WHICH VISUAL LITERACY IN THE TEACHING OF CULTURE?

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Abstract
Visual literacy is not a magic key to the mysteries of the image not only because teaching and learning is no magic, but also because there is no image (and therefore no mysteries linked to it). Images are cultural forms or cultural practices which ought to be studied as such in their social context, but starting from the proper disciplinary background of the student. The gradual and maybe unending disclosing of this context, which has always an impact on the context of the learner himself or herself, must be at the heart of every visual literacy program inspired by cultural studies. Heavily inspired by the ways of looking permitted or enhanced by cybernetic culture, this program rejects explicitly many of the presuppositions of communications studies and art history.

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A SMALL EXAMPLE TO START WITH (OR IS IT JUST ALREADY AN END?)

Suppose the students retrieve an image from an Internet-site and reuse it in their own site (or in a paper, or just store it). How can such a basic action, performed daily, often without any critical reflection, be linked with a concern for visual literacy (in the broad interdisciplinary sense we shall defend in this paper)?

A first concern should be here the relationship of the analysis of the image with the interdisciplinary background of the students. Contrary to many fashionable PBL (problem-based learning) methods, we do not believe that a previous disciplinary training is superfluous or can be learnt "on the job" (for a discussion on the use of interdisciplinary in cultural studies, see Baetens, "Etudes culturelles"). Rather than solving the problems at the moment they present the students, we prefer tackling those problems from within an already specified and organized disciplinary structure. Such a starting point means

however that there can be no "uniform" teaching of visual literacy at a more advanced levels, and this pluriformity should be accepted and even encouraged by the teachers, not in order to increase fragmentation, but to foster interdisciplinary cooperation within the groups of students.

A second concern should be with the analysis of the image "itself." Of course, given the fact that in our view there is no such a thing as the "image," this analysis should deal with the way the image is contextualized. If, for instance, the image has been found on a website, students should be trained to ask automatically questions on the nature of the site (who owns it? who makes it? who runs it? etc.), on the way this site creates or reuses its own visual material (how is the material presented? how is it described? what is the relationship with the "original"? etc.), on the way the image circulates in society, for instance, but not exclusively, financially (who owns it, who sells it, now and in the past) and symbolically (how can one determine the "value" of an image?), and, last but not least, with the student's own use and reuse of the image (why do I use this image and not that one, and why do I use it just this way and not that way? etc.).

In this paper, we would like to suggest some answers to some of the problems raised by the everyday practice of teachers confronted with the difficulties and challenges raised by the widespread use of images in contemporary culture and contemporary classrooms. After some preliminary historical remarks on the place and nature of images in cultural studies and digital culture, we shall engage a discussion with some traditional ideas on visual culture and images which are still popular in communication studies, but whose relevance we would like to put into question, in order to make room for a more cultural materialist approach of the image, both as concept and as practice.

FROM TEXT TO IMAGE

Some twenty years ago many Faculties of Arts in particular and many humanities in general underwent a tremendous and sudden shift from the teaching of literature to the teaching of cultural studies. In many cases, this shift resulted from the rejection of the traditional, Western canon, and its opening to new types of popular and subaltern writing: popular fiction, pulp fiction, women's literature, gay and lesbian writing, postcolonial texts, documentary fiction, etc. Yet this shift towards a new, postmodern, open vision of which texts are worth studying at the university, should not hide a second, even more important transformation: that of the gradual "visualization" of the Arts curriculum, even in formerly textual or literary programs. It is now generally accepted that the word "text" may refer as

well to a literary work of art as to a film, a photograph, a video game, etc.

The reasons for this second shift are many. First of all, since the core business of cultural studies is the critical, committed, and interdisciplinary study of contemporary life, its main object is necessary closer to the image than to literature. Contemporary is less textual than visual (film, television, video, multimedia). Therefore it would have been illogical to maintain the central position of literature in the cultural studies departments. Second, at a more abstract level, there is also the predominance of "theory" in the cultural studies paradigm. Given the fact that cultural studies has no "proper" object and no "proper methodology," only a very strong theoretical bias, it is perfectly understandable that the popularity of high-theoretical models inherited from literary studies would offer many new opportunities to the study of the image. Thoroughly analyzing images was a way to cope with one's love of contemporary visual culture without having to renounce the intellectual seductions of (literary) theory. Third, the emergence of the image at the heart of the literary curriculum has also to do with the crisis of traditional art history, which has been seriously challenged by the new field of "visual studies" (the name often given to specific forms of contemporary visual theory inspired by the political and methodological presuppositions of cultural studies). The violent resistance of art history toward these new forms of visual study has accelerated the global visualization of cultural studies itself: since traditional art history was so reluctant to innovation, many innovators tried to find their way in the field where fresh ideas and new objects were welcome, i.e., literary and cultural studies. It is not by hazard that in so many universities, the film studies program has developed from within the renewed literary curricula.

TWO VISIONS OF VISUAL LITERACY

Yet the emphasis put on the teaching of the image is one thing. The theoretical and methodological underpinnings of this teaching are another, and even a completely different thing. Given the lack of visual tradition in the departments were the analysis of images is now currently taught, it should not come as a surprise that the motivation of the visualized curriculum has longtime been "external," i.e., borrowed from other disciplines. The discussion on visual literacy has been borrowed from several fields, mostly that of art history and that of communication studies. The status of these two influences is however completely different. The plea for visual literacy coming from the field of art history has been received in a very ambivalent way: on the one hand, it is undoubtedly so that there is a strong intellectual and ideological analogy between the cultural studies

emphasis on the social constructedness of all types of representation and the emphasis put by scholars such as Gombrich on culturally determined "conventions" in the making and receiving of images;[1] on the other hand, the link with traditional art history and even with Panofskyan iconology has made the influence of this way of thinking remain relatively modest: cultural studies agreed with the basic assumption of the cultural construction of visual representations demonstrated by art historians, but it had many difficulties to receive this message focused on objects and practices which were miles away from the study of contemporary life. The case of communication studies has been different. First of all, because of the strong relationship between communication and cultural studies at its beginnings: nowadays, their split is complete—the average communication studies have made an empirical turn, whereas the cultural turn of cultural studies has permanently been reinforced. Second, because of the promises of an almost instant instrumentalization of visual literacy: contrary to art history, where the earning of a solid visual literacy was a matter of blood, sweat and tears, and some artistic sensibility, communications studies proposed down-to-earth checklists and stepstone reading protocols for everybody wanting to buy it.[2] For all these reasons, art-historical pleas for visual literacy have played a less direct role than the discussions coming from the field of communication studies.[3]

In this paper we shall critically discuss this strategy before making a plea for a different way of conceiving and motivating the study of images in a broad, interdisciplinary program. For us, what should be at stake in the teaching of images exceeds by far the sole field of communication (often reduced to the stimulus-reaction paradigm). This teaching reveals on the contrary an intersection of many practices and interests, and can therefore function as a scale model of the teaching of culture itself.

ICONOPHOBIC ICONOPHILIA

The starting point of most theoretical reflection on the necessity of the teaching of visual literacy, i.e., the capability of making sense of images instead of falling prey to their fatal attraction, is both objective and subjective. It is objective to the extent that there is indeed a gap between what is taught at school and what is lived outside school: the former remains mainly visual, the latter has become overwhelmingly visual. It is also subjective, since it exhibits a new form of iconophobia which is the more pernicious since it considers itself a form of iconophilia. Indeed, behind almost every visual literacy program one finds the tacit assumption that the image is by definition tricky, manipulating, ambiguous, treacherous: one has to protect oneself from the bad influences of the images,

whose power has to be domesticated by a strong *Bildung*. Even those who promote and defend the necessity of a serious visual literacy do this always in the name of an ideal of freedom and emancipation that considers verbal propaganda as an *accident de parcours* and visual manipulation as the *essence* of the medium.[4] In his usual flowery style, McLuhan once coined the idea of "media fall-out" which is often used by visual literacy theorists in order to attack the bad influences of an "unmastered" and chaotic visuality. Inevitably, all the discussions concerning the cognitive and esthetic advantages of visual literacy are accompanied by the eternal lament on the unreliability of the images and of the people or companies relying on images for the communication of their message.[5]

For this very reason of the profound iconophobia of many apparently iconophilic but in fact deeply iconophobic scholars, we will try to follow here a different path of thought, and insist as much as possible on what happens in the classroom. And instead of taking the classroom as a place where media-free instructors help victimized students to get rid of the visual pollution and the corporate agendas hidden behind it, we will consider it a space of interaction, where teachers learn form their pupils as much as the other way round.[6]

We start from the observation that the gap between the predominantly verbal model of the school and the basically visual orientation of society is not new. It is an illusion to believe that other forms of social organization were less visual than our postmodern 21st century society: mid-19th century European societies, at the dawn of general public instruction, or turn-of-the 20th century American society, with its massive arrival of many semi-illiterate and non-anglophone immigrants, were no less visual societies than today's, and nevertheless the linguistic and textual bias of their educational systems was not considered problematic. We believe that there were two main reasons for this global acceptation, by the students as well as by society as a whole, of the non-visual as the main vehicle of education: on the one hand the fact that the relation of text and image was a matter of hierarchy (verbal literacy was more highly considered than visual literacy), not of dichotomy (once the hierarchy was accepted, it was easy to combine both media in all possible ways); on the other hand, the fact that the relationship of student and education was hierarchic too (education was accepted as a tool of driving society and giving form to it; together with other forces such as, for instance, the Family, the Church, the Army, etc., the School was accepted as an organization where the individual was transformed into a member of society). Today, both hierarchies have faded. Contemporary visual culture no longer accepts its implicit or explicit secondary in comparison with the text, whereas the individual no longer accepts its secondary towards society (and thus towards the

institutions society uses to enroll him or her). The first evolution makes that the discourse on the image has been altered dramatically: what counts now is not the position of the image in comparison with that of the text, but its proper characteristics, its own specificity, its very detachedness from the verbal model. The second evolution explains why students can no longer stand the gap between what happens in their lives and what happens in the classroom: the clash between the individual values of "life" and the collective values of the "classroom" creates an uneasiness that plays against the verbal norms of the institution.

Does all this mean that, due to its relationships with verbal models and its social underpinnings, an education in visual literacy is condemned to fail? Not at all, provided the problem of visual literacy is tackled differently.

TWO FALSE PROBLEMS AND A REAL ONE

A first important observation has to do with the very notion of visual literacy, and the problems related with it. A solid demythification is absolutely imperative here. Indeed, in general it is not the student but the teacher who has a visual literacy problem: the reading, interpretation, use, production, and transformation of images are much less problematic for the former than for the latter. If nevertheless the myth of the visually illiterate student survives, this is because of the general weakness of his or her historical knowledge (mainly in the field of art history). But this does not imply that the scholar's knowledge of art historical topics makes him or her a visual literate, certainly not if some kind of technology is implied (everybody knows the jokes on the smart professor unable to turn on the slide projector, not to speak of the snakelike charms of PowerPoint or Photoshop). If there is a problem of visual literacy, it is clearly the teacher, not only because many teachers know less about images than their students, but also because they are computer illiterate (not in the sense that they are unable to search and retrieve information on the Internet, but in the sense that they have difficulties to cope with more sophisticated software such as Photoshop, for instance). At least in First World countries, where Internet access is widely spread and cheap, visual literacy and computer literacy can no longer be separated, and in this regard, too, teachers are not privileged by their general knowledge and experience.

A second observation, which in many regards continues the previous one, concerns the frequent complaint (by teachers, of course) that the advanced computer skills of students may enable them to (technically) *do* with images what teachers can only dream of, but without giving them any serious (historical) *knowledge* of the images they are working

or playing with. This question is as unreal, as mythological (in the Barthesian sense of the word), as the question concerning the student's supposed visual illiteracy. What is wrong with it is simply the fact that the very existence of such a question is the evidence of the problem it tries to pinpoint. Indeed, the very disjunction of *doing* and *knowing* can only be asked by somebody who has no idea of what doing in this case means, and what are the consequences of such a doing for the knowing of the image. A minimum of computer literacy (and as we have seen, there is no difference any more between computer literacy and visual literacy) should suffice to demonstrate that "doing" things with images creates also a specific knowledge about them (even if this knowledge is no longer framable in art-historical terms). The visual encyclopedia of "doers" may seem flat, ahistorical, decontextualized, but is does not prevent it from being real knowledge.

The mutual implication of (historically oriented) knowledge and (technologically based) competence brings us to a rather different problem, which is not only more real but also crucial for every understanding of the image. This problem concerns the necessity to always link the image and its "archè" (Schaeffer), i.e., the knowledge one has on the way the image has been technically produced. The well-known and often abused anecdote of the "savage" not recognizing his or her own photographic representation has nothing to do with some lack of visual literacy (as if in order to read a photograph one ought to be trained in the reading of the characteristics of photography as a "language," as traditional defenders of the visual literacy claim to be necessary) but is not without relationship with the notion of "archè" (what is problematic in technologically produced images for people unfamiliar with this type of pictures is not the visual representation itself, but the difficulty to grasp where these pictures come from and to understand how machines, and not the human hand, can deliver just that type of images). In other words, the basic question of visual literacy is always, or at least should be, a careful reflection on the image. But as we will see, this image is never just a thing.

WHAT IS AN IMAGE?

Today, the image has been digitalized. It has become a binary code, to be reproduced on screens and other terminals, maybe just looked at, maybe printed, maybe even exhibited (on screen or not). But in fact this is not the right answer. The matter is that in the digital era, the image is not in the first place a digital image (without original, without aura, without whatever you want), but most of all something completely different: even more than in the past (since of course images have never been innocent, they have

always been transformations of other images) the image of our digital era has become the processing of an image. In other words: the *object* has become an *action*.

The consequences of this transformation are exceptional. If the image does not exist any more, then the same can be said of the spectator, who is no longer a spectator but a manipulator of visual data (more precisely, of digitized data). Looking has become manipulating. In the most modest scenario, this manipulation is an elementary form of interaction (selecting, clicking, zooming, etc.). In the more ambitious scenario, it concerns sophisticated forms of visual data retrieval, production and processing. In more philosophical terms, the act of looking is now *literally* situated at the side of the "haptical," not of the "optical"—even if, as we all know, each act of looking has, is, metaphorically speaking, a combination of optical (unifying, "seeing") and haptical (isolating, "touching") dimensions.[7] For the question of visual literacy, this displacement confirms anyway the relative inutility of an exclusive "optical" training: learning how to recognize, to name, and to comment on images, remains of course an interesting occupation, but must inevitably lead to failure if the training has no other aims.

Once again, it should be noted that this larger view on what an image is (not just an object, but at least a Janus-like structure combining a visual interface and an active spectator) is not a characteristic of contemporary culture alone. In other historical periods, the role of the spectator and of the context of observation was as important as it is today. Not only in the intellectual, psychological meaning of the word, which concerns the necessity of knowing the rules of the game (when looking at a Russian icon, for instance, the spectator has to be familiar with the technique of the "inverse perspective"; when looking at, say, "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon," one has to know or to learn that cubism was a reaction against "linear prospective," etc.), but also in the material sense of the word, which concerns aspects such as: the body of the spectator and the physical and biological aspects of the act of looking, the existence and use of "looking machines," the material and institutional context of the act of looking.[8]

More broadly speaking, and this is the way we would like to answer the question on the nature of the image, it seems fruitful and even necessary to analyze the image not as a thing, a medium, an art form or whatever, but as a *cultural practice*, in which many dimensions (technical, psychological, institutional, artistic, etc.) are intertwined.[9]

WHAT TO DO (AT SCHOOL)?

First of all, it is always a pleasure to put aside some bad solutions. In the light of what has been argued above, it should be clear that two scenarios should be avoided at all cost: on the one hand a crash-course in art history and on the other hand, an instruction in computer literacy. Of course, we gladly admit that both courses help to face real problems, and maybe to find real solutions to them: students have clearly a lack of historical background and teachers are commonly undercompetent in technical matters. And of course we do not pretend that this knowledge and these skills are not important; on the contrary, they are. But what is missing in both approaches is the dialectics of the cultural practice.[10]

If the teaching of the image pays attention to visual dialectics, one should give priority to at least the two following aspects. First of all a description and analysis of the different aspects and parameters involved by the notion of the image: the image itself, of course, both in a synchronic and a diachronic way; its institutional context, as a dialogue of a production and a reception side; its technical and technological environment, and the impact of these aspects on the image itself. Second, and this aspect is even more paramount, the underlining of the shifting status of the image, which can be "monument" as well as "document." As Luc Baboulet explains it:

> A monument perpetuates an event and the memory of an event…. It materializes the will of the individual of the group to keep alive a relationship with the past that has been lived, but that it is impossible to live again and fastidious to repeat. Ideally speaking, it is the event itself. Practically speaking, it is its substitute. A document, on the contrary, helps to circumscribe the event, to define its nature and the story behind it, not to reenact its intensity: a document belongs to history…. This is why each document is such a threat to the monument: the first has the capacity of introducing a reinterpretation, and even a reconstruction of the latter, which can then no longer be thought of or experienced in a direct manner, nor as it was done before. Indeed, it is history itself which transforms what it creates: it congeals during a certain time the meaning of the documents it manipulates, and by doing so history produces blocks of provisional memory: the monument, in such a case, is never far away.[11] (437)

Yet the most interesting perspective is of course the knitting of these two perspectives: the multipolarity of the image and its fundamental (but exciting) hesitation

between document and monument. The study of the 19th century visual representation of the Far West by Martha Sandweiss is a wonderful example of this approach.[12] Sandweiss's book pays wonderful attention to the multilayeredness of the circulation of photographs of the American West, enabling her to correct many misunderstandings on the relationships between verbal and visual culture in the 19th century. It manages to find a perfect balance between the historical and cultural dimensions of its corpus (which she does not call "monument" and "document," but the image "in history" and the image "as history"). For the teaching of visual literacy, one can only hope that a book such as this will be widely read and used. Its unobtrusive but very efficient interdisciplinarity can provide a role model for cultural studies (whose scope is more and more determined by historical instead of exclusively contemporary questions) and visual literacy (whose basic error is to believe that there is such a thing as the image or a visual language).

A SMALL EXAMPLE TO END WITH (OR IS IT JUST A BEGINNING?)

Suppose the students retrieve an image from an Internet site and reuse it in their own site (or in a paper, or just store it). How can such a basic action, performed daily, often without any critical reflection, be linked with a concern for visual literacy (in the broad interdisciplinary sense we defend)?

A first concern here should be the relationship of the analysis of the image with the interdisciplinary background of the students. Contrary to many fashionable *PBL* (problem-based learning) methods, we do not believe that a previous disciplinary training is superfluous or can be learnt "on the job."[13] Rather than solving the problems at the moment they present the students, we prefer tackling those problems from within an already specified and organized disciplinary structure. Such a starting point means however that there can be no "uniform" teaching of visual literacy at more advanced levels, and this pluriformity should be accepted and even encouraged by the teachers, not in order to increase fragmentation, but to foster interdisciplinary cooperation within the groups of students.

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is the relationship with the "original"? etc.), on the way the image circulates in society, for instance but not exclusively, financially (who owns it, who sells it, now and in the past) and symbolically (how can one determine the "value" of an image?), and, last but not least, with the student's own use and reuse of the image (why do I use this image and not that one, and why do I use it just this way and not that way? etc.).

NOTES

1 For an even more radical theory of this conventionalism, see Goodman.

2 See Lester.

3 For a good survey of these influences, see van Alphen.

4 For a survey of modern iconophobia, see Mitchell.

5 For a survey, see Messaris, *Visual Literacy* and *Visual Persuasion*.

6 See Thompson.

7 For a discussion of this terminology coined by Aloïs Riegl in 1901, see Manovich 253-4.

8 For a survey, see Crary, *Techniques* and *Suspensions*.

9 The basic study on the image as cultural practice is still Raymond Williams's book on television.

10 An interesting historical comparison can be made here with the origins of the so-called New Criticism, whose focus on close-reading was not all determined by some elitist, high-cultural ideology of "l'art pour l'art," but by the necessity to teach a new type of culturally underdeveloped students who were given the opportunity to enroll massively in college thanks to the so-called GI Bill. (For a testimony, see Hillis Miller xxx.)

11 The original French text: "Le monument est la perpétuation de l'évènement, sa mémoire…. Il matérialise la volonté de l'individu ou du groupe de garder un lien avec un temps vécu, impossible à revivre et fastidieux à répéter. Idéalement, il est l'événement lui-même; pratiquement, il en tient lieu. Le document, lui, permet de cerner l'événement, d'en préciser la nature et le récit, non d'en revivre l'intensité: il est du côté de l'histoire…. C'est pourquoi le document est aussi pour le monument la plus grande menace: il peut amener à reconsidérer, voire à reconstruire, l'événement, qui ne pourra plus, alors, être pensé ou revécu en direct, ni de la même manière. Par un mouvement inverse, cependant, le document peut se transformer en monument. Car l'histoire elle-même procède par concrétions, elle fixe pour un temps la signification des documents qu'elle manipule, créant ainsi des blocs de mémoire provisoire: le monument n'est pas loin."

12 For a detailed review, see Baetens, "Review of Sandweiss."

13 For a discussion on the use of interdisciplinary in cultural studies, see Baetens, "Etudes culturelles.")

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