REFLECTIVE VISUAL LITERACY: FAR MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE

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ABSTRACT

The commonly accepted notion that a picture is worth a thousand words paradoxically places greater communicative value on images than on spoken or written language. Ironically, a lingering precedence of letters and numbers over images still characterize "enlightened" contemporary discourse, in spite of many claims that we live in a society dominated by the visual. This article explores the hermeneutics of photographs and visual images on a conceptual level, touching on issues such as validity of interpretation, the fallacy of a universally understood and pictorial language and the distinction between functional visual literacy and nuanced reflective visual literacy. Finally it makes a case for including visual literacy as part of the formal curricula at school and at tertiary level.

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INTRODUCTION

The origin of the well-known expression "a picture is worth a thousand words" cannot be determined with any certainty, but it became widely used in America during the early part of the twentieth century. Advertising people in America soon applied this bit of "common sense" in their advertising copy, one early example being the wide-ranging adverts for Doan's Backache Kidney Pills. These featured a black and white image of a middle-aged gentleman holding his back with his left hand, with the caption "every picture tells a story". In a 1911 lecture the celebrated American newspaper editor Arthur Brisbane (1864-1936) advised members of the Syracuse Advertising Men's Club to "use a picture. It's worth a thousand words" (Phrases.org.uk: n.d.: online).

This "lecture" represents, to my knowledge, one of the earliest intellectual discourses arguing that an image somehow communicates more efficiently (if not effectively) than words alone, although one could argue that Brisbane's stance might have had less to do with more effective communication and all to do with selling more advertising space in his newspapers, since images took up more column inches.

This article engages with the hermeneutics of photographs and visual images on a conceptual level and is therefore not based on empirical research. Using De Saussure and the "linguistic turn" of the previous century as a point of departure, the author briefly explores how the meaning of texts (linguistic as well as visual) are generated through the interpretative actions of readers / viewers, and how interpretative strategies have been influenced by, inter alia, formalism and the New Criticism, Reception Aesthetics, Structurlalism, Posstructuralism and Postmodernism.

Is a picture indeed worth a thousand words? Most people believe so, and with good reason. Consider the deeply disturbing photograph of the terrified children fleeing the effects of napalm bombs dropped by the South Vietnamese Air Force on the village Nam Trang Bang in the outskirts of Saigon on 8 June 1972. This picture was syndicated to international agencies and millions of people voiced their outrage. This single photograph arguably did more to expose the horror of the Vietnam War than the hundreds, if not thousands of articles that appeared in newspapers and magazines during the eight years of conflict.

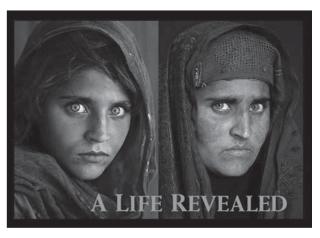**FIGURE 1:   FLEEING CHILDREN IN NAM TRANG BANG**

(Source: http://www.worthpoint.com/worthopedia/1972-upi-photo-viet-nam-trang-bang-fleeing)

But is it indeed a case of the picture being worth a thousand words, or is it the anguish and horror that speak from the children's distorted bodies and faces that seared readers' hearts? I would argue that the picture in isolation conveys emotions of horror and anguish, and generate disgust, sympathy, anger and a range of emotions in the reader, but it does not tell a story; in order to do so the latent signification of the photograph has to be activated by the context (caption, accompanying article, plus the reader's own socio-cultural, political, ideological, and other knowledge or beliefs). I shall return to this topic in more detail later.

INTERPRETING PHOTOGRAPHS

Next, consider the close-up photograph of Sharbat Gula, for 17 years known to the world as the "Afghan Girl" that appeared on the cover of the June 1985 edition of *National Geographic* (McCurry 1985: online). This photograph by journalist Steve McCurry mesmerised millions and "became a symbol both of the 1980s Afghan conflict and of the refugee situation worldwide" (*National Geographic* 2003: online). The image itself was named "the most recognized photograph" in the history of the magazine and *National Geographic* launched an expedition in January 2002 to find the woman behind the picture, and subsequently published her story in the April 2002 issue of *National Geographic* as "A life revealed" by Cathy Newman and Steve McCurry. The header reads: "Her eyes have captivated the world since she appeared on our cover in 1985. Now we can tell her story."

FIGURE 2:   'AFGHAN GIRL' AND 'A LIFE REVEALED'

(Source: http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/covers/gallery)

To my mind the sentence "now we can tell her story" is revealing, for the initial (1985) photograph (above left) told nothing, the photographer did not even know her name, and her face was merely exploited by the media to become "a symbol both of the 1980s Afghan conflict and of the refugee situation worldwide" (*ibid.*).

Following Barthes (1977) I would argue that these pictures in isolation convey very little meaning and hardly tell a story. To use my term, they are latent signifiers that generate meaning only by virtue of being "anchored" (Barthes) linguistically (caption, accompanying article) and by the reader's contextual savvy (socio-cultural, historical, religious, ideological, etc.).

Is a picture then worth a thousand words? Not to my mind. If one takes into account our increasing awareness of the complexity of the semiotic processes involved in generating and decoding meaning, the question warrants a closer look. Tomaselli (1999) views the photograph as an empty signifier; Roland Barthes argues (1977) that it is not a signifier at all, since it needs no "relay" or code to convey meaning. Mitchell (2008: 18) convincingly argues that an image "is constituted as a relation rather than an entity of substance", whereas a picture "is a material object, a thing you can burn or break. An image is what appears in a picture, and what survives its destruction – in memory, in narrative, and in copies and traces in other media" (2008: 16). To Mitchell, the image is therefore an abstract entity that can be evoked by even a word. In this regard he refers to Pananofsky's notion of the *motif*, an element in a picture "that elicits condition and especially *recognition*; the awareness that 'this is that'; the perception of the nameable, identifiable object that appears as a virtual presence; and the paradoxical 'absent presence' that is fundamental to all representational entities" (Mitchell 2008: 17). To my mind this distinction between picture (photograph) and image offers a way

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out of the bind Barthes causes when he states that the picture is not a signifier, but more about this later.

WHOSE PICTURE, WHOSE INTERPRETATION?

If we take the viewer's realisation that "this is that" as the key moment when picture becomes image (that is, it becomes representational of more that the physical components it is made up of), we move into the field of semiotics, and Peirce's concept of determinacy / indeterminacy becomes useful. Barthes' contention that the newspaper photograph needs to be "anchored" by linguistic text in order for its meaning to become clear supposes an indeterminacy regarding the meaning of pictures, or one may also speak of the latitude of interpretation that the picture (as a sign) allows. Iconicity (the resemblance between the pictorial sign and the referent) does not provide it with a determinate meaning. Human nature being what it is, we invariably determine what the picture means to *us*, thereby relating it to *our* existence, *our* experiences, *our* meaning expectations. The picture therefore remains dependent on interpretation by *someone*, using, amongst other things, culture-based contingencies and contextual elements to construct its meaning(s) (see also Gadamer's [1960, tr. 1975] "historically affected consciousness" or *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*).

The term visual literacy has been in use for more than 150 years, and "a tremendous force of rhetoric has been brought to bear on the notion that ours is a predominantly visual culture" (Elkins 2008: vii). While vision as the "master" sense has been discredited in phenomenological and deconstructivist discourses over the past number of decades, visuality, or modes of seeing and interpreting what is seen, has gained significance in most disciplines within the Humanities. While Mitchell (1996: 82) makes it clear that images are as complex as written text and demand equal scholarly attention, he is adamant that images are not reducible to a "grammar". Visual language requires a hermeneutics that recognises its particular ontology, but one should avoid falling into a kind of "visual essentialism" (Bal 2003, in Van Eeden & Du Preez 2005: 5). To my mind our ability to interpret pictures in a nuanced, critical way can benefit from key insights gained in linguistics and literature studies. It is generally acknowledged that the "language turn" of the previous century, heralded by De Saussure's work, had a huge impact not only on the study of language and literature, but on most of the disciplines in the Humanities and Social Sciences, particularly in the way that established notions on presentation, representation and meaning were questioned, and sometimes overturned.

By the seventies Gadamer's views had become widely accepted in the study of literature, and a shift occurred from the analytical, text-centred approaches established by the Formalists and New Critics to approaches that, while still acknowledging the importance of the text as central to interpretation and meaning, also became interested in how readers made meaning of texts (reception theory). In this regard it is useful to paraphrase Robert Scholes (1982: 15-16) who held that a text is the product of a person or persons, in a given form of discourse, originates at a certain time and in a certain

context, taking its meanings (plural) from the interpretative gestures of readers who use their knowledge of linguistic, social and other codes and conventions in order to make plausible meaning.

The above description of the construction and deconstruction of written texts can apply equally to pictures and images. As already stated, it is neither desirable, nor feasible to equate written texts to pictorial texts since they do not generate meaning in exactly the same way. For example, the syntagmatic axis is of primary importance in determining the meaning(s) of a written (linguistic) text, while the paradigmatic axis is of greater importance for a visual / pictorial text. However, the insight regarding the importance of codes and conventions, culture and context in the process of interpreting linguistic texts is as important when interpreting visual / pictorial texts, and at the very least, makes us wary of attaching apodictic, determinate meanings to visual texts merely because there seems to be a one-on-one relationship between the signifier and the signified.

VISUAL LITERACY

As mentioned, the term visual literacy (an "unavoidable contradiction" according to Elkins [2008: 1]) has been in use for more than 150 years. During this time visual literacy has denoted various competencies regarding the production and use of visual images to communicate. Elkins (2008) provides a concise conceptual overview of the term in *The concept of visual literacy, and its limitations*. Central to Elkins' thesis is that a university education should be based on images as well as (written) texts. He finds it amazing that, given the enormous literature on the visual nature of our world (citing numerous authors, such as Mitchell, Nicolas Mirzoeff, Martin Jay, Jean Baudrillard and Lisa Cartwright), university curricula "continue to be mainly text-based, with intermittent excursions into visual art and culture" (Elkins 2008: 3).

Elkins touches on four main areas pertaining to visual literacy, namely conceptualization, the politics of representation, pedagogy, and images outside the arts[1] (with a focus on technology, engineering, science and medicine). Although he does not specifically address the issue of degrees of visual competency (or levels of visual literacy, if you will), it is clear that the kind of visual literacy education that he advocates has a critical, rather than functional focus. In an article written more than twenty years earlier, Sylvia Scribner, writing on linguistic literacy in the American school system, uses three metaphors to indicate three main aspects of literacy: literacy as adaptation (what I would term the functional aspect), literacy as power (what I would term the politics of representation) and literacy as "a state of grace". She describes the latter as follows:

> The self-enhancing aspects of literacy are often given a cognitive interpretation (...). For centuries, and increasingly in this generation, appeals have been made for increased attention to literacy as a way of developing minds. An individual who is illiterate, a UNESCO (1972) publication states, is bound to concrete thinking and cannot learn new material. Some teachers of college English in the

United States (...) urge greater prominence for writing in the curriculum as a way of promoting logical reasoning and critical thinking. Literate and nonliterate individuals presumably are not only in different states of grace but in different stages of intellectual development as well. Although evidence is accumulating (...) refuting this view, the notion that literacy per se creates a great divide in intellectual abilities between those who have and those who have not mastered written language is deeply entrenched in educational circles of industrialized countries (1984: 18).

Can visual literacy be effectively categorised in terms of level of competency? More importantly, is it necessary? Let us take the concept of linguistic illiteracy as a point of departure. A person is considered illiterate if he or she is unable to read and write, with understanding, a short, simple sentence about everyday life (UNESCO 1995: 4). The converse would be true for a literate person, according to this classification. This is a very coarse classification and seems of little use for our discussion, since, if we apply it to understand images or pictures, one would be considered visually literate if you could describe a simple picture about everyday life – this would also reduce the concept of visual communication to merely using images to denote the object they represent. Such a view on visual communication denies that a picture or photograph is a signifier, and that complex relations between the (visual) signifier and the signified is possible.

A next step up could be described as functional communicative visual literacy, meaning that a person can use pictures or signs as a form of communication, allowing him/her to function in his / her society. The problem with defining various levels of competency is that it is always relative to a given context, in a given society, at a given time. I am also concerned that a focus on levels of visual literacy and the criteria defining each level could efface its contextual relativism, limiting the possibility of multiple readings and favouring the old hegemony of the "one true reading".

Although Scribner (1984: 14) writes on linguistic literacy in the context of American school curricula, her perspective on the quest for definition and measurement that informed much of the debate on literacy is, to my mind, also valid for this discussion on visual literacy:

> Grasping what literacy 'is' inevitably involves social analysis: What activities are carried out with written symbols? What significance is attached to them, and what status is conferred on those who engage in them? Is literacy a social right or a private power? These questions are subject to empirical determination. But others are not: Does the prevailing distribution of literacy conform to standards of social justice and human progress? What social and educational policies might promote such standards? (...) Points of view about literacy as a social good, as well as a social fact, form the ground of the definitional enterprise. We may lack consensus on how best to define literacy because we have differing views about literacy's social purposes and values.

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It seems clear to me that defining and measuring levels of visual communicative competence is far less important than understanding how visual communication occurs, and its role in society. It is important that we understand visual communication as part of an integrated, "multi-layered" discourse that, through modern information technology, presents itself as a seamless entity combining language, sound and image. In spite of claims to the contrary, late capitalist democratic society is not democratic in its distribution of resources and power, and communication is predominantly strategic (in the sense that Habermas uses the term).

Because of this, it is important that visual communication be analysed in terms of the way in which visual communicative competency enables individuals to function (and thrive) within specific contexts. It is, however, even more important to understand how visual communication functions in terms of the politics of representation (asymmetrical power relations) and what Scribner called "literacy as a state of grace", by which she referred to deeply held Western convictions regarding the correlation between literacy, cognitive ability and personal worth.

Let me briefly comment on the functional aspect of visual literacy. This is of particular interest to, for example, health communicators who wish to pursue non-linguistic ways of conveying messages that are clearly understood by patients in a multicultural, multilingual society with vastly differing levels of formal education. Health communication must be clear and concise, and leave no room for misinterpretation. Visual communication constructs that have been designed in such a way that it has one clear, "obvious" message has long been held as the answer to this requirement, with health communication practitioners striving to construct determinate visual signs that leave no leeway for alternative interpretation. Several South African studies (Delate 2001; Bechan 2003; Jordaan 2006) have shown, however, that visual health communication is not a panacea. Several billboard campaigns by loveLife, South Africa's largest HIV and Aids NGO, failed precisely because the planners and designers failed to take into account culture-based contingencies and contextual elements pertaining to the audiences, assuming that visual images conveyed the same meaning to everyone. Even more seriously, it seems that the designers did not have an adequate understanding of the way that meaning is visually encoded and decoded. These designers and graphic artists no doubt consider themselves highly competent in visual communication, but I believe that I have shown in the article mentioned that artistic competence (in producing striking visual material) does not necessarily translate to effective visual communication. For that to occur, the visual artist / communicator also has to be well-versed in the semiotics and hermeneutics of visual media, particularly in terms of the politics of representation.

It is therefore clear that even at the level of relatively simple functional visual communication, the making of meaning (interpretation of pictures, photographs and compound images such as often employed in billboards) is not straightforward, and visual communication is not a universal "language" understood by all.

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Regarding more complex visual texts, as often used in advertising, interpretation becomes even more complex, requiring reader (viewer) sophistication in terms of being *au fait* with the codes and conventions of the particular visual medium, the context (historical, cultural, political, ideological) of its production *and* reception. It seems that the average student studying in the Humanities at university level has no problem in "reading" fairly complex visual compositions, as research by a number of master's degree students under my supervision has shown. The readings, however, are "intuitive", that is, the students are not aware of *how* they interpret the visual data; using Scholes' terminology, one may say that they are not aware of the "interpretative gestures of individual readers using the grammatical, semantic and cultural codes available to them" (Scholes 1982: 15) to generate meaning.

To return to my original question regarding the possible classification of visual literacy: how would one distinguish between levels of competency in interpreting visual images, either in isolation, or in combination with linguistic texts? Would it be possible to design "reading tests" to determine the level of visual competency, and what would the purpose of this be?

I suppose that advocacy groups could find it useful to have a universal system of visual literacy classification in order to segment target audiences and design appropriate communication campaigns. In this regard I have already referred to health communication where the planners of campaigns and the designers of communication material need to distinguish between levels of competency regarding the ability of their intended audiences to make meaning. But I have also pointed out that the process of interpreting, of "making meaning" is hardly ever simple, even if the pictorial elements used to communicate seem to have "obvious" meaning for the creator / sender of the message.

The question of visual literacy, or visual communicative competency, is one that is at least as old as that pertaining to linguistic literacy, and may even predate it if it is accepted that humans used pictorial images to communicate before the invention of symbolic systems of writing. However, unlike writing, which is based on an arbitrary system of symbols denoting expressions of language (using arbitrary words/sounds which gain symbolic meaning through consensus), visual images trick us into conflating the signifier with the signified, leading us to a false sense of security that the picture is the thing itself, and therefore worth a thousand words.

It may very well be that a particular picture is worth a thousand words, but that is the very dilemma that faces visual communication: how to "frame" the "thousand words" so that the image does not slip into indeterminacy; how to reduce the latitude of possible meanings to arrive at a shared meaning. This is, unfortunately, a never ending project because meaning depends on ever changing culture-based contingencies and contextual elements.

I therefore propose that it would serve little purpose to design "reading tests" to determine generally applicable levels of visual competency. To my mind it is more feasible, and useful, to distinguish between *basic functional visual literacy* on the one

hand, and *nuanced reflective visual literacy* on the other hand. By basic functional visual literacy I mean the competency to "read" visual images at "face value", that is, to make plausible meaning of it without necessarily being aware of *how* that meaning is constituted. Ostensibly one would be able to categorise such basic functional visual literacy in terms of the complexity of the images that can be "read", but that would again lead to questions regarding the criteria used in such a hierarchy. It is, however, possible to clearly distinguish between functional literacy and nuanced reflective literacy, as the latter requires of the "reader" to not only be aware of what could be called the *codecs* employed in the text, but to also be a self-aware reader, that is, aware of *how* you are using culture-based contingencies and contextual elements (what I would call cultural, contextual and formal savvy) in order to construct and deconstruct meaning(s).

VALIDITY OF INTERPRETATION

Can one distinguish between a "correct" and "incorrect" reading of an image? Again, this is an old question and has been answered in different ways through the ages. For a long time the author's intention was used as a criterion to determine whether an interpretation was "correct" or not, but this was convincingly refuted by W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsly in their essay *The intentional fallacy* (1946, rev. 1954). The seminal hermeneutic E.D. Hirsch, whose work could be described as taking further the tenets of New Criticism, touches on several useful aspects for this article in his book *Validity in interpretation* (1967). Although Hirsch's work in this book could be typed as early Structuralist, and although he focused on literary texts, this does not decrease the applicability of his insights regarding validity in interpretation to the field of visual communication. A clear line of progression in theory pertaining to meaning and interpretation (with some jumps and points of *aporia*) can be seen in the works of twentieth century thinkers like De Saussure, Peirce, Barthes, Terence Hawkes, Jauss, Iser, Baudrillard and Lyotard. This is hardly surprising, since one finds that central tenets from a particular theory may well inform aspects of a later theory, which then acts as a "correction", or improvement of the previously dominant theory.

One can certainly show, referring to the evolution of literary theory and hermeneutics, that there has not been a single absolute break in the spiral of theories where all the tenets of a preceding theory have been completely overturned; in fact, one could quote instances where a current, dominant theory can lose ground against, if not the key tenets of an earlier theory, then at least in respect of some elements. As a case in point, one could argue that radical postmodernism has to some extent lost ground to American neo-conservatism (Jordaan 2004), and that post-postmodernism (to coin a phrase) increasingly re-introduces elements of structuralism in a post-late capitalist era characterised by a desire to find stable truths and values. Consider in this regard the current focus on green studies across all major fields of study.

To return to Hirsch's question regarding validity in interpretation: his purpose was not to arrive at a formula that could be used to determine if a given interpretation is correct,

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but rather to provide a paradigm that could be used to determine the soundness of the reasoning that informs the interpretation. This is done by establishing if such interpretation takes into account all of the structural / compositional elements of the text. Interpretations that take into account most (or all) elements of the text, and that are not in clear conflict with one or more textual elements, are deemed valid. This validity can be questioned by a subsequent reading or readings if such (a) reading(s) expose(s) textual element(s) that place a different perspective on the previous interpretation, conceivably rendering aspects of the previous interpretation implausible by showing that certain text elements cannot be reconciled with that particular reading. This essentially structuralist approach can be adapted by broadening the focus on intratextual elements to include intertextual and relevant extra-textual elements, thereby making use of insights gained from reader reception theory, poststructuralism and postmodernism.

The central criterion for effective communication (visual or other) is that the signified should, largely, be plausibly linked to the signifier (or its agents), using commonly accepted (if arbitrary) codes. While a particular signified (meaning) may be clear to one individual, based on an individualistic or idiosyncratic code, it does not qualify as communication if other individuals do not / cannot arrive at the same, or at least similar meaning construct(s).

Given my acceptance of the active role of the reader / viewer in constructing meaning, how far can connotation be taken before the "distance" between signifier, signified and Barthes' third-order meaning[2] becomes too strained and one gets bogged down in the postmodernist trap of the utter relativism of meaning?[3] For, as several postmodernist thinkers have shown, the (incorrectly) perceived postmodernist attitude of "everything goes" leads nowhere. Is it indeed a case of every reader making up his own meaning, like Italo Calvino's (1979) protagonists in *If on a winter's night a traveller?* In this novel two readers desperately try to put together a "logical" meaning for the book they are reading. The problem is that pages and even chapters are missing from the book, and some parts seem not to belong, or not to be authentic. Thus we find our protagonists, wandering along an incomprehensible maze of signifiers, missing parts of the text, generating confusion and conflicted meanings, based on their (often) erroneous suspicions and assumptions – all in a quest to arrive at the true meaning of the novel.

Are we therefore doomed to preliminary meanings, multiple ways of interpreting the same text, with no fixed (or at least stable) meaning, since each meaning is the construct of an individual reader, and in no way more "true" than any other reading or interpretation? Has the "intentional fallacy" (Wimsatt & Beardsly 1946) that dispensed with the critic who cites intimate knowledge of the author, his / her text, psychological, and voiced explanation of what he / she intended as "proof" of his / her interpretation come to full term with Barthes' Death of the Author? Reception aesthetics certainly places the focus on the role of the reader as co-creator of the meaning of the text, but it would be a misperception to push reader construction to the centre of the hermeneutic project at the exclusion of the insights gained by New Criticism and Structuralism.

To repeat Robert Scholes: any communication (text) is the product of a person or persons, originates at a certain time and in a certain context, taking its meanings (plural) from the interpretative gestures of readers who use their knowledge of linguistic, social and other codes and conventions in order to make plausible meaning. Obviously, many aspects of the text cannot be tied down in a single way – think of cultural, historical, intellectual and experiential differences that might exist between the creator(s) of the signifier and the current reader, and which may alter the perceived meaning(s) of the text. It is of course well known that texts take on altered meaning(s) for subsequent generations of readers of the same text. If not, why would Shakespeare's complete works, for example, still warrant new readings and analyses, given that what has been written on his work dwarfs his oeuvre?

If one is to believe that meaning by consensus (not necessarily truth) can to some extent be achieved amongst different readers, at least one has to agree to some common ground rules (conventions) that have to be satisfied in order to lend plausibility to (decoded) meaning. It goes without saying that these, in the case of a language, are completely arbitrary within a fairly closed system that effaces its very arbitrary nature. In the case of visual representation, however, these codes are never as rigorously circumscribed, lending greater capacity for "looser" signification, or, if you will, a wider range of possible meanings. On the other hand, because of the (visual) likeness between the signifier and the signified in the case of visual images, the opposite also tends to be true: the signifier is mistaken for the signified (Barthes already referred to notion that it ceases to be a signifier at all, since it needs no "relay" or code to convey meaning).

This "coalescence" of signifier and signified in visual communication does not generate a kind of universal language understood by all. This has, for example, become clear in health communication where pictograms were for a time seen as a way to effortlessly cross language and cultural differences between the caregiver and the patient. Dowse and Ehlers (2001) for example found that only 11 out of 23 USP internationally standardised pictograms were correctly understood by a sample of 46 isiXhosa speaking respondents. The same group correctly understood 20 out of 23 locally developed, culturally sensitive pictograms. Research conducted in Britain (Knapp, Raynor, Jebar & Price 2005) confirms that existing, "standardized" pictograms are not easily interpreted and the authors recommend that pictograms should be tested for suitability for specific target audiences.

To return to Barthes and the idea that the photograph in itself is no signifier; this is just a short jump away from Baudrillard (1981; cf. Poster 1988) and his notion of simulacra – endless copies of copies with no original available to us. But let us take Barthes' early work at face value and say that the photograph has a clear, direct meaning since it needs no "relay" or code to convey meaning. Returning to our first photograph of the children fleeing Nam Trang, most people will be able to identify the components of the photograph and describe it in words. A screaming child cannot be mistaken for anything else; soldiers in the background are indisputably there, etc. But to claim nuanced reflective visual literacy on that basis would amount to saying that a grade one learner who is able to read simple sentences is literary competent. It is a case of differing

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complexities, and the ability to interpret these complexities in a creative, yet plausible way. The problem arises when visual texts are seen as simple, "transparent", and it is not realised that it can be as complex as dense writing. Visual images, just like writing, range from compositionally simple to complex and can be likened to Barthes *lisible* (or readerly) text as opposed to *ecriture,* a term used to denote complex texts that demand significant input from the reader to generate meaning. Barthes' *lisible* text ("readerly" text) can be compared to a photograph with a "fixed" meaning: what you see is all there is. On the other hand, Barthes' notion of text as *ecriture* (the "writerly" text) requires my already referred to cultural, contextual and formally savvy reader who actively constructs meaning by decoding and recoding the textual composition.

VISUAL LITERACY AS PART OF THE CURRICULUM

I have already referred to Elkins' (2008) convincing argument for the inclusion of visual literacy in formal university curricula, and to Mason, Morphet and Prosalendis' (2006) proposals for the development of visual communication curricula for the sciences, so will not belabour the importance of such a project here.

While apodictic readings of texts are today frowned on in many disciplines (with Law being one of few exceptions), it does not mean that meaning lies solely in the eye of the beholder. Meaning is generated by a reader (viewer) who actively engages with the image, bringing a repertoire of known codes (social, linguistic, cultural, etc.) to bear. These are "intuitively" gained while growing up in a particular society. It is encouraging to see that visual literacy now features in our national school curriculum, however, my experience in presenting workshops on visual literacy to teachers indicate that very few are qualified to present such classes as they did not receive adequate training while they were university or college students. The result: visual literacy is prescribed in all the language curricula from grades ten to twelve, but very little comes of this as, in my experience, the visual literacy class turns out to be a DVD showing of one of the prescribed literature books. A bigger concern regarding the inclusion of visual literacy in the national school curriculum: again the responsibility to teach visual literacy seems to fall on language teachers, instead of teaching visual literacy across the curriculum.

In order to be considered linguistically competent you have to study your particular language for years, mastering its codes. This is done by combining theory (grammar) with the various practical applications of language we are all familiar with: writing, speaking and listening. If linguistic competence can only be gained by the study of its theory, coupled with practical application and the honing of skills, why is it assumed that competent visual literacy is somehow picked up along the way, with no need to study the "grammar" of the image? For if we as viewer-readers do not share a common set of codes that enable us to generate meaning when faced with an image, how shall we be able to make meaning of complex visual images? And how would we argue our interpretation, or question others' interpretations if we do not have a paradigm for it?

While highly developed literacy is today one of the key objectives of Higher Education, with a strong focus on the textual / linguistic competence of the student, visual literacy

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has been more or less ignored in general academia, except in those disciplines where the visual is key, such as in fine art, graphic design, architecture, cultural studies, medicine, and paradoxically, zoology and chemistry[4].

Academics take pride in students who can skilfully interpret and compose dense linguistic texts, and much active teaching is devoted to mastering "academic" English (or whatever the preferred language of the institution). But when it comes to visual literacy, students are expected to more or less "pick it up" as they go along their way (with the already noted exception of certain disciplines). It is as if letters and symbols have taken precedence over "mere" pictures or images, have greater intellectual status, and convey on its competent user academic, intellectual, economic, social, and personal prestige. Shlain (1996) proposes an interesting theory to explain this in his book *The alphabet vs the goddess: The conflict between word and image* by arguing that a hegemony of letters and numbers is still evident today, despite a perceptible growth in the status of the image. He links this precedence of letters and numbers to the decline of the status of females in almost all spheres of power before the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, basing it on the notion that women are right-brain dominant (more visually oriented) and males left brain dominated (abstract reasoning) and that the valorisation of values such as conceptualisation and abstraction, linked to masculinity, promote patriarchy.

This lingering precedence of letters and numbers over the visual / pictorial is ironic, given the generally accepted view that in the media dominated (especially visual media) late capitalist society our "direct" experiences are not direct or "real", but reactions to media representations. Thompson (1990) argues convincingly that present day society is largely a media construct, while Baudrillard (1981; 1994) has become (in)famous for his concept of the simulacrum: there are no originals, just copies that pose as the original, hiding the fact that they are copies, and that signs merely represent other signs, and have no true meaning.

In contemporary consumer society this perceived lack of distinction between reality and representation is the result of, I would argue, an education system that has not given adequate prominence to the development of visual literacy, and then in particular nuanced reflective visual literacy.

CONCLUSION

The generally accepted dictum that a picture is worth a thousand words masks the fact that visual images do not constitute a universally understandable means of communication that functions independently of language. While it is acknowledged that visual communication should not be explained in terms of language communication, images are nonetheless linked to language since we as humans are unable to think except in terms of language. Insights into how readers of linguistic texts generate meaning can be applied to the study of visual communicative competency, but one should be cautious not to attempt to explain the visual solely in terms of insight gained from linguistics.

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Visual literacy is crucially important in a contemporary society dominated by visual media, yet visual literacy education has not (yet) achieved sufficient recognition in terms of secondary and tertiary education curricula because of a paradoxical precedence of letters and numbers over the visual. Because the visual is so pervasive across disciplines, it has become the responsibility of everybody to teach it, and therefore nobody (formally) teaches it outside a few specialist disciplines.

Just as the ability to passively read simple language texts is not considered adequate for an individual to function optimally in current late capitalist society, basic functional visual literacy does not equip people to engage meaningfully with their worlds, contributing to an uncritical consumer society where the distinction between reality and representation fades. The answer is not to try and resist the new paradigm of a mediated society driven by social media where the virtual has taken the place of face-to-face human interaction, but to embrace visual technologies in a critically aware state, that of the person who is visually literate in the sense that he/she not only is able to make meaning of images, but also knows and understands the codes of its production and reception. This requires a reflective and critical attitude towards the construction and deconstruction of meaning in a visually dominated society.

Endnotes

[1] Mason, Morphet and Prosalendis (2006) argue the case for visual literacy training specifically for the sciences in South Africa: "Visual literacy is the ability to read and understand images. While we are taught to read and write words at school, no focused attention is given to teaching the skills to read images other than as 'art' or attractive illustrations of the words we read in school. However, in the Life Sciences images are not mere illustrative supplements to written texts, but are indispensable for communicating complex ideas and concepts, and, if visual literacy doesn't develop 'naturally' many will battle to grasp the full meaning of scientific images."

[2] Images can simultaneously operate on the iconic, indexical and symbolic levels. Functional visual literacy can be said to operate primarily at the iconic and indexical levels, and the "reader" engages mainly on a denotative level of meaning. Nuanced reflective visual literacy requires of the "reader" to engage on a connotative level (analogical, symbolic and mythic). Barthes (1977) argues that the first and second orders of signification, namely denotation and connotation, combine to generate myth, described by Fiske and Hartley (1978: 43) as a third order of signification. Barthes' use of the term myth can be likened to ideology that effaces the fact that it is a (hegemonic) social construct that presents itself as "natural", uncontested "truth". In this way, myth as third order signification paradoxically presents itself as first order signification: that which is natural, common sense and requires no explanation.

[3] Of course, such relativism is not equal to postmodernism, which has many supporters and detractors over a wide range of disciplines.

[4] One might argue that different visual competencies for these fields are required, and that competent visual literacy in chemistry, for example, does not entail nearly the same thing for, say, fine art.

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