

Stranger things in the classroom:

Drawing inspiration from children's visual culture

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Chapter 9: ROBERT WATTS - Stranger things in the classroom: Drawing inspiration from children's visual culture

Key words: art education; visual culture; images; cinema; television; computer games

TS1: Set high expectations which inspire, motivate and challenge pupils

TS3: Demonstrate good subject and curriculum knowledge

Chapter aims:

- *To explore notions of visual culture and its relationship to art education*
- *To review the range of images children currently encounter in school and at home.*
- *To provide ideas for learning experiences that draw inspiration from children's visual culture.*
- *To offer a rationale for teachers to draw on children's visual culture in order to motivate learning in art and across the curriculum.*

Introduction

It is not likely that I shall carry general agreement on the purpose I ascribe to education, for here there are at least two irreconcilable possibilities: one, that man should be educated to become what he is; the other, that he should be educated to become what he is not.

Herbert Read, *Education through Art*, 1943

The scene is a traditional English classroom. Light streams through tall windows onto panelled walls as uniformed boys take turns to read aloud from their books. The teacher, an elderly man seated at his desk, is unaccountably irritated by the pace of the lesson and rapidly asks one boy, then another to continue reading before he impatiently assumes the task himself. He stumbles over several simple words, pauses and looks up. *'Shall we watch the video?'* he asks the boys, *'We'll watch the video.'*

Readers who remember *Little Britain* will recognise this scene. It's a sketch from the television series in which Mr Cleaves, played by Matt Lucas, finds various ways to illustrate both his incompetence as a teacher and his indifference to his pupils. In this instance, the comedy lies in the notion that he should consider a filmed adaptation of a novel to have the same educational value as the novel itself. As viewers we appreciate that the commitment required of us to engage with a book may be far greater than that demanded by a film or TV programme. it might

take us several weeks to complete a novel, compared with a couple of hours slumped on the sofa in front of *Netflix*. Moreover, we believe there is less to learn from watching the movie. We miss out on the author's use of language, their attention to detail, their description of characters' internal lives. We laugh at Mr Cleaves because we know that real teachers would never say *we'll watch the video*, because time spent watching screens is time wasted.

Or is it? This chapter invites teachers who aspire to provide a broad and balanced curriculum to draw inspiration from children's visual culture. In recent years digital technologies have significantly broadened the range of visual material available to children, enabling them to access a rich and diverse variety of cinema, television and other media. However, the ways that children typically engage with this material – often alone, on hand-held devices and at random times – means that what were once shared, communal experiences are now individual and often isolated. Children engage with more visual material than ever before but rarely share their responses to it. Furthermore, there is little evidence to suggest that teachers either recognise the educational potential of this material or take advantage of opportunities to incorporate it into their teaching. This chapter argues that, by embracing the richness and diversity of children's visual culture, teachers could raise their pupils' levels of engagement in their learning – as well as their levels of attainment - not only in visually orientated subjects such as art and design but also across the curriculum.

The chapter begins by examining the notion of visual culture and reflecting on the range of images children encounter in school and at home, before exploring three starting points for classroom projects inspired by contemporary cinema, television and computer games. Though the lines from Herbert Read that preface this chapter date from the 1940s (a time, incidentally, when authors were rather less sensitive to the nuances of gendered language) the chapter argues that they have a renewed relevance for children in the 21st Century, in that teachers should be motivated to engage with children's visual culture and recognise its potential to help their pupils *to become who they are*. The chapter concludes by inviting teachers to consider how drawing inspiration from children's visual culture not only offers opportunities to provide a broader, more balanced curriculum but also to promote a more holistic, child-centred approach to education.

Visual culture – what is it?

The term 'visual culture' emerged during the 1990s in the work of authors who questioned traditional boundaries between art and popular culture (e.g. Walker and Chaplin 1997). It was first explored in an educational context in the 2000s, when several US authors sought to define visual culture in ways that emphasised an inclusive approach towards images. Freedman (2003), for example, proposed that visual culture 'provides context for the visual arts and points to the connections between popular and fine arts forms' (2003: 1), while Amburguy

(2003) conceived it as ‘a way of calling attention to visual qualities as important components of cultural practices’ (2003: 45). In other words, while art remained a significant part of visual culture, other sources of images such as the cinema, television, computer games and even advertisements were also worthy of attention. These authors argued that, although images drawn from such sources may lack the status afforded to works of art, the extent to which they were woven into people’s everyday lives lent them a similar significance. As Duncum (2002) acknowledges: ‘If pictures have not come to replace words, then at least they have an unprecedented influence in what we know about the world, and how we think and feel it, beyond personal experience’ (2002: 16).

Given that authors have written about visual culture for two decades, why should it now form a focus for teachers aiming to provide a broad and balanced curriculum? There are several reasons. Firstly, new technologies have revolutionised the ways that children engage with visual culture. Recent research shows almost three quarters of 11-year-olds own smartphones with cameras, while half share images on Facebook, Instagram or Snapchat and 90% regularly access images online (Statista 2017; Graham 2016; Ofcom 2016). Secondly, the traditional image of family members clustered around a television is outdated, as children increasingly view programmes alone. A recent report on children’s media use concluded that children now watch one third less broadcast television than they did in 2010 and are more likely to ‘binge-watch’ television series, often viewing alone on tablets, phones and other devices (Ofcom 2017). Thirdly, in a reaction against the test-driven culture of primary schools, teachers are growing more aware of the role of pedagogical approaches that value children’s perspectives such as *Philosophy for Children* (Fisher 2013), while researchers of children’s experiences have increasingly adopted child-centred methodologies intent on foregrounding children’s perspectives on matters affecting them (Greig, Taylor and MacKay 2007; Kellett 2010). New technologies mean that children’s visual culture plays an increasingly significant part in their lives – and it makes increasing sense to make it a part of their experience in school.

Box feature at end of section:

Reflective questions

What are your perceptions of how children’s visual culture is changing?

What childhood memories do you have of your own visual culture?

How did these experiences of visual culture influence your development?

What kinds of images do children encounter in school?

If we were to return for a moment to Mr Cleaves' antiquated classroom, we would notice its walls feature little in the way of displays. In contrast, creating displays of children's work is a well-established practice in primary schools (Hodgson 1988), and today's teachers widely recognise the value of providing stimulating visual environments (Bryce-Clegg 2014). Children also encounter images in picture books from an early age and are often highly skilled at interpreting meanings from images. Arizpe and Styles (2003), for example, describe how children notice complex details of illustrations and use their observations to deepen their understanding of the meanings of a text. The role of artists' work in primary schools is a little more complex, however, and it is useful to reflect briefly on the ways in which children encounter it.

As long ago as the 1940s, teachers were able to introduce their pupils to contemporary artworks, thanks to the School Prints initiative (Gooding 1980). The project aimed to provide children with access to 'real' works of art, in the form of a series of lithographs by leading British and European artists of the time including Picasso, Matisse and Lowry. Herbert Read helped to commission the artists and, despite post-war austerity, hundreds of schools bought prints to display in classrooms. The Arts Council was formed at around the same time, amidst a growing conviction that art was for everyone, not just a gallery-going elite. We can only imagine children's responses to the School Prints, which were almost certainly unlike anything they had seen before. Very few would have had artworks in their homes and even fewer would have visited galleries; illustrated books were still relatively rare and televisions rarer still. The significance of the School Prints project is that it marks the beginning of the belief that teachers should be responsible for broadening children's experience of art.

The presence of artists' work in primary classrooms grew stronger in the 1990s, when the National Curriculum for art and design identified 'knowledge and understanding' as an attainment target alongside investigating and making' (DES 1991). The curriculum proposed that children should make connections between their own and artists' work and prompted teachers to draw inspiration from a range of artists, craftspeople and designers from diverse cultures. In practice, however, teachers were inclined to plan lessons based upon a narrow range of work by white, male, European artists from the late 19th and early 20th centuries such as Monet and Van Gogh (Downing and Watson 2004). In a parallel movement, museums and galleries developed educational programmes designed to make their collections accessible to children. The National Gallery's *Take One Picture* programme, in particular, has raised children's levels of engagement in both looking at paintings and making work in response to them (Wyse and McGarty 2010). To bring the story full circle, the art gallery Hepworth Wakefield recently revived the School Prints project by commissioning lithographs from a range of contemporary artists (Guardian 2017).

What links these initiatives is that each is underpinned by an implicit belief that children should value certain aspects of visual culture in much the same way that adults do. When asked to explain the meaning of the lithograph he created for School Prints, Picasso said ‘The children will understand’. While this response reflects Picasso’s belief that children have an instinctive appetite for art, it fails to take account of the problem that many children find it difficult to appreciate artists’ work. Artists make art for many reasons, but rarely to please children. Whereas children’s authors and illustrators create stories and images designed to entertain their young audiences, artists are rarely concerned whether children will appreciate their work. This presents teachers with the problem of finding strategies to raise levels of engagement with artworks, and many succeed, as evidenced by the annual *Take One Picture* exhibition of children’s work at the National Gallery. Nonetheless, it remains a challenge for teachers. The remaining sections of this chapter explore the possibility that teachers might meet this challenge by looking to children’s own visual culture for ideas to motivate their learning both in art and across the curriculum.

Box feature at end of section:

Reflective questions:

What images have you chosen to support learning in your own classroom?

What opportunities did children have to respond to these images?

Why do teachers sometimes prioritise artworks over other images?

What kinds of images do children encounter at home?

New technologies have not only changed the ways in which children encounter images but also provided them with access to a more diverse range of visual material. While the recent shift in their viewing behaviour does not necessarily mean that children’s tastes or interests have changed significantly, it poses challenges both for parents wanting to monitor their offspring’s viewing habits and for educators aiming to understand children’s experiences. The increased affordability of smartphones and tablets means children are more likely to be watching their own screens without adult supervision. In this context, it is understandable that much of the recent research into children’s media use has focused on issues surrounding its impact on children’s mental health and online safety (e.g. Zilka 2017) rather than on its potential for learning.

My own interest in children’s visual preferences developed from a study I carried out in which I asked 50 children aged 10-11 to find and photograph images they thought were beautiful (Watts 2018). When children shared images during group interviews, I was surprised not only by the diversity of the subject matter but also by their ability to analyse and reflect upon their preferences. Images, it seemed, were important to children; they helped them to articulate their perceptions of the world and their understanding of their experiences. While

recent research has explored the potential of using comics and graphic novels in the classroom (e.g. Ogier and Ghosh 2017) there has been little, if any, research into teachers' use of images depicting children's cinema, television or computer games. In an effort to understand more about the nature of children's visual preferences and the films, TV programmes and computer games that appealed to them, I started to pay closer attention to what my own children – boys aged 11 and 13 – watched at home.

My research was helped by the fact that builders had recently demolished a wall in our house. The re-design meant that a journey from the stairs to the kitchen that had hitherto taken me past the living room door now involved a walk through an open-plan space. Whereas previously I had only overheard muffled sounds of the TV programmes and computer games my children watched and played, I now regularly caught glimpses of them onscreen as I passed through the room. Some of the images were bewildering, some banal – but others were more distracting. Certain scenes were striking. A group of friends clutching at each other's hands in quiet desperation as they appeared to face untimely deaths... A shadowy figure creeping silently through a deserted moonlit landscape... A teenager lost in dense woodland, the roots of trees twisting around her ankles. What was happening? Who were these people? And what, for Heaven's sake, is the *Upside-Down* all about?

The demolition of the wall began to take on a somewhat symbolic significance, as I began to realise that there was more to children's visual culture than I had previously acknowledged. I knew the movies they watched were often funny, exciting and entertaining, but I found I had underestimated their depth, diversity and visual complexity. Curiously, aspects of their most striking scenes were strangely familiar. Some reminded me of paintings. Those doomed figures clutching hands could have been trapped in one of John Martin's apocalyptic canvases; that moonlit landscape was just the sort of scene Romantic painters such as Samuel Palmer often captured, while those teenagers searching for their lost friend in the woods in looked like they could have wandered out of a landscape painting by contemporary artist Peter Doig. I realised children were sometimes interested in looking at similar things to me – but in an entirely different context, one widely perceived to be quite distinct from 'real' art.

The following section of this chapter explores three examples of images drawn from children's visual culture and explores how each offers teachers a starting point from which to explore children's knowledge and understanding. The images are drawn from the cinema, a computer game and a TV programme, and each depicts figures engaging (or hidden) in landscapes. Each image is accompanied by a painting with similar visual and atmospheric qualities. It might seem like an unlikely journey, but a lesson that begins by talking about *Toy Story* can conclude with a story from the Old Testament; another that begins with screenshots from the online game *Fortnite* can evoke a romantic landscape by Samuel Palmer, while a lesson inspired by the mysterious world of *Stranger Things* can be enriched by looking at Peter Doig's atmospheric paintings of

mysterious landscapes. In each case, teachers can say to children *We want to hear what you have to say about the images that intrigue you – and then perhaps you'll be interested in some of the images that intrigue us!* Some will need little prompting to make connections, and many will be surprised to learn how contemporary artists, illustrators and animators draw on a rich tradition of visual culture.

Box feature at end of section:

Reflective questions:

What are your perceptions of the changing nature of children's media use?

What do children find engaging about images they encounter outside of school?

What do you remember about how images impacted on you as a child?

**Raising levels of engagement through focusing on children's visual culture
– three examples to explore in the classroom**



Fig. 1

Toy Story 3

Many readers will know that the idea underpinning the three *Toy Story* movies is that children's toys, once out of sight, spring into lives of their own. In the final part of the trilogy the toys' owner, Andy, is now seventeen and leaving home for college. He packs away his toys – Woody, Buzz Lightyear, Mr Potato Head and others – in the loft, but a series of mishaps leads to them being thrown into a garbage truck and eventually dumped onto a conveyor belt headed for a huge incinerator (Fig. 1). The action freezes, the wisecracks dry up and, one by one, the expressions on their faces harden. In a gesture suggesting acceptance of their fate, the toys slowly reach out to hold each other's hands. No two faces have quite the same expression. While some stare blankly into the abyss, others try to hide; Buzz Lightyear grits his teeth and looks towards Woody, whose eyes wide open and mouth contorting in terror. By focusing on a single frame, children will see how beautifully the scene is drawn.

It's a sobering scene for adults, let alone nine-year-olds. Like much contemporary children's cinema, *Toy Story 3* is layered with material intended to appeal to viewers of various ages. Humour, obviously, plays a key part, with some jokes squarely aimed at children and others knowingly targeted at adults, but the visual depths of the movie also resonate with young and old. Much of the emotional punch of the movie lies in its unsentimental depiction of the outmoded, unwanted toys, but the 'incinerator' scene taps in to a deeper, almost primal instinct. Children won't need you to tell them that this is terrifying stuff.

Begin by watching the scene together or looking at online images of it. Watch it again, this time without the sound – removing the dialogue, music and sound effects will help children focus their attention on its visual qualities. Freeze-frame the scene and ask children to describe what they see. Remain receptive to a range of responses to the image but listen for those that allude to three aspects: character, colour and composition. When these themes arise, question children closely about them. Try to vary your language according to children's ages and abilities – ask each question twice, once using complex language, then again in simpler terms:

How did the designers succeed in making the scene so frightening?

(Why is this part of the film so scary?)

Can you describe how each character's expression reflects their feelings?

(How do the faces look different?)

How does the use of colour affect the mood of the image?

(How do the colours make you feel?)

Do the figures dominate the composition? Why not?

(Do the toys look big or small in the picture?)

Encourage children to think beyond the image and to reflect on the deeper meanings it evokes. Several interesting themes arise from the image (and the

movie) that children could explore through discussion: friendship, the passing of time, what is real and not real. Children might appreciate, for example, that the toys are *not* real but that the depiction of their relationships *is* realistic.

Once children have explored the plight of Woody and friends – they survive the scene, by the way – you might find they are ready to engage with work by artists who use different techniques to achieve similar effects. At two metres across, John Martin's painting *The Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah* (Fig. 2) looms over visitors to the National Gallery like a huge cinema screen. Martin's depiction of a storm raining down from Heaven anticipates the apocalyptic scenario depicted a century and a half later in *Toy Story*. Can children imagine the effect the painting had on viewers when it was first exhibited? Look closely at the painting, which depicts God's punishment for the immorality of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, and you'll see the only survivors, Lot and his daughters, escaping the destruction. Look even closer and you'll see a bolt of lightning headed for Lot's wife, she who ignored God's warning not to turn to look at the scene and was turned into a pillar of salt. Happy endings, children will learn, were harder to come by in those days.



Fig. 2

Fortnite



Fig. 3

Few things date faster than new technologies and, by the time the ink dried on the page you are now reading, or the pixels appeared on your screen, the online battle game *Fortnite* may be a distant memory. At the time of writing in 2018 however, it is a constant presence in children's visual culture. Parents, educators and media commentators all express concern at the exponential growth of *Fortnite*, with player numbers rising from one million in August 2017 to 125 million by June 2018 (Statista 2018a). They argue that the game is addictive, aggressive and can be disruptive to children's learning. As such, the idea that teachers might draw inspiration from *Fortnite* is, it must be said, contentious. However, while the game could be seen as the latest in a long line of boy-toys, figures from the US (Statista 2018b) reveal, surprisingly, that a quarter of users are female, and the huge popularity of *Fortnite* means teachers should be curious about its appeal. Some might consider exploring ways of incorporating some of the visual aspects of the game into their teaching.

Fortnite is set on an island. 100 online players parachute avatars on to the island, knowing only one will survive. A storm gradually descends, drawing players into an ever-decreasing circle of activity, and tension builds as they conceal themselves in derelict buildings, gathering weapons and anticipating attacks. The visual environment of *Fortnite* is compelling. The scene illustrated below (Fig. 3) is aesthetically pleasing, yet there is a sense of imminent danger lurking within the moonlit landscape. And while the threat that faced Woody and

his friends in *Toy Story* was apparent and imminent, the danger that lurks within and beyond this image – the abandoned car, the neglected house and the silhouetted trees – is subtler and more unsettling. We can anticipate scaling the hill, descending into the valley, conscious of what might lie in wait for us. The game’s designers have heightened the sense of drama with a limited palette of deep blues, greens and purples, while the bright moon illuminates some surfaces while others are plunged into shadow.



Fig. 4

A child playing *Fortnite* would *see* each of these things but might not consciously *notice* them. However, by isolating a single image from the rapid action of the game, we can encourage children to pause and reflect on its qualities, in the way we might lead them through a gallery of a hundred paintings before pausing to really *look* at one. Curiously, aspects of the *Fortnite* environment evoke certain genres of painting. Samuel Palmer was a Victorian artist whose work captured the essence of the English countryside, instilling it with a gentle, spiritual dimension, and *The Lonely Tower* (Fig. 4) is a beautiful depiction of a moonlit landscape, with trees and hills silhouetted against a soft evening sky. While the quiet, reflective atmosphere of the painting is far more reassuring than the *Fortnite* environment, the pictorial devices Palmer employs to communicate his vision – the composition, the silhouettes, the moonlight – are strangely similar

to those used by the game's designers. One significant difference however, is that Palmer has included in his painting a number of figures, people who appear to integrate harmoniously with the landscape. If *Fortnite* is war, then *The Lonely Tower* is peace.



Fig. 5

A second screenshot of *Fortnite* (Fig. 5) illustrates its connection with another artistic tradition. In the 18th Century a number of painters, writers and philosophers began to reappraise the appeal of vast, uninhabited, mountainous landscapes of the kind depicted in the game. The term 'beauty', they argued, did not do justice to such landscapes, and instead they conceptualised them as *sublime*. Caspar David Friedrich's painting *Wanderer in a Sea of Fog* (Fig. 6) perfectly encapsulates the notion of the sublime. Its mountains and diminishing clouds evoke a sense of infinite space, while the lone figure who has scaled one peak now stares across at the next and beyond into the distance. While Friedrich encourages us to imagine what it would feel like to *be there*, we are simultaneously relieved that it is the wanderer, and not *us*, in the landscape.

Children will quickly notice the similarities between the painting and the *Fortnite* screenshot and, with a little prompting, they will recognise that the game's designers are drawing on artistic traditions that date back centuries. The hooded avatar stands, back to the viewer, staring out into the hostile landscape. Mountains fade into the mist, creating a sense of infinity. The landscape falls away to each side, exaggerating the curve of the earth's surface – it's as if we are floating in a dreamlike state above the scene. While warm colours often create a welcoming atmosphere, the hues of this landscape are scorched, creating a sense

that time is running out, not only for the hooded figure but also for the planet itself. This might be the most sinister sunset children will ever see.



Fig. 6

Stranger Things

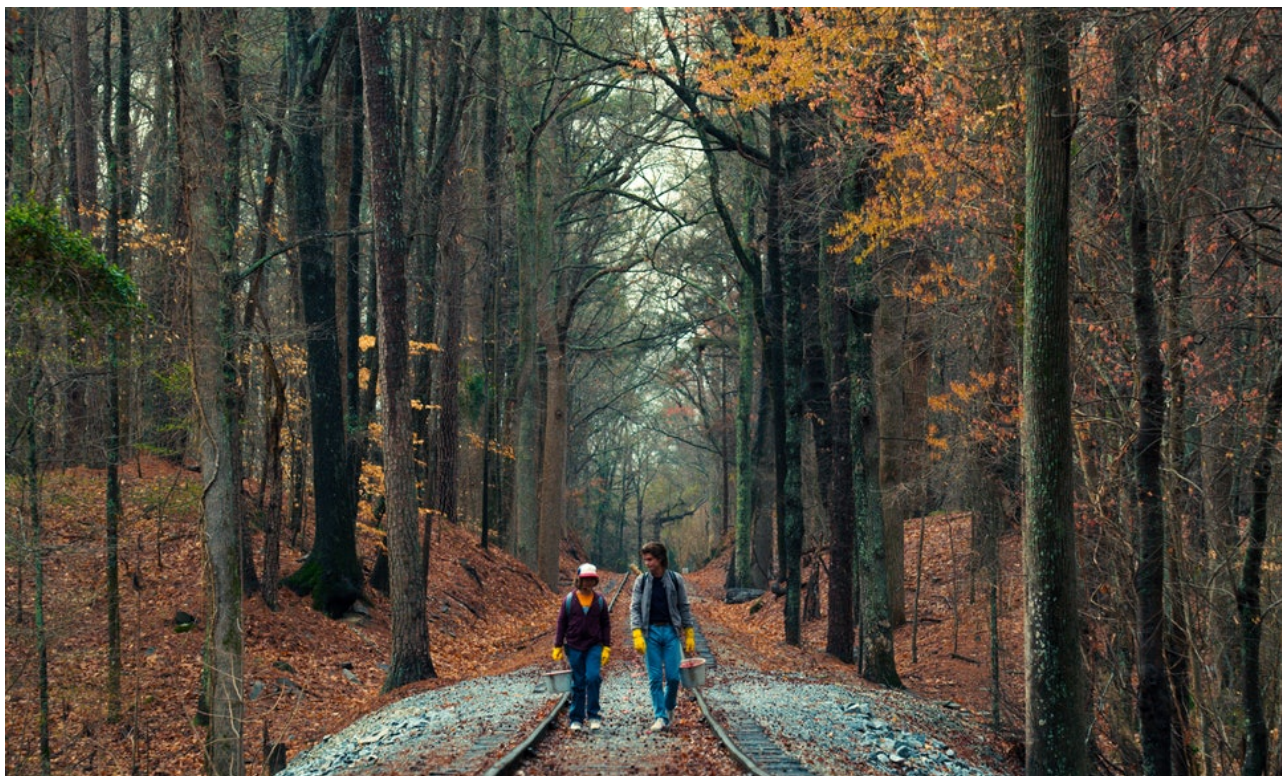


Fig. 7

Our brief journey through children's visual culture concludes with *Stranger Things*. If you're new to the *Netflix* series, it's probably best not to ask your class to provide a summary of the story so far – you could be in for a long conversation. Suffice to say that the sudden disappearance of 12-year-old Will leads his four friends to discover that, beneath their home town of Hawkins, Indiana there lies an alternative environment, an 'upside down' that has engulfed their friend. Oh, and there's a girl called Eleven living in one of their basements – she has telekinetic powers and is on the run from evil scientists who work at a secret government research laboratory that – you get the picture.

The visual appeal of *Stranger Things* centres on its juxtaposition of everyday life and the supernatural. Writer/directors the Duffer Brothers draw on the work of Steven Spielberg, John Carpenter and David Lynch, and the series also connects with some deeply rooted ideas surrounding childhood imagination. Its most compelling aspect is the sense that, only inches away from real life, there lies an entirely different reality. *Stranger Things* makes great use of locations. Sometimes these locations are naturalistic, such as this image of boys walking through a wooded landscape (Fig. 7). This is an environment that children will recognise, either from direct experience – they've been somewhere similar themselves – or indirect experience – they've seen storybook illustrations of similar places. *Stranger Things* transforms these familiar landscapes into malevolent environments, tapping into children's perceptions of natural landscapes as simultaneously nourishing and threatening. These are places

where we are meant to be – but we don't want to be left here alone. It's like taking a wrong turn on a woodland path through a fairy tale, locating itself within a long, rich tradition of children's stories of imaginary worlds



Fig. 8

While teachers might find it problematic to watch episodes of *Stranger Things* in class – Year 6 children are a little younger than the target audience – images from the series offer intriguing starting points for discussion and reflection. In this image (Fig. 8). Sheriff Jim Hopper is investigating a mysterious outbreak of rotting pumpkins – unbeknown to him, his excavations are about to lead him into the subterranean world of the Upside-Down. It's a serene scene with ominous undercurrents. The moon is the same one that shone on the people reclining in Samuel Palmer's rural idyll, but here it casts more sinister shadows across the landscape. Sheriff Hopper looks up at it as he points his torch down – it's as if the moon is messaging him, tempting him to dig below the surface. Isolated, exposed and vulnerable to invisible forces, Jim Hopper is a modern incarnation of Friedrich's *Wanderer*. Children don't need to know what's gone before or what's about to happen – this image alone contains enough to immerse them, to encourage them to stand in the Sheriff's shoes and imagine what might lie behind the trees, above the clouds or beneath the ground. Less, as they say is more, and a single frame of *Stranger Things* is enough stimulate children's imagination.



Fig. 9

The imagery of *Stranger Things* also evokes the work of contemporary artist Peter Doig. Born in Scotland and raised in Trinidad and Canada, Doig studied painting in London the 1980s and is one of several contemporary artists who draw inspiration from the visual culture that left deep impressions on them as children. Many of his paintings refer to cinematic images, movies his teachers never mentioned, images he never saw in school. *Echo Lake* (Fig. 9) is inspired by a scene from the 1980 horror movie *Friday the 13th*. A policeman is poised at the edge of a lake, surrounded by the darkness of the woods. Doig depicts the landscape as a mysterious, enveloping environment, eerily lit like the scene from *Stranger Things*: A horizontal line divides the land from the lake, bisecting the painting and providing a line of symmetry, below which the real landscape is reflected in the painting's own upside-down world. The policeman could easily be Sheriff Hopper, this time with his gaze turned away from the moon, his binoculars pointed towards us.



Fig. 10

As well as drawing inspiration from visual culture, Peter Doig's paintings are also inspired by childhood memories. *Blotter* (Fig. 10) depicts a boy alone in a frozen landscape, gazing down at his reflection in the ice. Once again, the painting could be a scene from *Stranger Things* – there is another reflected image of an upside-down world – and that could be Will on the ice, the boy who mysteriously disappears in the woods. Yet the image is open to interpretation, as Doig describes: 'The title refers to (amongst other things) the notion of one's being absorbed into a place or landscape, and to the process through which the painting developed: soaking paint into the canvas.' *Blotter*, then, refers partly to the process of painting – but it also alludes to the notion of being *immersed* in an experience. Like the boy in *Blotter*, children need to be absorbed. They might be absorbed in playing football, in singing in a choir, in making a painting. But the sight of a child absorbed, immersed in the experience of learning is perhaps the most persuasive argument for a broad and balanced curriculum in primary schools.

Box feature at end of section:

Reflective questions:

How do you think a focus on visual culture raise children's levels of engagement with their learning?

Which examples of art, or visual culture, absorbed you as a child? Which would you choose to share with children?

What themes or issues would you seek to introduce or address through drawing on children's visual culture?

Conclusion: Drawing inspiration from children's visual culture

In a recent (2018) interview on *Desert Island Discs* the Olympic diver Tom Daley described a happy childhood in which, when not plummeting ten metres into swimming pools, he often sat alone at a desk in his parents' garage, absorbed in drawing, painting and making things. Sadly, this image is increasingly unrepresentative of contemporary childhood. Children are primarily consumers, not creators. The range of images accessible to them via the click of a mouse, the swipe of a screen or the flick of a TV remote is almost endless and, for much of the time, images are a distraction rather than an inspiration. As teacher Kevin Jones recently observed, 'Images flow at our children like never before. They need to learn to read and interrogate the visual world, to find space to see feelingly and with wonder, to contact and reflect.' (2015: 25). Jones identifies a key challenge facing primary teachers. But by embracing children's visual culture, teachers can grasp new opportunities to help children to 'see feelingly' – to be *absorbed* by images.

Whichever curriculum area we teach, we want children to be absorbed, like the boy on the ice in Peter Doig's painting, or the young Tom Daley in his garage. We want them to be immersed in their learning, to use their imagination, to think new thoughts. It is widely recognised that a key characteristic of successful learners is that they make connections between different experiences, and as teachers we should look for connections, rather than contrasts between different forms of visual culture. When we look at a painting in the National Gallery we don't simply switch on the part of our brain labelled '*17th Century Dutch Masters*' – we place the experience in the context of a broader range of experiences that might help us to empathise with the people it depicts or admire the skill of the artist or appreciate the beauty of the subject. Similarly, we need to understand more about what children find engaging and absorbing outside of the classroom and offer experiences that connect with their interests. We should provide children with opportunities to articulate responses to their visual culture – and to understand that the artists, illustrators and designers who create the images they love are often inspired by art of the past.

Let's conclude with one last visit to Mr Cleaves' classroom. *That boy at the back. Yes you! What's that you're hiding under the desk?* What else could it be but an early artefact of children's visual culture – a copy of *The Beano*. In the 1950s the comic sold two million copies every week, providing a generation of children with a shared experience that helped them to define themselves in relation to their peers and, to use a phrase of the time, their 'betters'. *The Beano* represented the classroom as a battlefield, one centred around conflict between the apparently irreconcilable priorities of teachers and pupils. Clearly, teachers of the time were less interested in Herbert Read's notion that they should educate their pupils *to become what they are* and more interested in educating them *to become what they are not*. They had narrow-minded expectations of how their pupils should succeed, strongly-held convictions about the need for conformity – and a total lack of interest in understanding what really motivated children.

Today teachers have a greater awareness of the value of child-centred approaches to teaching, of individual styles of learning and of children's diverse needs. But those who aspire to provide a broad and balanced curriculum should also create opportunities for children to explore, share and articulate responses to their own cultural experiences. By paying attention to children's perspectives we show them that we want to understand what engages, inspires and motivates them. A focus on children's visual culture offers an accessible, valuable way of providing a broader, more balanced curriculum in primary schools and reflects a genuinely child-centred approach to teaching and learning.

Further reading

The Arts and the Creation of Mind, by Elliot Eisner.

A great starting point for reflecting on the purposes of art and the nature of creativity

Teaching Thinking: Philosophical Enquiry in the Classroom, by Robert Fisher.

An inspirational text for teachers intent on helping children to articulate their thoughts through discussion.

Foundations of Art and Design by Alan Pipes.

An original and insightful book that draws intriguing connections between the qualities of a diverse range of visual images.

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