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**TELLING STORIES FROM PICTURES:
VISUAL CLOSE-READING TOOLS FOR
A CRITICAL VISUAL LITERACY**

**CONTANDO HISTÓRIAS ATRAVÉS DE IMAGENS:
FERRAMENTAS DE ‘CLOSE-READING’ VISUAL
PARA UMA LITERACIA VISUAL CRÍTICA**

ABSTRACT: This study is based on a theoretical framework that combines critical approaches to culture, representation and interculturality, aiming at revisiting the pedagogical potential of images in teaching culture. It reflects on in-class experiments that tested methodologies for reading images authored by Anglophone artists to analyse the ways they represent the social category ‘race’ and the contexts that framed these representations. It also introduces methodologies that will enable the students to apply a visual close-reading to the images. It is argued that by exploring pictures carefully, students will develop their critical visual literacy and expand the practice into the real world.

Keywords: EFL, culture, photography, critical visual literacy, visual close-reading

RESUMO: Este estudo baseia-se numa moldura teórica que combina abordagens críticas dos conceitos de cultura, representação e interculturalidade, tendo como objetivo visitar o potencial pedagógico das imagens no ensino de cultura. Aqui se reflete sobre experiências em sala de aulas que testaram metodologias de leitura de imagens da autoria de artistas anglófonos, de molde a analisar como representam a categoria social ‘raça’ e os contextos que assistiram a essas representações. Este trabalho apresenta metodologias que permitem ao/às estudantes aplicar uma ‘close-reading’ visual à imagem. O argumento de fundo é que uma exploração atenta das imagens conduzirá ao desenvolvimento de uma literacia visual crítica que deve alargar-se ao mundo real.

Palavras-chave: Inglês, línguas estrangeira, cultura, fotografia, literacia visual crítica, ‘close-reading’ visual

1. Introduction

Starting with the saying, “Every picture tells a story”, this reflection will focus on productive ways to find these stories in the specific context of the EFL classroom. This paper will firstly put forth a brief analysis of resources of this type in EFL manuals used in Portuguese schools and then proceed to examine a few examples to explore images productively and creatively, bringing to the foreground issues of context which are fundamental to provide students with the cultural component of language. The ultimate goal is to discuss some tools for *visual close-reading* that will help students realize the narrative potential of the image and, accordingly, develop a critical visual literacy. For the fact that we live in a hypervisual society does not entail that we all are able to critically read the diverse visual stimuli that surround us.

Having taught culture for several years now, I usually teach from a content-driven perspective. This paper reflects the challenges not only to that experience in the seminars in the Masters’ program in Teaching English but also to pedagogy and didactics, examining strategies and tools to determine how to teach materials related to culture.

The focus on the image as one such tool is not meant to limit it to an instrument in teaching a language despite the common reductive use assigned to the image in most EFL manuals in Portuguese schools. A review of some of these materials reveals that illustration, if not mere decoration, is the most common usage ascribed to images, even when they are enticing and complex and can be further explored. But images usually appear paired with texts, instructions, or grammar exercises, to reinforce the ideas established there. Images in these contexts have no value in themselves; they are accessory. In addition, textbooks tend to overuse visual effects, such as colors, shades, the organization of information on the page, the juxtaposition of text and images, and sequences of images, which may have the negative result of distracting the student and eventually also level the information, making the student less receptive to the particularities of the image itself. The fact that most images are everyday, realistic or informative photographs in turn creates a habit of familiarity that calls for recognition only, instead of creating

curiosity or surprise that would in turn demand a more careful and attentive reading, looking for connections or differences, or favor a creative response.

As a consequence, students are barraged with images but they are not invited to look closely at or read them – EFL manuals just reproduce or take further a tendency that has become the ‘style’ of the visual society we live in, the banalization of the image.¹ Images, like their creators, tend to be greatly undervalued for their aesthetic and social contributions to society. Photographs, for instance, are very often involved in the construction of a community’s cultural memory, which is why they can be such rich sources for the study of a particular historical context and the people’s involvement. To offer an alternative, my choice for images privileges their intercultural potential, their authenticity, their appropriateness to the linguistic level in question and, finally, their familiarity – I deliberately avoid images the students are bound to know already, choosing instead to foster their curiosity and surprise.

Society is saturated with images, often to the point where we indifferently pass them by. Nevertheless, images are powerful; some critics have argued they can create *a sense of reality* – a simulation, as philosopher Jean Baudrillard called it.² In a word, hardly ever are images transparent, even when they are realistic and direct; neither are they devoid of prejudices or interests, so we should be *aware* of them. Of course, there is no single correct reading. Images will be read according to the viewers’ life experiences, interests, aspirations and also their particular cultural and social contexts.

Because I trust images are there to be read and not just looked at passively, some of the methodologies I use to explore pictures are the same as those used to explore texts. For, in fact, I am not of the mind that images are more effective in teaching than texts; I respect their differences. Actually, I would

¹ The manuals taken as evidence were *Your Turn*. Robert Quinn. Oxford UP, 2015 (9th grade); *Hotspot*. Virginia Evans et al. Leirilivro, 2015 (9th grade) and *iTeen*. Maria Emília Gonçalves et al. Areal Editores, 2013 (10th grade), the latter of which does explore a couple of cartoons but in other instances presents them simply in the section ‘Have fun’, as a full stop to a particular section, with no instructions whatsoever. There is however one exception, a manual in which different types of images – graffiti, paintings, photographs offering alternative types of representation as well – are the center of the exercises and motivate the learning activities: *Bridges*. Celeste Simões et al. Leya, 2013 (10th grade).

² See Baudrillard (1988).

bring both media together by approaching the image as a visual text. What I am ultimately looking for is a *visual close-reading* that will enable the students to develop analytical critical skills, while they also gain a deeper understanding of both the home and the foreign cultures.

2. Theoretical framework

In order to work the image more productively in the EFL classroom and develop critical visual literacy skills, within the teaching of culture in particular, I apply a theoretical framework that combines critical approaches to culture, representation and interculturality. Culture is, as British critic Raymond Williams has cautioned us, one of the most diffuse words in the English language (Williams, 1986: 87). The danger of generalizations is not binding, though; one can instead roam through the diverse definitions and reach the one that makes sense for any student of culture, as a twin-concept to language. Indeed, we take as a starting point that language and culture form a whole that can not be separated. We become aware of culture in an ordinary fashion, as we stumble upon a word, for instance, and find its meaning strange. As anthropologist Michael Agar remarks, “[c]ulture starts when you realize that you’ve got a problem with language, and the problem has to do with who you are. Culture happens in language, but the consciousness it inspires goes well beyond it” (Agar, 1995: 21).

It is this inseparableness of language and culture that Agar wants to reinforce in his concept of *languaculture*, for, as he also argues, “[l]anguage, in all its varieties, in all the ways it appears in everyday life, builds a world of meanings. When you run into different meanings, when you become aware of your own and work to build a bridge to the others, ‘culture’ is what you’re up to. Language fills the spaces between us with sound; culture forges the human connection through them. Culture is in language, and language is loaded with culture” (Agar, 1995: 28). If we then see culture as the symbolic dimension of language in its aggregation of common meanings, we might add that words are the practical and individual concretization of culture, where the individual expresses his/her subjectivity.

Returning to Raymond Williams's theory, his take on culture as a way of life is particularly interesting in this regard, firstly, because he refocuses on the ordinariness of culture *vis-à-vis* classical definitions such as that of the 'Belles Lettres', coined by Matthew Arnold (1869), qualifying culture as 'the best that has been thought or known in the world'. This allows Williams also to argue that culture is both a product and a process, made up of representations, practices and experiences that reproduce and renew meanings and values at both an institutional and an individual level, hence calling for a negotiation towards common meanings, where culture is 'a way of life' (Williams, 1989: 4). Thus, the subjective charge of culture is accepted, beyond the simple and static set of guidelines according to which people live or the set of particular referential objects that people somehow revere or in which they search for meaning. For Williams, context and process are the two core elements of culture (Williams, 1986: 87). Although they explain how culture develops, culture then also becomes the people's own 'property', as it were, stressing the creativity that goes into its making and the inevitable personal meanings it also acquires (Williams, 1989: 4). It is in this sense that he calls it 'ordinary': "culture is ordinary in every society, in every society and in every mind" (Ibid.), stressing culture as a living, developing process that gets hold of people's attitudes, values and behaviors because it is ultimately the symbolic dimension of their lives, a web of representations that further has the power to accrue *value*, through meanings, to the world surrounding us.

Because meaning is unstable, as it relies on context, and because meaning carries value, culture becomes the terrain where struggles over meaning take place, and a struggle over meanings always entails a struggle over power. Hence, when studying culture, one should neither neglect the relations established between the cultural subjects and the objects nor the power those relations bring to each of those involved. That is, who represents who or what, and who/what is represented, and to what purpose? – these are crucial questions to bear in mind. By transposing this idea into the classroom, we can extrapolate that visual representations, in this case, are the arena where meanings build up identities, so that we can observe and critically examine how identities are created, contested and recreated, which ultimately attests to their artificiality.

For words and images are the main systems through which meaning circulates and in this point I find cultural theorist Stuart Hall's concept of representation particularly useful. It stresses that, while it is in the connection between word and its corresponding concept that meaning lies, what matters most for students of culture is the process by means of which that connection is elaborated – and that process is representation (Hall, 2010: 19). He defines it as “the production of the meaning of the concepts in our minds through language. It is the link between concepts and language which enables us to refer to either the ‘real’ world of objects, people or events, or indeed to imaginary worlds of fictional objects” (17). It follows that meaning is an artefact, rather than inherent in things or in the world; as Hall defends, “[i]t is the result of a signifying practice – a practice that [. . .] *makes things mean*” (24). For instance, in *Ways of Seeing* (1972), art critic John Berger has demonstrated how our forms of seeing the world are profoundly cultural, in evincing how a particular tradition in painting – the nude – associated ideas of passivity and submission to the notion of the ‘feminine’ by representing the female body according to particular conventions. Berger also shows how those cultural associations still resonate in today's notions of gender.

As Hall (1973) has also remarked when analysing ideology in television, meanings are firstly *encoded* in representations but they only work when they are *decoded* by the viewers. Images, too, have their own discourse, a system of codes involving a particular grammar and syntax according to which meaning is both encoded and decoded (Clarke, 1997: 27). In regard to the process of decoding when reading an image, critic Roland Barthes's notions of ‘denotative’ and ‘connotative’ readings can be usefully added to the analytical frame proposed thus far. The denotative reading is a first approach attending to the overall picture, whereas the connotative reading scrutinizes the image, searching for details. Barthes distinguishes these types of looking as ‘*studium*’ and ‘*punctum*’ (Barthes, 2010 [1981]: 26-27). This reading deconstructs the image and its ultimate goal is a critical commentary based on attention to detail, that may depend on contextual data as well. It is thus in the details that the places of culture are reached.

This leads to the different levels implied in the analysis of an image: on the one hand, who produced it, in what context (or ideology) and by what

means; then, on the other hand, the audience, who looks at and interprets the image (Levine, 2004: 10). The image in its wholeness is as much produced by its readers or interpreters as by its author. In the case of the classroom, the role of the teacher as mediator is also crucial because the ways s/he will include the image in the classroom, following a particular topic and providing coordinates of context and reading guidelines, will have an impact on the way it is decoded.

The general approach to the image, Barthes's *studium*, implies reading questions that locate the viewer, such as, 'Who/what do we see?', 'What objects stand out?' and 'What colors dominate?', or 'Are there figures in the picture and what are they doing?' In turn, *punctum* orients the viewer towards deeper aspects that the picture does not necessarily show directly and about which external knowledge may be required, such as historical or social facts or biographical data on the artist. In this case, the questions to ask would be, for example, 'Why are the figures acting like that to one another?' or 'Do the colors or the use of light have any effect on the picture?' to explore particular details. As a third step in the process, specific questions regarding culture could be asked, such as associations that come to mind in regard of the action/situation/figure represented, depending on the image in question.

Yet another aspect to bear in mind when analyzing an image in the cultural context in the EFL classroom is that the concept of culture must be pluralized to acknowledge both its plasticity and dynamic character, first, because we will be dealing with more than one single culture and, second, because although it is true that cultures compete and conflict, they also coexist and dialogue. In any case, we must be reminded that cultures interact. Thirdly, we should also do away with the idea that any one culture is 'single' in the sense of homogeneous. Accordingly, another concept is required, *interculturality*. The idea was first introduced in the context of the integration of immigrant groups in Western societies and was therefore connected from the start to a general concern with difference (Byram *et al.*, 1994: 181). Theorist of foreign-language education and intercultural education, Michael Byram transposed these concerns to the field of foreign language teaching-and-learning.

According to Byram (1989), an intercultural practice in the classroom relies heavily on the creation of empathy. He argues that a critical reading

of cultures aims at much more than just to perceive difference as otherness in the sense of strange, exotic, curious, odd, or disturbing. It is rather a matter of accepting the other as different (1989: 89), so interculturality is a position in between cultures that carries the corresponding awareness that divisiveness is not just inevitable but necessary for dialogue. Acceptance of a different culture does not therefore entail identification or the will to be the same; the intercultural competence demands a critical distance, a decentring both from the foreign culture and the mother culture (1989: 92). This process will denaturalize fixed, distorting representations, such as stereotypes or other forms of generalization or simplification. At this stage, it is not so important that the teacher tries to look for the common points between cultures; it is far more challenging to look for the differences. Indeed, Byram *et al.* (1994) also asserts that students must be exposed to the contradictions and conflicts inherent in cultures in order to create the critical understanding that is the basis of interculturality (1994: 179). Only then will they arrive at a complex notion of their own cultures as well. Of course, interculturality could not but rely on a comparative perspective (Byram *et al.*, 2002: 12) which, unlike ignorance or the unjustified perception of difference that often stimulate prejudice, is bound to bring cultures closer instead of distancing them.

But, above all, teachers must recall that they are dealing with representations; not with facts, but with meanings, and so will the students, in their own readings, produce their own meanings. To return to Stuart Hall, things do not mean in or by themselves; it is the responsibility of the 'reader' to accrue meaning to them, in this case, by deconstructing the image. Our ultimate task in the classroom is therefore to lead the students to develop relationships between the meaningful aspects of the images, as representations of reality to thereby begin to grasp the power of perception and develop both creative and critical responses. For the image is static – it does not in fact 'tell' a story; but its visual power has the capacity to challenge the viewers, to raise their curiosity and imagination, and also to raise their consciousness – so the viewers and readers will actually *tell* the story. This is the critical intercultural approach that will eventually lead to what Byram calls an education for international citizenship (Byram, 1994: 181).

I would finally integrate in this perspective scholar Antonia Darder's critical thoughts on education. Darder (1991) proposes an education towards freedom that develops a particular awareness to issues of culture in teaching students critical perspectives and modes of inquiry by means of which they reassess the role of society in shaping their goals, aspirations and dreams. Ultimately, students will be able to challenge and change the conditions in which they live and the models/identities in which they are made to fit (Darder, 1991: xvi) – and they will accomplish that, I would add, by realizing the power entailed in the images surrounding them and by being willing to engage critically with the meanings they offer.

3. Looking for places of culture: analysing images

As for application in the classroom, the selection of the most authentic materials possible is as important as the conception of original tools to explore them, keeping in mind the type of image to be used, be it photography, illustration, painting, or a cartoon and its source. Considerations include whether it is a private or a public photography, for instance, whether it is historical or contemporary and whether the style or the topic represented is formal or informal. Being aware of the promises and the limitations of each type, the selection should tend towards the image that best serves the interest of the target class. In pedagogical terms, my concern is to put into practice Byram's ideas about interculturality, namely to touch upon issues of difference that will lead the students to reflect back upon their own cultural experiences as well.

Take, for example, a photo by a contemporary Swiss-born photographer who later became a U.S. citizen, Robert Frank, extracted from a much celebrated collection of photos taken on a road trip in the 1950s, entitled *The Americans* (1958). The collection however was far from acclaimed at first, published originally in Europe and only one year later in the United States. Beat poet and writer Jack Kerouac's introduction (in Frank, 2008 [1858]) may explain the resistance to what was perceived as a pessimistic

view of 'America', when he asserted that Frank's photographs "sucked a sad poem out of America" (n.p.).³

The United States at the time was already the prototype of the consumer society. The post-war era had seen an explosion in consumption and the so-called "American way of life" was desired in many other parts of the world. The "American Way" thus became a formula, encompassing the ideals of democracy, freedom of choice and 'the good life'. It may have taken an outsider, someone with a substantial distance from this environment, to look at U.S. society from a more critical angle. But many Americans disliked what they perceived to be a lack of 'empathy' in many of Frank's photographs, which tended to focus on common people engaged in uninteresting everyday routines rather than heroes or glamorous personae. However, decades later Frank's photographs were ascribed a high documentary value that offers a counterbalance to the myths associated with 'America' and its culture, and it is precisely that value which I propose to explore. As I intend to show, in the apparently uninteresting everyday gestures of these figures there is in effect a great deal of interest and meaning.

According to the current programs for English in the Portuguese schools, I believe the materials I will shortly introduce and explore would fit both the 10th grade, under the topic "Youth in the global era – Youth today: val-

³ EFL teachers will find a wealth of authentic visual materials on the Web, sometimes with suggestions for teaching, in institutional websites, some of which include: <<http://besthistorysites.net/american-history/>>; The Library of Congress has a generous archive on photography at <<https://www.loc.gov/photos/collections/>>, as well as a site for teachers that includes forms to support text analysis: <<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/usingprimarysources/guides.html>>. See also <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/>, the Library of Congress webpage, especially the sections 'Picturing Modern America 1880-1920' and the "American Memory" Archive; the site of the literary and critical magazine *The New Yorker* offers plenty of critical cartoons, recommended for more advanced levels though, at <<http://www.newyorker.com/archive>>. Also the newspaper *The New York Times* shows a section, "What's going on in this picture?" at <http://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/category/lesson-plans/whats-going-on-in-this-picture/?_r=0>, where students can explore recent images published in the newspaper but without a title, caption or headline so that they must rely only on the information in the image. Also useful at *The New York Times* is the 'Learning Network Section' at <http://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/02/27/10-intriguing-photographs-to-teach-close-reading-and-visual-thinking-skills/?_r=0>. As for British Culture, consult the National Archives webpage for primary source material in the section 'Docs Teach', while links to the 'National History' section provide lesson plans and the 'Documents Analysis' page offers suggestions on how to teach with documents. Finally, teachers can find a handful of good pictures available for Public Domain, via Creative Commons, Flickr, Picasa, or Shutterfly, among others.

ues, attitudes, forms of behavior, dreams and ambitions”, or the 11th, within the rubric “A World of Many Cultures – the multicultural society, equality of opportunities, equality of rights, socioeconomic inclusion and discrimination”. While the topic of multiculturalism is not a novelty in Portuguese EFL manuals, the take promoted is usually one of celebration and unproblematic engagement with difference. So, while the visibility of the abstract topic is evident, its complexity tends to remain invisible, which explains why issues such as race are absent and proves education scientist Stephen R. Stoer’s hints at the hidden curriculum actually in place as indicative of an actual disconnection between school and society.⁴ Stoer asserts that in Portuguese schools there is “the appeal to a *benign cultural pluralism* inside the school which is revealed to be i) naïve with respect to the unequal social status of different cultural groups, and ii) unarmed in regard to a State which, despite its good intentions, continues to promote an educational policy that justifies a political citizenship by means of denying cultural particularities and specificities” (Stoer, 2001: 258).⁵

I would therefore also link the program topic specifically to the question of race, an aspect that is central to the study of U.S. culture, as well as to the whole western world, since the history of slavery rests at the core of the western empires. Having said this, I am also aware that race is a controversial subject and that, at this stage, students have already dealt, at least at school, with the heinous history of slavery. My stress will be very clearly on race as a social construct that structures the relations between people and their own place in society, rather than as a determinant of individual identity. Because interculturality, as previously defined, promotes empathy by inviting the students to put themselves in someone else’s shoes, I believe the approach to race in the classroom may be used as a tool against racism. The images I chose to analyse illustrate these aspects, and also that the ultimate goal in this teaching project will be to foster a discussion on racism, rather than race.

⁴ Despite the fact that Stephen Stoer’s study dates from the late 1990s, the approach to multiculturalism in current manuals has not changed significantly.

⁵ Italics as in the original. Translation by the author.



Image 1: Frank, R. (Photographer) (1955). *Trolley – New Orleans 1955* [photograph].

© Robert Frank from *The Americans*.

In “Trolley – New Orleans” (1955-1956) (image 1), a photograph of a public nature, the denotative analysis should take into account internal sources of information. A description of the picture can be created based on general or closed questions, such as ‘What do we see in this photo?’ ‘Where does it take place?’, ‘Are there figures? What are they doing?’, ‘Who are they?’ and ‘When was the photo made?’ And because the picture could be cropped into individual trolley windows, taking each window as a portrait frame, students could make the individual descriptions based on the expressive features of each figure. Moving into the detailed level, this would rely on connotative details, like ‘What does s/he look like?’ and ‘What can we learn about this figure’s life or occupation?’, until reaching the crucial detail – the question of the place each figure occupies in the bus; whites in the front seats, African-Americans in the back rows – a division. Questions like ‘Is this important?’ and ‘Why this division?’ would be needed to consolidate the transition into the process Barthes (2010 [1981]) calls *punctum* because these questions delve into the particular cultural experience of these figures, whose everyday life is conditioned by the rules imposed by the racial regime of segregation. For instance, these people are reminded of the color of their skin any time they have to choose the door

to enter a restaurant, the day to visit the swimming-pool or their seat when taking public transport, be it a trolley, a bus or the train.

We have thus arrived at the place of culture in the picture, the racial division that reflects the way people were led to avoid interacting with one another in public places because of the racial identity they were assigned. This would then lead the discussion towards interpretation in the sense of a more connotative analysis: how the idea of race determined place in society and the relation to others and at the same time justified the system of segregation, a form of institutional racism, in the U.S. South. The teacher would then provide external sources of information regarding context, namely the history of segregation and the challenges to it made by the Civil Rights Movement at the time Frank took this photo, shortly before legislation regarding segregation in public transportation began to change due directly to pressures from the Civil Rights Movement.

The external sources of information could certainly be inferred by the students themselves from the title of the photo, which provides its original context. Exploring the location would then require further information about the Civil War and its causes, outcome and follow-up, the period of Reconstruction – and its failure to implement resulting in the institution of segregation as the cultural legacy of slavery. I would complete this with what critic Terry Barrett calls the ‘photograph’s casual environment’ (2006: 44), which includes the information provided above about Frank’s travels in the U.S. and his intention to portray the U.S. post-war society in less idealized ways than those that resonated in Europe, where a fascination with U.S. culture was inevitable given the U.S.’s role in the reconstruction of the continent after World War II. For Frank the foreigner, informed by the myth of the American way of life that was projected in Europe, the questions would certainly be ‘Where is freedom?’, ‘Where is democracy?’ and ‘Where is happiness in these people’s faces?’ In view of these contradictions, Frank’s photograph brings in issues of citizenship and can therefore be considered an ethically evaluative photograph in the sense espoused by Barrett (2006). It might be going too far to call Frank an activist who was intent on denouncing the system of segregation but the fact is that, in this picture, he clearly portrays this reality.

Whereas this photo exposes the historical context of segregation in the U.S. South generally by means of anonymous passengers on a segregated trolley, the photo I would propose to complement the analysis individualizes segregation with a specific life story. Ruby Bridges was the first African American child to break with school segregation, coincidentally also in New Orleans, in 1960 (image 2). Bridges was allowed to attend the William Franz Elementary School, where, despite the word of the law, her presence was endangered by reactions by parents, teachers, staff and the other pupils. Boycotts of all sorts ranged from parents who would not allow their children to go to school to teachers who refused to teach Ruby's class, and staff who threatened to poison her food in the canteen. The boycott was eventually lifted but Ruby's family was itself the target of a number of threats and the city authorities were forced to secure the girl's safety by assigning her a police escort to ensure that the law was respected. This is what this public image, a newspaper photo, represents: six-year old Ruby's strange routine walking to school.



Image 2: Photographer unknown; Public domain photograph

For the photo analysis, the same steps previously mentioned could be followed, with general informative questions and then detailed connotative questions exploring the place of culture, in particular the absurd contrast between the child's innocence and frailty and the power of authority embodied in the four strong police agents who escort her, perversely misleading the distracted observer. It seems that Ruby herself posed a danger to society or had the power to do something horrible that required vigilance. Ruby's smile is also distracting and poses another connotative question, "Isn't she feeling oppressed by this show of force?" The rather candid response will likely be that she is simply enjoying and anticipating what will be her first day at school, a milestone in her life, as she is completely unaware of the social conflicts that her simple activity would set off within the community. This is complementary information the teacher would find through previous research into Ruby Bridges's biography.

But this photo would only introduce the subject – Who might the girl in the image be? Where is she? What is she doing? Who are the men surrounding her? Who is the man behind the glass door? As an alternative to a second photo to diversify the kinds of materials while sticking to visual cultural documents, the visual analysis of Norman Rockwell's painting "The Problem We All Live with" (image 4) could be used. The painting was actually inspired in the newspaper photo shown above, a relation that certainly also deserves mention – and if you choose to crop the original photo of Bridges's first walk to school (image 3), the relationship will be even more evident.

Originally published as an illustration in the magazine *Look*, in 1964. Rockwell's painting represents Ruby Bridges escorted in her famous first walk to school. To better understand Rockwell (1894-1978), who is generally undervalued as a populist artist, it should be mentioned that he was first more famous as an illustrator than as a painter, an appreciation based on his decade long contributions of sentimental and humoristic illustrations for the cover of the magazine *The Saturday Evening Post*. He is usually considered too sweet, the representative of an idealized 'America' – that of the myths Robert Frank deconstructed in his photographic tour of the U.S. Yet, there is a less acknowledged facet to Rockwell that our students may well discover and of which this painting is representative. Rockwell did not remain indifferent to the social

turmoil around him and, from the 1960s on, the civil rights motifs that appear in Frank's photo we have just commented on, take an obvious urgency in some of Rockwell's paintings and illustrations as well.⁶



Image 3: Photographer unknown. Public domain photograph.

“The Problem We All Live with” adds a number of aesthetic elements to the casual photograph analysed in image 2. Ruby’s white dress in particular appends meaning to the original image, contrasting with the color of her skin and possibly hinting at innocence. Her posture suggests determination and confidence, against all the odds – and the odds are there and distract our attention from Ruby’s calm walk. The *studium* of the image reveals the cultural detail, the red stains on the wall left by tomatoes violently thrown against it and the word “nigger” graffitied on the same background wall; these signs of violence make hate visible despite the absence of violence *per se*. And

⁶ In other paintings, Rockwell’s awareness of the violence around the Civil Rights Movement is even more at odds with the association of his artistic style with mild-manneredness and humour; see, for instance, the painting “Southern Justice,” from 1965.

this is obviously the hate the guards are protecting Ruby from, in this much more violent representation whose details enrich the cultural analysis of the image. The disproportion in volume between the guards and the little girl is also highlighted while the idea of security is reinforced by the composition of the picture: the figures of the guards form a protective frame surrounding small frail Ruby on all sides.

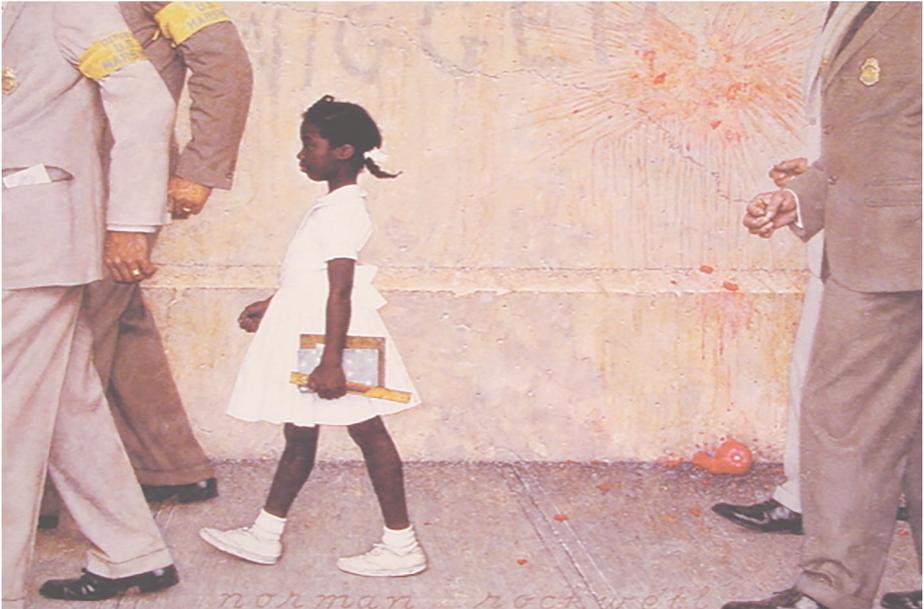


Image 4: Rockwell, N. (1964). *The Problem We All Live With*.
The Norman Rockwell Museum, Stockbridge, Massachusetts.

To consolidate the analysis, I would suggest a final activity that combines the contextual strength of Frank’s photograph with the power of the individual story/testimony in the case of the second photograph or Rockwell’s painting. This would take the form of a writing assignment aimed at exploring the narrative potential of the image in tandem with both the creative and imaginative potential of the students and the practice of interculturality in the classroom. Going back to Frank’s photo of the New Orleans trolley and cutting it up window by window of the trolley, students can “tell the story” suggested

by each individual window frame, imagining either a life story or 'a day in the life' of one of those figures who rode the segregated trolley. This would allow them to effectively putting themselves in the shoes of others as reinforced by Michael Byram (1989: 88). Time allowing, it could be an in-class writing exercise or a homework assignment to be later assessed by the teacher. These diverse stories might then be shared with the class and even debated and discussed. Above all, I believe the exercise of taking the other's position would help the students to develop not only their negotiation skills but also greater competence in understanding the complexity of other people's experiences.

To round-off the class, a couple of recent photographs of the Black Lives Matter Movement (image 5) could establish the ongoing relevance of the issue of race in the United States, some sixty years after Frank and Rockwell created the representations analyzed previously in this class. The photo I picked, in black and white, suggests that connection: the enduring presence of racial conflict in the U.S. society embodied in new movements, which actually in many ways just retrieve the issues already on the agenda of the Civil Rights Movement, such as racial profiling and police brutality.



Image 5: Photo by Johnny Silvercloud, "Demilitarize the Police, Black Lives Matter"

The debate should, of course, be enlarged to encompass the question of racism in Portugal and to what extent the legacy of slavery has left similar or different marks, or similar or different cultural understandings of history, in relation to those already discussed. To add to the visual dimension underlying the exercise as a whole, the class topic could be further extended through a brief research project in which students would be required to collect media photographs that represent cases of racism in Portugal. At least a handful of those in class would certainly learn something which they were previously unaware of about their own culture.

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