

EXPLORING VISUAL LITERACY THROUGH A RANGE OF TEXTS

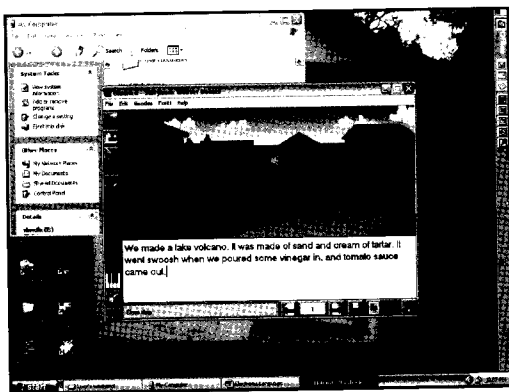


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By investigating the characteristics of still and moving images, and their codes and conventions, we can develop a better understanding of how texts are produced (written, scripted or designed) or consumed (read or viewed). We have chosen to use 'producing' and 'consuming' rather than writing and reading because we feel that these terms better represent the processes teachers and students engage in when they move away from the more conventional forms of texts and literacy to the new literacies.

Conventional views of text

Text can be narrowly characterised as passages of written, or print, language that convey meaning. This conventional view of text (Lankshear, Gee, Knobel and Searle 1997) suggests that text is merely printed words. Such a view is based on the linguistic semiotic system – the set of signs, codes and symbols (e.g. grammar, sentence structure,



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paragraphing) that form the basis of print text.

We are not suggesting that this view of text is incorrect, but rather untenable in the 21st century in the light of the new literacies.

New literacies require engagement with the visual, auditory, spatial and gestural semiotic systems that form the basis of new forms of text. We will limit our discussion here to the visual semiotic system that is at the heart of the new forms of visual

texts such as film, video, gaming, the Internet and the increasing visual content in books and magazines. Knowledge of print text and the linguistic semiotic system is still necessary, but it is no longer sufficient in a highly visual age of increasing technological innovation.

Table 1 taken from Anstey and Bull (2006, p. 104), is an example of a diary of the still and moving images that adults or students might attend to in a deceptively simple activity like eating breakfast before arriving at school.

Daily activity	Semiotic system used	Reason for use
Eating breakfast. Reading cereal packets.	Linguistic	Deciding which one to eat for breakfast based on number of calories.
Reading the newspaper	Linguistic, visual	Catching up with sports reports
Watching morning TV news; Listening to news broadcast and reading accompanying print text	Auditory, linguistic	Finding out latest news
Watching a video interview of politician Attending to politician's message, looking at film clip and watching body language	Visual Auditory, visual, gestural	Checking where interview is taking place Trying to decide whether to believe message
Looking at weather map, listening to forecast, attending to weather patterns on map, watching host	Linguistic, visual, auditory, spatial, gestural	Making up mind whether to go for a picnic

Table 1. Diary of attention to still and moving images

Table 1 demonstrates that texts we use in everyday activities may draw upon more than one semiotic system. The proliferation of multimodal texts in our lives indicates the need to augment classroom study of semiotic systems beyond the linguistic. A useful way of exploring the nature of multimodal texts, how often we use them and why, is to ask your students to keep a diary like that in Table 1 for a day and keep one yourself. Compare and contrast these in a discussion. Focus on the purpose of the texts and how the semiotic systems used in them facilitate that purpose.

In Table 2 (modified from Anstey and Bull 2006, p. 103) we have outlined how classroom study of multimodal texts might be explored across the major discipline areas. We have not filled in all the columns, but have attempted to illustrate how multimodal texts and semiotic systems lend themselves to study across the curriculum. It is important to look at all the subjects, not just English, and also to realise that non-print texts can be live or electronic. However, if we are going to use

multimodal texts in other disciplines we must teach students explicitly how to use these texts and make meaning from them.

Visual texts

Visual text can be produced as both still and moving images, and students need to be aware of the codes and conventions that are employed in both forms. The semiotic system associated with still images includes such elements as colour, line, form, texture and shape. Film, videos, television and cartoons require knowledge of the codes and conventions of moving images to interpret, for example, camera angle, lighting, gesture, setting and dress. We will explore these codes and conventions in more detail shortly.

TEACHERS AND STUDENTS NEED A SHARED VOCABULARY OR METALANGUAGE

Students may have had a significant amount of exposure to still and moving images in visual texts before commencing school but they still need to develop the ability to critically analyse these texts. We have previously developed a list of possible questions (see Anstey and Bull 2003) that can support students when they are producing or consuming text. These questions can be applied to visual or print texts.

Mathematics	Set text Math exercise book		Linguistic, visual (diagrams)
Social Science		Field trip	Visual, auditory, spatial, gestural,
Science		Experiment	Visual, auditory, spatial, gestural,
Health & Physical Education		Demonstration	Visual, auditory, spatial, gestural,
The Arts		Short film Play	Visual, auditory Spatial, auditory, gestural
Technology		Internet site	Visual, auditory, spatial, gestural, linguistic
LOTE (Languages other than English)		Short film	Visual, auditory

Table 2. Classroom study of multimodal texts.

- 👤 Who produced this text?
- 👤 What is the purpose of this text?
- 👤 Who is this text produced for?
- 👤 Of what relevance is this text?
- 👤 Why is this topic being written about?
- 👤 From whose perspective is this text constructed?
- 👤 Are there other possible constructions from different points of view?
- 👤 Whose interests are being served by this text?
- 👤 Who is excluded or included in this text? Why?
- 👤 What assumptions about the potential audiences of this text have been made?
- 👤 Are there particular attitudes, values and ideologies that are foregrounded in this text?
- 👤 Are there certain Discourses that are valorised?
- 👤 Who is silenced or marginalised by this text?
- 👤 Who is empowered by this text?
- 👤 Are any stereotypes represented or challenged?
- 👤 How might this text be transformed or reconstructed?

Using these questions might help you to review your classroom pedagogy with multi-modal texts. You may wish to look at how you plan for and use multi-modal texts in your class over a week. For example does your pedagogy encourage students to examine the constructions represented in these texts and how do you teach them to do this? It could also be useful to look at the range of text types that you

use over a week to see whether you are employing a balance of different types (e.g. electronic, live or print) rather than over-relying on one type.

Still images

In order to answer questions about the construction of ideas in multi-modal texts and how to interpret still images, teachers and students need a shared vocabulary or metalanguage to talk about these images and what part they play in constructing meaning. The semiotic system of still images has its own codes and conventions developed from the work of researchers such as Kress and van Leeuwen (1990), van Leeuwen and Jewitt (2001), and Kress and van Leeuwen (2001). In Figure 1 (adapted from Anstey and Bull 2006) we present a simplified version of this system.

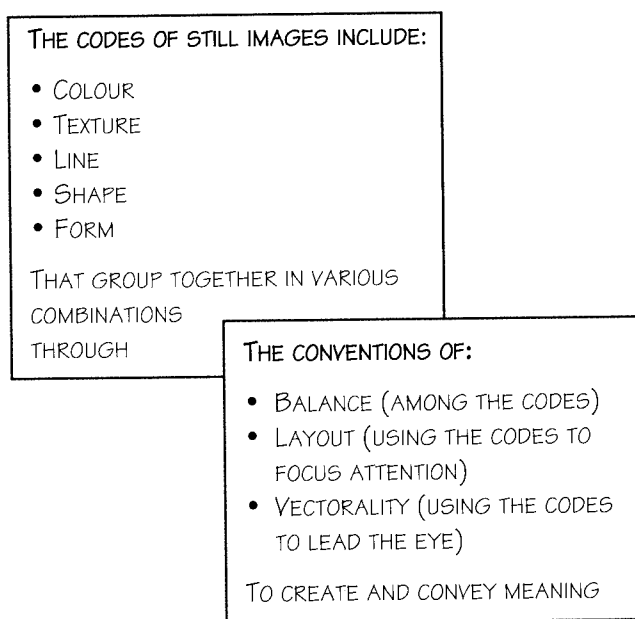


Figure 1. The semiotic system of still images.

Picture books are a great place to commence the study of still images. They are familiar, accessible and high quality. Start with one code, for example, with moving images. The important thing to remember is that the selection from the film, video or TV program should initially be quite short – perhaps a maximum of 30 seconds. Try downloading from a program that the students are currently watching or from a sporting event that is recent. Explore the selected code in a number of books, comparing and contrasting how it is used to make meaning in each of them.

You can view an article about how to do this on our website at no cost (see www.ansteybull.com.au/Resources/Purchase.aspx and click on 'It's not all

Black and White: Postmodern picture books and new literacies').

Moving images

Some of the codes and conventions of still images form part of the codes and conventions for moving images; the elements represented in Figure 1 are therefore useful in viewing moving images. However, moving images have additional codes and conventions of their own that represent meaning. These include technical codes that assist in constructing texts, screen codes. Screen codes are to do with the actual images on the screen, and auditory codes draw attention to, or adding further meaning to, the images on the screen. This is illustrated in Figure 2 (adapted from Anstey and Bull 2004). Choose one of the codes to begin with and focus on this alone. Good ones to start with are camera position (point of view), framing (particularly the difference between long and close-

Codes	Conventions
<p>Technical Codes</p> <p>Point of view – high, low, & eye level angle, soft & hard focus</p> <p>Framing – long, medium & close-up shots/ views</p> <p>Lighting – soft, hard, glaring, subdued, bright, dull, spot, backlight</p> <p>Editing – parallel cutting, speed-up, slow motion, inserts</p> <p>Pacing</p> <p>Transition- fade to black, fade to white, dissolves, subtitles</p> <p>Technical codes are used to further highlight and produce the screen codes and auditory codes, for example the use of low camera angles to enhance the power of the character.</p>	<p>Screen codes and auditory codes are manipulated to represent the purpose and genre of the audiovisual text. For example the symbolic costuming of the bad character in black and the use of 'dark' music to accompany this character on screen in a narrative such as a the traditional 'cowboys and indians' or science fiction movie.</p>
<p>Screen Codes</p> <p>Setting & props</p> <p>Costume</p> <p>Physique & Movement</p> <p>Auditory Codes</p> <p>Sound</p> <p>Dialogue</p> <p>Non-verbal</p> <p>Music</p>	

Figure 2. The semiotic system of moving image

up shots) and lighting. Remember that you are not so much watching the movie as studying how the codes construct meaning. In the early stages it is very easy to get side tracked. This is why it is useful to show the selection a number of times (multiple passes) so that students stop watching the movie and start looking at the codes.

We hope that these ideas will get you started. In our experience you will be surprised at what the students will learn and how willing they will be to participate.

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