

BOOK REVIEW

Reading images: The grammar of visual design



Book review

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Introduction

Visual literacy has become an indispensable skill in an increasingly mediatized world and may safely be said to be a 21st-century competence. Tools for visual analysis that help us decode and interpret or “read” the meanings of images may greatly contribute to develop this ability.

Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen may be considered such a tool, providing us with a widely acclaimed theory, terminology, and methodology that enable us to analyse our visual culture and its products in a systematic and comprehensive way.

Since its first publication in 1996, *Reading Images* has been considered a ground-breaking work in terms of its contribution to visual communication and design practices as well as culture and media studies. The long-awaited third edition of this seminal work was published fifteen years after its second publication in 2006 – a considerable gap that resulted in a revised edition in which much of its original content was added to, rephrased, or omitted. Sadly, this interval also witnessed the passing away in 2019 of Gunther Kress, formerly Professor of English and Head of the School of Culture, Language and Communication at the UCL Institute of Education, UK. Like Kress, Van Leeuwen, who is Professor of Language and Communication at the University of Southern Denmark and Honorary Professor at the University of New South Wales, Australia, has authored many influential publications on visual communication, language, and semiotics.

From the moment the current edition appeared, I have discussed the second and third publications with students from various cultural contexts, ranging from Dutch to Moroccan and Thai backgrounds, during classes on visual communication at VU University, Amsterdam, Al Akhawayn University, Ifrane, and Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, respectively. These teaching experiences have not only been helpful in testing the relevance and applicability of Kress and Van Leeuwen’s methodology in a cross-cultural academic context, but also have enabled me to compare these two editions from a professional and practical point of view.

I have used Kress and Van Leeuwen’s systematics together with Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS), a method co-developed between 1988 and 1991 by Harvard Cognitive Psychologist Abigail Housen and Philip Yenawine, formerly Director of Education at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, to stimulate visual

thinking among museum visitors. Their approach (and the educational program that followed from it) greatly influenced my thinking and helped me enhance visual literacy among my students.

In this review, I will give an overview of the contents of the current third edition of *Reading Images*, point out some major differences between the second and the third editions, and assess their respective qualities.

Synopsis

The Introduction of the third edition of *Reading Images* deals with Kress and Van Leeuwen’s social semiotic definition of grammar as “a means of representing patterns of experience.” The authors point out that their visual grammar describes “a social-semiotic resource of a particular group” and can, for this reason, never be “universal” (pp. 2-4). Hence, their investigations largely focus on Western visual communication.

Chapter 1 discusses “the emergence of radically new relations between the verbal and the visual,” creating a shift to a “new visual literacy” which is characteristic of a new semiotic landscape and essentially “multimodal” (pp. 21-43). This multimodal view underlies the current edition.

In chapters 2 and 3, Kress and Van Leeuwen proceed to elaborate their methodology proper and discuss narrative and conceptual patterns of representation. The authors distinguish six main “vectorial” types or “narrative structures” and discuss represented and interactive participants, Actors or Reacters, Goals or Phenomenons, and the concept of Circumstances. Chapter 3 is devoted to representations which lack a vector and whose essence is (hence) generalised, stable, or timeless. This category is referred to as conceptual and subdivides into three main types: classifications, analytical structures, and symbolic structures, all with their particular subdivisions. An example of a narrative pattern of representation is a depiction of a cat stalking a mouse, whereas an image of the moon in the sky is considered a conceptual structure.

Chapter 4 treats the interaction between visual representations and recipients in terms of contact, distance, and angle. Represented participants may show a demand, gaze, or offer, depending on whether they look directly or indirectly at the viewer. In addition, the distance between the represented and interactive participant carries meaning determined by their social relation. Equally crucial to interaction are the vertical and horizontal angles that may signify authority,

submissiveness, involvement, and/or detachment. Importantly, it is the combination of these dimensions which ultimately determines the overall interaction.

Chapters 5 and 6 address the issue of modality/validity (truth value) or “signs of credibility that operate in visual communication” (p. 149) and discuss how meaning is brought about by composition, i.e. the three dimensions of information value, framing, and salience. Information value depends on the position of elements in the various zones of an image: left and right, top and bottom, centre and margin. Framing decides whether elements or groups of elements are disconnected or connected, and salience determines the importance of represented elements through size, sharpness, colour, foregrounding, and/or cultural factors like a powerful symbol or a celebrity.

Chapters 7 and 8 discuss how signification is affected by the material characteristics of visual production and expand the theory to include “the third dimension”: plasticity and movement. Kress and Van Leeuwen’s methodology is brought to bear on such diverse three-dimensional forms of visual communication as sculpture, architecture, cars, cups, and children’s toys, but also on film and video.

Assessment and application

Terminology and structure. As the authors point out, the new edition occasioned a number of “renamings.” A notable example is the introduction of “structure” as an alternative for “process.” Conceptual representations are essentially static. Hence, describing them as “processes” may be confusing. However, Kress and Van Leeuwen continue to use “structure” and “process” interchangeably throughout this edition, which does not add to its consistency.

Similarly, chapter 3 is a confusing mix of replaced, new, and omitted terminology. Kress and Van Leeuwen add new subdivisions such as “open and disguised symbolic structures” (Fig. 3.32), but drop crucial and perfectly feasible terms like “compounded,” “conjoined,” and “fused” (which were used to describe how represented participants are related) without proper substantiation. They also discard terms like “structured” (possibly because the introduction of “structure” instead of “process” would have led to awkward namings like “(un)structured structures”). Accordingly, “(un)structured” was replaced by the new terms “arranged” and “disconnected.” These are used interchangeably and readers, as has been observed by my students, are at a loss. The diagram (p. 100) which used to be much

clearer in the previous edition is not much of a help either. The illustrations (pp. 100-102) are incomplete and similarly confusing: “exhaustive” and “connected” are not included and “quantitative” and “spatial” are not clearly distinguished.

All in all, Kress and Van Leeuwen’s third edition, and especially this third chapter, seems to suffer from what my students and I would like to call “overstructuring,” especially through renaming. The authors seem to have somewhat overshot their goal by adding nuances of depth that occasionally seem to be at odds with the original transparency and practical applicability of the method.

In addition, a major drawback is (and remains) Kress and Van Leeuwen’s use of terms to indicate social distance. The terminology they use does not always correspond to the widely acknowledged terms from cinematography and video production. Their “medium close shot,” for instance, “cuts off the subject approximately at the waist, the medium shot approximately at the knees. The medium long shot shows the full figure” (pp. 123-124). Film theory however would call these distances of framing “medium,” “medium long shot,” and “long shot,” respectively (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008, p. 191). In my experience, this discrepancy is especially confusing to students whose curriculums include film studies.

Digital and contemporary media. The third edition has been updated with numerous references to today’s online media (e.g. pp. 113-115). The authors discuss avatars, “lenses” on Snapchat, and selfies as an interesting instance of demand (p. 121) and consider these as part of a trend towards centralised composition. Symbolic Suggestive structures typically emphasise mood or atmosphere and this, according to the authors, “has become newly popular through the filters of Instagram” (p. 105).

Interestingly, in their chapter on validity, Kress and Van Leeuwen discuss how “the photographic past” (the standard set by analogue 35 mm colour photography) is still dominant, but evolving from the naturalistic “towards the sensory *and* towards the abstract” (p. 178). This trend is exemplified by a computer-generated artist’s impression, which is analysed in a section called “Validity in the Digital Age,” which I find one of the most perceptive and intriguing in their current publication (pp. 174-178). I would have welcomed many more of such instances, considering the fast changing visual and digital landscape. This already includes computer-generated images like deep fakes, NFT-related creative work, interactive data

visualisation, and generative AI, which will undoubtedly affect our views on “modality/validity” and “new visual literacy.” Nevertheless, Kress and Van Leeuwen’s treatment of contemporary media is, I feel, enticing. Their discussion of the computer-generated artist’s impression shown in Fig. 5.23, for instance, is laudable – taking into account shadows, proportions, and time of day – and shows Kress and Van Leeuwen at their analysing best.

Editorial treatment. As one would expect in a key work on visual communication, this third edition is lavishly illustrated with colour illustrations (where the second edition merely contained eight colour plates). Also, the revised edition has new and updated images.

On the other hand, quite a few images are simply referred to but not shown, or are even skipped, such as the crucial photograph of a penguin and her baby (Fig. 2.27 in the second edition) which served to illustrate the difference between a “Circumstance of Accompaniment” and a “Symbolic Attribute.” The accompanying text presupposes a familiarity with the second edition. Here and elsewhere, *Reading Images* draws heavily on the imagination of the reader. Frequently, the authors confine themselves to verbal descriptions of visual material where photos or illustrations are essential to our understanding (and verification).

Illustration issues also include low resolution or out-of-focus images, images that are too small, such as the crucial illustration of the English soldiers stalking Aborigines (Fig. 2.1), and “reconstructed” ones (e.g. Fig. 3.1). Moreover, the third edition’s picture editing is marred by a number of errors. Fig. 4.17, for instance, should be Fig. 4.13 from the second edition and one of the references to Fig. 6.19 (p. 205) should be Fig. 6.18. In addition, the text contains mistakes such as the artist’s name “Brancuse” [sic] which should read “Brancusi” (p. 234).

Applicability and conclusion

The Introduction of *Reading Images* contains an interesting statement that is easily overlooked. The authors discuss increasing regionalism and globalisation and the impact these have on the “grammar of visual design.” Kress and Van Leeuwen briefly touch upon their experience with students from European countries such as Greece, Spain, and Italy and mention how they gave these students home assignments seemingly related to their method and various European media. They also shared their methodology with students from Singapore (and possibly other countries), but this is nowhere

elaborated and their approach is not accounted for. I find this a major drawback of the book, as a discussion of their findings would have greatly added to its educational value and application in teaching contexts.

As has been mentioned earlier, Kress and Van Leeuwen emphasise their method’s relevance to education and their approach has been referred to as a book with a “‘tool-kit’ character” (Forceville, 1999, p. 163). However, from my experience with the book as an educational tool and feedback from students, I would like to argue that the practical character of the book may nonetheless be improved. In a classroom context, Kress and Van Leeuwen’s method would no doubt benefit from an accompanying, easy-to-use workbook or an assignment-based online tool like a website as a major (and contemporary) teaching aid. A good example of a textbook which uses a digital assignment-based tool is *Analysing Media Texts*. Its accompanying interactive DVD-ROM was the winner of the 2006 British Universities Film and Video Council “Learning on Screen Award” for Interactive Media (Gillespie & Toynbee, 2006).

In the absence of these suggested tools, I make use of a step-by-step, incremental approach which consists of alternating Theory and Assignments sessions. Theory is discussed during one class in a chapter-by-chapter approach and tested and discussed during separate Assignments class sessions that test students’ analytical competences and their relative abilities to reflect critically. Each Assignments class builds on previous ones, with individual assignments which frequently analyse the same images. This makes students aware of the layeredness and complexity of Kress and Van Leeuwen’s methodology and helps them see its applicability.

In addition, students collect and submit examples from their visual cultures. These primarily focus on professionally made, editorial images such as advertisements (from digital and analogue media), film stills, film posters, infographics, magazine covers, and documentary news photos. Moreover, students apply their findings to individual creative assignments such as producing film posters and magazine covers and accounting for these in terms of the methodology that has been shared.

The lack of a practical teaching aid, however, does not diminish the value of Kress and Van Leeuwen’s time-honoured method. The third edition shows that *Reading Images* has retained its value as a “usable gauge for thinking, for using and for researching ‘image’” (p. xiv). First, as a “gauge for thinking,” the method

continues to stimulate academic debate. One of the major objectives of my classes dealing with this approach is the development of academic thinking and reasoning. In my experience, students enthusiastically take part in interactive assignment-based sessions to discuss their interpretations, and to convince their fellow students (and me) of their analyses of visuals. Hence “thought-provoking” seems an appropriate qualification of Kress and Van Leeuwen’s achievement.

Second, as a “usable gauge for using images,” *Reading Images* is a feasible tool that is not only relevant to academic curriculums, but also and particularly to professional practice. The authors rightly point to their methodology’s relevance to the workplace, which increasingly requires “multimodal competencies” (p. 15).

Finally, as “a usable gauge for researching,” Kress and Van Leeuwen express their wish that their observations will lead to further investigation. The authors point to “much room for further research” (p. 69), for instance with respect to cross-cultural issues such as different “dialects” and “inflections” of the grammar of visual design – an issue which “needs to be explored more fully in the future” (p. 7). In my opinion, their methodology can be a useful guideline, too, for researching cross-cultural *differences* instead of similarities or, in the words of Kress and Van Leeuwen, “regularities” (p. 1).

My classes with non-Western students have convinced me that Kress and Van Leeuwen’s method can be used to structure the discussion of culturally specific aspects such as contact, salience, colour saturation (and hence validity), social distancing, and Left-Right directionality, and will inspire my visual research across cross-cultural contexts. Indeed, I would venture the assumption that the methodology which the authors offer may prove its value in this alternate direction (researching differences in addition to similarities) and yield interesting results in terms of visual literacy. This seems corroborated by the responses of my international students, who enthusiastically called this method an invaluable “eye-opener” or even “a new pair of glasses” that increased their awareness of visual differences between Western and non-Western representations.

To sum up, I would like to emphasise that *Reading Images* remains a highly relevant and useful tool for visual scrutiny. However, I prefer the second to the third edition because of the latter’s editorial flaws and shortcomings such as overstructuring and, as my students pointed out, linguistic intricacies that can

occasionally be impervious and even forbidding. The update apparently also necessitated a condensation of texts that used to clarify the method but had to make room for new examples and observations.

Be that as it may, and despite these drawbacks, *Reading Images* may be regarded as the most comprehensive attempt at visual structuring to date. It shows how the constituent parts of images are designed and combined into meaningful wholes, thus enabling us to make informed judgments about all sorts of visual materials. Hence, this publication is, as Routledge states on the back cover, a useful tool “for students and scholars of communication, linguistics, design studies, media studies and the arts”. In addition, and because of its “tool-kit” potential, I would like to recommend *Reading Images* to professionals active in the creative industry.

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