

DO YOU SPEAK VISUAL? A Primer on Visual Language

- a proposal for an educational TV series -

The ubiquitous prevalence of visual media as sources of information in today's world raises a very important educational issue - that of acquiring the appropriate media literacy. As an educational objective, then, acquiring media literacy represents a real challenge for the future, especially when it comes to educating youth. Therefore, a project with such an objective should be a natural outgrowth of the 348 Session of the Salzburg Seminar.

There are two basic issues this project would address. On a general level, it would deal with educating children and youth to acquire basic *media literacy* in the domain of visual language. The need for this kind of education has been largely underrated not only in developing countries but also in some of the highly developed ones. In this way, a great cultural achievement is being marginalized, leaving an open door to all kinds of media abuse. The deleterious effects of media abuse can be demonstrated by many examples, the most recent and dramatic one being the hatred, violence and cruelty generated by the breakup of the former Yugoslavia. Therefore, a more specific aim of this project would be to offer at least basic guidelines for protection against *media abuse*.

1. The problem: history and present context

Almost three years ago, on December 28, 1994, the world had celebrated an important anniversary: 100 years since the first film was shown in Paris. This was a centenary of utmost significance to all those involved in filmmaking and culture in general, but not nearly as important to those involved in education. And it certainly should have been, since it had marked a hundred years since humanity began creating and using a completely new kind of *language* - that of the moving pictures. Among educators, this occasion should have been regarded as being of the same importance as other epoch-making events in the history of communication and transfer of knowledge, such as the emergence of speech, writing, print or radio.

Visual language, of course, is much older than film, even much older than writing. However, in its long history from cave drawings to film, communicating through pictures has come a long way. The most recent period of that history was the time when the biggest, perhaps crucial, step was made: the emergence of television. What written language gained by the emergence of print, and what speech gained by the emergence of radio, was what visual (cinematic) language gained by the emergence of television: a new medium involving large audiences and therefore gaining much more power and influence. To many people, a TV set is just another household gadget; to some, it is a status symbol; to both, it is a "world window". Unfortunately, most of them are rarely aware that what they see and hear through that "window" is not the world itself, but only *one of the many possible images* of it, presented in a specific language. They often tend to misunderstand that language not because it is complicated and difficult to learn, but mostly because *they are unaware that it is a language in the first place*. As for children, relevant research shows that this misunderstanding is not only a mass phenomenon but that it is also significantly related to the specific nature of their cognitive development. It is therefore necessary to be especially careful in conceiving and implementing any audiovisual education program intended for children.

The main reason why an average viewer confronted with a filmed or televised message is not inclined to notice the language in which it is encoded, lies in the fact that its basic means of communication is *moving picture*. Moving pictures are what makes viewers "believe their own

eyes" , accepting visually presented information as a mere reproduction of reality rather than as only one of the many possible ways of presenting and interpreting reality. It is easy to show, however, that such an attitude is a huge and dangerous misconception.

Although it is true that moving pictures are an unsurpassed means of documenting information about events, it is also true that their technical capacity for revealing the whole truth about them - which is usually more than meets the eye, or a camera lens - is often rather limited. It is also true that the technological potential of visual media, especially of their electronic/TV version, enables them to serve the viewer with half truths or even absolute lies. This intrinsic contradiction that marks the nature of visual media has been poignantly expressed in the promotional slogan for the film *Adventures of Baron Munchhausen*: "The adventures of Baron Munchhausen - a true story! We've got a film to prove it!" It is this intrinsic contradiction ("life-like" quality + technical limitations+ sophisticated technology) that constitutes the perfect formula for all kinds of manipulation and abuse.

Direct and indirect manipulation of the attitudes, perceptions and feelings of people (both children and adults) by means of visual media has been brought to light not only by a substantial body of research but also by mass tragedies, such as the war in the former Yugoslavia. The "media war" which has been waged several years before the real war broke out is a drastic example of how deleterious the effects of such manipulation can be. Although it is impossible to prove that such effects could have been avoided altogether, it can be assumed that they would have been less tragic if the potential victims of that war - millions of viewers throughout the former Yugoslavia - had been equipped with the appropriate "defense weapons" : (a) a clear awareness that what one sees on TV is not a mere reproduction reality, but its interpretation conveyed by means of a specific language (which, like any other language, has a capacity for creating false messages), and (b) at least a basic knowledge and understanding of the major ways in which that language is used. It is these two ingredients that form the basis for a critical reception of messages conveyed through visual media, i.e. for what is sometimes termed *intelligent television viewing*. More than one hundred years after the world began to "speak" the language of moving pictures, a language whose power to influence people's beliefs, feelings and behavior surpasses all other languages, it is high time that the young generations were systematically taught at least its basic "lexicology" and "syntax". Better than by means of any book or manual, this could be achieved by using that language itself.

2. Objectives

The realization of this project would have two mutually related goals:

- (a) *acquisition of basic media literacy* , i.e., introducing children aged 14 - 18 to the principal means of communication in (audio)visual language.
- (b) *protection agaunst media abuse*, i.e. helping children apply the acquired knowledge so as to protect themselves from being manipulated by means of (audio)visual language.

Therefore, the ultimate purpose of this project would be to assist children in *developing the capacities to critically receive messages from (audio)visual media*.

3. Methods

The most effective means for achieving the goals cited above would be an educational TV series. The series should address the following topics:

(Note: numbers 1 - 6 denote the tentative titles of the particular episodes of the series; the text in parentheses deals with the same topics in semiotic/technical terms)

(1) A picture speaks a thousand words - but which? (pictures as signs)

- what do pictures resemble (the iconicity problem from cave drawings to photography)
- how are pictures made (angles and frame sizes from cave drawings to photography and film)

(2) Moving pictures: what is it that's moving?

- movement in the picture (static camera)
- movement of the picture (moving/rotating camera)
- how moving pictures are made (combinations of angles, frame sizes and camera movements/rotations)

(3) What do pictures mean: pictures + other pictures

(meanings of pictures in relation to different visual contexts)

(4) What do pictures mean: pictures + words

(meanings of pictures in relation to different verbal contexts)

(5) What do pictures mean: pictures + viewers

(meanings of pictures in relation to cultural and psychological contexts of the viewer)

(6) To believe or not to believe one's own eyes?

(problem of authenticity of information received by means of visual media)

- summary of the above, involving examples of media abuse in shaping of attitudes and biases through political propaganda, marketing, entertainment programs, etc.

A possibility should be considered that, as a sequel to the series, an educational program for secondary schools be developed. The program should be aimed at helping children relate the contents and the messages of the series to their own experience. This would give them a chance for gaining a deeper understanding of the nature of visual language, as well as help them exercise the newly acquired skills. Developing of such a program would include publication of an appropriate educational kit: videotapes of the entire series, a teachers' manual and children's workbook.

Taken together, the series and the program would constitute adequate educational means for children to acquire basic media literacy and to learn how to use it to protect themselves against media abuse.

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