

Commentary

Paul Martin Lester, Editor

"No one can get really drunk on a novel or a painting, but who can help getting drunk on Beethoven's Ninth, Bartok's Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion, or the Beatles' White Album?" (Milan Kundera 1999, p. 92)

Marion G. Müller, a professor of mass communication at Jacobs University, Bremen, Germany and chair of the visual studies division of the International Communication Association (ICA), asked former *VQC* editor Julianne Newton, Oregon to moderate a panel titled, "The Impact of Visual Communications: Networking the Power of the Visual." The presentation in May 2008 turned into a *VQC* showcase with editorial board members Michael Griffin, Carleton College, and Brian Rusted, University of Calgary, along with Luc Pauwels, University of Antwerp, who has a research paper published in this issue, and myself.

Julie e-mailed the participants with four questions:

1. What are points on which visually focused disciplines agree, and what are points that distinguish each discipline?
2. What can we learn from one another?
3. How can we move the study of "the visual" forward as a comprehensive field?
4. How can we network our passions for studying the power of the visual to help meet the social challenges of our time?

She also wrote that we would have 5 minutes each to answer those four questions (the time restriction was imposed to facili-

tate a conversation with audience members). Problem was, when I started writing my notes for the session that I have used for this Commentary, my opening joke was more than 5 minutes! When it came to my turn on the panel all I said after my opening joke¹ was, "It's time for us to stop thinking of ourselves as second class citizens."

It's not that I thought questioning the current status and direction of the complex field most of us know as visual communication is a futile exercise, it's that any quick scan of a book room at a major conference and you should agree with my rewording of a question once posed to Picasso, "What is visual communication (art)." He reportedly answered simply, "What is not?" Visual communication is on every cover; it's on every page.

Coincidentally, a journal I picked up in the ICA book room, *Cultural Studies*, began with an editorial statement from Lawrence Grossberg and Della Pollock on the occasion of the journal's 20th year. It was a call to rethink the discipline: "We believe that cultural studies has to remake itself—its questions, theories, methods, analyses, and politics—as its context changes, and as it seeks to produce the best knowledge it can of that context and its possibilities." The two editors

intend to foster "a conversation about the changing and competing discursive and material conditions, struggles and possibilities of the contemporary world, in all their complexity and diversity" (Grossberg & Pollock, 2007, pp. ii–iii).

Last June a leader in our field, Edgar Huang, the 2007–2008 head of the visual communication division, sent out this e-mail: "The officers of each AEJMC division have been asked this year to complete a five-page report following the convention that assesses the state of the discipline. If you've got thoughts on the state of visual communication as a discipline, I'd appreciate hearing them" (personal e-mail, June 3, 2008). Although not as specific as the request from Grossberg and Pollock, Huang's message is the same: What exactly is our discipline and where is it headed?

The current synchronicity in thinking about the direction of various disciplines is that "people of the word" have discovered the power of the visual, and yet don't know quite what to make of it while "people of the image" are being challenged to produce explanations for their methods and presentational forms.

Visual communication, as with many other disciplines, is

composed of many often interconnected components. When faced with this assignment, you soon realize that the field quickly gets messy as the various “disciplines” may include Amateur/Naïve, Artistic, Communications, Cultural/Rhetorical Studies, Exterior/Interior Design (including Signage), Non-Verbal, Philosophical, and so on. Furthermore, the various constituencies that produce and are affected by visual communication should be considered: Academics, Grantors, Lay Public, Professionals, Students, and various other stakeholders. Finally, the intent and purpose of production is important: Economic, Entertainment, Frivolous, Meta Analytical, Micro/Macro, Political, Recombinant, Sarcastic, and so on. Such woefully incomplete listings indicate the richness of the field, but don’t get us any closer to understanding the natural synergies that could be experienced if they were somehow combined.

Perhaps an historical approach is needed. The idea of classifying fields of study can be traced to the Vedic Period from about 1500 BCE. This ancient Indian culture divided all known knowledge into four units: *Dharma* (Law and Ethics), *Artha* (History and Sciences), *Kama* (Arts and Literature), and *Moksha* (Spirituality and Philosophy). Centuries later, the American Thomas Jefferson more efficiently divided the books on the shelves of his personal library into three categories that I like: Memory, Reason, and Imagination.

All well and good, but our field can be divided into two categories: Pictures and Words.

Simply put, in its crudest and traditional expression: pictures show and words explain. Such a classification system is independent of technology—it applies to analog or digital presentations (and both simultaneously).

There is no doubt that these two major categories of visual communication can be enhanced if words contain more images (text that includes meaningful illustrations, informational graphics, and thoughtful and aesthetic uses of typography, graphic design, and interactivity) and images contain more words (analyses, better “artist” statements, background on influences and philosophies, methodologies, affects on viewers, background stories, and so on).

I worry, though, that these two categories will still propagate the wall between the two communication forms. That is why my secret desire is to see the two combined into one. Other art forms show us models where images and words are merged. The sensual inputs of smell, taste, touch, sound, and sight as well as the earliest expressions derived from them—dance, music, poetry, drawing, literature, eggplant parmesan—are examples of a kind of language that is not quite images and not quite words, a hybrid and original state of mind in which the symbolic is more salient than the literal. Julianne Newton and Rick Williams said it in their poetic visual communication book. There is, in all of us, an archetypal understanding that amounts to a “knowing before words” (Newton & Williams, 2007, p. xv).

My suggestion, then, is to throw out all of the categories and start over with each of us committing to collaborating as much as possible with as many as we can. Perhaps the next issue of this journal will be available on disk and will contain all of the research articles, portfolios, book reviews, and bibliography in the form of musical compositions. We should agree on the absurdity of the distinctions or the possibility of the union. As such, please note the “Call for Work” on the last page. Let’s see if we can play and learn from the concept of interactive design and propel our field to the next level through collaborative efforts.

In This Issue

The eclectic nature of visual communications is alive and well as demonstrated by the range of work contained in this issue. The article include a thoughtful discussion of the work of photojournalist Giles Caron by the always erudite Claude Cookman. Our new European friend, Luc Pauwels, gives us his take of an important question: Is it ethical to take pictures in public of persons without their consent or knowledge and use those images for our research purposes? Team Burriss presents a study that I confess I never thought of before: In space there is no “up” or “down” so why are there gender differences between orientations in photographs of space? For the portfolios, with the gracious contributions from John Filo and John Harte, who supplied me with all their images taken from the Kent State shooting and a boy’s

drowning in Bakersfield, I attempted a type of content- and form-pairing. Let me know if you think this experiment worked. John Chervinsky has run the particle accelerator at Harvard for almost 2 decades, but his graceful visual puns and depth illusions lead me to conclude he should quit his day job. Martine Fougeron offers a unique and highly intimate set of portraits of her son, Adrien. Her photographs show an eerie closeness that will stay with you, I suspect. Reviews include a beautiful review of a beautiful book from our own Mar-

jorie Yambor (the review) and Craig Denton (the book) and a fascinating review (by Julian Kilker) of a, well, strange book. Finally, Dennis Dunleavy affords us another reason to look up little known publications.

Notes

¹Although my friends cautioned me against telling it, here it goes: "You know, this conference and this country are particularly well suited for a discussion concerned with visual communication. After all,

we are here at the Eye See, Aye?"

References

- Grossberg, L., & Pollock, D. (November 2007). Editorial statement. *Cultural Studies*, 21, ii–iii.
- Kundera, M. (1999). *The unbearable lightness of being*. New York: HarperPerennial.
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