



**Art**

**&**

**Pedagogical  
Strategies**

**Intercultural Education Strategies**  
**Edited by: Rosita Deluigi**  
**Adéla Machová**  
**Flavia Stara**









# **MEDIA, ART AND DESIGN. INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION STRATEGIES**

**Edited by: Rosita Deluigi, Adéla Machová, Flavia Stara**



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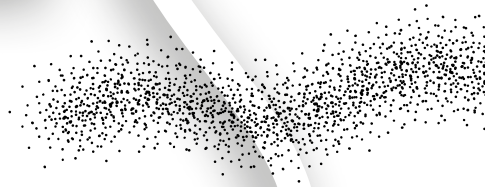
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# I. THEORETICAL FRAME



## 2

# BACKGROUND — OVERVIEW OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES ON VISUAL LANGUAGES AND COMMUNICATION

Flavia Stara

Visuality and visualisations are present in all cultures, and often interpreted and appreciated differently. In the face of the proliferation of images in all areas of human life, we can talk about the importance of education on how to adjust to and operate in visual space, and how to read and develop specific alternative languages. The use of visual technology in communication, within contemporary urban iconospheres, is connected to cultural, political, and economic differences.

Visual language is defined as a system of communication using visual elements. The term “visual” in relation to language describes the perception, comprehension, and production of visible signs. People verbalise their own thinking and can visualise it. A diagram, a map, and a painting are all examples of uses of visual language. Its structural units include line, shape, colour, motion, texture, pattern, direction, orientation, scale, angle, space, and proportion. The elements in an image represent concepts in a spatial context rather than the time-based linear progression used in talking and reading. Speech and visual communication are parallel and often interdependent means by which humans exchange information (Habermas 1984).

In visual communication information is conveyed via messages of a graphic design composition. Therefore, it is necessary to properly understand visual techniques. Visual communication is the presentation of information by visual recognition; it is also the most common way with the longest history.

Human interactions occur through verbal and nonverbal symbols. The former mainly refers to languages and words, while the latter includes music, dance, drawing, and architecture; as well as body language (Belting 2011). Contemporary communication can be divided into direct communication among people through languages, words, gestures, sounds, and so on, and indirect communication among people via multiple signs: logos, advertising, illustration, product design, directions, regulations, etc. Visual language is a rich set of principles, elements, and techniques carrying meanings. Certain arrangements of words, symbols, hues, and shapes have specific cultural meanings that create visual interactions and impact people.

Visual information is conveyed by the movement and change of the design order, direction, illusion, and psychological implication. Visual language is an effective tool to describe social attitudes, behaviours, and cultural preferences. People from different cultural backgrounds have different perceptions and imageries of reality when it is described through words. Likewise, visual languages can present

a variety of meanings in effective ways. The emotional perception of visual language is set through the combination and arrangement of psychological attitudes and elements of design, such as pattern, hue, and words. Since visual language is manifold, it produces a wide range of emotional experiences. It conveys meanings related to cultural values and traditions. Nonverbal cues function via stimulating passion and emotion beyond verbal symbols. Forms and shapes can be thought of as positive or negative, and understanding the use of colour is crucial to effective composition in design and the fine arts. Colour arrangements are very powerful, and have an enormous impact on the representation of reality on both an individual and collective level. Cultural significance in hue is strictly connected with the traditions and customs of a country and ethnicity. Certain colours are related to spiritual backgrounds; similarly, fabrics and garments create visual impacts and refer to specific lifestyles and beliefs (Panofsky 1962; Lester 2011).

The term 'visual communication studies' refers to an interdisciplinary academic field of scholarship that analyses the composition and effectiveness of messages that are expressed primarily or in significant ways through imagery or graphical depiction. While text, often called verbal or linguistic communication, may accompany these messages, in order to be considered visual communication, the objects, artifacts, or symbols that comprise the message must be designed or delivered in ways substantially dependent on the visual attention or vision of audiences (Elkins 2003, Pinotti and Somaini 2016).

The study of visual culture has emerged over the past 30 years across a range of disciplines including art history, aesthetics, film studies, graphic design, media studies, comparative literature, anthropology, and museology, all focusing on visuality as an object of study. The many studies on visuality cannot be recognised as a unified field of inquiry, as they lack a common paradigm and are characterised by lively debates over their object domain; that is, what they actually study. The term itself is complex, implying that cultural expressions become more and more visual, thereby requiring new theories and modes of inquiry and understanding. Therefore, one comes to realise it is not the epistemological status that is of interest so much as the prospect that visual culture studies might be an entire methodology with which to conduct research; of seeing and knowing, of outlining our encounters with visuality. It is in this way that the object of visual culture comes into view.

Visual culture as a research field focuses on the visual as a knowledge space where meanings are created and challenged. Western culture has consistently privileged the spoken word as the highest form of intellectual practice, and considered visual representations as a second-rate illustration of ideas. Nevertheless, the word 'imagination' suggests that one can also think in images. The emergence of visual culture generates what W. J. T. Mitchell called "picture theory", in the sense that some Western cultural expressions adopted a pictorial, rather than textual, view of the world. According to Mitchell, picture theory stems from:

the realisation that spectatorship (the look, the gaze, the glance, the practices of observation, surveillance, and visual pleasure) may be as deep a problem as various forms of reading (decipherment, decoding, interpretation, etc.) and that 'visual experience' or 'visual literacy' might not be fully explicable in the model of textuality. (Mitchell 1994, p. 16)

Such remarks indicate the extent to which even literary studies came to agree that the world-as-a-text has been replaced by the world-as-a-picture. Such world-pictures cannot be purely visual, but, by the same token, the visual disrupts and challenges any attempt to define culture in purely linguistic terms.

Visual culture studies is not simply theory, or even visual theory, in any conventional sense, and it does not simply apply theory or visual theory to objects of study. It is not the study of images based on the casual premise that our contemporary culture is an image. Rather, the object of visual culture studies was born, emerged, was discernible, showed itself, and became visible over the years. In its phenomenology, the object of visual culture studies engenders its own critical way of being meaningful, of being interpreted, and even of not being understood. It is not a matter of discerning which objects are appropriate or inappropriate from the perspective of visual theories, but of recognising how social interactions take place beginning from the specifics of visual culture.

The fact that visual elements include cultural values indicates that globalisation can affect visual production only to a certain extent. Generated visual languages internalise local cultures: there are always intercultural differences in any given visual interaction. In the intercultural dialogue, the culture of the place where the visual is generated must be appreciated by the visual approach of other cultures. The otherness cannot be assimilated because the common is not the similar, the repetitive, the uniform, or the overcoming of differences, but rather a fruitful opening precisely because it is always declined in the plural. The interdisciplinary analysis of visual communication frees it from strict typologies, from secured enclosures. It is liberated from cultural constraints and encourages transcending social boundaries: it may favour grasping the essence of diverse cultures rather than fixing them in forms of specific identity (Jullien 2012).

The critical hermeneutics of the polysemic nature of visual imagery returns to visual representations a reality that articulates ambiguities and contradictions by addressing a broad range of issues concerning different layers of existential experiences. Physical and real spaces loaded with shared social values are linked to virtual and ritual spaces. Concrete spaces shaped by historical and cultural passages, as well as natural events (earth and seaquakes, volcanic eruptions, floods), are completed by imaginary spaces in which humankind projects desires, dreams, fears, and sorrows.

Any art-educational research path should explore and preserve what is alive rather than systematise the amazing variety of languages and streams of human thought, behaviours, and faiths.

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