# INFORMATION

# READING IMAGES - THE GRAMMAR OF VISUAL DESIGN

*Gunther Kress & Theo van Leeuwen*
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## 1. Introduction



"Print- and screen-based technologies" have innovated the definition of *literacy*. The traditional definitions are no longer comprehensive enough in a world where texts are becoming increasingly multimodal - they communicate to us through graphics, pictures, layout techniques as well as through words. In fact, *"it is difficult these days to find a single text which uses solely verbal English"* (Goodman, 1996). **Visual literacy**, as its name suggests, denotes the ability to interpret, negotiate, and make meaning from information presented in the form of an image. This notion extends the meaning of *literacy*,

which commonly signifies interpretation of a written or printed text.

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). For that reason, several questions are posed to the viewers. Some common ones might be "*How can we come to justified and grounded meaning(s) of the picture?*"; and "*How can we understand the basic structure of an image text?*" (Hermawan, 2011, p.147). The path of seeking answers to these questions suggests that there should be an underlying pattern or structure that people can rely on to interpret the meaning of visual texts.

To this direction, **Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design (second edition)**, by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, offers "*a usable description of major compositional structures which have become established in the course of the history of Western visual semiotics, and to analyse how they are used to produce meaning by contemporary image-makers*" (p.1). Building on the reputation of the first edition (1996) as "the first systematic and comprehensive account of the grammar of visual design" (https://books.google.com.vn/books/about/Reading_Images.html?id=wprZmJFXUXIC&redir_esc=y), this second publication (2006) updates its data

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source with new materials on moving images, colours, web and web-based images, as well as anticipates the future of visual communication. Taking Hallidayan social semiotic approach to language as the framework, **Reading Images** offers a model of three accounts for images: representational meaning, interactional meaning, compositional meaning. Kress and van Leeuwen consider the model of three accounts works well not only for language but also for thinking about all modes of representation, hence images (p.20). They also claim to provide the readers of the book with a handy "tool-kit" for reading images throughout the explanation of theory and sample visual analysis. The book consists of eight chapters and a complimentary postscript, each of which is summarized in the following part.

## 2. A journey of the book

The journey of **Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design (second edition)** starts with justification of the authors on what they really mean by "grammar" and why they use "the grammar of visual design" as a subtitle of the book. As followers of the Hallidayan School, they see grammatical forms as resources for encoding interpretations of experience and forms of social (inter) action. Their "visual grammar" is a "*general grammar of contemporary visual design in "Western" cultures, an account of explicit and implicit knowledge and practices around a resource, consisting of the elements and rules underlying a culture-specific form of visual communication*" (p.3). Also in this **Introduction** section, the authors explain how the Social Semiotic Theory of Representation lays a solid theoretical framework for their work on visual representation. They exemplify several child-drawings in order to clarify what is meant by sign-making, the signifiers and the signified. Kress and van Leeuwen notice that visual design, in their belief, fulfils the

three metafunctions – ideational function, interpersonal function and textual function as in Halliday's terms.

Chapter 1, *The semiotic landscape: language and visual communication*, discusses in detail the themes that the two authors have touched upon in the Introduction. Kress and van Leewen would like to treat images as seriously as linguistic forms in communication; and by doing so, they refuse Barthes' argument that "*the meaning of images (and of other semiotic codes) is always related to, and in a sense, depended on verbal text*" (Barthes, 1967, cited in Kress & van Leewen, 2006, p.17). Basing on their analysis of several examples of visual literacy from books for young children, Kress and van Leewen prove the need for redrawing the boundary between the mode of writing and the visual arts as well as introducing the concept of design to education. The chapter ends with a note on social semiotic theory of communication where the authors summarize key points about each metafunction and note on which chapter(s) readers can find specific explanations and example analysis for each. The next two chapters deal with *patterns of presentation* which the "grammar of visual design" makes available, and therefore, "*with the way we can encode experience visually*" (p. 15).

Chapter 2, *Narrative representations: Designing social action*, addresses the issue of narrative representation. The chapter labels those involved in the messages exchange as*represented participants*, i.e. what/who are in the visuals, and *interactive participants*, i.e. who participate in the act of communication. A large proportion of this chapter is then devoted to narrative processes which are categorized into different types according to the kinds of vector and the number and kind of participants involved. Examples for analysis in this chapter are taken mostly from newspapers and photographs. The authors finish the chapter with a table giving

the correspondences between linguistic and visual narrative processes.

The issue of conceptual representation is elaborated in *Chapter 3 – Conceptual representations: Designing social constructs*. In this chapter, Kress and van Leeuwencategorize processes into classificational, analytical, symbolic, and embedding. The authors complete the chapter by discussing "*the points of contact between the way conceptual structures are realized in language and images*". For example, they explain that the Visual Classificational and Analytical structures may be similar to Intensive and Possessive Attribute clauses respectively. They also note that there are more differences than similarities since in many cases we cannot figure out the linguistic equivalence of the visual semiotic.

Chapters 4 and 5 deal with patterns of interaction, or in other words, "what we can do to, or for, each other with visual communication, and with the relations between the makers and viewers of visual texts which this entails" (p.15).

Chapter 4, *Representation and interaction: designing the position of the viewer*, shifts to the interaction between the image and the viewer. Here Kress and van Leeuwen explicate how images place the audience into a given position. They also explain that since the producers are absent from the place where the actual communication is completed, social relations and the relations between the producer and the viewer are "*represented rather than enacted*" (p.116). The direction of the look, the gaze of represented participant, the size of frame, and the viewing angle all play important roles in identifying the relation between the represented participants and the interactive participants.

Chapter 5, **Modality: designing models of reality**, looks for how to evaluate the credibility of the images and thus the messages offered by the images. Kress and van Leeuwen remind readers that modality markers in the messages and textual cues are what we rely on to weigh

the reliability of the information we receive. The authors go on reasoning why modality should be "interpersonal" rather than "ideational", and basing on such justification, concluding that in visual communication, modality judgements are dependent on "*what is considered real (or true, or scared) in the social group for which the representation is primarily intended*" (p.156). Colours, hence, serve as "a marker of naturalistic modality" in terms of three scales: *colour saturation, colour differentiation*, and *colour modulation*. Other key markers of visual modality include contextualization, representation, depth, illumination, and brightness. Producers of visuals can configure the modality choices to express specific meanings.

While Chapter 6, ***The meaning of composition***, works with the "textual" function, the way in which "*representations and communicative acts cohere into meaningful whole*" (p.15), Chapter 7, ***Materiality and meaning***, specifies the materiality of visual designs – the tools to make them with and the materials to make them on. Both of them are hence devoted to the discussion of meanings. Chapter 6 details the compositional meaning of the design and takes examples from a variety of sources to illustrate how compositional meaning can be built through factors of information value, salience and framing. Meanwhile, in chapter 7, the authors discuss the role of technology and further elaborate the function of colours.

Chapter 8, ***The third dimension***, is in fact a courageous effort of the authors to try out the application of visual grammar for three-dimensional visual and moving images.

The journey of Reading Images closes with the postscript of the authors, which presents a final example of a child's painting. Here they analyse the painting in all three meanings: representational, conceptual and compositional in order to prove that "*the cognitive and the affective are not antithetical but inevitably always co-present.*"

## 3. Evaluation and application

### 3.1. Contribution

**Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design** provides a systematic and comprehensive account of grammar of visual design. Built on a strong foundation of social semiotic theory, the book serves as insightful notions and detailed information on how to understand visuals. It is of particular interest to graphic designer researchers since it has established frameworks to understand the ways in which theoretical design questions can be asked and answered. The book is also valuable to linguistic researchers whose research interests are within the field of multimodal discourse.

This publication has also been designed in a user-friendly mode, with chapters following quite the same organization: starting with an introduction into the theoretical background for the issue, extending into arguments for the framework, followed by detailed analysis of example visuals with constant reference to the framework, and ending with a charted summary of the framework. The ready-made "tool-kit" for understanding visuals proposed in the book is of practical application for those who want to break down the images into observable tiny pieces to comprehend their meanings. To me, **Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design** proves an excellent source of knowledge to study visual designs, without which, it must be very challenging, elusive and nearly impossible to make meaning of. Its authors, Kress and van Leewen, are indeed pioneering a largely unexplored territory.

### 3.2. Critique

While being considered as the first systematic and comprehensive account of grammar of visual design, the series of **Reading Images** in general are not flawless, according to a number of researchers. However, little critique can be found regarding the 2006 edition of **Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design.** In this section, I will try to draw on reviewing articles of the first edition and compare the reviewers' viewpoints with what I can observe in the second edition.

Forceville (1999) expresses his concern about a number of problems relating to methodology and perspective in the approach of Kress and van Leewen. According to Forceville, though defining the eight markers of visual modality and saying sensible things about each of these markers, Kress and van Leewen "*have not provided enough discussion on how some of them relate to one another, and how they can be used in the practical analysis of specific pictures*". In the 2006 edition, I also question the relation between the named visual modality markers, and observe a lack of thorough analysis of given colored photos (Plate 1 to Plate 8).

Forceville (1999) asserts that in the 1996 book there are a substantial number of pictures whose interpretations are debatable, and he quotes several visual analyses in the book to illustrate. When comparing the two editions, I realize that in the new one, Kress and van Leewen do remove a number of images with questionable interpretations; however, for those that they have decided to keep, they persist on the existing explanations. Yet, there is no official reasoning from the authors as for on what criteria they decide to retain or omit certain images.

Haught (2012) doubts the reliability of many hypotheses presented in the book. He adds that though he places beliefs in most hypotheses, there should be qualitative and quantitative research being done to test them. Haught (2012) mentions, for example, Kress and van Leewen's argument that visuals provide a rich and unique mode of communication for humans. While he accepts that this might be true, he calls for visual communication researchers to "*build theory regarding representation and rhetoric based in what is seen, and not what is said*". Haught also remarks that in his opinion, the idea that social semiotics can be used for modal symbol analysis "*requires an additional layer of rigor to attach the correct societal mode to its symbolism*" and

looks for Kress and van Leeuween's rationale for using social semiotics in the first place. In the 2006 edition, the two authors have noted that the new version "offers a much more comprehensive theory of visual communication", and they have dedicated a significant proportion of the Introduction and Chapter 1 to explain how a social semiotic theory works for visual communication.

## 4. Application

For people with linguistics background, the accounts of visual grammar presented in the book help break down images into more accessible, interpretable objects for studying.

The book offers a framework for still image analysis in "Western culture", which is perfectly what I am looking for to frame my research. The most valuable part of the book to my work lies in Chapters 1 to 7 since Chapter 8 concentrates on 3-D and moving objects. I believe to benefit a great deal from the charted summary of each chapter since the highlighted points here can function as the key to direct my analysis. Also, I learn from the way the authors analyse still images, especially those depicting maps (Figure 2.13), residence (Figure 5.9), food (Plate 4), to name but a few. As for analyses of fine arts like sculpture, surrealism works and such, though my research does not concern with the area, they still prove excellent examples to understand the theory.

There are challenges in applying the presented theory into practice, though. Seen from the book, each image offers so many aspects to study on. Therefore, I am considering either to focus on one or two metafunction(s) only or to narrow down the number of images being included in my research inventory. Besides, there is an urgent need to trace back to Social Semiotics Approach by Halliday so as to map the concepts for textual analysis to the appropriate ones for visual analysis.

I would highly recommend **Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design (2006)** to anyone interested in communication, the media and the arts as well as those who are fascinated by the strong migration of plain written texts to the multi-semiotic Internet-based texts. As we move from a culture dominated by language to one in which visual literacy becomes increasingly important, this book provides an invaluable "tool kit" for comprehending images.

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