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Visual Harassment, Intimized Culture and Sexualization of Public Space

How can we interpret the discoveries on children's, especially girls' dissatisfaction with their body? Unlike in Norway and Sweden, in Finland among 10-11 -years old children three quarter of girls and half of boys are unsatisfied with their body. (Oksanen, forthcoming). These numbers are extremely high compared with some other studies on displeasure with appearance: according to Cusumano and Thompson (2001), about half of adolescent girls reported body dissatisfaction, while already 80% among 13 years old Finnish girls were dissatisfied with their appearance. While boys' satisfaction with their appearance increases during adolescence, during the same period girls feel decreasing satisfaction with appearance (see Hoare & Cosgrove 1998; Rosenblum & Lewis 1999).

Compared with my research on school children's hero idols and gender ideals based on data collected in the end of 1980's (Näre 1992), Oksanen's (ibid) results give an impression that in 2000's children recognise the expectations directed on their gender two years earlier than 15 years ago.

There has been an enormous cultural change in Finland during 1990's. Since 1980's the issues that before were typical mainly for women's and men's magazines have become the content of dominant media: today issues dealing with emotions and sexuality belong to the common discourse in news papers, especially in afternoon papers, television, radio and internet. Advertisement follows this development, too. I have called this process '*intimization of publicity*' (Näre 1999a). Intimization concerns the culture as well: even very famous and appreciated people tell intimate things about their lives (e.g. media's interest towards the intimate life of Princess Diana).

The change has applied to sexual policy as well. It has strengthened the commercialisation of sexuality and sexualization of culture in Finland. Hedonism and liberalism in the values of the 1980's have created ideological and political bases for this development where the liberalisation of the sex trade has taken place on behalf of sexual liberation. The development has been rather libertarian (Näre 1994; 1999b): libertarianism is a radical version of liberalism following the inheritance of hedonism and individualism (Ross 1992). It is a politics of maximal pleasure with the opinion that it should be supported by society. Libertarianism in sexual politics encourages people to look for different kinds of sexual pleasures. According to this view, maximizing freedom is the condition of maximizing satisfaction. In this condition, 'visual freedom' is also maximized.

Maximal visuality, sexualization of public space, intimization and pornographization of whole culture mean that we are not free any more to create the pictures of our imagination. Among young generations, the commercial and even pornographic pictures come into the minds of infants by the advertisement of public space. This may disturb the mentalization, the

learning process to distinct psychic imaginary and mental states from action. According to Peter Fonagy (2004, 15), "violent individuals have an inadequate capacity to represent mental states", because "the failure to mentalize creates a kind of psychic version of auto-immune deficiency state that makes these individuals extremely vulnerable to later brutal social environments."

In pornography, fantasies and mental states become actions. Private fantasies become a kind of common mentalization process when shown in public space. There is the risk that pornographization of public space increases vulnerability to mentalization disorders. "Violence is normally triggered when an idea, a feeling, a prejudice, a suspicion, is mistaken for physical reality." (Fonagy 2004, 27).

Visual harassment as imaginary violence

Our culture is intimized at the level of speech as well as at the level of presentation (Näre 1999a; 2005a). This intimization has caused visualisation of culture and vice versa. The development reaches its highest point in the sexualization of public space and pornographization of culture (Jeffreys 2002). This kind of cultural atmosphere is seductive rising up intimate images, visions and mental pictures. Visual seduction forces us to practice self-control and it has strengthened the process of modernisation. (Näre 1995; 2002B) But the seduction may turn us to practice a kind of 'risk analysis' in order to protect ourselves, especially our minds. This kind of need for protection and defence means that we feel harassed by visual materials.

In the culture of *visual seduction* and even *visual harassment* especially the children become vulnerable: mental innocence of children gets broken earlier and earlier. This kind of visual harassment means harassment of integrity, and it has been legitimised by the constitution principle of 'freedom of speech'. But does 'freedom of speech' mean 'freedom of pictures' as well? 'Freedom of pictures' follows the freedom of markets, the freedom of advertisements, and it is relevant to raise the question, what is the difference between freedom of markets and freedom of speech. Are markets - media included - abusing freedom of speech?

Visual harassment means disturbing the peace to grow and creates a risk atmosphere of sexual or cultural violence. According to Galtung (1999, 39) 'cultural violence makes direct and structural violence look, even feel, right - or at least not wrong'. That's why probably we do not even recognise risky contents we allow for the visual culture. If we have to live in the continuum of trust and risks trying to balance between confidence and reflection of our own vulnerability, we may not notice children's need for confidence in order to build mental strength to avoid vulnerability. (Näre 2000; 2005b.)

Visual culture produces ego ideals, object relations and virtual objects which may be impossible to realise (Levä, Näre & Oksanen 2002.). When the visual ideals become too demanding we can speak about imaginary violence, even visual violence. Concrete visual pictures create imaginary pictures in the mind, and violence means the disturbance of identity building by visual harassment we meet in our everyday life. It means disturbance of mentalization.

The relation with our body connected with our identity seems to become more and more virtual in the course of the visualisation of culture. Potential body becomes the criterion of our body but never reachable. That's why we have to control, shape and sign our body continuously. Virtual body is between real and abstract, continuously on the liminal state. Continuous cultural message according to which our body is never enough is a kind of state of abuse and violence. (Näre & Oksanen, forthcoming.)

Visual harassment creates objectified body consciousness and body shame connected with this kind of dissatisfaction (McKinley 1998; Gilbert 2001; 2002.). According to McKinley (1999), the concept of objectified body consciousness is derived from awareness that social audiences construct views on what is the ideal or acceptable body and how to feel pressured to adopt these values. The experience of bodily shame involves a state of self-consciousness and embarrassment evoked when individuals view their body shape or appearance as falling short of society's representation of the ideal male or female (McKinley 1999). Women exhibit higher levels of body 'surveillance', body shame, and body dissatisfaction than do men and women's greater body consciousness appears to mediate the relationship between gender and body esteem (McKinley 1998).

Visual coercion in the memory

According to the theory of memory, everything we see remains in our memory of body and emotions. Memory prints, especially traumatic prints, may work unconsciously. (Schacter 2001.) Because visual materials, e.g. 'hard core advertisements', may work as memory hints, visual culture when turning into visual harassment can be a risk factor especially for vulnerable persons. Visual harassment may raise shame, and shame and rejection may impact brain and body (Schore 2001).

The intimization and visualisation of culture have meant more and more objectified body consciousness shaping the *implicit memory*. Daniel Schacter has developed the theory of implicit memory by combining clinical studies with neurological and cognitive researches. In the implicit memory experiences have automatic, unconscious effect without the knowledge of the origin. Brains record actions by strengthening connections between nerve cells to create memory prints. New perception is connected with old by nerve net, and memory is activated by memory hint. (Schacter 2001.)

The function of implicit memory can be interpreted to be important in mediating culture, especially in mediating visual culture. Cultural coercion, visual compulsions and bodily demands are mediated through implicit memory. When the importance of self-control has increased in the cost of external control, the demands become implicit and explicitly unclear. (Elias 1976; see Näre 2002a) In this situation the function of unconsciousness and implicit memory may strengthen: memory hints printed in our body may motivate our choices and behaviour - ultimately, our body makes choices.

The younger we receive these memory hints mediated by visual culture, the stronger the print that may be left in our implicit memory. That easily effects into mentalization process, too. In this respect, we are living in the visual culture abusing children's integrity. The cognitive mechanisms of perceptions and images are similar: it is difficult to make distinction between images and memories, because images are essential part of memories. Visual perceptions shape our thinking by images, since our thinking is partly based on pictures. So, visual surroundings impact our inner life caused by the fact that memories and images come involuntarily into our consciousness and influence our mentalization.

According to vulnerability theorists Ingram and Price (2001) vulnerability can play a causal role at risky, stressful environment. Environmental vulnerability factors include socialisation processes, trauma or injury. Intimization of visual culture raises a question how to prevent vulnerability in front of the visual imaginary produced by commercial interests. (Näre 1999a.)

What is the relation between freedom of speech and protection of privacy? We can speak about harassment when freedom of speech - or more specifically, freedom of pictures - turns into disturbance of mental privacy. There seems to be a risk of insulting privacy in applying freedom of speech to the spreading of visual materials: the 'freedom of visual materials' insults the integrity of vulnerable people, especially children.

Visual harassment as an insult to transitional state of mind

Children's vulnerability by the visual materials is obvious when considering their *mental integrity*. Mental integrity presupposes the protection of privacy not guaranteed to the children in our culture. The insult of integrity and privacy is potential according to the theory of object relation. The most private space is our mind: in our transitional state of mind we create our relation with others and with ourselves. This transitional state is a kind of liminal space between fantasy and reality where one can orientate towards future by playing and imagination. It is the space of imagination needed in building integrity and identity. (Winnicott 1971.)

Words still give space for creating images and pictures in mind, unlike pictures when given too early to take the place from imagination. So, when insulting integrity 'freedom of visual materials' may turn into visual harassment. (Näre 2002a.) The younger the children become victims of visual harassment, the narrower their mental space for imagination may remain - especially if their personal relations are poor. If the imaginary space decreases, the potentiality of mental processing by acting out behaviour increases. (Näre 1992.)

Visual harassment with sexualised and/or violent 'hard core' contents can have similar impact with traumatic events. According to the trauma theory, the memories of trauma record in the non-verbal memory which makes them difficult to handle by therapeutic methods. Trauma changes the processing of stimuli. Body reacts to the memory of trauma, e.g. touching, independently if there is any hazard or not, and the body itself becomes a source of fear. This extra activation may lead to deactivation and loss of sensing. Situations similar with the traumatic memories may activate the trauma. Trauma memory can be like a burning print in the brain without forgetting like many other memories. Similarly, traumas can activate unconscious visual images, but they can cause difficulties to remember as well. (van der Kolk 1996; Rothschild 2000; Schacter 2001.)

So, because visual surroundings work as memory hints, visual seduction and harassment may have similar elements to traumatic experiences disturbing the transitional space in mind. When the public is unselected, as typically in the case of advertising in public places, there is the risk of insulting the transitional space, and mentalization. In practice, this means especially insult against children's integrity and privacy.

Visual harassment creates *postindividualism*?

How can you create individual identity if the space to imagine is disturbed by pictures dominating your imagination? Is the individuality in hazard by visual harassment?

Individualism exists when there is enough confidence and trust, enough emotional capital. This confidence presupposes consistence of objects. An individualist can seldom act alone but rather needs objects. In the society of individualists one has to shuttle and negotiate all the time with the other individualists in order to actualise oneself. So, the more individualists, the more difficult it may be to actualise oneself. Sharply, the society of individualists may mean paradoxically the collapse of individualism. This paradox of individualism I have called postindividualism.

Correspondingly, the paradox of confidence is the main paradox of individualism: trusting makes you vulnerable for betrayal and abuse. In the context of visual culture, this means lose of innocence. In order to protect your imagination and to avoid the vulnerability for visual harassment you have to make a kind of risk analysis already from very early age. If missing trust is a risk factor in emotional segregation, visual harassment may create emotional insecurity. (Näre 1999a;2005b.)

So, in the core of postindividualism there is the paradox of trusting, the continuum of trust and risks. Visual harassment is a risk representing inconsistence of objects. It follows the dynamics of sexual violence: violence actualizes unexpected, as a surprise. Visual harassment has similar kind of unexpected character. It works as memory hints and gets printed in the transitional state of mind. This way it also shapes mentalization process. Harassment prints and bodily demands are present when creating one's identity. So, if visual harassment disturbs the building of individuality, we may conclude that it is an element leading towards postindividualism. It is a factor in the development of collapsing individualism.

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