

Commentary

Paul Martin Lester, Editor

In her research paper on subject reactions of images from 2005's Hurricane Katrina, Andrea Miller begins her study with, "At the snap of a fingertip, people can associate an event in history with an image."

Thankfully, she did not use the usual cliché, "at the blink of an eye..." I appreciate her inventiveness because it allows me to think of the connection between touching and seeing, not just the complex brain activity known as hand-to-eye coordination, but of a deeper collaboration between these two senses.

Perhaps her opening sentence can be thought of as an analogy for words and pictures.

Ah, the good, old days. Those of us born before 1800 (not a "sic") may remember when words printed with sculptured metal forms in the shape of letters were smeared with a ball of sticky ink and pressed onto sheets of heavyweight cotton paper. After the liquid dried, you could run a finger over a line of type and feel the exquisite extent of the era known by the amusingly double entendre, "hot type."

Cooled down, the words had actual weight, beyond the meaning of their symbolism.

There is tactile pleasure in touching the slightly raised letters that helped fuse the medium with the message. Ever rub your nose along a line of type after it comes out of your laser printer? It will feel a little warm, maybe even a bit comforting, but that's about as far as it goes for tactile stimulation.

Some of us may also remember and rue the loss of making black and white prints under the orange glow of a safelight and amid the sound of running water or someone's stereo combined with the prickly smells of developer, stop bath, and fixer. Hands and eyes, of course, were a part of the process, but sounds and smells were also a vital part of that creative world. What have we given up for efficiency and economy in our earbud-isolating iTune computer labs?

If words are touch and images are, well, sight, they truly do belong together. Think how *hungry* the hands of Helen Keller's portrayer Patty Duke

were to "see" an object or a person in the biopic, *The Miracle Worker* (1962) after she finally understood the connection between her inner and outer worlds. Although she couldn't see as you or I define the word and take for granted, Keller probably saw more of her world than many of us because she connected with it in a directly physical way. The analogy teaches us that if we separate words from pictures, typography from illustrations, descriptions from depictions, we do so at a layout's peril.

How did the phrase "at a blink of an eye" ever get used anyway if such a quick revelation can only happen if the eyes are closed for an instant?

Back in the 1970s the Charles "On the Road" Kuralt of the Associated Press was the great roving feature writer Jules Loh. While we were on an assignment at an alligator farm deep in the mysterious and dangerous swampland of southern Louisiana he once blurted out, "Photographers have it easy. They only have to work at 1/500th of a second." Similarly, I once asked another AP great, Eddie Adams about his famous execution photograph that won him a Pulitzer Prize and helped change public opinion about the Vietnam War to tell me how he came to take the picture. "At 1/500th of a second," was all he offered in his war-weary way.

A blink of an eye or a snap of a finger is all it takes to make an image and to understand its meaning? Not really.

Furthermore, an insight that happens when your thumb is used as a prop for your middle finger which overcomes the resistance and slams into the fleshy part of your palm (actually, this process, as with everything, can be infinitely complicated as a search on Google of "how to snap a finger" attests) takes less time than a blink of an eye because we can keep our eyes wide open as we snap. Touch and sight combine as words and images collaborate to gain our ever-increasing distracted attention and to hopefully communicate great things.

But wait a minute. Without *hearing*, there is no "snap" of a fingertip. So how can that sense be placed within this awkwardly contrived set of analogies? Ha. That's up to you to figure out.



Here It Comes Again. Words and pictures collaborate in this powerful message expressed on the screen of a television set in a bed and breakfast room in Kylesku, Scotland, 2009. PML

Copyright of Visual Communication Quarterly is the property of Taylor & Francis Ltd and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.