

Joachim Schroeder (1991)

Images educate

Or: How a copper engraving becomes a codification

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Intercultural educational practice moves in worlds in-between, in a zone where worlds meet, where cultures get in touch, where an encounter of different forms and understandings of life, of thinking and patterns of perception takes place. The (inter-)cultural encounter is the basic topic of intercultural education as such; because this concept assumes that the reflection on different cultures can be pedagogically fruitful in school and stimulates learning processes. Yet it is unnecessary to underline that these intercultural encounters, not only in schools but in the federal republic more generally, currently take place in a very problematic way. Where cultures and worlds meet, currently violence and forms of domination rule: in the neo-colonial encounter of first and third world as much as in the slightly more tacit form of violation of the foreign in mass summer tourism, in the encounter of work migrant/asylum seeker with the German world of life, bureaucracy and economy, as well as in (sub) cultural encounters of well-to-do middle class with "a-social" subcultures, or women's and men's worlds. These societal problems and structures naturally affect schools and class work. Yes, inter- and subcultural encounters are part of the basic and everyday experiences of any student and rarely take an unproblematic course. Examples are, again, not only the often unintelligible, speechless encounters of guest workers' children with German classmates, or the helpless, incomprehensive efforts of engagement between teachers and foreign pupils; but also the routine and subtle forms of conflict between teachers and students, between adults and children, between the world of school/students and real-life are often experienced as violent by one side or the other. The encounter with the foreign therefore is not only the basic topic and principle of intercultural education, not only an important problem politically and in society, nationally or internationally, but it is an everyday experience of students, an existential theme of the student world.

Existential themes, that comprehend both the individual and subjective experiences of the students and the social relations and problems behind them, are always worth being taken up in class, to make them visible and reflect on them. Obviously there are many forms how such themes can be reconstructed and represented in class. Lastly this is a question of finding or developing a proper "codification" by which the students can find their access to the theme. The concept of "codification", as developed by Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire, now does not refer to finding a smart introduction to the topic, giving an impulse or motivating students through proper material. A codification is more than that: it contains the current, concrete experiences of the students and makes them an object of learning; it takes up social problems subjectively experienced and tries to lay open their contradictions and interrelations; it "names" problems and encodes them at the same time, because it is the process of de-codification,

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of analysis and reflection of the codification, where learning proper takes place; it tries to represent tangible reality in a way that its connection with personal experience as well as with societal problems becomes visible (cf. Freire 1973, S. 79ff.)

Codifications can be newly produced, or one uses existing material. Codifications can be texts, roleplays, music pieces or images. In Latin America, mostly images or comic-like booklets are used; this is because the often illiterate population can work best with images. Also students often find easier access with images to topics and questions: images bypass reading difficulties, images make visible, the language of images is more international. This contribution wants to show, how even works of “high culture” - in this case a copper engraving from the late renaissance – can be used as codifications. Yet, for use in class the artwork still has to become a codification, meaning that it has to be prepared for use in class and it has to be used outside of common methodology. If used as codification, the work of art can not be treated on the level of art or art history, but it has to be mediated in the concrete societal context and close to student biographies. This is not to negate the necessity of consulting academic literature and studying the history and contexts of production of the image. But in class, the problem represented in the picture and the process of decoding with the students has to take center stage, the discussion of what students see, associate, name and decode.

With Peter Weiss at the latest such an active and “discursive approach of appropriation” is found, by the way, also in the discussions in art theory. The point for him is neither appreciative contemplation of an artwork nor interpretation in art history, but the incessant analysis and appropriation of the contradictions in the artwork; it is not about understanding the image, but with the image one’s own situation and position.

In his “Aesthetics of Resistance” Peter Weiss illustrates such active approaches of appropriation and decodification with many examples, in form of the novel: “...to use the first impression only as an opportunity to take the given apart, to question it from different directions, to put it together anew and thereby appropriate it” (I, 336). The goal is not an interpretation of the image. He understands appropriation as a “process of remembering” of one’s own and society’s history and situation: “But as the depicted became understandable and pointed to the own powers which had brought it about, it showed us our own position...” (I, 340).

In this contribution I attempt to show with an example how codifications can be used in class and how they have to be prepared. I selected for this a well-known copper engraving by Theodor de Bry (image 1). The image for me contains the unresolved historical problem, and the currently to-be-solved problem of cultural encounters, in very compact codification. It shows the word in-between, where worlds meet, it shows the border and the line of contact, it is an intercultural image.

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The image

[historical information on author and image]

[own decodification by the author]:

[...] in connection with the caption it is revealed as an image of a wish: the alliance of friendship did not last long and was replaced by a relation of domination. [...]

The image works with clear contrasts: on the one side, the clothed, civilized whites in arms; on the other side the naked, fearful Indians bringing their presents; the scene is dominated by a Columbus as the center of the image, and by ships as technological achievement of the whites; like fearful sheep the Indians assemble together, already in this image placed at the margin, bringing their offers devotedly; the image is split (vertically by spear and mast) in two unequal sides and both parts are sharply separated [...]

The image shows a historical opportunity that was wasted: a friendly exchange would have been possible, a mutual give and take, as the image suggests, an intercultural dialogue.

But the image shows as well that the roles were split unequally from the start: the indios deliver the piece of gold, the raw material, and themselves – that's all they have to offer, the image says. The whites bring civilization (shirts, hats), culture (mirror, knife), technology (ships, inventiveness) and lastly the cross, the true belief and the truth. Carefully, most part of the indians' world is left out of the image: their civilization, their culture, their technology and belief. In this sense, the image shows the encounter of two cultures and the establishment of a relation of domination between these cultures. While the caption still wishes for intercultural dialogue, the image itself shows already that this wish has not been fulfilled.

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At this same place Columbus was received friendly and cordially by the Cacique; and while they honoured each other with gifts and presents they made and confirmed the alliance of future friendship: Columbus honoured and endowed the king with shirts, hats, knives, mirrors and similar things, on the other hand the cacique honoured Columbus and presented him a big and heavy lump of gold

[further information on the image's historical context and representational references between imagery in Aztec codices, European depictions of the Americas and modern Latin American caricature]

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How a copper engraving becomes a codification

The faculty to decode images has to be learnt. To use images as codification, to prompt students to see their own experiences mirrored in images and to recognize their connection to societal problems in them, even more has to be learnt and practiced, especially for students. That the students themselves produce codifications, bringing their subjective experiences and condition into and image and making them visible and available for discussion with others, is a goal that can be reached only through previous stages. This is the aim of the following suggestions.

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The copper engraving by de Bry shall be used, as already stated, as codification for the problem of intercultural (or even subcultural and everyday) encounters. The image is highly symbolical, that is to say that in the individual elements an often very complex content of consciousness is hidden, a

compressed message. This symbolism has to be de -encrypted, the image has to be taken apart. This can be done in class very easily and in a graphic way by really “taking apart” the image, cutting it into parts. A first task for the students can be to cut out the individual parts of the image and past them again on a new sheet, but now ordered by questions: Who is represented in which way? What is being shown/not being shown about whom? Which information does the image give about the Spaniards, which about the Indians? These informations, likewise can be ordered by thematic groups: Dress, technical items, political symbols, etc. Image 3 shows what such a worksheet could look like. This can be used in the following in a variety of ways:

- the students can identify and analyse in more detail the individual image -parts [...] The Indians, for example, do not carry a lump of gold, as it says in the caption, but a chalice, decorations and a jewelbox, things that have to be pasted on the *Spanish* side.
- One can attempt to fill the significant information gaps about Indians. Which tools and technologies did they have before Columbus came, how did they live , which symbols did they use, which religion did they have and which indian people are we even talking about in this image? In this research, by the way one will notice that the Europeans took over a lot from Indian peoples, even that our everyday life is quite Indian [...]
- Through the worksheet, an easy access can be found to the basic problem of the image: the character of domination of the encounter. The symbols of domination can be named again (cross, armed Spaniards, the erected spear, the fleeing Indians in the background), as can be the aesthetics of domination (splitting of the image in two unequal halves, the contrast pair Columbus-Indians). An important method of oppression, the not-wanting-to-recognize specific realities, can already be found here as well. What is important as well is the contradiction between image and caption: the iconographic mise -en-scene of an alliance of friendship is quite surprising.

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Variations on the same topic

Surely it is effective to practice the competences of decodification on other images, before inviting students to try possibilities of codification themselves. The context of the Columbus-image offers a lot of suitable material.

[other depictions of the same scene, other scenes of landings of Europeans in other countries, taking columbus' diary entry of the encounter as a point of comparison, other engravings by de Bry, their reference to depictions in aztek codices, and the caricature of the european images in a modern Mexican caricature, comparison to the picture of the American landing on the moon]

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How the images resemble each other...

Surely not all students have to take such detours to be able to produce actualizations and parallels to the basic significance of the image, mirror an experience in it and try to code it in images themselves. Very quickly it is said usually: "Well that's the same as today, we take the raw materials from those in the third world and bring them the machines". Such actualizations, if one wants to stay with the theme of the Third World, can be facilitated asking once again for the details and for "naming":

- Who/what is "Columbus" today (corporations, world bank, experts, techologists, development workers, missionaries)
- Who/what are the ships today? (machines, factories, technology, fertiliser, genetic technology, etc.)
- Who/what is the cross today? (Scientific studies, development plans, loans, etc.)
- Who/what is the lump of gold? (raw materials, food, workforce)

But one can also quickly "name" other forms and situations of cultural encounter: Foreigner-German, Punk-social worker, Man-Woman, Teachert-Pupil, children-parents. The relations of violence and domination are more subtle here, often cannot be ascribed only to one side and obviously are more difficult to express in signs. The following exercise could be to depict everyday encounters of worlds/cultures/Foreigners or to sketch this as a collage using publicity and newspapers, always staying close to the template of the copper engraving. Students this way can make their thoughts visible and clear to others, and they can be discussed and decoded.

In Chile, many women sew pictures like this from fabric rests. They code their everydaylife in the Arpiller wall carpets (meanwhile they are known here as well), to make clear to themselves and to others their conditions and problems of life and search for possibilities of change. I have learnt two things from these women: firstly, to think about the question whether in textile crafts classes really one can only learn crochet and mending socks, and secondly, to experience how images educate.