

# The Educational Significance of Mass Arts “Resisting advertising consumerism”

( اهمیت آموزشی هنرهای عام، مقاومت در برابر رواج مصرف‌گرایی )

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چکیده: نگاه انسان امروزی به پدیده‌ها تغییر کرده است. بدون شک یکی از ابزارهای مهم این تغییر نگرش هنر عام «Mass Arts» و به ویژه نوع تصویری آن است. تصویرهای گرافیکی نه تنها با ما سخن می‌گویند بلکه، مهمتر از آن، برای ما تعیین نیاز می‌کنند و، در واقع، به زندگیها جهت می‌دهند. ما، چه بخواهیم و چه نخواهیم، زیر تشعشعات این امواج قرار داریم. ویژگی هنر عام نفوذ به درون توده مردم است و این کار جز از راه شناخت فرهنگ میسر نیست. هنرمند، از یک سو، ظرافتهای فرهنگی را بهتر می‌بیند و، از سوی دیگر، توانایی آن را دارد که آنها را در بیانی هنرمندانه و در نتیجه تأثیرگذار عرضه کند. اکنون که هنر عام در خدمت جامعه مصرفی مدرن عمل می‌کند، شناخت اصول و ظرافتهای آشکار و پنهان آن نه تنها برای بزرگسالان لازم است، بلکه ضروری است به روشی نظام‌مند در برنامه درسی کودکان و نوجوانان نیز قرار گیرد. مقاله حاضر، با تکیه بر نظریه پردازان این رشته، بر این موضوعات متمرکز است.

کلیدواژه: هنرهای تولید انبوه، تبلیغات، تصاویر تولید انبوه، معانی صریح، معانی ضمنی، مصرف‌گرایی، نشان ویژه، خویشن‌بینی، آموزش هنر.

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There have been several definitions for the term “mass arts.” For the purposes of this paper, I will refer to two definitions given by Noel Carroll and Laura Chapman and I will discuss the role of mass arts as defined by Chapman.

In Carroll’s theory of “mass art” there are three conditions that are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for something to be defined as a “mass artwork.”

According to Carroll, “X is a mass artwork if and only if 1. X is a multiple instance or type of artwork, 2. it is produced and distributed by a mass technology, 3. which artwork is intentionally designed to gravitate in its structural choices (for example its narrative forms, symbolism, intended affect, and even its content) towards those choices that promise accessibility with minimum effort virtually on first contact, for the largest number of untutored (or relatively untutored) audiences” (Carroll, 1997).

Carroll states that his theory is geared to mass art as it emerged in the industrial revolution and as it continues in the information age. Roughly stated, the extension of the items that he intends his theory to capture includes: popular commercial films, TV, commercial photography, pop music, broadcast radio, computer video games, comic strips and World Wide Web sites.

In her article “Art, Art education and Mass arts,” Laura Chapman gives a slightly different definition of mass arts. Although she seems to agree with Carroll’s conditions for an artwork to

be considered mass art, she narrows down his definition by adding the concept of profit. Chapman explains that “artistic expression in American life is dominated by mass-circulated images, mass-produced artifacts, events, and environments that flow from a consumer-based economy and quest for profit” (Chapman, 2003). She refers to these images as arts of aesthetic persuasion or mass arts. She also suggests that images (artifacts, environments, events) created, produced and distributed under these conditions can be regarded as art to the extent that they are a) descendants from more traditional art forms, and b) intentionally contrived with an interest in merging form and content aesthetically.

Producers of mass arts, create kinds of imagery that would intrigue their viewers to make meanings. They research audience response to determine if the meanings they intend to convey are the same as the ones their audiences would receive in order to guarantee short term or long-term profit. All images have two levels of meaning: denotative and connotative meanings. The denotative meaning of an image refers to its literal, descriptive meaning. Everybody, regardless of his or her age or cultural background, describes a single image in the same way. But the connotative meaning of an image is more culturally specific. Connotative meanings rely on the cultural and historical context of the image and its viewers’ lives, felt knowledge of those circumstances. People of different age groups or cultural background are not likely to interpret a

single image in the same way, which is why designers of mass arts need to conduct several surveys before coming up with the final design.

One of the most persuasive kinds of mass arts are advertisements. Images have a primary role in functioning of commerce through advertisements. We are confronted with advertising images constantly through the course of our daily lives, in newspapers and magazines, on television, in movie theaters, on billboards, on public transportation, on clothing, on the World Wide Web, and in many other contexts in which we may not even notice them. Ads speak to us in a broad range of voices and through an array of strategies.

Advertising is a central component of consumer societies and capitalism. A consumer society is one in which the individual is confronted with and surrounded by an enormous assortment of goods, and in which the characteristics of those goods change constantly. A capitalist society produces more goods than are necessary for it to function, so the need to consume goods is an important part of its ideology. Capitalism is an economic system in which investment in and ownership of the means of production, distribution, and exchange of goods and wealth are held primarily by individuals and corporations. Advertising is one of the primary means through which this exchange of goods is promoted, whether on product packaging or in print, television, radio, or on the internet.

In our consumer based economy, we are faced

with many choices within the mass arts. The quantity and diversity of choice arise from the freedom to seek profit in our society and the central role of consumption as an indicator of living well. It has been argued that people derive the sense of their place in the world and their self-image at least in part through their purchase and use of commodities. Many people find pleasure, identity, and a sense of self-determination by choosing attractive, meaningful, and affordable ready-made fare. These choices are greatest for those with discretionary income, of course. However, even if income is not an issue, the taken-for-granted pleasures of the mass arts may promote an illusory sense of creative self-determination.

One of advertisers' primary strategies is to turn a product into a recognizable brand. A brand is a graphic identity of a product (DK Holland, 2001). It's a product name that we know about whether or not we own or ever intend to purchase the product. We are exposed to hundreds of brands everyday in packaging, advertising, and on products, and we feel our lives become just a little more exciting when brands' glamour rubs off on us. It's a complete manipulation and what is surprising is that we all seem to love it.

Many cultures, democracies in particular, have encouraged individuality in the twentieth century. And so, individuals have incorporated many different means of self-expression in the form of hairstyles, handwriting, jewelry, clothing, etc, into their lifestyles. Brands are responding to this by

supplying products that when adopted by the individual “say” to friends, family, and passerby, “This is who I am. This is what I stand for.” Through their products, Brands provide a fallacious sense of belonging and identity. People that fall into the identity trap of brands have no choice but to keep purchasing products of that brand in order not to lose their sense of identity. In case they are forced to stop purchasing the products of that brand due to economical problems, they are most likely to experience an identity crisis.

Because of their subconscious, emotional impact, the brands’ abuses of power will increase dramatically as brands attempt to increase their control of people through the brand-loyalty programs that they are establishing. The primary goal of a loyalty program is to establish the profile and purchasing patterns of the consumer and to use that knowledge to manipulate customers to purchase more of their products and purchase their products more often.

Advertising actively speaks to customers about their identities, and appears to offer solutions to perceived problems of self-image. By addressing the issue of self-image, advertisements project anxiety on consumers. Behind their message of self-improvement there is the hidden message that the viewers should be anxious about what they do not have yet and who they should be. Ads that use anxiety to sell products work by suggesting to consumers the ways in which they may be not only inadequate but also potentially endangered or

weakened without a particular product.

During the last decade, advertising companies have started targeting, at the youngest possible age, a captive audience largely ignorant of the persuasive effects of advertising and marketing. Children possess little economic power, but considerable “pester power” by which they influence purchasing decisions made by other family members. In the United States, children are estimated to be responsible for about \$10 billion in purchases while they influence about a further \$130 billion worth of purchases (DK Holland, 2001). No wonder then that producers have adopted a “child-centered” approach to product promotion. They have gone so far as hiring an increasing number of experts on children’s psychology with the intent to use the latest youth trends to their own advantage. Moreover, increasing number of periodicals and books offer advice on how to develop new products, programs, and advertising by using children’s psychology to tap into their changing needs and wants.

If the young population is not conscious of the manipulative strategies of the advertisers to sell products, and does not learn to interpret the messages carried by mass arts, they will be unwittingly buying, wearing, promoting, and otherwise consuming opinions with which we may or may not agree.

All the above reasons make it essential to include studies of mass arts in the school curriculum with the intent to enlarge students’

understanding of the personal, social and civic consequences of these forms of artistic expression. Studies of mass arts can make them aware of the manipulative role of advertisements in our consumer-based society and perhaps teach them ways to stop feeding consumerism.

Designers of mass arts have gone through years of studies of techniques of traditional art forms, aesthetics persuasion and semiotics which is why the consequences of mass arts are not likely to be grasped without studies of: a) The techniques of aesthetic persuasion the mass arts exploit, b) The connections of those techniques to more traditional forms of artistry, and c) The conditions which make the mass arts so prominent in our public culture.

In his article, "Visual culture in the classroom", Paul Duncum gives some examples of the kind of activities and questions that can be included in teaching advertisements of consumer goods. Here are some of those examples:

#### **Activities**

- Have students comb through magazines looking for their favorite products. Students can create a kind of self-portrait consisting of their favorite products, so that they see how their tastes are socially constructed.
- Students can also compare advertising today with advertising from the 19th century. Focus especially on how images are now much more important than in earlier periods.
- Have students rank advertisements for the impact or significance of words versus pictures on

a scale of 1 to 10.

- Students could take an advertisement and alter it, or appropriate it, so as to turn its message on its head or to make an ironic comment upon it. This could be done with the addition of words or by juxtaposing the advertisement with other images.

#### **Guiding Questions**

- Are consumers generally rational or irrational, in charge of themselves or manipulated, autonomous or over concerned with the opinion of others, active or passive, creative or conformist? Is there a difference between how we see ourselves as consumers and how we see others?
- Does living in a consumer culture lead people to being unhappy because it shows more of what they cannot have than it offers what they can have?
- Is it legitimate to treat all problems as solvable, as advertising does? In short, are there limits to consumer culture, and if so, what are they? What doesn't consumer culture satisfy?

Duncum's examples for the kinds of activities to include in teaching advertising consumer goods, although interesting, do not cover a deeper understanding of how advertisements are constructed.

Teaching of mass arts should be framed to help students not only become conscious of their perceptual processes as they encounter the mass arts but also a) understand how the mass arts are constructed, b) identify varieties of the mass arts and understand their role in public culture and personal expression, c) understand how the mass

arts have emerged as the dominant forms of artistic expression in our time, their sources in and borrowings from diverse artistic traditions, and d) become imaginatively, critically, and pro-actively engaged in determining the forms of artistry in their own lives and communities

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