heyd (2012) posits that aesthetic senses are culturally specific, while Robb (2020) suggests that aesthetic expressions are linked to ontological and cosmological beliefs, emphasizing that the act of seeing is constructed within a given social and historical context. Sayre (2010) succinctly captures this idea: "Everything you see is filtered through a long history of fears, prejudices, desires, emotions, customs, and beliefs." Figure 3 playfully illustrates this concept through a reinterpretation of an imaginative cave painting, featuring an expressionistic happy yellow cow by Franz Marc (1911) alongside a dreamy white and blue cow (with a parasol) by Marc Chagall (1946).

Figure 3
Happy cows – influences from cave paintings, Marc and Chagall. Mixed media. (Margaretha Häggström, 2023).

Sociocultural theory underscores the profound influence of culture and society in the formation and development of identity. It posits that learning is a social and cultural process, mediated by cultural tools

such as language and the arts (Aulgur, 1998). Originating from the work of Vygotsky (1930, 1934), this theory asserts that children acquire knowledge and skills through interactions with more proficient individuals, such as teachers, parents, or older friends. This learning process from a more skilled person is known as the zone of proximal development. It is defined as the space between what an individual can accomplish independently and what they can achieve with guidance or collaboration with more capable peers. Teachers and peers play a pivotal role in shaping individual learning, cultural beliefs, and attitudes. Educators, whether teachers or parents, should assess an individual's capabilities in a social setting, emphasizing what the person can achieve with support, rather than solely focusing on independent abilities. For this social-culturalist author, the interpretation of experiences is inherently shaped by cultural perspectives, with individuals constructing their understandings through social frameworks. These interpretations find expression in various forms, including oral, written, or visual narratives. Language is recognized as a universal tool. Vygotsky (1934) extended the concept of language to encompass all sign systems prevalent in a specific culture, regarding them as mental tools. Consequently, diverse modalities, such as music and sound, dance, art, and drama, are considered forms of language or modalities (Kress, 2010). These modalities serve as tools mediating and representing individuals' thinking, providing children with multiple avenues for constructing knowledge. In this context, art expressions, are viewed as methods for structuring ideas, capable of evolving and manifesting in new contexts (Aulgur, 1998).

Much of McFee's work delved into the intricate interplay between culture and identity formation through visual art (e.g., McFee, 1988). Her conceptual framework aligns with cultural-historical activity theory. This theory examines the relationship between the human mind and activity, exploring the interplay between individual thoughts and feelings and their actions and behaviors (Roth & Lee, 2007). Originating from Vygotsky, this theory was developed by Cole (1998) and expanded by Engeström (1999). Fundamental to this theory is the idea that people engage collectively and learn through practical experiences, communicating through their actions and adapting tools for communication. The community plays a pivotal role in meaning-making, learning, communication, and action. McFee embraced Vygotsky's idea that an individual's consciousness and perceptions are shaped by activities mediated through artifacts or tools. This includes visual signs and symbols. The use of signs leads to a specific structure of actions, influenced by the cultural-historical context. However, McFee consistently integrated societal dimensions, including socioeconomic structures and cultural and institutional perspectives within a given culture, into her writing and advocacy. She questioned whether economically and socially deprived students might feel "overwhelmed that the society that demands that they go to school really has no place for them when they finish" (McFee, 1965, p. 89). In line with Engeström (2001), who emphasized the consideration of multiple activity systems, McFee argued that societal norms and intersubjective community relations are crucial for understanding human behavior. In the realm of art education, she advocated for what Engeström terms as multi-voicedness—embracing diverse points of view, traditions, and interests. Figure 4 illustrates a dynamic identity transformation within cultural-historical art contexts and commences with a portrait of June King McFee.

Figure 4
*Changing portraits. Mixed media and collage (Margaretha Häggström, 2023).*

Visual Literacy and Communication

To McFee, visual literacy is an interconnected process that cannot be isolated. It is consistently tethered to a specific context, culture, society, and the ongoing formation of identity (1999). She explaine that every choice an individual makes emerges from their cultural and social milieu. This includes decisions related to image composition, the selection of colors and shapes, and the conveyance of content and messages. McFee emphasized that these choices are not arbitrary. Rather, visual expressions are sociocultural constructs that unveil an individual's visual literacy abilities. Additionally, when people analyze artworks, their perceptions and interpretations are rooted in their own cultural framework. McFee underscored the critical importance of being cognizant of this dynamic interplay.

A comprehensive definition of visual literacy encompasses the ability to read, write, and create visual images. It entails proficiency in interpreting and producing visual content. Visual literacy can be conceptualized as involving four essential visual abilities, nurtured through four key social practices: visual code-breaking, visual meaning-making, visual use, and visual analysis (Häggström, 2019, 2020, 2023). Emphasizing social practices underscores that visual literacy is intricately tied to and influenced by cultural contexts, including social relations, roles, and power dynamics. Visual code-breaking, essential for creating, using, and analyzing images, involves recognizing elements and structures within visuals, such as shape, color, light and shadow, and composition. Aligning with McFee (1999), considerations of gender, class, and cultural background are pivotal in this process, acknowledging that sociocultural affiliations shape human thinking and, consequently, how they decipher visual communication. Visual meaning-making stems from personal experiences with images, which are, in turn, grounded in sociocultural contexts. It involves communication and interactions within practices and relies on reflections and understandings of the context. In the realm of art education, it becomes imperative to represent images from diverse cultures, thereby fostering inclusive learning environments.

McFee argues that students have a democratic right to visualize and discuss their contrasting beliefs, fostering diverse thought communities. Examining how human experiences and expressions converge in various ways becomes crucial for understanding visual literacy. Visual use involves developing the capability to leverage one's knowledge in meaning-making. This includes using and creating images based on one's social and cultural resources, thereby empowering the creation of visual communication. McFee advocates for each student feeling secure in showcasing and utilizing their own visual traditions and cultural heritage. Collaborative activities that draw on each other's knowledge and backgrounds can lead to the emergence of new understandings and collective identities. Visual analysis guides individuals to diverse sources and is grounded in asking relevant critical questions. Critical questioning entails a discerning awareness of social justice within visual language, power dynamics, and identity (Häggström & Schmidt, 2021). This critical awareness holds the potential to heighten students' consciousness of sexist, racist, and postcolonial structures. McFee consistently incorporated this issue into her teaching. Visual analysis serves as a tool to unveil underlying or concealed messages, intentions, and ideologies (Dan & Arendt, 2021).

The extent to which individuals can respond both aesthetically and cognitively to artistic communication hinges on the information they have acquired and the breadth of their understanding of artistic symbolization and structure. These elements serve as the foundation for a critical response, as articulated by McFee (1965, p. 10). Figure 5 represents an endeavor to explore and respond to artistic communication and the theme of female identity.

Figure 5
Identity building. Mixed media and collage. (Margaretha Häggström, 2023).
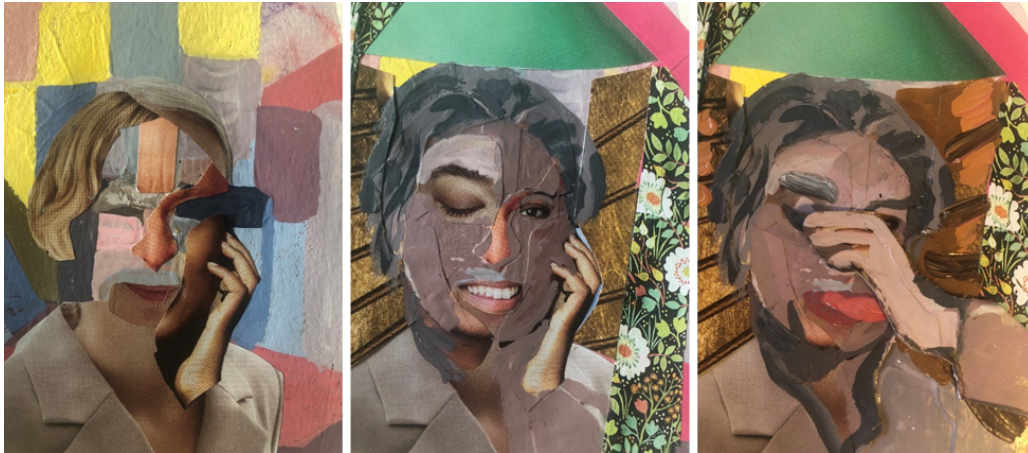
Discussion

In this paper, I have expounded and interpreted sociocultural perspectives on human communication and visual narration, focusing specifically on June King McFee's pedagogical approach to art education. Despite her influence in education, women's issues, art education, and environmental movements, McFee's recognition has not been commensurate with her significance. She emphasized the need for a comprehensive and complex theoretical foundation to comprehend human identity formation, interactions, and learning. This is exemplified in her work, as seen in McFee (1999). In Figure 6, this understanding is depicted as an individual's amalgamation of mixed identities and multifaceted roles. McFee asserted that addressing social issues through education should be an integral part of the mission of art education. Her approach involved blending anthropological and psychological perspectives to grasp learning and social behavior (McFee, 1961), with a multicultural point of departure evident in her articles and books (e.g., McFee & Degge, 1977; McFee, 1998). Throughout her publications, she reflected on the role of art and art education, posing questions such as, "How can art experience and symbolic communication contribute to a sense of identity and social participation?" (McFee, 1966, p. 132). McFee underscored personal integrity as a fundamental quality in artmaking (McFee, 1966).

Figure 6
*I and my representations. Acrylic painting and photograph. (Margaretha Häggström, 2003).*

McFee, ahead of her time, demonstrated a profound interest in environmental issues, as evidenced in her works (McFee, 1974; McFee & Degge, 1977). In the mid-1960s, she foresaw a future marked by inequalities in access to water, food, housing, health care, education, and communication. Her warning remains relevant today (Keifer-Boyd et al., 2016). In 1974, she emphasized the need for humans to cultivate the capacity to "use art as a humanizing force in improving the quality of life on this earth" (McFee, 1974, p. 11), as depicted in figure 7. Expressing concern for humanity's well-being, she highlighted risks stemming from "overpopulation, decreased natural resources, and inflation on a worldwide basis." In 2023, these concerns are glaringly evident in the form of refugee crises, pandemics, global warming, climate change, and wars. Exploring McFee's path could reveal how art and visual literacy can contribute during the ongoing global crisis.

Figure 7
*Global warming. Photo collage (Margaretha Häggström, 2023).*
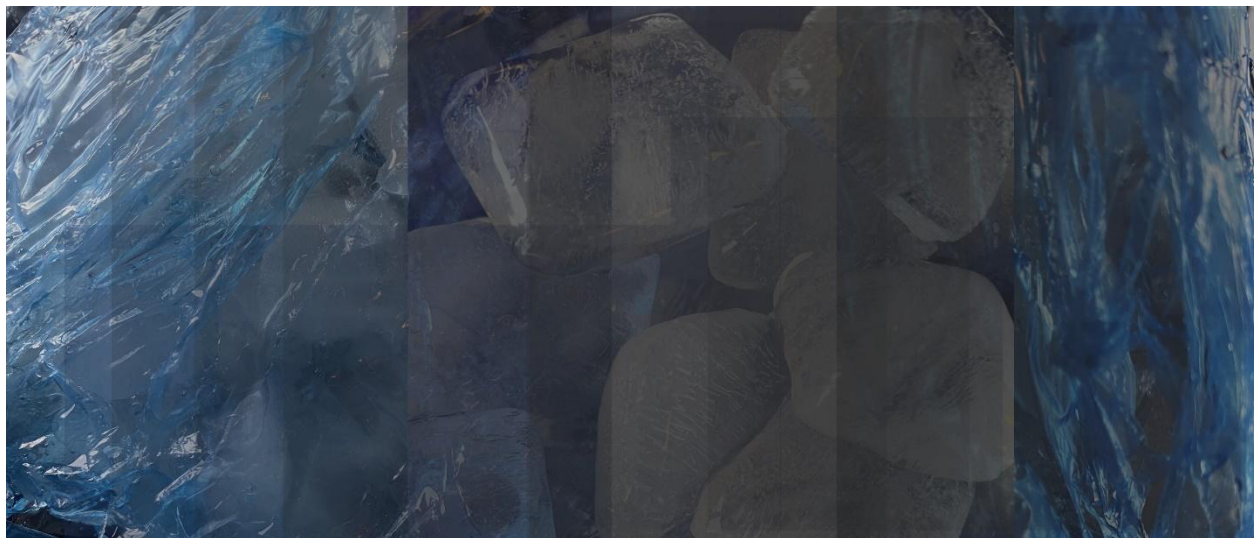
Through an exploration of McFee's writings, this paper contends that art can function as a catalyst for change, with humans naturally expressing stories of their life-worlds, culture, and circumstances through visual narratives, adapting techniques with each era. Art has the power to unite people and their ideas, influencing mental health, energy, and agency. The historical continuum of artistic expressions, from cave paintings and rock carvings to contemporary digital platforms, underscores its enduring relevance. Amid present crises, such as global warming, climate change, pandemics, and war, art provides a medium to process these challenges. It bridges the gap between research findings and human emotions. This fusion of facts and emotions is pivotal for human agency and the ability to act, emphasizing the urgency of care. Building on the discussion of visual literacy abilities earlier in this paper, it becomes clear that they are essential for conveying emotions ranging from anxiety and fear (as depicted in figure 8) to hope and confidence. Echoing McFee's perspective, "If we assume that education is more than a tool for survival but a tool for making survival worthwhile, then the arts need our careful consideration" (1965, p. 9). Through art, communities are forged, and diverse visual narratives serve as vehicles for sharing experiences and events, fostering a sense of interconnectedness.

Building on the insights of Kukkonen and Chang-Kredl (2017) and Bakar et al. (2020), it is evident that visual narratives, particularly contemporary artworks, wield the power to influence and even shape people's values, attitudes, and beliefs. This observation aligns with McFee's overarching argument, which emphasizes the potential of artists to alter global dystopian narratives. Visual narratives have the capacity to propel individuals into leading roles within current narratives. They can transform these narratives from

dark scenarios into sources of strength and motivation. Visual culture and art education, pivotal in the development of visual literacy, emerge as the mediating tools, echoing Vygotsky's assertion that they can evoke emotions and instill hope in people. Drawing inspiration from McFee's teachings (1998), it is imperative to embrace diversity and ensure the inclusion of all people and cultures, not just the privileged few. Only through such inclusive practices can art become a democratic force for reexamining values and promoting equality and justice.

Figure 8
Dystopia. Photocollage (Margaretha Häggström, 2023).
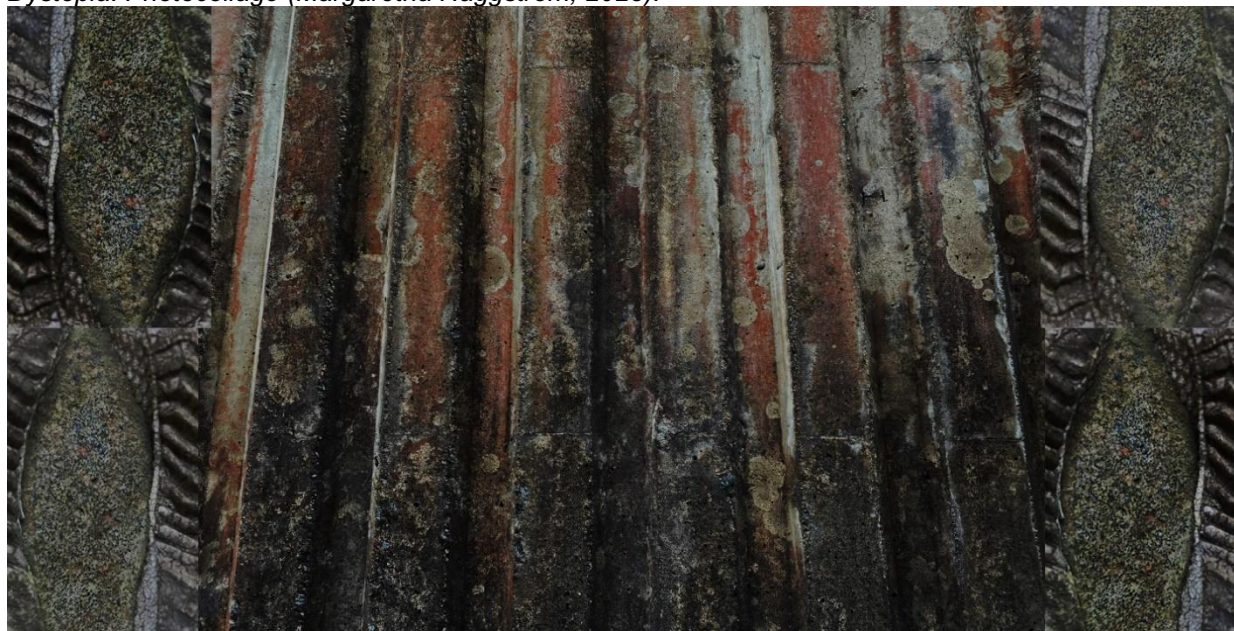
Conclusion

This paper has explored visual literacy as a fundamental cornerstone for human communication, underscoring visual narratives as potent catalysts for cultural change. A visually literate perspective is essential for critically analyzing historical and contemporary visual narratives, especially when wielded by influential figures such as politicians. Employing cultural-historical activity theory as an analytical lens sheds light on human art creation and actions toward a more promising world, elucidating the intricate connection between human thought and action. According to cultural-historical activity theory, community plays a pivotal role in meaning-making, learning, communication, and action. Within this framework, visual narration emerges as a force capable of fostering intercultural discourse. This is especially significant in today's era of global crises. It has the potential to instill a realization that individuals are integral parts of the global community, contributing to a broader collective identity (Wilson & Snæbjörnsdóttir, 2022). McFee's emphasis on being part of a larger "we" resonates through various dimensions in art education. This offer not only a fundamental question but also a key solution to address the challenges of our contemporary crises.

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