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Author(s)	Lutz Presser
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Visual Literacy: The Role of the Artist and Art Educator in the New Millennium

Lutz Presser

The following paper is pro-visualist: it is deliberately biased towards and privileges the visual. In other words, the eye, as an instrument through which intelligence is honed. It advocates the intelligence of sight. Intelligent seeing is the means by which the artist/designer/craftsperson develops his/her skill as an artmaker. This approach is confrontational to, and subverts logo-centric degradation of images.

I argue that the making and analysis of images through spectatorship is not synonymous with empty gaping or voyeurism. Seeing is not just looking. Furthermore, I suggest that images should be free from the traditional Platonic, idealist identification with *trompe l'oeil*, i.e. the notion that images lie because they merely reflect or imitate reality.

In brief, historicizing and outlining my argument, it is understood that prior to the last two hundred years, vision and cognition were inseparable, for ancient authors *to know* in fact meant *to see*. To see was to establish an immediate relation between the soul itself and the object being looked at. This notion did not conflict with, for example, the Christian concept of faith, as faith was not cognition, but related to the invisible and was acquired not by sight but by hearing. Until the late 1600s, the intellect was identified with seeing. However, within the concept of *seeing* and the word *vision* are embedded ambiguities and tensions implying penetration and understanding beyond what is visible to the naked eye. Clairvoyance, or to be a seer, may be to see clearly, but what is seen is discerned through an extraordinary power which transcends normal sight and unavailable to most people.

In *The Name of the Rose*, by Umberto Eco, a book goes missing. In the search to find it, the man who represents enlightenment in an age dominated by the feudal mentality, clarifies the distinction between looking and seeing. The dialogue goes as follows:

- Then it should be there still. But it is not there.
- Just a moment. We say it isn't there because we didn't find it. But perhaps we didn't find it because we haven't seen where it was.

- But we looked everywhere!
- We looked, but did not see. Or else saw but did not recognize.
(Fig. 1)



Fig. 1: "Jesus Christ" (Reproduced from T.R. O'Neill, "Dual-Tex Camouflage Pattern", *Aarmor*, Nov-Dec 1977).

By the 17th century, visual experience could be understood as being divided into three doctrines. The first concerned the logic of seeing: the mind as camera obscura, a private, inner theatre for screening of representations. The second doctrine concerned the morality of vision, which was the Platonic-Augustinian notion of subordinating corporeal vision to intellectual or intuitive vision. The third doctrine concerned the politics of vision and attempted to describe God's and/or the state's surveillance of the world.

Barbara Maria Stafford deals with this problem in her recent series: *Body Criticism: Imaging the Unseen in Enlightenment Art and Medicine*; *Artful Science: Enlightenment Entertainment and the Eclipse of Visual Education*; and *Good Looking: Essays on the Virtue of Images*. She states: "By logocentrism I mean the cultural bias, convinced of the superiority of written or propositional language, that devalues sensory, affective, and kinetic forms of communication precisely because they often baffle verbal resolution". The premise maintaining the inferiority of images and conversely, the superiority of texts is predicated on the privileging of language as standing for all higher handless and sightless cognitive

activity. I agree with Stafford and other scholars, such as Martin Jay in *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, that postmodernism's dialectics are essentially negative, as they propose an antiocular suspicion that all forms of representation are voracious, dominating and duplicitous simulacra. Contemporary society's obsession with language has highlighted semiotic; poststructuralist and deconstructivist translations of the pictorial can be self-protective and unidirectional. Educated seeing is precisely about recognizing that information cannot be separated from the manner of its display.

The sensory scepticism introduced by the Cartesians, British empiricists and French sensationalists, identified visualisation with sophistry, because they understood image manipulation as delusional trickery. The history of image making is filled with examples of admirable skill and misleading *trompe l'oeil*. The connection between long-standing antiocular rhetoric and the massive anti-image bias culminating in current post-modern criticism has yet to be fully explored. The paradox is that the seemingly relentless negative critique of images and the abuses of 'the gaze' have surfaced in exponents of the visual arts profession itself, where it seems we demean the activity necessary for the production of art and despise the very objects we make. Furthermore, it could be argued that one of the underlying reasons for much of the 20th century's inward focused gaze in the visual arts has been generated by the insecurity and inadvisability of looking outward.

Claude Levi-Strauss, the 'father' of structuralism, comprehended the system's incompleteness when applied to the manufacture, critiquing and analysis of visual art objects. He wrote:

Because the human sciences have brought formal structures to light behind works of art, there is a rush to fabricate works of art on the basis of formal structures. But it is by no means certain that these conscious and artificially constructed structures, taken as the basis for inspiration, will be of the same order as those that are discovered, after the fact, to have operated in the mind of the creator, most often without his being aware of them (P. Caws, *Structuralism: The Art of the Intelligible*, 1988).

P. Caws in quoting Levi-Strauss states: "I note for future reference that this amounts to an admission of the incompleteness of the structuralist explanations in the domain of art".

It is not just academics or the educated public who suffer from being visually remedial. Those in the field, i.e. artmakers and art educationalists, who believe that language is the paradigm of depth, seriousness, thought, even our very identity, are complicit to devaluing the power of the visual. Complex imagery and revealing portraits are real and go beyond the power of words.

In her discussion Stafford laments that even though the iron grip of a univocal language-like prototype for cognitive activity is starting to be eroded:

Understanding, imagined as a combinational and synthetic physical function, has the potential for taking into account a broad range of multisensory endeavours. This suggests that truly enlarging the horizon of the emergent sciences of the mind (cognitive science, neurobiology, linguistics, AI, philosophy) should entail learning from the transactional visual arts about the experiential structures of thought. Ironically, the aesthetic, historical, and humanistic dimensions of perception remain virtually absent from the new interdisciplinary matrix in which cognitive being is about to become embedded.

Moreover, insofar as we constitute a distinctive group of professionals, we have not been looked to for intellectual leadership. Our opinion is not sought in the academic or the public domain when debates on, or decisions are made as to how best we can apply what we know. This problem is further exacerbated by the fact we have no coherent policies or models to elaborate on if we were called to formulate a bridge between socially relevant imaging problems within teaching institutions, cultural bodies and the public arena. In other words, we do not appear to have developed any methodologies for alerting and educating diverse audiences to the true, false, and ambiguous nature of images and image making.

I believe that educated seeing, or visual literacy, can be learned and that the present argument elevating text above vision as the paradigm of knowledge, truth and reality, is seriously flawed, as it denies a basic skill for helping us understand the world. 'Seeing' can be trained and honed into an instrument serving knowledge, truth and reality. I also suggest that intelligent seeing, can and should be nurtured and developed in the classroom at all levels, in order to equip individuals not only with the ability to 'read' images, but also to create them. I believe the role of 'teaching' seeing; imagining and imaging falls to those trained as artists and art educators.

I recently attended a seminar on a method of teaching primary and secondary students finding favour in the USA. So far two manuals are available and others are expected to follow soon. Volume one – entitled “Infusing the Teaching of Critical and Creative Thinking into Content Instruction: A Lesson Design Handbook for the Elementary Grades” (Critical Thinking Books and Software, 1994), by Robert J. Swartz and Sandra Parks – contains the exemplar science lesson on the Kestrel. Our seminar group was introduced to the ‘infusion’ method by this particular lesson. The lesson is designed to aid students in determining parts-whole relationships. Hence, through a combination of text, illustration and graphic organizers students become informed about an American bird of prey. On page 184 of the Handbook is an illustration of the bird and a brief outline of some of its characteristics (Fig. 2). Teachers who might wish to use the Kestrel lesson in their own classes are advised to show videotape of the bird in action, if possible.



Fig. 2: Kate Simon Huntley, “Kestrel” (Reproduced from R.J. Swartz & S. Parks, *Infusing the Teaching of Critical Thinking into Content Instruction: A Lesson Handbook for the Elementary Grades*, Critical Thinking Books & Software, Pacific Grove, CA., USA, 1994).

The seminar group only had the illustration to go on, which led me to conjecture that the role of the visual aid is sometimes not only misunderstood, but can also be easily abused, by those attempting to use it as a method of disseminating knowledge. What information am I given by this reproduced image of the bird? What can I conclude about the Kestrel from the drawing? Given that my background is a visual one, I became aware from the answers proffered in class that others took for granted certain things about the image. They brought a sophistication and knowledge to the 'reading' of the illustration, which I found lacking. They presumed, for example, that the bird had two wings, had feathers, not fur or some other material covering its body, wasn't black and white in colouring, wasn't bleeding from the eye, didn't live in a white void, that the object attached to its claws wasn't another body part, and that it is larger than a budgerigar. My training suggested to me that this was a poor image because it misled me, i.e. it lied. Moreover, due to its place in a teaching manual and the fact that the artist had signed it, it simultaneously performed the dual role of a visual provider of knowledge and art, i.e. powerful and intimidating authoritarianism. I found the graphic organizer equally complex because of its hierarchical layout, requiring one to jettison certain types of thinking and evaluation in favour of the conformist structure provided. The virtue of scientific and botanical illustration, the genre to which the above cited Kestrel image purportedly belongs, is that the knowledge imbedded within the drawing leads to clarity and demystification of whatever is illustrated, not confusion.

Ironically, we appear to live in pre-eminently visual times, a period becoming ever more reliant on sophisticated imaging. It seems as we cross the threshold of another millennium, many new frontiers of ways of seeing are becoming available to us, from popular culture's movies, television, virtual reality video games, to supercomputers which allow us to see internal and external worlds anew. Computer simulations of the brain's interconnected nerve cells, for example, provide neuroscientists and cognitive psychologists with literal insights into how the mind thinks senses and feels. X-ray tomography (CT) exposes bone structures. Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) gives a cross-sectional picture of the brain's architecture, making transparent what was previously opaque. The process uses computers to reconstruct a visual, three-dimensional map of the brain, which may be rotated and explored at will. Dynamic visualization is employed in astrophysics; radiology, meteorology and engineering, thereby bridging the gap between accumulated raw data and a constructed image enabling practical analysis. Seeing can lead to believing. Visualization of complex data, which otherwise would be literally unimaginable, is now critical

to the advancement of many fields of science. Moreover, new graphics, in the form of charts and histograms are being employed in mathematics to interpret statistics. It seems we need succinct images in order to help us think.

Other fields, such as the legal profession, through an increasing reliance on the examination of visual evidence, have become cinematic. The new workplace is a technologically vibrant environment where administrative, productive and personnel activities are filtered through a computer screen.

Historically, the paradigm of artist-technologist, whose role was finding new ways of visualizing, existed, for example, during the Italian Renaissance, where painters and sculptors, through skilful draughtsmanship, pioneered the anatomical fields of myology and osteology. Similarly, the artist-technologist was the foremost delineator and antiquarian, interpreter and defender of the changing urban landscape of Rome. The creation at this time of galleries, museums, libraries and natural history cabinets was grounded in a visual encyclopedism, persuasively encouraging cross referencing in a distant public that strolled and paused before minute details and eye-arresting features, prompting mental locomotion.

Visual lessons and visual means learned from the past could be applied imaginatively to tackle current problems in imaging. One of the ramifications of the computer revolution has been the revelation that the image is not merely a quasi-idea tied to the material, but is crucial to cognitive processes. As Stafford suggests: "Why not assume an affirmative role as a bridging and orienting discipline centred on our diverse visual aptitudes? Why not integrate the study of art, and more broadly images and their technology, into the trans-disciplinary inquiry developing at the end of this century?" I am suggesting that intelligent seeing, can and should be nurtured and developed in the classroom at all levels, in order to equip individuals not only with the ability to 'read' images, but also to create them. I believe the role of 'teaching' seeing; imagining and imaging falls rightfully to those trained as artists and art educators.

Lutz Presser is a visual artist, writer on art history and theory, and an associate professor in the Division of Visual and Performing Arts at National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University.