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Literacy and the visual: Broadening our vision

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ABSTRACT: The inclusion of visual images in current educational literacy discussions tends to contextualise them within more semiotic, socio-critical and textually focussed theoretical traditions. These particular traditions privilege and emphasise the structures and "language-like" aspects of visual images, and include the broader social and cultural structural frames, such as gender and class, as well as the specific codes and "grammars" of individual images. While there are strong benefits in employing these approaches, the nature of visual images themselves may require a broader, interdisciplinary approach. This paper will include discussion of the field of visual culture in general, the unique nature of images, the role of philosophy in regard to image, the inclusion of the individual's hermeneutic role in meaning-making, and the attendant educational implications when applying such work to contemporary educational literacy practice.

KEYWORDS: Visual literacy, literacy, visual culture, pedagogy.

INTRODUCTION

In our highly visual cultures, we regularly experience and react to images as part of a plethora of other written, spoken and electronic texts, while we work, study or play. Educators, keenly aware of the need to assist their students in engaging with these evolving cultural communication forms, coined the term "literacies" when dealing with the literacy skills and knowledge needed to transverse the texts of an ever-changing social and technological landscape and time period (Luke & Elkins, 1998). While many types of "literacies" have been named as having a place within these new landscapes and times, an understanding of how image is theorised and practised within educational settings is a constant in the discussions (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Callow, 2003; Downes & Zammit, 2001; Kress, 2000; Pailliotet, 2000; Unsworth, 2001).

Over the past ten years, literacy approaches, particularly in Australia, New Zealand and the UK, have generally moved towards more semiotic, socio-critical and textually focussed theoretical traditions (Green, 2002). The term *text* has assumed prominence as an overarching concept for all manner of works, such as novels, picture books, advertisements, electronic media, film, artworks and even theatrical performance (Kist, 2000; Kress, 2002). The benefits of this more "textual" approach are many, but at the same time, any approach to a field will privilege, by necessity, one way of thinking at the expense of other possibilities.

When the English and literacy curriculum expands to include a larger range of cultural practices, these textually focussed literacy traditions tend to privilege and emphasise

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language-based understandings, often applying them to this broader range of works. For example, visual images or a film are analysed as texts, where the purpose, audience, structure and the "grammar" of the image or film are studied as a means to understanding and critiquing them. It must be said at the outset that there are immense benefits and possibilities in using these paradigms. My own research and teaching is indebted to approaches such as genre theory, systemic functional linguistics and critical literacy practices (Halliday, 1994; Luke, 2000; Martin, 1999). In terms of visual images, the work of Kress and Van Leeuwen has made a powerful contribution to an understanding of a grammar of images within a socio-cultural and semiotic framework (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). Other researchers have developed this work in a range of educational contexts and seen students empowered in their understanding of how meaning is constructed in multimodal texts (Callow, 1999, 2002; Goodman, 1996; Stenglin & Iedema, 2001; Unsworth & Wheeler, 2002; Zammit, 2000).

However, while there are strong benefits in employing these approaches, the nature of visual images themselves may require a broader, interdisciplinary approach. Are there other ways to experience, appreciate and critique visual images which might enrich or complement current literacy approaches? This paper will provide an overview of visual images within current literacy contexts, and then expand the discussion into the field of visual culture in general, the unique nature of images, the role of philosophy in respect of image and the inclusion of the individual's hermeneutic role in meaning-making. It will conclude by proposing a model that might integrate this broader understanding of images in an educational context.

IMAGES IN CURRENT LITERACY CONTEXTS

Current theorisation of visual literacy is informed by the wider theoretical orientations of literacy practice in general. The rapidly changing nature of texts and literacy practices in our local, global and virtual communities has given rise to the term "New Times" (Luke & Elkins, 1998). The cultural, economic and social changes of these "New Times" have radically changed previously held definitions of literacy, born of the Twentieth Century. Luke argues that these changes present new challenges for students who will be confronted with complex "multiliteracies" (New London Group, 2000). Much of the literature linked to "New Times" and multiliteracies includes an emphasis on students bringing a critical literacy to bear on all types of texts (spoken, written, visual and multimodal) including those that they produce themselves (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Lankshear, 1997; Luke, 2000; New London Group, 2000). Visual images form an integral part of the new literacy discussions, where students need to read/view, critique and create a variety of visual texts, from single still images in a picture book, through to multimodal web pages and the moving images of television and film (Semali, 2001). The role of images within evolving communication and information technologies is noted as particularly significant. Bolter's overview of the area suggests that within hypertextual and web environments, the graphical element, with its attendant visual literacy implications, may well be "the great open question facing education in the coming years"

(Bolter, 1998). Thus, the idea of "visual literacy" located in educational contexts sits within a wider framework of thought about the changing nature of literacy itself.

As reviews of various literacy models implemented over the past decades have shown, particular theoretical approaches to English and literacy have influenced syllabus and curriculum documents, as well as informing the types of classroom practice that teachers adopt (Anstey & Bull, 1996; Luke, 2000; Richardson, 1991, 1998; Wyatt-Smith, 2000). While educators adopt a variety of approaches in classrooms, current theoretical approaches and their attendant strategies and practices tend to dominate, disseminated through syllabus documents, professional development and commercially produced teacher resources. This tendency to accept current literacy approaches as "given" is both understandable and practical from a busy educators viewpoint, but also runs the risk of "normalising" theory, accepting it uncritically, even if current theory itself is aligned with more socio-critical approaches (Corson, 1997; Richardson, 1998). With this in mind, the following discussion of images and visual literacy will seek to problematise some of the current thought.

BROADENING OUR VISION – VISUAL CULTURE

The theory and practice of understanding visual images is not by any means the sole domain of education and literacy. The emergence and exploration of the term "visual culture", is a truly interdisciplinary venture, drawing from areas of the fine arts, graphic design, architecture, cultural studies, film studies and feminist theory, to name a few. Works such as Nicholas Mirzoeff's (1999) *An introduction to visual culture*, Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright's (2001) *Practices of looking: An introduction to visual culture,* and Malcolm Barnard's (2001) *Approaches to understanding visual culture* all contribute to a growing understanding of this term. In these works the concepts "visual" and "culture" are explored in detail. In its broadest sense, Barnard defines the term referring partly to "the enormous variety of visual two- and three-dimensional things that human beings produce and consume as part of their cultural and social lives. Visual culture in this sense is an inclusive conception. It makes possible the inclusion of all forms of art and design, as well as personal or body related visual phenomena, under a single term." (Barnard, 2001, p. 2). There is a danger, from an educational perspective, of thinking that anything (and therefore nothing) can now be considered a visual text. However, by examining the discipline of visual culture studies, we might be pushed to move beyond purely "text"-framed understandings of visual images when we return to consider educational and literacy contexts.

Integral to the discussion of visual culture is the recognition of wider cultural and philosophical connections. W. J. T. Mitchell posits the term "pictorial turn", which suggests that Western philosophy is adopting a more pictorial view of the world, as opposed to privileging textuality as the dominant "lingua franca" (Mitchell, 1994, p. 11). Presenting an extended and complex discussion, Mitchell argues that the pictorial turn as "the realization that *spectatorship* (the look, the gaze, the glance, the practices of observation, surveillance, and visual pleasure) may be as deep a problem as various

forms of *reading* (decipherment, decoding, interpretation, and so on) and that visual experience or "visual literacy" might not be fully explicable on the model of textuality" (Mitchell, 1994, p. 16). Mitchell's discussion is important for many reasons, but particularly because he includes issues of philosophy in his discussion, as well as questioning the efficacy of textuality for understanding visual images.

The question of textuality is a key one here. Mitchell's assertion of the pictorial turn is in response to Rorty's use of the phrase "the linguistic turn". This phrase draws on the argument that while ancient and medieval philosophy dealt with *things*, and the philosophy of the seventeenth through to the nineteenth century dealt with *ideas*, contemporary philosophical discussion is concerned with *words*. The arts, media and cultural forms are critiqued and spoken of as "texts", even nature and the unconscious are described in language-like structures (Rorty, as cited in Mitchell, 1994, p. 11). Mirzoeff further explores the problematic nature of applying a textual based or structuralist tradition to visual images. He contends that "concentrating solely on linguistic meaning, such readings deny the very element that makes visual imagery of all kinds distinct from texts, that is to say, its sensual immediacy. This is not at all the same thing as simplicity but there is an undeniable impact on first sight that a written text cannot replicate" (Mirzoeff, 1999, p. 15).

From an arts perspective, Raney (1998) makes a similar point in her discussion of the term "visual literacy". She suggests that in Western culture, vision has been associated with reason and logic on one hand and with unconscious desire and fantasy on the other. This means that images are both open to rational analysis (a more linguistic approach) but can also be resistant to such analysis by the very unconscious forces they embody (Raney, 1998, p. 40). When visual images are treated in the same way as language, she contends, discussions of creativity, judgement and "aesthetic openness" are not evident or considered (Raney, 1998, p. 41).

Reflecting on this broader scope for theorising visual images, the question might be asked whether it is possible to consider visual images as sensual, aesthetic and creative experiences, a "visuality" that can also interact with "textuality" (Baetens, 2003). Are they mutually exclusive, or is there the possibility for multiple understandings of images?

Figure 1: Chrysler Building (New York)

Barnard's *Approaches to understanding visual culture* in one sense addresses these questions. He presents a variety of different approaches for understanding visual culture, suggesting that they can be viewed as falling on a continuum that runs between more structuralist understandings to more hermeneutic understandings. Briefly, he argues that structuralist traditions emphasise understanding and interpretation in terms of the systemic, social and cultural structures that surround them. The "individual consciousness is itself a product of structures" (Barnard, 2001, p. 34), whether these structures are identified from various disciplines, such as art history, feminism, design theory, Marxism or semiotics. For example, the photograph of the Chrysler Building (Figure 1) might be understood in terms of the angle of the shot (low angle suggests a powerful feel), with the strong vertical lines drawing the viewer's gaze towards the pinnacle of the building. The use of black and white as opposed to colour suggests a more stylised or artistic feel, while the context or narrative in which the image is viewed (story, advertisement or personal photo collection) will influence the possible meanings of the image. There are also varied iconic interpretations in using a famous American building from New York City, symbolising the city, the country or even an attitude.

The hermeneutic tradition contends that "understanding and meaning are the business of individuals", which include the desires, beliefs, hopes and values of each person involved in both creating and viewing images or objects (Barnard, 2001, p. 6). An artist, illustrator

or film-maker will have an idea or conception in their head which will eventually be expressed in some visual form. To understand a visual work must involve finding out about the ideas and intentions of the artist or designer, their thinking, purpose, feelings and desires. Sometimes these will have to be reconstructed if the work is historic or there is no direct access to the person or persons that created the piece, as is often the case with the excess of images and advertisements we come across in our day-to-day living. Approaches which try to understand ideas of expression include art theory, auteur theory in film and psychoanalytical approaches, which explore the unconscious desires of the individual. Again, consider the Chrysler building. What might have been the purpose for taking the photo? Is it part of a portfolio for a series or a one-off holiday snap? Does it suggest an affection for the building or a disrespect? Has the photographer taken the building on an angle to suggest an "unstable" view of the skyscraper, or of New York City? Perhaps the use of black and white on a cloudy day suggests a sombre feel, slightly sad. The photo may be one of a series of similar buildings, where the photographer has created a theme of isolation, using spires from across the city.

There are also the interpretive reactions of the viewer. A personal hermeneutic, while informed by considerations of the photographer's style and choices, will also be influenced by the individual's own feelings, experiences and beliefs. A photo of a New York building may recapture a holiday memory, a favourite Woody Allen film, historical knowledge of depression era America or disturbing connections to events from September 11th, 2001. The viewer may express an aesthetic like or dislike for the photo, based on personal preference or other photographic styles which appeal to them.

The above is a simplified summary of a complex range of approaches but it serves to illustrate the broader issues of how visual images might be understood. Approaches at any place along Barnard's proposed continuum have strengths and weaknesses. More hermeneutic approaches need critique for not acknowledging the cultural codes and structures needed to understand art, music and design. Personal aesthetic taste is not divorced from social and political forces (Kress, 2002). At the same time, Barnard critiques structuralist approaches for not acknowledging the role of the individual who is the active agent in any interpretive account. His account of semiotic approaches is particularly pertinent, given the discussion of textuality thus far. Barnard notes that in the structural and semiotic accounts of visual culture, there is little attention given to the role of the individual, no mention of individual intention. He states that the "beliefs, hopes, fears and desires of human subjects as they go about understanding visual culture have not been any part of the explanation. There is a distinct sense in which, far from being the starting point for understanding, the subject, or individual consciousness, is in fact the product of structural understanding" (Barnard, 2001, p. 164).

Barnard concludes by drawing on the work of philosopher Paul Ricoeur who argues that "structural analysis is not possible 'without a hermeneutic comprehension' and that hermeneutic comprehension is impossible without structure, without an economy, and order in which the symbol signifies" (Ricoeur cited in Barnard, 2001, p. 199). So, Barnard seems to argue that while the integrity and importance of each approach should not be diminished, that there exists a counterpoint relationship on the continuum, holding

a necessary tension between structural and hermeneutic understandings.

EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

If we draw back to the educational arena, there are some important issues already raised in terms of re-framing how images might be understood. It would appear that in the present context, textuality will continue to be a dominant metaphor for understanding images, even with the afore-mentioned cautions. However, there does seem to be the possibility of introducing more creative, imaginative hermeneutic aspects. Bill Green's insightful exploration of English and literacy in the Australian context re-casts English in the light of philosophy and the humanities (Green, 2002). Green revisits his original literacy model, developed in the 1980s, which is a "holistic, integrated view of literacy, as composing three interlocking dimensions or aspects", which he terms the "operational", the "cultural" and the "critical" (Green, 2002, p. 27) (see Figure 2). The operational includes knowledge of how language functions, the use of grammar, linguistic genres etc. The cultural draws on the knowledge of literary culture, author knowledge, contextual understandings of texts and their cultural meanings. The critical element entails bringing critique to texts in terms of power relations, asking whose voices are heard, whose are not heard, and in whose interests particular texts are created and distributed.

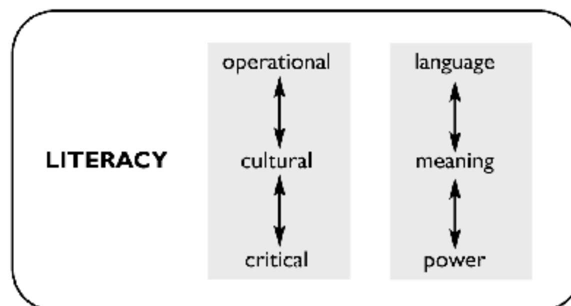

Figure 2. (Green, 2002, p. 27)

By integrating these dimensions, he sought to bring together powerful but different aspects of literacy learning and practice in order to create a more robust understanding. The significance of his work and that of other similar formulations has meant that English and literacy educators have been able to engage in a broader understanding of how different literacy practices might overlap and influence each other. Green concludes his paper with a call to re-energise the literacies of the imagination. Interestingly, he also draws on Ricouer's work, emphasising the imaginative and creative aspects of language, providing the possibility of "redescribing reality" (Ricouer, as quoted by Green, 2002, p. 134). While there is not the space to elaborate here, his description of Ricouer's work strongly suggests the importance of the individual's meaning-making role intertwined with both structural and critical discourse sensibilities. I would like to take up the call Green extends here but in the realm of visual literacy.

In the context of images, I would suggest a model which includes three dimensions: the *affective*, the *compositional* and the *critical* [1].

> *Affective:* This dimension values and acknowledges the individual's role when interacting with images, including the sensual and immediate response, the aesthetic appreciation, the hermeneutic comprehension and the creative choices in both the viewing and creating of visual objects.
>
> *Compositional:* This dimension considers how images are composed, including semiotic, structural and contextual elements. Drawing broadly on structuralist approaches, it acknowledges the crucial role of understanding how specific elements and signs work to create meaning in the structure of an image, as well as the impact of specific social situations and the wider cultural context. This category would bring into discussion the formal stylistic and artistic elements of a work, or consider the designs, sign systems, symbols or "grammars" that constitute images. The term "compositional" evokes influences from both artistic and design fields as well as structuralist, semiotic and linguistic study.
>
> *Critical:* This third dimension acknowledges the importance of bringing socio-critical critique to an understanding of images, from fields such as post-structuralist theory, critical discourse analysis and feminist theory. All images, even apparently neutral ones, are "entirely in the realm of ideology" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 12), where particular discourses are privileged, while others are downplayed or even silenced. By promoting a critical analysis of how images might position all types of viewers, this aspect also explicitly supports a socially just and equitable approach to understanding images.

It should be noted that while the affective rightly foregrounds the role of the individual in meaning-making, the "individual" is also infused across the other aspects. Similarly, the foregrounding of socio-cultural considerations in the compositional and critical categories does not mean that the affective is considered in some unrealistic, socio-cultural vacuum. Here, if we take Barnard's implication of an ongoing counterpoint between approaches, the visual representation is crucial. Arrows moving between terms still suggests rather separate components, even though there is an interplay between each one. Visually, I would argue for the model to be more strongly reminding us of the influence and interplay of each term upon other, where terms visually overlap and connect with each other.

Responding to an image might be understood as a both a cycling through and an overlapping of these three aspects. For example, while considering the more compositional aspects of an artwork, there will always be some aspects of the affective, the immediacy acting upon us, as there will be implications of the critical, positioning us as a viewer, with or without our awareness. When focusing on the affective, by studying, playing with, or even disliking the possible meanings we are creating or making, we may

[1] Single word labels can only point towards more complex ideas, never fully encapsulate them, and will always remain somewhat limiting and no doubt contested.

also be consciously or unconsciously using a compositional knowledge of design or artistic skills, as well as positioning or being positioned as meaning-maker or viewer.

Figure 3: Three dimensions of viewing

Over a longer period, particularly if we consider educational contexts, there will be times when learning or play focuses around each of these aspects, moving between them both during a lesson and over a period of learning. Of course, to focus on one at the expense of the others may lessen a rich learning experience for those involved, so a conscious understanding by a teacher to include all aspects would be important.

As with Green's model, the static nature of the printed page may privilege a particular reading i.e. the left to right unfolding of the model, as well as the discussion of the top / bottom divide of the words. An animated version of this, where each term moves into dominance, while the other two still stay visible in the background, further reinforces the

interrelatedness of these aspects. The continual movement of the animated model, where the sequence of words changes also disrupts a hierarchy of sequential reading.

[click to activate model]

Educational Implications

Consideration of affective, compositional and critical approaches to images in an educational context may open up and legitimise learning experiences hitherto glossed over or unexplored. The importance of acknowledging the affective aspect of images is probably instinctual for many teachers when using picture books, working in the visual arts, exploring multimedia programs or even the well known transfix of video, sometimes resorted to on rainy sports afternoons. However, consciously implementing experiences across the three aspects can prove powerful.

As part of a research project on student engagement, a Year 6 teacher at a school in south western Sydney integrated visual images as part of a cross-curriculum unit. The unit was designed to develop her 11 and 12-year-old students' understanding of visual and cultural images of Australia (Callow *et al.*, in press). One aim of the research was to observe how the use of Australian artworks might complement and engage students in literacy learning. Traditionally, many students from low socio-economic backgrounds often struggle academically but also lack interest and engagement in school curriculum (Munns, 2001).

The unit explicitly included multiliteracies around written, spoken and visual texts. These included reading and research skills using books and web sites, written responses about artworks, and an oral presentation about student's own artwork. Initially, the students were introduced to Australian artists that they would focus on as part of their studies. One activity involved students listing questions which interested them about the artists. These questions then helped shape the design of the unit. As the unit progressed, students were taught the reading and critical thinking skills necessary to access a variety of sources, such as art gallery websites, art books and works of art. Their knowledge about how these visual artworks were produced, as well as the influence of historical and cultural contexts, was assessed through written and oral presentations. For example, after modelling an example of a descriptive response to an artwork, students chose another piece to respond to, where they combined their developing compositional analysis, knowledge about the painter and time period, with formal writing skills. However, the affective element was revisited regularly by students creating their own artworks and experimenting with the different techniques of chosen artists. Their final pieces allowed them to create a personal vision of their Australian landscape. These were projected onto a large screen for their oral presentations to an audience which included parents, community members and university visitors.

The introduction to the artworks involved students being invited to use their five senses, to imagine what it would be like if they were standing in the depicted landscapes, what they could see, hear, feel, smell and touch. The various landscapes, by well-known Australian artists such as Sidney Nolan, Russel Drysdale and Frederick McCubbin, were initially experienced at very personal and aesthetic levels. Students' comments about their imagined experience or about the artworks were all accepted – there were no right or wrong interpretations. This created both a safe learning experience for the children but also explicitly valued the affective and hermeneutic interpretation. As the students became confident in discussing their feelings and reactions to the artworks, the teacher began to include specific stylistic terms, such as colour, shape, line, texture and perspective. This focus on the more compositional aspect complemented the initial affective aspects, building a more complex experience of the artworks.

Complementing the viewing act was the act of painting, where the students experimented with the various colours and techniques that the artists used. Their enjoyment of this was obvious from their enthusiasm and comments about their work. Nearly all commented about the enjoyment of painting, summed up by one student who recorded in her reflection journal: "I liked, enjoyed creating a piece of artwork because it makes me feel good." The learning experiences with these students moved back and forwards between more affective discussions and experiences, to more compositional understandings of the artworks and the cultural and historical contexts of the artists, as well as including more critical reflections. Critically, students were encouraged to think about how they might represent their own view of Australia, their own Australian identity in an artwork. The class had discussed the fact that some English artists came to Australia and painted the landscape in the style of English country gardens. The issue of gender also came up, where one student commented:

> I learnt that most of the artists from the 1850s-1860s were male. It was very rare to find a female artist and it might have had something to do with women's rights.

The same student also showed a more developed sense of the choices that an artist might make. When explaining about Tom Robert's work *Opening of the First Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia,* he noted the choice of colours used by the artist, particularly in regard to the class of people who would have been present at such an event. When asked about these colours, he replied:

> That's how he sees it – that's how he sees the world – that's how he wants to make the world, by using world colours and making the people well dressed. Not poor people where their clothes are all ripped.

For their final learning experience, students painted an artwork that showed something of their view of Australia. Some painted their impression of the Australian outback or the bush (Figure 4), while others painted their local area. The unit concluded with an oral presentation to an invited audience, where students talked about their own artwork and its connection to their Australian identity. While all students found this a challenging experience, personally and academically, the pride they showed in presenting their work

was obvious. Each student, with varying literacy abilities, was able to share their personal experience of the painting, as well as their expertise about the work. Importantly, they were explicitly encouraged to see their artworks as reflecting something of themselves, their individual ideas, desires, and beliefs, as well as reflecting compositional and critical understandings about how texts are constructed and influence their audience – a powerful counterpoint for engaging with the visual image.

Figure 4: The Lonely Outback

CONCLUSION

By engaging with broader concepts of visuality from disciplines such as visual culture, the possibilities for a more enriching understanding of images seems apparent. These possibilities offer not only multiple perspectives on images at a theoretical level, but also at a pedagogical level, where educators might provide multiple pathways into positive learning experiences. At a time when socio-critical readings of all types of texts are crucial, particularly in current global political contexts, there simultaneously needs to be value attached to the personal hermeneutic, the creative and pleasurable experiences which images engender.

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