

Critical Visual Literacy in Activism: Artist Violet Ray's Counterimages

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Abstract

*Critical visual literacy develops the ability to investigate the social and cultural contexts of visuals to illuminate power relations. Artist-activist Violet Ray's critical response to visual culture provides a potent example of how visual literacies can be activated to interpret and creatively confront received cultural imagery. Informed by John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*, which considered power's privileged manipulation of visual imagery as a tool of social and economic dominance, this paper considers Ray's photo collages of visual protest as counterimages that subvert cultural value messaging through the juxtaposition of advertising and news photo source imagery. Viewed in relation to the Framework for Visual Literacy in Higher Education, this paper examines the methods by which Violet Ray's confrontational collages pursue social justice through visual practice. Through this exploration, the paper contributes to the growing discourse on critical visual literacy, emphasizing its role in activism and the pursuit of social change.*

Keywords: artist-activists, counterimages, critical visual literacy, social justice movements, visual culture

Introduction

Critical visual literacy, defined as the capacity to probe the sociocultural underpinnings of visuals to expose power dynamics (Kim & Serrano, 2017), helps reveal the profound influence of images in shaping cultural values. Power structures harness images to mold and reinforce societal norms, manipulating visuals as a tool of sociocultural dominance. Artist-activists also use images, but they leverage them to subvert the values that power is trying to sell. In this arena, artist-activists emerge as unique agents, wielding images to challenge the values propagated by power. In the hands of these activists, critical visual literacy transforms into a tool for crafting counterimages in the pursuit of social justice.

The rise in academic inquiries into the nature and applications of critical visual literacy invites conversation about the historical uses of imagery to activate critical visual literacy in the service of social change. While studies have explored teaching visual literacy for social justice (Yang, 2014), the deployment of critical visual literacy in the efforts of artist-activists of historical social justice movements has received little attention thus far. Despite the Association of College and Research Libraries' *Framework for Visual Literacy in Higher Education* recognizing the intrinsic link between visual practice and the pursuit of social justice (ACRL, 2022), the application of critical visual literacy by artist-activists within social justice movements has been largely unexplored.

This paper seeks to fill this gap by examining the methods of an artist-activist known as Violet Ray, whose critical response to visual culture serves as a potent illustration of activating visual literacies for interpreting, responding to, and acting upon received cultural imagery. Disenchanted with what he perceived as the ineffective visual strategies of the anti-war movement, Ray opted to "speak the language of the supermarket rather than political jargon" (1984, p. 1), creating anti-war advertisements during the Vietnam War. Dismantling the contents of *Life* magazine, Ray cut and pasted war photos into product advertisements, yielding critical counterimages.

Initially reproduced as posters and distributed at anti-war marches, later used as the basis for a pedagogy of advertising as a medium for protest, and eventually collected by a university museum, Violet Ray's collaged counterimages starkly juxtapose disparate imagery to powerful effect, compelling American consumers to make complex associations between the war in Vietnam and their own lifestyles and values. Ray's realization extended beyond protesting the Vietnam War; he aimed to challenge the capitalist consumer culture sustained by that conflict. This is the essence of critical visual literacy in activism—probing the sociocultural contexts of images, illuminating power relations, and responding with transformative counterimages.

Unveiling the Power of Critical Visual Literacy in Activism

Recent studies underscore the importance of adopting a critical visual literacy approach to scrutinize power relations in the sociocultural context, serving as guideposts for future directions (Brumberger, 2019; Chen, 2022). Moreover, the effectiveness of visuals in contributing to social justice is recognized as part of a broader shift toward a critical paradigm in visual literacy, emphasizing the role of critical visual literacy in cultivating a discerning citizenry (ACRL, 2022; Statton Thompson et al., 2022). In various realms—social, cultural, economic, and political—critical visual literacy can unveil how power exploits visual images to mold and influence cultural values. Given its effectiveness in this regard, a profound engagement with the visual culture of social justice movements becomes imperative for nurturing critical thinking about the intentions behind visual representations.

Critical visual literacy serves as a crucial skill for assessing our visible surroundings. However, to be effectively deployed in the pursuit of social justice, it must transcend mere comprehension by critically intervening in the dominant visual culture to unlock the subversive potential of art for the transformation of everyday life. The protest work of artist-activists engaged in visual practice for social justice vividly displays the critical process of visual literacy—characterized by investigation, interpretation, illumination, and activation. This approach necessitates the cultivation and application of critical visual literacy to analyze, appropriate, and re-present received cultural values, as well as to interpret newly created counterimages. It goes beyond simply understanding an advertisement as an emotional appeal; it involves critically and creatively recontextualizing advertising as an integral part of a corporate capitalist culture dependent on the passive reception of cultural messaging.

Artist-Activists: Pioneers of Critical Visual Literacies

Artist-activists develop and deploy critical visual literacies to communicate counter-messages in the pursuit of social justice. In the hands of artist-activists, critical visual literacy becomes a transformative tool for challenging the values advanced by those in power. The study of activist art facilitates examining power relations, challenging dominant narratives, and developing the crucial visual literacy skills required for an informed citizenry. Furthermore, it aids in crafting responses necessary for dismantling and responding to the manufactured cultural images and values increasingly monetized in today's image-saturated society.

In looking back at the visual culture of protest movements, artist-activists emerge as trailblazers, spearheading the development and deployment of critical visual literacies to convey counter-messages in the pursuit of social justice. By studying their often-confrontational techniques, individuals can actively cultivate and practice the visual literacy skills essential for substantive engagement in participatory democracy. Studying activist art develops the critical visual literacy skills necessary for an informed citizenry as well as the ability to craft radical responses.

Counterimages and Image Appropriation: Navigating Ethics and Context

A counterimage (see Figure 2), at its core, contradicts another image (see Figure 1). Counterimages leverage intricate critical visual literacies to articulate alternative interpretations of events and experiences, giving voice to dissent within the dominant culture and playing a pivotal role in the ongoing struggle for social justice. Counterimage creation frequently involves the appropriation of existing imagery, subverting its meaning, and commandeering its emotional charge to confront viewers with conflicting viewpoints. This process raises ethical questions surrounding image appropriation, with critics questioning the morality of such practices. Considering how the ethics of image appropriation might vary for those in positions of power versus the oppressed adds an important layer to the complex discourse surrounding this powerful tool in the arsenal of critical visual literacy.

Figure 1

James Montgomery Flagg, I Want You, 1917 (Public Domain)



Figure 2
Anonymous, I Want You, 1972 (Public Domain)



Visual Literacy Activism: Harnessing the Power of Counterimages in Social Justice Movements

Social justice movements leverage the impactful force of counterimages to disseminate protest messages within participatory democracies. The visuals associated with social justice movements can be viewed as forms of what can be termed visual literacy activism. Artists within the counterculture have a longstanding tradition of appropriating, recontextualizing, and subverting images from their society's dominant media culture. Consequently, the protest art emerging from social justice movements offers a compelling body of critical imagery, displaying sophisticated and subversive applications of visual literacies tailored for social protest.

While the significance of visual literacy to understanding images has been studied extensively, the focus must shift to activating these literacies in the pursuit of social justice and cultural change. Counterculture artists can illuminate this process, and protest art serves as a potent example of using visual practice for social justice. The techniques of critical visual literacy employed by artist-activists in the pursuit of social justice illuminate how people perceive visuals and are affected by them.

In the mid-1960s, the United States' escalation of the Vietnam War laid the foundation for the anti-war movement across America, prompting citizens to engage in critical visual protests. The counterculture's youth and students responded to what they perceived as the pervasive materialism and conformity of mainstream U.S. culture. A key slogan of the era was "From Protest to Resistance," and resistance meant active participation in efforts to disrupt all aspects of the war machine (Reed, 2019). New Leftists aimed to incite a participatory democratic uprising among the underprivileged. Studying the visual art of protest movements like this one unveils the potential of creating visual images to uncover, critique, resist, respond to, and ultimately counter capitalist commercial culture. A study of historical precedents of the engagement of critical visual literacy for social justice equips people with actionable visual strategies that "speak" and have a visual "voice."

Unveiling Power Dynamics: Violet Ray's Visual Protest as a Manifestation of Critical Visual Literacy

In my ongoing research into the development and deployment of critical visual literacy methods by artist-activists creating counterimages of protest for social justice movements, I discovered the work of an artist-activist known as Violet Ray, a pioneering source of anti-war counterimagery in the social movement politics of the mid-1960s and 1970s, who radically repurposed the visual culture of *Life* magazine to protest America's war in Vietnam. This research involved ongoing communication with Ray, allowing for deeper insight into his experiences of using sophisticated critical visual literacies to provoke radical social change.

Ray immediately disapproved of the term "visual literacy," considering it an oxymoron that privileges verbal interpretation over visual response, leading to a denigration of visual culture (V. Ray, personal communication, July 21, 2023). In this way, Ray prefigures later studies that decry the unequal emphasis placed on verbal over visual modes (Debes, 1974; Statton Thompson et al., 2022). Ray's collages appealed to viewers' emotions to ignite a radical reconsideration of consumer values sold by corporate capitalist visual culture. In Ray's hands, collage is an art that reveals through substitution, recombining imagery to clarify relationships and critically engage with the duality of competing value systems evident in visual culture.

Ray realized he could use advertisements as the medium for his counterimages, seamlessly inserting war photos into real ads, harnessing their graphic power instead of merely deconstructing their meaning. Recognizing that consumer culture relies on advertising that depicts the fantasy of consumer desires, Violet Ray, unable to reconcile these fantasies with the horrors of the Vietnam War, viewed his appropriation of advertising as guerrilla warfare. He coopted the manufactured fantasy imagery and Freudian power of advertising, invading it with the harsh realities of the war. For Ray, the real issue is what values and beliefs the symbols and images serve (V. Ray, personal communication, July 21, 2023).

Ray intended his collages to function like magazine advertisements by appealing to viewers' emotions, not to sell products but to question values. Ray centered his work on the emotional charge of images. "For a couple of cents invested in some old magazines," he stated, "you have available to you all the resources which cost Madison Avenue millions of dollars and years of research to produce" (Ray, as cited in Stamberg, 1968, p. 4). His collages confront viewers with disturbing connections between the war and their everyday lives. In this way, Ray activated critical visual literacy to pursue social change, transitioning from image interpretation to radical response.

Ray's counterimages exhibit a deep understanding that the viewer is always already in a critical relationship with the visible world. His method of juxtaposition equips viewers with critical tools to assess their world. Ray used photomontage to prompt spectators to engage in critical modes of perception, challenging the status quo and revealing hidden political agendas, social ideologies, and cultural ideals propagated by the mass media. Inspired by the American culture industry, Ray sought to turn advertising strategies against the mass media itself. The critical visual literacies deployed and activated by his contradictory counterimages empowered the oppressed, underprivileged, and countercultures to criticize the power structures at the center of visual culture and communication.

Ray's approach activated a sophisticated critical awareness of visual culture. Disturbed by how advertising had altered the dynamics of the class struggle (V. Ray, personal communication, May 24, 2023), Ray

focused his work on attacking the power imbalance with subversive visual communications. Ray's collaged commentaries take the shape of an ideological critique, focused on power recuperation through image appropriation. His advertisements against the war in Vietnam link the selling of the war to the selling of popular products, and the passive consumption of war images with the passive consumption of consumer goods.

Ray's collages, reproductions, and their distribution in various media platforms during the anti-war movement demonstrated a protest against the Vietnam War and a profound critique of consumer culture and advertising. By turning advertising imagery into counterimages, Ray confronted the passive consumerism and commodity fetishism underpinning the status quo. His collages, like improvised bombs, were combustible, challenging norms and revealing the violence inherent in the cut-up creation process. Through scissored interventions, Ray's work mirrored the violence depicted in the images, emphasizing displacement, destruction, and the broader socio-political context of the Vietnam War.

***Life* Magazine, the Vietnam War, and Advertising: Uncovering Contradictions Through Critical Visual Literacy**

In the tumultuous mid-1960s, the Vietnam War inundated American media, with *Life* magazine serving as a prominent conduit for both stark documentary photography (see Figure 3) and persuasive advertising (see Figure 4) that defined the nation. Violet Ray pioneered an approach to critical visual literacy and activism through the strategic juxtaposition of war imagery and consumer advertisements. Ray's counterimages (see Figure 5) in response to *Life*'s visual culture expose the stark contradictions between advertising's idealized interpretations and the harsh reality of the world.

Figure 3

Henri Huet, 1966 (Associated Press)

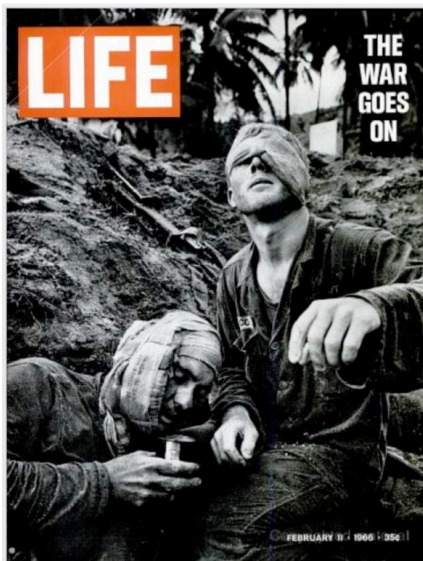


Figure 4
 Revlon advertisement, 1966 (*Life* magazine)



Figure 5
 Violet Ray, Revlon Oh-Baby Face, 1967, ad collage, 13.5 x 10.25 inches (courtesy Violet Ray)



Ray felt that much activist art of the time was alienating, consisting mainly of atrocity photos and political slogans. An Art Workers Coalition protest poster (see Figure 6) uses a photograph of the My Lai Massacre (also published in *Life* magazine), using journalistic evidence rather than symbolism or metaphor to convey the horrors of the war. Ray contrasted these techniques with his own methods. “This bluntness,” he says of the former, “failed to communicate to the average citizen what this remote conflict had to do with their daily lives” (Ray, 1984, p. 1). Ray’s technique involved pasting war photos directly into *Life*’s advertisements, compelling consumers to confront complex associations tied directly to their lifestyles and values. Ray sought to communicate the profound impact of the Vietnam War on the average citizen’s daily life. His confrontational collages aimed to bridge the gap between the remote conflict and the consumer experiences of the American public.

Figure 6

Art Workers Coalition, And Babies, 1969



Violet Ray was determined to probe the deeper motives for U.S. involvement in the war and to communicate his counter-messages of protest. Consider the cynicism on display in *Life* advertising Fresh Spray Deodorant at the same time the U.S. is dropping napalm in Vietnam. In Ray's collaged response (Figure 7), critical interpretation is activated in the pursuit of social justice.

Figure 7

Violet Ray, Fresh Spray, 1967, ad collage, 13.5 x 10.25 inches (courtesy Violet Ray)



Examining *Life* magazine spreads underscores the visual contradictions between war-torn Vietnam and the seemingly carefree lives depicted in advertising. The juxtaposition of a bleeding child in Vietnam (see Figure 8) adjacent to an advertisement for a slide carousel as a family memory protector (see Figure 9) starkly highlights the cultural cynicism prevalent at the time. The shock of such contrasts can be considerable not only because of the coexistence of the two worlds shown, but also because of the cynicism of the culture that shows them next to one another between the pages of the same magazine (Berger, 1972).

Figure 8
 Paul Schutzer, Child left bleeding, November 26, 1965 (Life magazine)



Figure 9
 Airequist advertisement, November 26, 1965 (Life magazine)



By the middle of the 20th century, Americans found themselves swimming in a veritable ocean of advertising. However, just as fish do not think about the water they swim in, people do not often think about the created cultural context promoted by advertising because it is unavoidable in their daily lives (Pollay, as cited in Boihem, 2007). Further, if one of the goals of education is to get the fish to think about the water, experts agree that advertising is the best place to look (Jhally, as cited in Boihem, 2007). Likewise, the goal of critical visual literacy in activism, the goal of counterimages and critical visual literacy education and the goal of Violet Ray's ominous counter-advertisements is to raise awareness of the visual environment. The problem for activist artists like Violet Ray was that the everyday public was rendered passive to the war in Vietnam by capitalist desires at home. The pervasive influence of advertising was and is a cultural force shaping societal values. Advertising sells more than products; it sells values. Ray decided that the best way to challenge these values was to coopt the tricks advertisers used, altering their visual images to challenge passive consumption.

A poignant example involves Ray's integration of the harrowing image of a Vietnamese family escaping U.S. bombs (see Figure 10) into a Chanel advertisement (see Figure 11), disrupting the usual product-centric focus. Ray adds the disturbing photo directly to the Chanel advertisement, taking up the space normally occupied by the product shot (see Figure 12). The half-drowned Vietnamese family can be seen struggling to escape the same waters the model appears to be bathing in. Without the qualifying image of

the product, the direct gaze of the Chanel model becomes a challenge to the viewer, accusing them of being complicit in the atrocities depicted (Wilson, 2012).

Figure 10

Kyoichi Sawada, 1965 (UPI)



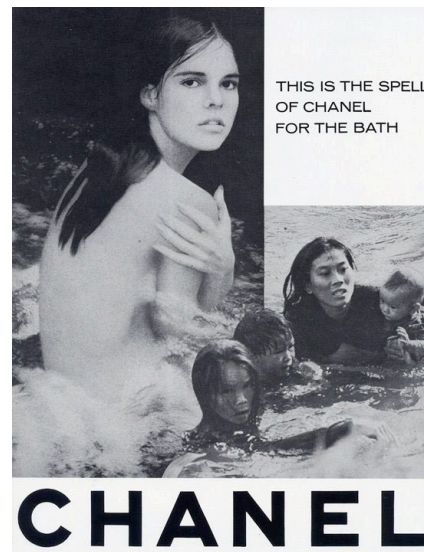
Figure 11

Chanel advertisement, 1965 (Life magazine)



Figure 12

Violet Ray, The Spell of Chanel, 1967, ad collage, 13 x 10.25 inches (courtesy Violet Ray)



Cutting and pasting connections between the war in Vietnam and consumerism at home, Violet Ray's counter-advertisements serve as a powerful manifestation of critical visual literacy, unraveling power structures and provoking viewers to reconsider the societal costs underlying consumerism. By strategically appropriating images, Ray's work induces emotions of disgust and concern, challenging the accepted narrative of free-market capitalism, revealing its hidden human toll as part of the nation's costly and unending war machine.

Activating Change Through Visual Reproduction: Violet Ray's Anti-War Message

Much like advertising's commitment to customer acquisition relies on insinuation and repetition to lodge its messages in the brain, Violet Ray's commitment to disseminating his anti-war counterimages was significantly shaped by the strategic use of reproduction. In 1967, he took a bold step by printing 10,000

reproductions featuring three impactful collages: *The Spell of Chanel*, *Revlon Oh-Baby Face*, and *Fresh Spray*. This extensive print run was intended for distribution at the National Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam demonstration in New York City, a historic event that drew an estimated 250,000 marchers, including Martin Luther King, Jr.

Despite the profound impact Ray anticipated, securing funding for these leaflets posed unexpected challenges. Organizers, worried over being sued by advertisers, and deeming the collages too sophisticated, were hesitant to support the initiative financially. Undeterred, Ray took matters into his own hands and self-funded the printing. During the protest, he personally distributed these leaflets to curbside onlookers, ensuring that his anti-war visual message reached a broad audience at this pivotal moment in history. Despite the initial challenges, the collages achieved a powerful effect by turning the system's own weapons against it (Stamberg, 1968), in effect fighting advertising with advertising, and being reprinted in underground and other newspapers and on street posters.

Intersecting Tides: The Social Justice Movement and the Visual Literacy Movement

In the autumn of 1969, the Day of Dissent emerged as a pivotal moment, rallying over a million Americans in the largest anti-war protest in the nation's history. Amidst this wave of profound public outcry, the inaugural conference of the International Visual Literacy Association (IVLA) unfolded. Co-founder John Debes of Kodak articulated the essence of a visually literate person as one possessing the ability to creatively communicate discriminating interpretations (1974). This characterization finds resonance in artist-activist endeavors, emphasizing the capacity to discern and interpret symbols within their environment for creative communication.

While the direct influence of social justice movements on Debes and the IVLA remains unclear, Debes's conceptualization of visual literacy's importance for social communication emerged in a broader context. A burgeoning segment of the population took to the streets in a critical visual protest, setting the stage for a convergence between visual literacy and societal transformation. In this dynamic interplay between social justice and visual literacy movements, a transformative synergy emerged, challenging established norms and demanding a perpetual evolution of methods for navigating and shaping the visual narratives of societal change.

Navigating Visual Culture: Unveiling Power Dynamics in *Ways of Seeing*

Amidst this cultural shift catalyzed by the counterculture, the year 1972 witnessed the emergence of the *Ways of Seeing* television series and its accompanying book. Critic John Berger used this platform to scrutinize how commercial visual culture perpetuates dominance through manufactured visual messages. He underscored visual culture's role as a significant arena for analyzing power and dissecting the political and economic control of images. Berger's conclusion, that power manipulates visual imagery as a tool of social and economic dominance, resonated with the evolving socio-cultural landscape.

Berger astutely pointed out the passive role of viewers confined to receiving and consuming preexisting images and meanings (see Figure 13). Urging action, he emphasized that the future of modern democracy hinged on transforming this dynamic, compelling viewers to evolve from mere interpreters to active transmitters. In essence, participation becomes the key to enacting social change, underscoring the indispensable role of critical visual literacy in analyzing and responding to manufactured cultural images through the creation of counterimages.

Figure 13

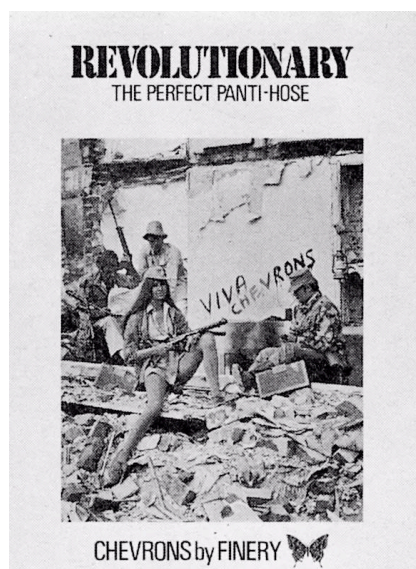
Screenshot from *Ways of Seeing*, Episode 1, 1972 (BBC-TV)



As the mid-1970s unfolded, the advertising realm assimilated countercultural images, utilizing revolutionary visuals to sell even products like pantyhose (see Figure 14). This raises ethical questions about image appropriation. Artist-activists, as pioneers of critical visual literacy, laid the groundwork for advertisers eventually co-opting their radical strategies for integration into the dominant visual culture. This integration necessitated social justice activists to innovate, developing novel techniques of critical visual literacy for communicating counter-messages through images.

Figure 14

Chevrons by Finery. From *Ways of Seeing*, 1977 (Penguin Books)



Understanding the interplay between art and advertising techniques is crucial because they influence one another, shaping the visual world and challenging the myths people live by. They guide people in reclaiming space for counter histories, counternarratives, and counterimages. Counterpropaganda, created using advertising mechanisms, appropriates their power, hijacking their influence. This is the essence of how critical subversive images operate: by taking existing visual materials and re-presenting them in a new context.

The Enduring Influence of Violet Ray's Visual Literacy Activism

Initially conceived as a form of anti-war protest, Violet Ray's early collages evolved into a powerful commentary on advertising and the underlying corporate cultural values it perpetuated. In the 1980s and '90s, these pioneering anti-war advertising collages became a focal point in exhibitions showcasing the protest art of social justice movements from the 1960s and '70s. Notably, the University of Oregon's art museum recognized the educational value of the series, acquiring 32 original collages for its teaching collection. The integration of Ray's ad collages into university galleries suggests their potential effectiveness in critical visual literacy studies. Reflecting on the enduring relevance of his work, Violet Ray expressed, "Eventually, the war in Vietnam ended, yet I found to my surprise that the collages had not lost their punch. I came to realize that the subject of my original artwork was not the Vietnam War but the nature of advertising itself" (V. Ray, personal communication, July 21, 2023).

In the contemporary landscape of 21st-century social justice movements, counterimages are notably scarce. Instead, the impact of powerful documentary visuals such as the photographs from Abu Ghraib or Wikileaks videos challenges the credibility of nation-states (Rasmussen, 2014). Violet Ray's groundbreaking political art laid the groundwork for subsequent waves of visual protest, notably the emergence of publications like *Adbusters* and the work of street artists like Banksy. In 2008, Ray took his insights to the classroom, teaching a class titled Advertising as a Medium for Protest at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. The adoption of critical visual literacy methods in education reflects a convergence with the techniques employed by artist-activists engaged in visual practice for social justice movements.

The Evolving Landscape: *The Framework for Visual Literacy in Higher Education*

Studies have concluded that the creation of images is just as important to critical visual literacy as interpretation (Simons, 2008; Statton Thompson et al, 2022). In response to the evolving demands of information literacy instructors and the growing need for critical visual literacy, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) took a significant step in 2022 with the publication of *The Framework for Visual Literacy in Higher Education*. This transformative framework encourages learners not only to dissect the choices made in the production of visual communications but also to harness the skills to remix visuals, actively crafting messages finely attuned to the needs of specific audiences (ACRL, 2022).

According to the *Framework* this can be achieved through the cultivation of visual discernment and criticality, empowering students to actively contribute to pursuing social justice through visual practice. In the realm of activism, critical visual literacy, exemplified by the creation of counterimages, challenges the authority of cultural visuals with contradictory and at times confrontational responses, all in the name of advancing social justice. The *Framework* emphasizes the imperative for students across higher education to cultivate critical engagement with visual information. It envisions these students as discerning citizens in today's visually saturated society and considers a visually literate individual as not just a critical consumer of visual media but also a competent contributor to a shared cultural narrative (ACRL, 2022).

The document extends beyond theoretical foundations, advocating for hands-on engagement with authoring visual texts. By participating in these practices, students gain a profound understanding of the power and influence wielded by the media, as well as the pivotal role played by corporations in shaping societal norms. This approach empowers students to scrutinize decision-making processes influenced by media marketing, encouraging them to challenge ingrained media and cultural constructs and, importantly, to present alternative perspectives to the "real" world (Chung & Kirby, 2009). In essence, *The Framework for Visual Literacy in Higher Education* emerges as a guiding light, steering students toward active participation in the reshaping of our visual and cultural landscape.

Exploring Frontiers in Critical Visual Literacy: Further Research

Numerous avenues remain unexplored in the realm of critical visual literacy, particularly in uncovering the sophisticated visual literacies activated and deployed by artist-activists within social protest movements. The intricate connection between visual communication and social change, as well as the intertwined histories of the social justice movement and the visual literacy movement, beckon for comprehensive exploration. Questions abound: How can critical visual literacy effectively challenge the oppressive

dominance of consumer culture? What implications does the visual work of artist-activists hold for unraveling and contesting the visual culture perpetuated by capitalism? In what ways does critical visual literacy influence decision-making, spur public action, and contribute to civic discourse?

Brumberger (2019) has identified the critical domain of social impact as a vital area for study, emphasizing its centrality to the future of visual literacy. Statton Thompson et al. (2022) echo this sentiment, highlighting the imperative of investigating visual literacy's relationship to other literacies and underscoring the significance of cultivating criticality in an astute citizenry. Recognizing students not only as scholars but also as citizens means that responsible education involves pedagogy designed not just to increase understanding of circumstances but also to empower students as citizens to participate in changing them (Simons, 2008). The quest to unearth the diverse applications of critical visual literacy in promoting social justice remains paramount. The study of the historical uses of political graphics in fomenting social change provides key touchpoints for future developments.

The landscape of critical visual literacy, social impact, and social justice movements is multifaceted and warrants continued exploration. Delving into these complexities promises to uncover new insights, fostering a deeper understanding of the transformative potential embedded within the realm of visual communication and activism. As social upheaval persists and illusions of participation abound online, the weaponization of cultural imagery in ongoing "culture wars" demands a closer look. In the realm of visual culture, revolution lies in restoring the possibility of response (Baudrillard, 1981).

Conclusion

This paper has examined the pioneering methods of an artist-activist, Violet Ray, whose frustration with the Vietnam War and the shortcomings of the anti-war movement led him to "use the language of the supermarket" (Ray, 1984, p. 1) to create impactful advertisements against the war. In this endeavor, he not only protested the war but also exposed the entwined nature of the conflict with capitalist consumer culture. Recognizing that advertising and protest art employ similar visual communication tactics, Ray's unique approach disrupted viewers' assumptions, bringing the war into the familiar realm of consumer culture.

While counterculture movements have often pioneered new means of visual critique, there remains a dearth of research into the avant-garde artist-activist origins of those who could be termed critical visual literacy activists. These pioneers, through graphics often using appropriation of received visual culture, seek to expose the real enemy: the corporate commercial culture of capitalism. Critical visual literacy emerges as essential for participatory democracy, surfacing alternative voices and counter-messages to equalize power structures. However, the rarity of counterimages in 21st-century social justice movements, as noted by Rasmussen (2014), prompts questions about the evolving landscape of visual activism. Understanding the implications of artist-activists' work and exploring new strategies for critical visual literacy in the digital age remain vital areas for future research.

This paper transcends the realm of image interpretation to advocate for activating critical visual literacy among artist-activists as public educators. Critical visual literacy in activism challenges people not only to interpret the world critically but also to respond creatively with counterimages. Critical visual literacy emerges as a pivotal force in the pursuit of meaningful social change by actively intervening in sociocultural contexts, stepping outside the confines of dominant cultural narratives, and following interpretation with artistic action.

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