

Visual Communication: A Taxonomy and Bibliography

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The study of visual communication is a multi-disciplinary, multi-dimensional effort. People who write on this topic come from mass communication (including photography, advertising, and news editorial areas), film and cinema studies, education, art and aesthetics, anthropology, psychology, philosophy, linguistics, semiotics, architecture and even archaeology. This rich melange of viewpoints is an asset because of the insights that come from cross-fertilization, however it causes some problems academically for those of us who teach visual communication because of a lack of any sense of common theory.

This is not to suggest that there is or should be a central of core theory that organizes the field, however, it would be easier to order a curriculum, as well as a graduate program of study, if there were some notion of at least the important theories and scholars from the various disciplines that need to be covered. This project looks at the body of literature and the categories that emerge from the writings to develop a taxonomy of topics and some sense of the location of the most important, or at least the most frequently written about, areas of study. The objective is to collect the scholarly writing on the most central visual communication topics (mental imagery, visual thinking, the language metaphor, psychology), as well as peripheral topics that interweave with visual communication, such as sociology, anthropology, archaeology and architecture.

But first let's look at a review of some of the major pieces of work similar to this effort. In terms of books, Probably the most important book specifically focused on visual communication theory is So Worth's series of essays which appeared in his landmark book, *Studying Visual Communication*.¹ Another important work is a book of readings called *Visual Literacy* edited by Moore and Dwyer, which comes from the educational media discipline but includes a number of essays that relate to basic visual communication theory, as well.²

¹REFERENCES

¹Worth, Sol. *Studying Visual Communication*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981.

²Moore, David and Francis Dwyer, eds. *Visual Literacy: A Spectrum of Visual Learning*. Englewood Cliffs NJ: Educational Technology Publications, 1994.

Rune Pettersson's *Visual Information* is a useful textbook that focuses more on information theory.³ Paul Lester's textbook on visual communication is another important general introduction to the topic.⁴ The Morgan and Welton book, *See What I Mean?* approaches visual communication from a communication theory perspective.⁵ Arthur Asa Berger's *Seeing is Believing* is an introduction to visual communication from a more semiotic perspective.⁶ John Berger's book, *Ways of Seeing*, is a series of essays based on a BBC television series by the same name.⁷ Artist Deborah Curtiss has written a book, *Introduction to Visual Literacy*, which explains how we learn to appreciate and use various aesthetic elements.⁸ Communication scholar Donis Dondis also analyzed the basic elements of images and composition in terms of syntax and visual literacy in her book, *A Primer of Visual Literacy*.⁹ Most recently Paul Messaris's book also titled *Visual Literacy*, takes on the conventional view of visual literacy as a learned process similar to language and instead proposes that visual literacy is largely a natural process.¹⁰

Other important conceptual investigations includes a work by Braden and Baca, "Toward a Conceptual Map for Visual Literacy Constructs" that attempts to map the field of visual literacy in terms of basic concepts, as this report hopes to do for the broader area of visual communication.¹¹ An important theoretical analysis of the instructional/educational technology viewpoint was developed by John Hortin in his review, "The Theoretical Foundations of Visual Learning" in Moore and Dwyer's book

³Pettersson, Rune. *Visual Information*. Englewood Cliffs NJ: Educational Technology Publications, 1993.

⁴Lester, Paul Martin. *Visual Communication: Images with Messages*. Belmont CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1995.

⁵Morgan, John and Peter Welton. *See What I Mean?* London: Edward Arnold, 1992.

⁶Berger, Arthur Asa. *Seeing Is Believing: An Introduction to Visual Communication*. (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1989).

⁷Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. (London: Penguin Books, 1972).

⁸Curtiss, Deborah Pratt. *Introduction to Visual Literacy: A Guide to the Visual Arts and Communication*. Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1987.

⁹Dondis, Donis A. *A Primer of Visual Literacy*. Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1973.

¹⁰Messaris, Paul. *Visual Literacy: Image, Mind & Reality*. Boulder CO: Westview Press, 1994.

¹¹Braden, R.A. and Hortin, J.A. "Identifying the Theoretical Foundations of Visual Literacy. *Journal of Visual/Verbal Language*. 2, 1982: 37-42; Braden, Roberts and Judy Clark Baca. "Toward a Conceptual Map for Visual Literacy Constructs." In Darrel G. Beauchamp, Judy Clark Baca and Roberts Branden (eds.). *Investigating Visual Literacy*. IVLA Conference Proceedings, Blacksburg VA. 1990.

of readings.¹² The visual literacy approach outlined by Hortin begins with verbal language as a fundamental model and focuses on the transactional processes by which we receive and transmit visual meaning. This approach reflects the work of many IVLA scholars.

Hortin's piece highlights the important work of John Debes¹³ as a pioneer in this area, as well as scholars like Ruesch and Kees who developed a model of three kinds of nonverbal languages (pictorial, action, object) in their book on nonverbal communication.¹⁴ Francis Dwyer's *Strategies for Improving Visual Learning* is another important early contribution in this area.¹⁵

Also in the Moore and Dwyer book is a review of visual literacy, thinking, learning, and communication by Barbara Seels.¹⁶ Nikos Metallinos has also reviewed visual literacy theory relative to television processing in "Visual Literacy: Suggested Theories for the Study of Television Picture Perception."¹⁷

Some scholars have tried to identify the interrelationships between visual and verbal information such as Roberts Braden¹⁸ who has developed a theory of visual/verbal symbiosis. Ralph Wileman has created a typology of verbal and visual image relationships.¹⁹

From an entirely different discipline, philosopher Nelson Goodman in his analysis of art, *The Language of Art*, also concludes that pictures represent reality in the same way that language does.²⁰ In other words, meaning is determined by convention

¹²Hortin, John. "Theoretical Foundations of Visual Learning." In Moore and Dwyer, 5-29.

¹³Debes, John. "Some Foundations for Visual Literacy." *Audiovisual Instruction*. 13, 1968: 961-964; "The Loom of Visual Literacy." *Audiovisual Instruction*. 14 (8), 1969: 25-27.

¹⁴Ruesch, J and W. Kees. *Nonverbal Communication*. Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1956.

¹⁵Dwyer, F. M. *Strategies for Improving Visual Learning*. State College, PA: Learning Services, 1978.

¹⁶Seels, Barbara. "Visual Literacy: The Definition Problem." In Moore and Dwyer, 97-112.

¹⁷Metallinos, Nikos. "Visual Literacy: Suggested Theories for the Study of Television Picture Perception." *Journal of Visual Literacy*. 12 (1) 1992: 57-72.

¹⁸Braden, Roberts. "Visualizing the Verbal and Verbalizing the Visual." In Braden, R.A. & Walker, A.D. (Eds.) *Seeing Ourselves: Visualization In a Social Context*. Proceedings of the 1983 IVLA Conference; "Examining Visual Verbal Relationships. In Roberts Braden, Judy Baca and Darrell Beauchamp (Eds.) *Art, Science and Visual Literacy*, Proceedings of the 1993 IVLA Conference.

¹⁹Wileman, Ralph. *Exercises in Visual Thinking*. New York: Hastings House, 1980.

²⁰Goodman, Nelson. *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*. 2nd ed. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976.

and thus learned. The Morgan and Welton book, *See What I Mean?* also presumes that visual appreciation is learned.²¹

In contrast to the viewpoint of Nelson and most of the IVLA scholars, communication scholar Paul Messaris's argues in his book *Visual Literacy* that people become visually literate through a process that is basically perceptual and innate rather than learned as is language. His premise, that visual literacy is a normal human condition, is also argued by Cassidy and Knowlton.²²

Some of the work listed in the bibliography come from conferences and there are many that include topics that are interrelated with visual communication. The most important, however, would probably be the summer Visual Communication conference, the International Visual Literacy Association conference, and the Visual Communication Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication. Other conferences to consider include the Association for Education in Communication and Technology, the International Communication Association, and the Speech Communication Association, among many others.

There are hundreds of journals represented in this bibliography but there are a few that are particularly important such as the *Visual Communication Quarterly* which runs as an insert in *News Photographer*, the *Journal of Visual Literacy* (previously known as *The Journal of Visual Verbal Languaging*), *Visual Sociology* and *Visual Anthropology*, the *Journal of Broadcasting*, and the *AECT Journal*, among many others.

A number of bibliographic studies have been done in the visual literacy and visual communication area. Probably the biggest effort is one by Howard Levie, "Research and Theory on Pictures and Imaginal Processes" which appeared in *The Journal of Visual Verbal Languaging* in 1984. Martin Oudejans broadened the topic in his piece "A Bibliography of Visual Literacy" which appeared in the same journal in 1987. Alice Walker has analyzed both IVLA conference proceedings and the *Journal of Visual Verbal Languaging* and later the *Journal of Visual Literacy* in articles in 1990 and 1991.

The findings of an earlier part of this study, which was a survey of people who teach in the visual communication area to determine the key theoretical areas of visual communication, were presented at the 1995 Visual Communication conference. The data from that survey, however, was useful as guideline in developing this second attempt to map the field. The exercise of coding and categorizing these responses led to the development of the first draft of a taxonomy. In order to better understand these categories and the body of literature represented by them, this bibliography project looked at the literature itself and tried to build a more extensive bibliography of visual communication scholarly literature--theory, research, teaching--as well as a taxonomy that was better grounded.

²¹Morgan, John and Peter Welton. *See What I Mean?* London: Edward Arnold, 1992.

²²Messaris, 1994; Cassidy, M.F. and J. Q. Knowlton. "Visual Literacy: A Failed Metaphor." *Educational Communications and Technology Journal*. 31, 1983: 67-90.

A Note Some caveats are in order: This bibliography began with our own files and the publications with which we are familiar. Then we asked scholars to submit their own vitas with their work, as well as the reading lists they used in their courses. We also consulted other printed bibliographies. Consequently we have been able to double check the material from our collections, but not the work that has been submitted to us by all the various people who sent vitas and reading lists. Ideally we would have double checked all those citations before including them, but neither time nor staff resources permitted that kind of effort. Consequently, there may be some citations that are incomplete or in error. If so, we apologize and would appreciate it if you would send us a note about any citation that doesn't check out.

We consider this to be the first step in the evolution of visual communication bibliography. It is not comprehensive; it is inevitably shaped to a certain extent by topics that are of central interest to the authors, but it is a place to begin. The next generation of this bibliography will be on line and hopefully with a cross-referencing index, another effort that we abandoned in the drive to get this document to press.

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