

Editorial: English and the visual: From montage to manga

ANDREW BURN

University of London, Institute of English

HELEN NIXON

Centre for Studies in Literacy, Policy and Learning Cultures, University of South Australia

English has a long, intimate relationship with the visual: the illuminated manuscripts of mediaeval romance; the woodcuts of 17C chapbooks and 18C broadsheet ballads; the painting and poetry of the pre-Raphaelites; Dickens illustrated by Cruikshank, Milton by Blake, Coleridge by Doré, Ted Hughes by Leonard Baskin; the art of the modern picture-book; the graphic novel; the comic strip from DC and Marvel to manga; the modern audio-visual narratives of film, television and computer games.

However, the history of English as a school and university subject has been one of a struggle which has led to the establishment of the discrete study of linguistic and literary texts, to the exclusion of all else. Indeed, in the early sixties, the school English version of Leavisism sought to protect the sanctity of the word from corruption by the visual, as this quote from David Holbrook's once-influential *English for Maturity* (1961) shows:

... the word is out of date. It is a visual age, so we must have strip cartoons, films, filmstrips, charts, visual aids. Language is superannuated. ...
Some teachers fall for the argument. ...
We must never give way: we are teachers of the responsiveness of the word. ... The new illiteracy of the cinema, television, comic strip, film-strip and popular picture paper they accept as the dawn of a new era (pp. 36-37).

This issue of *English Teaching: Practice and Critique* in effect articulates an exact inversion of this argument. Holbrook's sarcasm makes his text easy to invert through paraphrase: "It is a visual age, so we must have strip cartoons, films, charts, television, computer games. We are teachers of the responsiveness of the multimodal sign. The new literacy of the cinema, television, comic-strip and computer game we accept as the dawn of a new era."

This latter argument, now well-developed though, almost always partial in some way, in the versions of English practised and taught around the Anglophone worlds, rests on three intellectual justifications. One is semiotic – Saussure's argument that language take its rightful (subordinate) place alongside other sign-systems in a general science of semiology. One is multimodal – in some ways, a logical progression from the first, but subsequent to and consequent on the social view of language articulated in Halliday's *Language as social semiotic* (1978). And one is cultural, deriving from the tradition of Cultural Studies that began with Raymond Williams' insistence on treating the variety of contemporary popular media of the mid-Twentieth Century as the authentic culture of ordinary people (Williams, 1961).

Different state and local curricula for English and the Language Arts recognise the bond of word and image differently around the Anglophone world. There is, in some countries, a strong backward pull towards an English that was resolutely anti-visual, defined by the sanctity of the word. While no one now would endorse the virulent objections to the visual as the enemy of the word as proposed by the disciples of Leavis, it is undeniable that the English curriculum becomes resolutely monomodal at the ultimate point of public accountability – in the exam hall, where the pictures all fade away. In the UK, there has been for some years a struggle to expand the semiotic range of English, with gradual, incremental recognition of media texts, in particular film, in the reading section of the curriculum only, a location at odds with the several accounts of media “writing” or production by students in the articles of this issue.

In other countries, the communicative power of the image in all its variety is increasingly accorded a place of value, and children are encouraged, even required, both to analyse and produce their own visual and audiovisual texts. In parts of Australia, New Zealand and Canada, the “viewing” of still and moving image has been accorded an equal place alongside reading, writing and speaking as cornerstones of the English curriculum. However, there have been fewer initiatives to integrate the production of visual texts into the curriculum, particularly the kinds of multimodal texts that can readily be produced using digital media. Moreover, there is little evidence that the possibilities of digital media have as yet been widely taken up within the English curriculum.

Over this push-me-pull-you movement of English away from and towards the image, hang some interesting conundrums, which this special issue of ETPC probes. Do we derive a new importance for the place of the visual by looking backward over the history of literature (and other media, as Mark Reid’s article suggests); or forwards to a new landscape of multimedia technologies? or both? Can past and present converge, as Gabrielle Cliff Hodges’ article suggests, in new visualizations of Victorian literature through the filming of contemporary cityscapes? Do we continue with a sense of the visual as a semiotic appendage to language, the locus of the illustration dependent on language, as Barthes famously proposed, for its “anchorage”? Or do we accord it a more important place, as in film, game or comic strip, where it is clearly the dominant mode? How is the case for the production of visual texts in English altered by the advent of digital technologies, allowing for the authorship of video, multimedia, web-page and computer games? Has the age-old cry of, “Miss, I can’t draw!” given way to a new utopia of digital design?

Mark Reid’s article on poetry and montage looks both forward and backward in time: forward to an increasing expansion from the mode of language into other semiotic modes, in this case film; but backward for its inspiration to Eisensteinian montage, here understood not only as a radical editing practice, but as a fundamental principle of meaning-making, and as a metaphor for associative intellectual processes.

Gunther Kress, one of the central proponents of social semiotics and multimodality, argues, in an interview in this issue, for a move from a linguistic to a semiotic focus in English, where not only the visual but all communicative modes would be accorded equal status as children and young people explore the multimodal texts of today’s culture. There is a sense, here, both of what English might move towards as it locates itself in relation to the contemporary cultural landscape; but also of the common cause

English might make with other pedagogic traditions in the arts. However, this trajectory for English necessarily involves milestones; and Gabrielle Cliff Hodges proposes one moving image project of the kind which English teachers might adopt as a step towards a connection between literature and audiovisual forms of representation.

Another way in which the debate about the visual is often framed is in relation to our understanding of literacy. On the one hand we have become battered by multiple notions of literacy – visual literacy, media literacy, digital literacy, silicon literacy, cine-literacy, moving image literacy. There is a danger, maybe, that the metaphor is wearing thin; or, as some argue, that it was never properly sustainable in the first place. On the other hand, the idea of a language of film, of a grammar of visual design, both at micro and macro levels of text, and the concomitant idea of a literacy required both to interpret and produce visual texts, can make for useful and systematic models of conceptual development, metacognitive understanding and learning progression. Jon Callow, in this issue, constructs a version of visual literacy remodeled from Bill Green's (2002) view of literacy as comprising operational, cultural and critical dimensions. Callow's three-part construct draws attention to the affective, the compositional and the critical dimensions of visual literacy. He emphasizes the importance of acknowledging the affective aspect of images. A similar point lies at the heart of John McKenzie's exploration in this issue of the dialogic nature of image and narrative and its relationship to children's pleasure in the scatological humour found in some popular picture books.

The notion of the visual as grammatically constructed is evoked in Caroline Pelletier's article on children's designs for computer games, interpreted here using Kress & van Leeuwen's (1996) social semiotic framework, and also seen as a performance of gendered identity. More generally, this article represents an argument for the place of games as a visual form in the textual repertoire of English, alongside still images, print media, film and television.

Part of the argument for games, as with other forms of popular culture, is an argument for a foregrounding of the media cultures of young people themselves. Margaret Hagood presents a case study which demonstrates the crucial role of media cultures, in this case manga and anime, in the growth and transformation of identity and social selfhood of teenagers. She also explores how the texts of popular culture shape interpretations of the visual texts of the body. While recognition and inclusion of these cultural landscapes often conflict, for teachers, with the prescribed heritage culture of various national and state curricula, this is an area where we can have our cake and eat it, as Kress's account of his recent research into the production of school English suggests. The canon can be accommodated and transformed, taking its place in an expansive, generous version of the textual repertoire.

Of course, the place of the visual in English begs the question about the place of other modes and media of communication – the gestural repertoires and spatial design of drama; the oral patternings of Martin Luther King, the Beowulf poet and the rap artist; the constitution of subjectivity through urban soundscapes which Steven Connor (1997) calls “the modern, auditory I”. In the “turn to the visual”, is there a danger of a “tyranny of the visual”? This question is addressed briefly by Kress, who points to the different affordances of speech as against writing; but also to the kinds of

codification in oral narrative traditions that deserve a newly-configured place in an expanded notion of English's possible semiotic territory.

A clear emphasis which emerges in several of the articles is the production of visual texts by children and young people. This reflects, perhaps, a general movement in English's embrace of media and new media from a restrictive preoccupation with interpretation and analysis to a recognition of the creative possibilities of producing the visual as still image, video, game, comic-book. However, it also represents a timely riposte to a reductive view of the place of ICTs in education, as technological vessels into which curriculum content can be poured. If computers can be seen as latter-day adjuncts to the minds of children, then this view of ICT is in effect 21st century Gradgrindism, thinly disguised by a lavish sprinkling of the fairy dust of "creativity" (often reified, rarely defined). The approach to digital authoring technologies represented in these papers, by contrast, reveals the grammars and literacies at work, and makes the connections with cultural histories (of film, in Reid's article), and with children's media cultures (in Hagood's article). This approach puts the "culture" back into ICT, a task which English teachers are well equipped to do. The task is amply illustrated by Melbourne teacher, Greta Caruso, in her teacher narrative about the design and production of "Fantale" lolly wrappers. Maybe this should be one of our explicit aims in the next few years: to propose a new vision of ICCT – Information, Communication and Cultural Technologies.

However, this issue also presents a range of visual media which are not all digital – picturebooks, children's drawings and paintings, photographs, manga and anime, as well as computer games, digital video and websites. In some cases, young people are shown moving between digital and non-digital media. This issue serves to remind us, then, of the textual histories that lie behind today's digital media; that while digital tools offer new affordances, they are also inflected and informed by the languages and cultures that precede them.

Finally, because this journal sees itself as both initiating and continuing conversations, we have published a teacher narrative from Yohanes Widiyanto, now teaching English at a university in Indonesia, who reflects on what has made him a multicultural English teacher. This narrative might be seen as entering into dialogue with Volume 3, Number 1 of this journal (May, 2004), which focuses on "The challenge of teaching English in a multilingual or monolingual context".

REFERENCES

- Barthes, R. (1978). The photographic message. *Image-music-text* (S. Heath, Trans.). New York: Hill and Wang
- Connor, S. (1997). The modern auditory I. In R. Porter (Ed.), *Rewriting the self: Histories from the Renaissance to the present day* (pp. 203-223). London: Routledge.
- Green, B. (2002). A literacy project of our own? *English in Australia*, 134, 25-32.
- Halliday, M. (1978). *Language as social semiotic*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Holbrook, D. (1961). *English for maturity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Kress, G., & Van Leeuwen, T. (1996). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design*. London: Routledge

Williams, R. (1961). *The long revolution*. London: Chatto & Windus.