



Reviews



Review: Kristie S. Fleckenstein. *Vision, Rhetoric, and Social Action in the Composition Classroom*. (Southern Illinois University Press, 2010)

Tanya K. Rodrigue, Wheaton College

In *Vision, Rhetoric, and Social Action in the Composition Classroom*, winner of the 2009 JAC's W. Ross Winterowd Award for composition theory, Kristie Fleckenstein presents a provocative theory of social action and describes how it can be used to help students recognize personal, cultural, and social injustices and gain tools to make changes in the world. Social action, she argues, emerges from visual habits, rhetorical habits, and place, and she refers to the interplay of these as a "symbiotic knot." Because ways "people think through imagery" and assign visuals "meaning, significance, and power" (163), Fleckenstein claims that to identify and address social injustices we must recognize the ways we see and develop new ways of seeing. Her approach is distinctive for its use of visuals to teach habits encourage students to participate actively in the world and become compassionate, empathic citizens—the ultimate goal, she claims, of social action.

Fleckenstein explores three visual habits: spectacle, animation, and antinomy. In each chapter she identifies a visual habit and its relationship to agency, rhetoric, space, and literacy, then explains how the combination invites or hinders social action, and then presents teaching strategies.



In “A Knot of Silence: Spectacle, Rhetorical Compliance, and the Struggle for Agency” (Chapter 2), Fleckenstein explores the visual habit of spectacle as entwined with rhetorical compliance—a way of seeing that breeds passivity, creates a false sense of community and agency, confines people to the present, and prevents them from engaging with the world. A monologic classroom, a space that invites passive learning, is a consequence of spectacle. Fleckenstein identifies several activities symptomatic of a monologic classroom—remediated presentations, arhetorical assignments, and rigid style requirements. She advocates a “counterspectacle pedagogy” that positions the classroom as a space for dialogue and encourages assignments that oppose elements of spectacle. Fleckenstein describes several assignments that ask students to use images and words, and sometimes only images, for various writing tasks. For example, a storyboarding assignment calls for students to chart their writing process using images. This assignment, Fleckenstein says, counters elements of the spectacle by helping students imagine their ideas in the future, see themselves as “experts” and primary decision-makers, and “tackle the uneven match between word and image,” dismantling the “illusion of unity” (77).

In Chapters 3 and 4, Fleckenstein explores two “symbiotic knots” that foster social action. In “A Knot of Bodies: Visual Animation and Corporeal Rhetoric” (Chapter 3), she focuses on the relationships among three elements: animation, a visual habit characterized by embodiment (moving between representation and presentation) and boundary blurring (the fluidity of act, actor, and audience); the rhetorical body; and “lively” locations. This symbiotic knot brings the body into focus, emphasizing how we can “live, learn, and teach in ways that are generous to those bodies” (83) and in turn, imagine ourselves as “embodied agents of systemic empathic change” (81). To exemplify this kind of social action, Fleckenstein describes the silent protests of Women in Black, a group of mothers whose daughters, mainly factory workers earning low wages, have either disappeared or have been murdered in northern Mexico, and the simultaneous on-line protests of Women in



Black avatars in a chat room. Both the women and avatars engage in social action that evokes empathy through the knot of bodies. She argues that writing teachers who adopt “lively, performance-based writing pedagogy” can help students develop the visual tool of animation. One such assignment could be asking students to write and act in live drama performances. Fleckenstein describes TeenStreet, a program in which teens write, produce and perform plays, to illustrate the effectiveness of such an assignment. The TeenStreet performers engage in exercises that call for “dialogic perspective-taking” and “imaginal interactions” in various ways such as the spontaneous movement of bodies in response to another and impromptu repetition of a peer’s contribution to a co-written performance.

Like the “knot of bodies,” the “knot of contradictions”—the relationship among antinomy, digressive rhetoric, and radical places—encourages social action because it can create a space for developing realities and identities that resist and subvert oppressive forces. In Chapter 4 (“A Knot of Contradictions: Antinomy and Digressive Rhetoric in Subversive Social Action”), Fleckenstein describes *antinomy* as a visual habit that invites people to explore tensions and contradictions in the relationship between images and words, to piece together existing realities to create new realities, and in turn, to develop a new way to identify themselves and their position in the world. Antinomy, she states, supplies tools to engage in popular literacy. To exemplify the symbiotic knot of contradictions, she analyzes a 96-page cartoon her daughter Lindsay created in middle school during a time in Lindsay’s life when she had difficulty fitting in with her classmates. Lindsay used fragments of her life experiences to construct a “reality free from mistreatment” and a “space to grapple with social trauma” (121). Rhetorically, the creation of this “underground cartoon” disrupts the socially constructed “peer structure in her middle school” (128). In a “radical” composition classroom, writing teachers can help students develop visual and rhetorical tools by encouraging them to explore contradictions in imagery and language and to develop “a contradictory orientation in writing” (137); in doing so, students may



develop a way of seeing that might encourage them to “take an inventive, subversive approach to person and social change” (137). Fleckenstein says a revision process that begins with an image prompt and image-word writing offers students the opportunity to play with fragmented realities and contradictions, giving them agency to invent and compose a new way of seeing and being in the world. The ultimate goal of such an assignment is the awareness and understanding of antinomy.

The concluding chapter is particularly useful for composition teachers who want their students to engage with injustices and take action. Taking the example of an upper-division course on memoir, she describes the steps involved in constructing a radical classroom that encourages the habit of antimony.

Fleckenstein makes several contributions to the field of composition and rhetoric. She creates a language to discuss writing, vision and social action. Moreover, she presents, defines and explains a significant list of terms. For example, she identifies four reasons for choosing the word “antinomy” and further defines it using three others terms—bricolage, paradox, and agency invention. While scholars will certainly find this language useful, the complex terms are at times overwhelming. Most significantly, Fleckenstein provides composition teachers with a theoretical lens for designing a course or assignment that seeks to promote social action. She provides a way for compositionists to think about how we might teach visual epistemologies, empathy, and compassion by asking students to think and compose with visuals. Her theory of social action defamiliarizes her sometimes familiar assignments; it guides us in refiguring how and why they might be used in a writing class and what they might be teaching our students.