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Any meaningful definition of literacy will acknowledge its social function, that it is essentially about how we communicate in our culture, going beyond a limited emphasis on the skills of reading and writing. English teachers in particular are very familiar with the notion that oracy – the development of skills in speaking and listening – is fundamental to students' literacy development.

In the twenty-first century, there is great speculation about the future of print text. Multimodal texts are in the ascendancy and visual communication has become a core component of the world of work and of our lives in general. Therefore the literate citizen must develop a knowledge of visual codes, at least in order to interpret written information.

> *Because of the increase in design software and the wider availability of computer technology, traditional definitions of literacy are no longer adequate in a world where texts communicate to us in new ways – through graphics, pictures, layout techniques as well as through words. It is difficult these days to find a single text which uses solely verbal English.*

(Goodman 1996)

In supporting this claim, Sharon Goodman reminds her readers of the rich variety and presence of multimodal texts. Newspapers contain photographs, diagrams and changes of typeface. Even a company letterhead will be carefully designed, including the choice of graphics and colour of the paper to craft the company's image. We now take it for granted that an electronic text, such as a page on the web, will use more than one of the language modes.

The challenge for English teachers in developing our students' understanding of language as a social semiotic is to develop both their knowledge of the visual codes (which will enable them to make meaning of multimodal texts) and their understanding of the cultural contexts in which this type of communication, in its varied textual forms, takes place.

Visual images, like all representations, "are never innocent or neutral reflections of reality…they re-present for us: that is, they offer not a mirror of the world but an interpretation of it." (Midalia 1999 p. 131) In this way, students must be made critically literate: they require knowledge and understanding of how visual texts are produced and composed and how viewers will "relate to and interrogate" (Stephens 1997, p. 164) such representations of the world around them.

Print advertisements are ideal for exploring familiar visual texts with students as they develop understanding of the language of visual elements, the aesthetics of visual texts, and of the constructed nature of these texts as social products reflecting the dominant ideology of their time. The social element in critical literacy has become increasingly important in using visual texts in the classroom, as companies and corporations, competing for elusive marketing dollars have begun to target teenagers and children as niche markets.

In his study of the fast food industry in America, Eric Schlosser notes that the major advertising agencies now have children's divisions, and a variety of marketing agencies have begun to focus solely on kids. Many such organisations now operate on the premise that brand loyalty may be established as early as two years of age. (Lane 2001, p.43.) This is a global phenomenon. He cites an Australian study from the 1990s as finding that 50% of 9 and 10 year olds believe that Ronald McDonald knows what children should eat (p. 231).

The English classroom, then, has become a crucial place for students to examine the forces shaping their behaviour as consumers.

The grammar of visual design

Pedagogy in media studies has traditionally drawn on a variety of approaches to or ways of "reading", visual images, including an examination of the iconography of specific images, the technical elements of composition in the conventions of photography and film-making, as well as the psychology of perception.

A new approach to reading visual images came with the publication of *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen. Taking as their starting point the idea that visual images can be read as "text", the metaphor of "grammar" can be applied to the study of visuals. In this sense "grammar" is not a set of rules for the correct use of language but rather a set of socially constructed resources for the construction of meaning.

Such a "grammar", Kress and van Leeuwen argue, can be used by individuals to shape the subjectivities of others. They advocate the place of reading images in the school curriculum so that students participate effectively in the changing "semiotic landscape". They also believe that visual design, like language and all semiotic modes, is socially constructed and this makes their work very useful for teachers seeking to develop critically literate students.

Representation and meaning: Design and the processes of making meaning

Once students have had the opportunity to look at a particular image and have formed some initial thoughts and reactions, the process of critical reading might begin with consideration of what, if anything, is actually happening in the image. (Callow 1999, p.4) Kress and van Leeuwen identify two processes as carrying representational meanings in images:

Conceptual processes explain what things are like and have a didactic function.

Presentational processes deal with actions and events and so function as a narrative.

Conceptual processes

Students will be able to recognise *conceptual processes* and be able to identify what a "represented participant" (i.e. a person, place, or thing in an image) means by identifying an absence of action; nothing is happening in the image in terms of the representation of a story. Consideration can then be given to possible *symbolic meanings*. Kress and van Leeuwen suggest that symbolic meanings take two forms: the *attributive* and the *suggestive*.

In the *attributive* symbolic process, meaning is made through the highlighting of one represented participant in an image where there are two participants. This highlighting of a particular one in relation to the other (whether through its size, colour, lighting, or placement within the composition, any conventional association it may have with the symbolic values of a particular culture, or the directing of the reader's focus to it through gestures such as pointing or lines) functions to associate it and its meaning with that other. Figure 3 provides such an example. The emphasis on the bottle opener, through its size, colour, placement within the image and its representation as a devil-like object, functions to associate certain qualities or values with the advertised chocolate. These include indulgence, sin, wickedness and celebration.

The *suggestive* symbolic process involves just one represented participant, through which the meaning is carried. In such an image, "mood" or "atmosphere" tend to be emphasised over detail, with colours and lighting serving important functions in capturing a generalised essence.

Presentational processes

Presentational processes are also identified by Kress and van Leeuwen as being of two major kinds: *actional* and *reactional*. They identify different kinds of narrative process according to the *vector* (see below) and the number and kind of *participants*.

Processes described as *actional* are those in which an action creates a relation between represented participants. If the image has only one participant (which may then be called the actor) the action is a *non-transactional* structure, as it has no goal. It is not "aimed at" or "done to" anyone or anything. If an image has two participants, Kress and van Leeuwen describe one as the *actor*, the other as the *goal*. The actor is the participant from whom or from which the action originates. The participant to whom the action is done, or at whom the action is aimed is the *goal*. Such a structure is described as transactional.

When the *vector* creating the relation between two or more participants is the result of a look or gaze (a type of *vector*), such as in Figures 1 and 2, Kress and van Leeuwen describe the process as *reactional*. The participants in such a structure are termed *reactors* (instead of actors) and *phenomena* (instead of goals).

The Diet Pepsi advertisement labelled Figure 1 involves a sophisticated interplay of action and reaction. The woman's *demand* of the audience (see below) makes her an actor in a non-transactional action structure. However, "Mr Right" is depicted as gazing up at the represented woman, creating a reactional structure in the same image. Representing the woman as *phenomena* is a central component of the positioning of her as an aspirational figure for the advertisement's target audience of young adult heterosexual women. Her power and ability to attract men and then manipulate them to her own ends is suggested in the text of the advertisement. The man gazes up at her, reacting to her very being with a look of dutiful, if not worshipful compliance, deliberately reversing the predominant trend that many media theorists have identified in the gender roles ascribed in advertising.

Representation and interaction: Designing the position of the viewer

Kress and van Leeuwen suggest that interpersonal meaning in visual texts may be identified through the *representation of relations between viewer and image*. A number of aspects of interactive meaning are integral to the description of viewer—image interaction: mood, perspective, social distance, lighting, colour and modality.

Mood

Reading visual images in terms of gaze through the codes of *offers* and *demands* allows us to identify mood.

The woman depicted in the Diet Pepsi advertisement (Figure 1) looks intently at the viewer, her gaze establishing a direct connection between her, the represented participant, and the viewer, an interactive participant. Kress and van Leeuwen call this visual configuration a *demand*, as it explicitly acknowledges the viewer: the producers of the image wish to influence the viewer in some way to enter into an imaginary relation with the represented participant. In this image, the woman's body language, stance and gaze suggest a challenge to the target audience to emulate her. The way to take up this challenge, is, of course, to purchase the advertised product.

Figure 2 addresses the viewer indirectly. The viewer's role is that of an invisible and detached onlooker. This constitutes an *offer*, as the represented participants are depicted impersonally as items of information or objects for the viewer's contemplation.

Perspective

Reading visual images in terms of both the *vertical* and *horizontal angles* establishes whether the viewer is being positioned to adopt a *subjective* or *objective* point of view.

Subjective images are those in which everything is arranged for the viewers, positioning them to adopt a particular stance with an image. Such images tend to the naturalistic, as opposed to the symbolic. The *vertical angle* defines the nature of the power relations between the viewer and the image. If the represented participants (whether objects or people) are depicted from a *high angle* – that is viewed from above - the interactive participants (both the composer of the image and the viewer) are in a position of power. Conversely, a *low angle* gives the represented participants – as they are seen from below - power in relation to the interactive participants. If the angle is *straight on* – at eye-level – there is no power difference involved and the point of view is one of equality.

In Figure 1, the woman's independence and strength are suggested through her representation from a low angle. Her challenge to the viewer is to be like her, to move from a position of inferiority to one of superiority. In Figure 2, the angle places the composer and target audience in a position of equality with the represented participants, reinforcing the offer to think about the implications of this scene, the choices that the viewers have in terms of their drinking habits and how these choices may affect their behaviour and the wellbeing of those close to them.

Horizontal angles encode the "involvement" of the reader with the image through frontal and oblique points of view. If the participants in an image are depicted on the horizontal angle from the front, facing the camera squarely, then a connection is established between the represented participants and the viewer. Such a representation invites the involvement of the reader with the image. This may be seen in Figure 1. The composers want the target audience to know that the represented figure of the woman is part of their "world", as a role model. The represented and interactive participants share common wants, needs and concerns: there is recognition of "us".

Conversely, if the participants in an image are depicted on an *oblique angle* (i.e. the angle is not straight on) the reader is being positioned to adopt a *detached* point of view. The participants are not recognised as part of the "world" of the reader: they are "them" rather than "us". The somewhat oblique angle on which the young women are represented in Figure 2 suggests the desire on the part of the composers of the image not to alienate the target audience from the messages of the advertisement. However, the oblique angle works to allow the reader to adopt a detached, contemplative point of view.

In *objective images* viewers are disregarded in terms of their involvement with the participants in an image. There is a shift from the more "naturalistic" to the predominance of *signification*. Such images do not include perspective, as described above, and may be characterised by the representation of non-naturalistic objects and shapes that have little or no sense of being to scale. Figure 3 is an example of an objective image. Meaning comes from the symbolic connections that the reader makes between the distinctive bottle opener and the brand of chocolate that is being advertised.

Social distance

Readers are positioned so they respond to represented figures in visual images with varying degrees of familiarity. Their response will be the result of *framing*. This code allows the reader to imaginatively come close to the participants, perhaps viewing them as friends, or to take a more distant point of view, with the participants being viewed as strange "others".

A shot of just the face or head of the participants denotes an *intimate distance*. A shot of the head and shoulders represents a *close personal distance*. A figure from the waist up encodes a *far personal distance*. An image in which a whole figure is shown is framed as a *close social distance*. A *far social distance* is represented in the framing of the whole figures of a group of people. The varying degrees of what is called in filmic terms the *close-up*, then, may be said to be the realm of personal relations. What may be described as *medium shots* (close social distance) represent the realm of social relations, and *long shots* (far social distance) represent public relations.

In Figure 1 the woman is framed at a close social distance through a medium shot. This places her at one remove from the reader, reinforcing the idea that she is a role model or aspirational figure, while at the same time acknowledging that her concerns are familiar and largely those of the target audience.

Lighting

Photographic images depend on light. The way in which visual images in print advertising are lit will tend NOT to be natural (e.g. daylight). With the use of filters, daylight can be made to look like moonlight. Even if the lighting used in a print advertisement appears to be "natural", it is assumed in analysis that such a lighting effect is used to convey a particular meaning.

In print advertisements, as in cinema, lighting is a code. Such things as the degree of brightness and the direction of the source of the light indicate meaning to the reader. For example, shadows may suggest that something is being concealed about a character. Bright lights might suggest a sense of hope or, when directed at a particular section of an image, they may highlight something significant, giving a dramatic feel to the image. Softer light may create a romantic feel.

The most common form of lighting is three-point lighting, made up of the key light, fill light and back light.

- The *key light* is the main source of illumination and is directed onto the subject, usually from 45 degrees above and to one side of the camera. It is hard, direct light that produces sharply defined shadows. It can be bright (high intensity) or dim (low).

- The *fill light* is a soft or indirect light that "fills in" the shadows formed by the key light.

- The *back light* shines from behind the subject, usually to differentiate it from the background.

Colour

The use of particular colours in a visual image may represent particular moods or feelings. The symbolic meanings that we attach to particular colours may change according to context. In one visual image, red may suggest passion. It may suggest danger in another, or both in a third image. Colour can also be described in terms of tone and saturation. Tone is the degree of lightness or darkness of a coloured area (e.g. "dark tone"). Saturation is the degree of purity in a colour (e.g. "highly saturated").

Some of the more common symbolic associations for colours in Western culture are represented in the following table.

Blue	Peace, tranquillity, truth, dignity, power, melancholy, coolness, heaviness. Regarded as being therapeutic.
Yellow	Happiness, cheerfulness. Can denote caution, decay, and sickness.
Red	Warmth, urgency, passion, heat, blood, excitement, danger and hostility. Used as an accent colour, it can promote expectations and quick decision-making.
Green	Growth, fertility, health, cheerfulness, vegetation, money. Signifies life, new growth, energy and faith.
Grey	Cool detachment, bleakness, and lack of intensity.
Purple	Wealth, royalty, sophistication, intelligence. Also the colour of passion and love.
Black	Death, rebellion, strength and evil. Associated with the supernatural, it can also suggest inner strength and determination, as well as power and formality.
White	Purity, chastity and cleanliness.
Black and white	Nostalgia, seriousness, truth, detachment.
Brown	Credibility, stability, and neutrality.
Orange	Warmth, strength of personality. Associated with autumn, it also has broad appeal.

Modality

The linguistic feature of modality may be used to describe the degree of "credibility" manifest in a visual text. The "touchstone" in assessing modality in images is a colour photograph taken by a good photographer using a 35 mm camera in natural sunlight. This, Kress and van Leeuwen claim, is widely accepted within Western culture as being as close as a visual image will get to representing what is real in a "naturalistic" sense of how people, places and things might be depicted.

The use of colour, texture, light and shade in such a photograph give it high modality; a high degree of "truthfulness" or "credibility" may be ascribed to it. (**Note**: There are the exceptions of certain representations, such as diagrams, maps and technical plans, that do not aspire to "naturalism". These are still held to represent what is "real" in a scientific or technical sense and they may be said to have high modality). Other influences on modality include idealisation, decontextualisation and perspective. Modality occurs in degrees from lowest (least real or least credible) to highest (most real or most credible).

The composition of Figure 1 is clearly designed to reflect median modality. Representing the woman as an aspirational figure or role model means she is "better than real": she has left the restrictions and mundanities of the "real" world behind. Although she is recognisable as being of a certain age, having particular personality traits and is placed in a familiar domestic setting, the image does not "mirror" the world in a naturalistic sense.

Similarly, the signification attached to the head over the toilet in the composition of Figure 2 raises the modality of this image. This functions together with other codes (see above) to allow the viewers — the target audience being young women — to distance themselves from the represented action as not being part of this "world" and to view it, nonetheless, as a representation they might consider. Figure 3, as an objective image, is totally non-naturalistic and has no pretence to realism in its composition; its modality is low.

Representation and text design: Layout and compositional meaning

Kress and van Leeuwen identify the functional role of a number of codes that operate in the layout of an image to produce meaning and create textual coherence. The codes include salience, the reading path, vectors, the compositional axes and centres and margins.

Salience

The "visual weight" allocated to elements in an image is a result of the interaction of such things as size, focus, colour and distance. Placement in the image is also significant. In general, elements become heavier as they are positioned towards the top or left of an image.

In Figure 3 the most salient feature is obviously the bottle opener, given its colour and size. In Figure 2, the toilet bowl is the most salient image. It is large and it functions in an attention-grabbing way as a symbolic item in the representation of a recognisable social setting. In Figure 1 the colour of the woman's dress and the way it is riding up her hips, the front lighting and her size combine to make her torso the most salient component of the image. Some viewers might include the woman's face as a highly salient feature because of the way that it is framed by black hair, her demanding gaze and the highlighting effect created by front lighting.

The reading path

The reading path is taken through the salient elements of the image. The path begins with the most salient element and moves to other less salient elements. In Figure 3 the reader will proceed from the bottle opener to the chocolate. In Figure 2 the path travels from the dancer on the left to the girl on the right, then her head, then to the toilet bowl, up to the text in the centre middle then to the lower right-hand corner text in small print. In Figure 1 the reader's eye will move up the woman's body to her face, down her upper arm to the adjacent text box and the figure of "Mr Right", down the vacuum cleaner handle to the product logo and the slogan.

Vectors

Vectors lead the reader from one element to another. They may take the form of lines, visible or otherwise, created by such things as a gaze, pointing fingers or extended arms, an object held in a set direction or protrusions of various sorts. In Figure 2 the open mouth leads straight to the toilet. In Figure 1 the woman's upper arm is clearly directed down towards the adjacent text box featuring Mr Right. In addition, other vectors — the pointing hand featured on the wall hanging, Mr Right's gaze and the vacuum cleaner handle — return the reading path back to the woman, highlighting her as the centre of the image.

The compositional axes

The composition of elements in a visual image may be read through its vertical and horizontal axes.

The *vertical axis* creates a structure which Kress and van Leeuwen call *given* or *new*. The left side is called the *given*. Elements of an image placed here are known or understood by the viewer, making these elements a familiar and agreed-upon departure point for the message.

The right side is known as *new*. The elements of an image placed here are representations of what is not yet known and so, are crucial to the point of the message. In summary, the new is more difficult for viewers whereas the given is more accepted.

In Figure 1, the figure of the woman is placed in the given. Her representation as an independent, strong, and attractive figure is intended to be recognisable to the advertisement's target audience (the readership of *Cosmopolitan*) and one with which these viewers will associate. The new connects the notion of a "Mr Right" who will be so hypnotised by such a woman that he will break with stereotypical masculine behaviour, namely watching the football, and do the vacuuming. In Figure 2 it is a given that young women dance and enjoy themselves. The new establishes the result of drinking too much alcohol. Clearly, the advertisement is composed to give its target audience of young women cause to consider the consequences of their drinking behaviour.

The *horizontal axis*. Placing different elements in the upper and lower sections creates a structure called *ideal* or *real*. The elements of an image in the upper section are represented as *ideal*. Those in the lower section are represented as *real*. For something to be represented as ideal means that it is the generalised essence of the information and therefore its most salient part. The real is opposed to this and presents more specific, factual, or practically orientated information.

The "ideal" is quite frequently represented as the "dream" or "aspiration" and the real the more mundane. The ideal represented in Figure 1 consists of the steely gaze of a strong, independent woman who has "Mr Right" under her spell. The real, however, features her legs, the vacuum cleaner and the Diet Pepsi symbol. This suggests that "Mr Right" does not exist, he is just a dream; the woman is left to do the vacuuming which remains. The consolation is that she has Diet Pepsi, which will enable her to maintain what the makers of the product, and the composers of the image, wish to represent as a desirable and shapely figure. An exception to the ideal/real structure, as outlined, is a text that presents a warning, such as Figure 2. In such instances the ideal becomes the "promise" of what will inevitably occur if the warning is not heeded. The elements of the image found in the real will be geared towards providing guidance as to how to prevent the "promise" from becoming a reality.

Centre and margin

Images can also be composed along the dimensions of *centre* and *margin*. The centre is presented as the nucleus of the information, whereas the margin is subservient or ancillary. Placing the devilish bottle opener at the centre of Figure 3 means that its symbolic qualities are highlighted over the actual product, which is ancillary but nonetheless significantly positioned as both real and new. It is common for the product or its logo to appear in this section of an advertisement as a visual prompt. It tells the viewer that the product can be bought and that it is the material means to acquire the values, qualities or lifestyle attributed to the product.

Theory into practice

The PowerPoint display that follows illustrates how the "grammar" of visual design can be fruitfully applied in the classroom through the teaching of such a "grammar" as a resource for analysis. The focus is on the applicability of specific codes derived from this "grammar" in reading two print advertisements.

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Advertisements

Figure 1: Clemenger, Sydney Pty. Ltd., 2000, *Diet Pepsi*, Sydney.

Figure 2: Commonwealth of Australia, 2002, *Drinking. Where are your choices taking you?*, Canberra.

Figure 3: Ferrero Australia Pty. Ltd., 1998, Advertisement for "Ferrero Rocher Chocolate" in *HQ Magazine*, Australia.