

# Review of Popular Pleasures, an Introduction to the Aesthetics of Popular Visual Culture

Reseña de “Placeres populares, una introducción a la estética de la cultura visual popular” | Revisão de “Prazeres populares, uma introdução à estética da cultura visual popular”



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“Pictures can heighten sensory awareness but also dull it” (Duncum, 2021).

Since ancient times, philosophers have explored how images can deceive and persuade; consequently, understanding the power of an image to lure and persuade people is a timeless pursuit. What are the invisible strategies and psychological mechanisms that render us helpless in images’ impact? Paul Duncum’s latest book, *Popular Pleasures, an Introduction to the Aesthetics of Popular Visual Culture*, is a comprehensive guide for

interpreting and understanding popular aesthetic pleasures and how images lure. Images are not innocent, and the different aesthetics that have evolved throughout human history have become tools of persuasion and seduction in our days.

This book is considered an in-depth investigation of visual seductions, which he discussed in his previous book, *Picture Pedagogy, Visual Culture Concepts to Enhance the Curriculum* (Duncum, 2020). In this work (Duncum, 2020), he introduced aesthetic seductions in popular images to help educators make purposeful choices when designing teaching content and practices. The tensions between aesthetics, beliefs, and social values become visible, and consequently, art content reinforces students' critical thinking. In his latest book (Duncum, 2021), he delves into aesthetic pleasures and features connections between popular aesthetic pleasures and historical and sociopolitical threads.

The historical and sociopolitical investigation is a vehicle for thorough research and reveals an aspect of contemporary aesthetic pleasures that are hidden. For instance, it is stimulating that the pre-modern fine arts conform to the popular preferences, as today's popular images do. Duncum provides us with emblematic examples of pre-modern art, such as the artworks of the 18th-century group *The Sentimental Painters*, that appeal to the popular taste of sentimental. The stories, that these artists depict, represent ordinary life circumstances such as deathbed senses or country girls wearing melancholic expressions to evoke a sentimental response from the spectator.

Further, the research reveals that evolutionary biology and psychological responses to imagery have defined prejudices, behaviors, and attitudes to images and aesthetics. It is an intriguing idea, for instance, to acknowledge that the bright and busy aesthetic as a strategy of seduction for consumerism purposes is grounded in humanity's evolutionary history, since the glistering reminds us of our ancestors' quest for water.

Some questions arise from the title of the book about an oxymoron that appears between the notions of aesthetic and popular, especially for those nurtured with modernist art philosophy. Duncum approaches the notion of aesthetics from a postmodern perspective. Namely, to understand popular tastes as diverse aesthetic preferences, it is necessary to comprehend that the widely accepted philosophical distinction between high art and popular images, established by modern philosophers, like Emmanuel Kant, is a prejudicial comparison that places popular images as inferior to high art. Instead of embracing the modernist view, the author encourages readers to face popular images as diachronic and long-standing aesthetic pleasures. Further, he invites viewers to examine popular images by considering the visual features of imagery together with the psychological intensities that are associated with them.

The significance of this book lies in the aestheticization of contemporary life. In our era, in which every aspect of contemporary life is immersed in the dominant mass culture, people need to acknowledge how aesthetics are used to reinforce specific behaviors and attitudes. Having warned many years ago about the bonds that exist between aesthetics and ideology (2008), in this book, Paul Duncum offers theoretical research on the topic of the bonds between popular aesthetics and ideology. In the contemporary globalized visual society, professionals have taken over the aestheticization of politics and everyday life to impose ideologies on the masses. It is intriguing how the thread between aesthetics, meanings, and ideological purposes unfolds in this book.

Besides the connection between aesthetics and ideology that is drawn, Duncum's perspective on diverse popular pleasures is rather neutral and adopts a descriptive tone in his writing. He anticipates avoiding defining popular aesthetics as inherently harmful.

Instead, he stresses the sociopolitical function of imagery and illustrates how images as texts are always related to their context. He explains that each popular pleasure is not “inherently praiseworthy or damnably” (p. 4). In contrast, he adopts a critical writing tone toward the sociopolitical function of images, not regarding people’s tastes. He justifies and accepts people’s involuntary engagement with popular aesthetics. He acknowledges people’s tastes and their tendency toward popular pleasures as a source of knowledge and not as an inherently harmful activity. He distances himself from how formal aestheticians face the popular as inherently inferior concerning high cultural taste. He elevates the value of popular visual pleasure by searching for what consciously or unconsciously lures contemporary people.

Each of the 15 chapters is devoted to a distinct popular pleasure such as realistic style, the illusionistic, the bright and busy, the highly emotional, the sentimental, the vulgar, the violent, the horrific, the miraculous, the exotic, the erotic, the spectacular, the narrative, the formulaic and the humorous. Each chapter begins with an initial illustrative example of aesthetic pleasure that aims to engage the reader by recalling their visual experiences or surprising them. This example derives either from contemporary popular digital visual culture or from art history by discussing an outstanding historical example of fine art. The connections that the author makes with popular experiences are fascinating, for example, Pokemon Go augmented reality becomes a powerful popular reference for the realistic style and James Bond movies become a compelling reference for the formulaic. Then, incidences of the visual experiences of everyday life are described for us to understand how we experience images. A historical review of how specific pleasure has been perceived by philosophers, the religious creed of the past, and art historians deconstructs the contemporary behaviors and prejudices toward images.

Each pleasure is explained by analyzing a great number of images that have been carefully chosen to illustrate the entanglement between art and popular culture. Specific examples of artworks or other images throughout human history show that people have similar needs, which leads them to seek the specific enjoyment that images offer. Consequently, each lure is presented in pictures from ancient art, medieval art, premodern art, and more. There is a thorough description of each image, yet in some cases, it is not as precise as it should be. For example, in Masaccio’s painting (1427), *The Tribute Money*, it seems that important information about the spiritual miracle that happened when coins appeared in the fish’s mouth is missing. This case will probably raise questions and objections, especially for readers who feel that their creed is misunderstood.

On the contrary, the analysis of aesthetic pleasures with specific instances of art history reveals prejudices about the meaning of images—that significant historians and critics have been trapped. For example, art critic Arthur Danto (2013), in his book *What Art Is*, strongly criticized Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel ceiling restoration. He described the revealed bright colors of fresco paintings as an example of questioning the validity of the restored work because the particular aesthetic does not represent the artist’s pursuit at the time he created it. Through Duncum’s analysis, the critic’s view is questioned because of his prejudices regarding the doctrine of decorum and determines the perspective of the meaning of bright and busy images as an inherent expression of the lower taste of beauty.

The interpretation of aesthetic pleasures is carried out using a variety of investigative strategies. For example, centuries-old stereotypes about what constitutes masculine and feminine energy help us understand how images lure emotions. Furthermore, the

interpretation of feelings is presented in the narrative pleasures. In visual storytelling, people enjoy emotional identification with heroes through their emotions.

In other cases, the explanation of how images seduce comes from interpreting the pleasurable cognitive operations that take place when we see an image. For example, people are excited by imitation because they make comparisons between the original and the copy of an image.

In other cases, possessing a higher social status reinforces popular pleasure. The exotic, becomes possession through the symbolic function of the images. Photographs from exotic places, for example, were proof of the achievements of European empires, both in the past and today, in tourism, and the images are the virtual symbolic possession of the experience.

Ancient philosophy founded the investigation since the dominant ideas about beauty and art have formed for later art and therefore the pleasures associated with images. The roots of high-culture aesthetics, such as the restraint from glitter and over-ornate items, and the doctrine of decorum, are traced back to ancient philosophy. Images without serious purposes for Plato were worthless and dangerous, Duncum explains.

In summary, *Popular Pleasures, an Introduction to the Aesthetics of Popular Visual Culture*, is a timely publication. Considering the prospect of a dystopian global disastrous war, the visuality becomes a new form of weapon, a weapon of the so-called hybrid war. Consequently, I perceive this book to be useful for everyone who wishes to deepen their critical understanding of pictures. In parallel, it is very useful for educators, researchers, and artists who hope to extend their views and understanding of what popular taste consists of and the pleasure it offers all of us. As the borders between art and popular culture have long been crossed, this book may inspire artists who wish to recontextualize the meaning of the popular in their artworks.

As art educators, we understand the importance of images in contemporary youth's lives. Over the last decades, teaching, and learning have been central to the everyday visual experience of our students because education should respond to the current social and global conditions, and our students need to decode the meaning of popular images. As a consequence, how people view and interpret images should be the topic of the training.

The choices for the school art curriculum often reflect a biased perspective that presents the superiority of specific aesthetics without acknowledging their implying social values. For example, the modernist approach to formal and structural elements with concepts such as balance, harmony, variety, etc. are essentially linked to the divisions that modernist aesthetics deemed necessary to strengthen the position of the middle class. In contrast, a pluralistic aesthetic approach in art curriculum, in which the diverse aesthetics are linked to the respective beliefs and meanings, enables students to learn how to critically reflect on images.

Overall, copies of the book will find themselves on the desks and shelves of educators from all disciplines because today, in the globalized visual culture, interdisciplinary, and art-based learning have become an appropriate teaching tool for addressing ideological bias.

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