Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design

Gunther Kress
&
Theo van Leeuwen
Introduction: The grammar of visual design

- A grammar is the rules and constraints on what can be represented.

- A grammar is a social resource of a particular group.
Visual grammar is not transparent and universally understood. It is culture specific.

Visual grammar cannot be separated from verbal grammar or any other grammar.

Individuals freely combine elements from languages they know to make themselves understood.
Signs are never arbitrary.

‘Motivation’ applies to the sign-makers and the social context in which the sign is produced.

The “semiotic potential” for making signs is determined by the resources available in a particular context.
Communication requires that participants make their messages maximally understandable in a particular context.

Representation requires that sign-makers choose forms for the expression of what they have in mind and see as most apt and plausible in the given context.
Ch. 1
The Semiotic Landscape
“Old Visual Literacy”
- dominated by writing
- passage from childhood images to adult texts
- designated adult elites allowed to be image makers

“New Visual literacy”
- complex mix of text, images, sound . .
- largely not taught in schools (?)
- applies to all life stages
- threat to old visual literacy
The Desk Set, Behind the Book, and Desert Island Comics present:

**WOMEN WORKING IN PANELS**

Have a drink with a panel of female graphic novelists and cartoonists as they discuss drawing, writing, and publishing in this macho world.

Featuring:
- Rebecca Donner
- Fly
- Miriam Katin
- Leslie Stein
- Sara Varon
- Lauren Weinstein

and moderated by the lovely Betty Bird of fuse #8

7pm Monday July 21st
Huckleberry Bar
588 Grand St. Williamsburg, Brooklyn

Suggested donation (includes 1 drink)
Get lucky in the Raffle!

All proceeds go to Behind the Book's programs to bring authors and illustrators into NYC Public Schools. www.behindthebook.org
Language and visual communication can both be used to realize the “same” fundamental systems of meaning that constitute our culture, but each does so by its own specific forms, does so differently, and independently (p.19)

e.g. - subjective / objective
Coming up now. With anticipated wind patterns, looks like Mexico would catch the worst. We could probably salvage a lot of the farm-belt... Losing the east coast, we'd need to. I don't know...
An unconventional history of writing

- Two independent modes of representation
  - language as speech
  - visual images or marks

- In “literate” cultures the visual is subsumed by the oral

- Cultures retaining both modes often labeled “illiterate”
COAL BLACK AND THE SEBBEN DWARFS
IN TECHNICOLOR

A MERRIE MELODIE CARTOON

A LEON SCHLESINGER PRODUCTION
Semiotic Landscape

- The range of forms or modes of available communication
- The uses and valuations of those forms and modes

The world represented visually in the new media is different from the world represented on the pages of print media.
WATCHMEN

In an alternate 1985 America, costumed superheroes are part of the fabric of everyday society, and the “Doomsday Clock” — which charts the USA’s tension with the Soviet Union — is permanently set at five minutes to midnight.

Austin, TX
Monday, February 23, 7:00pm

Alamo Drafthouse Cinema
1120 South Lamar Blvd., Austin, TX 78704

WANT TO SEE THE MOVIE FIRST? HERE’S HOW

1. Add Black Curtain Screenings to your top friends
2. Print out your profile and bring it with you to the theatre.
3. Show up at the theater and line up. Remember it’s first come first served!!

Please do not bring camera phones and/or recording equipment. Thank you.
Different potentials for meaning making may imply different potentials for the formation of subjectivities.

The different modes of representation are not held discretely, separately as strongly bounded autonomous domains in the brain, or as autonomous communicational resources in culture.

Affective aspects of human beings and practices are not discrete from other cognitive activities.
Halliday’s Three Metafunctions

- **Ideational Metafunction**
  - representation of the human world outside the representational system

- **Interpersonal Metafunction**
  - representation of social relationships between producers and viewers/reproducers

- **Textual Metafunction**
  - Formation of complexes of signs which cohere both internally with each other and externally with the context in which they situated.
Want to come work out with me?

Oh no, I need to lose weight before I go to the gym!

As Curves, there are no mirrors. No men. No spandex. Only wonderful women just like you, getting fit and having fun.
13 million

Sure it wasn't a nightmare?

I had a dream!

More than 13 million Black Americans have been killed by abortion.
Ch. 2
Narrative representations: designing social actions
Unidirectional Actor → Goal
Non-transactional reaction
Conversion

Actor ➔ Relay ➔ Goal
Bidirectional interactor ↔ interactor
Bidirectional
Senser

Krazy Kat.
Sayer

Pow

TRANSGRESSION

ZIP
Setting
Means
Accompaniment