

Using Humor to Teach Visual Culture

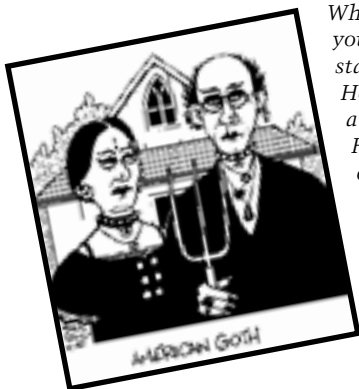
Sharon Warwick

Fine artworks, images from advertising art, architecture, and the natural environment all around us are part of our visual culture. Exploring the significance or symbolic nature of such images can be very motivating and can involve students in analysis, interpretation, and judgment about the objects that abound in our lives. When students are given opportunities to discuss the meaning of imagery in visual culture, they are often able to make better choices and selections as consumers. When humor is added to the discussion or made the object of focus, interest and enthusiasm are often heightened.

Focus on Humor

You can motivate kids with toys, anime and comics, funny commercials, and objects of curiosity to stimulate critical thinking and personal interpretations of images our students see in their daily lives. Like fine art in great museums, objects that are designed, created, and present everywhere in our daily world express emotions, moods, and ideas. They communicate ideas about the working artists who create them and about the people to whom they are targeted. All manner of objects are designed using the same elements of art, principles

What knowledge do you need to understand this cartoon? How is the title a play on words? How is it a play on images? Would it mean anything to you if you had never seen Grant Wood's painting?



of design, and expressive qualities that are fundamental to art everywhere. Some are just funnier than others.

Focus on Toys

Did you know there is a Darth Vader Mr. Potato Head? Can you imagine the discussion around the table at Playskool when someone came up with that idea? How about an Art Teacher Barbie? (one of their career series) Also available are Teacher Barbie, Wheelchair Barbie, and multicultural Barbies. Is there a difference between dolls and action figures? And why did Barbie and Ken break up?

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Focus on Cartoons

Newspaper cartoons are available to almost everyone and run the gamut from old favorites like Peanuts to political strips like Doonesbury. I like to use cartoons that play off of a knowledge of art or a specific artwork, like *American Gothic*, *Mona Lisa*, or *The Scream*. Some cartoons manage to include a number of elements. For example, Stephan Pastis' *Pearls Before Swine* recently had a storyline in which Osama Bin Laden was hiding in the home of the Family Circus!

Focus on Digital Imagery

Digital imagery alone can yield salient discussions that help students make more informed decisions about what to think and



Art Teacher Barbie, one of the career series.

believe about the thousands of movies, pictures, and ads that confront them each day on computers, TV, and even cell phones. Just what is the appeal of SpongeBob SquarePants? Why are so many classic toys shown in the movie *Toy Story*? How is Japanese anime different than animation of Western origin? Is *The Simpsons* really written for adults or children? Such discussions promote reflective thinking and make art more accessible and relevant in young peoples' lives. Just try it and watch the motivation to talk and write about art and visual culture take a giant leap into the critical-thinking zone! 🧐

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NATIONAL STANDARD

Students describe the origins of specific images and ideas and explain why they are of value in their artwork and the artwork of others.

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