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A plea to teach visual texts in L1 and L2 classrooms

## UPENDING TRADITIONAL WRITING INSTRUCTION: A PLEA TO TEACH VISUAL TEXTS IN L1 AND L2 CLASSROOMS

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### Abstracts

With the advent of multi-media, interpreting visual texts has become an important function of literacy. Yet, few L1 or L2 English writing classes devote any time to these texts, in part because many L1 and L2 teachers do not know how to interpret these texts themselves. This article suggests two methods for understanding visual discourse: the interpretation of images, pictures, and graphics within a system of similar visual artifacts and the location of those images, pictures, and graphics within a historical and cultural context. As an example, two graphics on the University of Athens' homepage were examined.

**Keywords:** visual texts, visual discourse, images, literacy, pictures, graphics

### INTRODUCTION

The prevalence of visual texts both challenges and reforms traditional views of literacy in L1 and L2 writing instruction. Not only are visual texts more prevalent now than they have been in years, but also, as Bolter (2001) argues, citing a diverse group of critics, ranging from Frederick Jameson, W.T.J. Mitchell, and E.H. Grombrich, we live in a visual culture where a preponderance of ideas are expressed through images, graphics, and pictures. Indeed, as Bolter notes, we have historically favored visual rhetoric through iconography, pictures, and paintings. It was only recently in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that print-based literacy began to achieve an equilibrium with visual literacy. However, with the development of new media, most notably film, television, and hypermedia, visual literacy has regained its foothold.

Unfortunately, L1 and L2 instructors of traditional and ESL composition programs respectively have tended to ignore visual literacy in their classroom, focusing instead on the written and spoken words. Even

when this instruction occurs in computer-assisted classrooms, as is so often the case in many writing classrooms, the emphasis is on print-based literacy. Rather than serving as portals of study for how video, audio, graphics, and text join together to make meaning, these computers become glorified typewriters for students to complete traditional academic essays. Yet, if we are to prepare our students to enter the visual culture of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we need to instruct them in visual rhetoric. To do this, we must ourselves understand the forms of literacy historically taught in the L1 and L2 classroom and the relationship of visual rhetoric to these forms of literacy as well as ways of teaching visual rhetoric.

## **LOGOCENTRICISM IN L1 AND L2 CLASSROOMS**

L1 and L2 classrooms have followed a movement from the teaching of speech to instruction in writing, from orality to textual literacy. Ulmer (1994) argues that Western forms of literacy have historically been logocentric, a term that he borrows from post-structuralists to describe how the Western alphabet emphasizes sound with each grapheme representing a different phoneme. This of course is different from other alphabets, especially Eastern alphabets, where picturesque characters often represent entire words and phrases. Ulmer observes that this logocentric view of language, which privileges sight over sound, influences the way we teach writing. In short, we teach writing as a window to sound, rather than as an art form in and of itself

We certainly see this in the recent history of L1 writing instruction. As Berlin (1994), Russell (2002), and Harris (1996) as well as other historians of writing instruction have noted, the teaching of English composition developed during the final part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when important universities, most notably Harvard and Yale, began to move away from speech, particularly forensic rhetoric, in a student's final semester to writing instruction during the student's first year. For nearly a century later into the 1960s, writing was seen as the step-sister of speech with composition instruction emphasizing usage and style. Moreover, both speech and writing were viewed as a reflection of the student's innate cognitive ability. A bright student, it was believed, reflected his (never 'her') intelligence through grammatically and stylistically correct speech and writing.

Likewise, L2 instruction before the 1960s tended to equate speech with writing, resulting in an emphasis on oral drills and sentence level construction. As Matsuda and Silva (2001) note,

Because of the strong influence of structural linguistics and behavioral psychology—as well as the view of language teaching

as a mere application of linguistics—the goal of second language instruction before the early 1960s was considered to be the mastery, mostly through pattern drills, of the sentence structure and the sound system of the target language, and writing was regarded as but a secondary representation of language. (p. xiv)

Like their L1 counterparts, L2 learners were taught that in order for a person to write well, s/he must speak well, and in order to speak well, s/he must write. Commenting on L2 teaching in the basic writing classroom at this time, Shaughnessy (1977) notes the inherent racism with its equation of correct usage with cleanliness in mind, spirit, and body. In other words, inarticulate speech represented a disorganized mind, unkept body, and an unwashed soul.

Of course, L1 and L2 writing instruction has advanced significantly since the 1960s to immerse students in textual literacy. Both movements have seen important changes through process-based writing, instruction in disciplinary discourses and genres, and critical pedagogies that emphasize a student's cultural, social, and economic background. Computer literacy has also begun to affect the L1 and L2 writing classroom. It is not uncommon for students to receive some of their writing instruction, if not all, in a computer assisted classroom. Students in the L1 and L2 classrooms are now exposed to hypertext and hypermedia. And, yet, as Hawisher and Selfe (1999) and Warschauer (1998) have separately opined about the L1 and L2 classroom, the writing instructors still often treat the computer as a glorified typewriter. While this is less true now than it was in the 1990s, writing classrooms still privilege textual literacies where students turn in Word documents or who asked to research in the library when the same material is available on the web. Very few of these classrooms study or produce multi-media texts, especially as a main project. The teaching of visual rhetoric provides us an opportunity to challenge this logocentricism of print and speech. In his description of picture writing, a form of visual rhetoric that often tells a story through pictures, Bolter (2001) notes something that can be said of all forms of visual rhetoric:

If alphabetic writing is regarded as secondary writing, in the sense that it refers the reader to another system (spoken language), picture writing seems to be primary. The signs in picture writing, stylized images, seem to constitute their own silent language. Although the writer and reader may use words to describe and interpret the pictorial message, two readers could explain the same message in different words, and speakers of different languages could share the same system of picture writing. (p. 59)

Visual rhetoric challenges the logocentricism of print and speech by forcing language outside the written and, thus, spoken word. The viewer of a visual text may refuse to conceptualize an image, graphic, or picture in spoken and written language; and, if he or she chooses to do so, he or she will most likely interpret the visual differently from the way another person might. In short, a visual does not itself refer to a sound, which, when placed together with other phonemes, creates a word or a sentence.

## **A METHOD FOR INTERPRETING VISUAL TEXTS**

How then do we begin to understand and then teach visual rhetoric? We might first take a closer look at what Bolter (2001) says. It is important to note, as Bolter clearly does, that even though “picture writing seems to be primary,” that is, a direct relationship between the sign and the object signified, it really isn’t. Picture writing and other forms of visual rhetoric for that matter rely on perspective, tone, and style, just as other forms of speech and writing. In the case of the former, the photography or graphic artist chooses to represent an object from a particular vantage point. S/he decides which objects to forefront in the picture, which to place in the background; which angle to photograph, draw, or paint the central object and which angles to ignore.

However, understanding the formal qualities alone will not suffice. More importantly, we must take a more structuralist and rhetorical approach in determining the system of signs in which the visual artifacts are placed as well as their context. In terms of the former, photographs, images, and graphics are meant to be read against other, similar photographs, images, and graphics. In short, the process of viewing a visual artifact is actually a process of reading that artifact within a system of other artifacts. Just as de Saussure theorized that we cannot understand a word or concept alone, outside the language that it is apart, we cannot comprehend an image by itself. For example, in many cultures, a red road sign means stop. This road sign itself does not carry meaning outside the myriad of other signs which signify yield, go, slow down, etc. In terms of the latter, visual artifacts are situated within a social, cultural, and historical context. The way that a sign develops along with how and what it communicates depends upon its context. In teaching students to read visual texts, we must engage them in these two aspects of reading.

## INTERPRETING GRAPHICS ON THE UNIVERSITY OF ATHENS' HOMEPAGE

Before we continue this abstract conversation, let's look at an example. In a recent study, I examined the homepages of Greek university websites (unpublished manuscript). University websites offer us interesting texts to examine web genre along with social, historical, and cultural ideology. While these websites have increasingly become a tool for student recruitment and dissemination of information about the university, their large graphics and photographs alone play an important symbolic role, first attracting the eye to an image that speaks to the nature of the university. Many Ivy League institutions, for instance, include a central image that is a photograph of an important building on campus to emphasize historical place, while most state institutions depict students interacting in class as well as on and off campus. Without recounting the details of the study, I want to look at the website for the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (University of Athens), which in many ways typifies other Greek university websites, while at the same time providing something different. The website for the University of Athens elicits an interesting study of graphics and ideology. The site itself contains two central graphics that are situated to the right of the site's navigation bar. The first is a representation of a prominent mural. The mural depicts rhetoric, poetics, history, archeology, philosophy, physics, astronomy, law, medicine, theology, and mathematics as females dressed in Doric Chitons and Peploi. They approach a seated male figure, Theory, who is also dressed in a Chiton with a blue Chlania draped over his shoulders. The women either read from their books or discuss great thoughts as they approach Theory, who himself seems to be discoursing before the world. One further addition is that while the women's faces appear traditional, Theory sports a handle bar moustache, more characteristic of the Greek revolutionaries of the 1820s than of the Greek notables of the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. The second image depicts the main building, which was designed by the Danish architect Christian Hansen in 1841. It is an example of 19<sup>th</sup> century Greek revival with a façade modeled on the propylaea of the Parthenon.





**Figure 1:** The two main graphics on the University of Athens website.

As I noted, the first thing we need to determine is how these images fit within a system of signs. In this case, it is how the University of Athens homepage offers graphics with a system of other university graphics. The University of Athens website offers us three important elements often found on Greek University websites. The first is a sense of place that is represented through the image of a building, usually a historical building. All Greek university websites, in one form or another, depict the idea that the University is a place of study, most often a place with some historical connection to the past. In this case, the image is two-fold. On the one hand, it represents a building that played an important role in the development of Athens as first the cultural center and then the capital of Greece after the 1828 revolution. On the other hand, the neo-Hellenic façade of the building harkens back to Athens' role as the cultural and educational center of Ancient Greece.

It is important to note the difference in the University of Athens' choice of graphic amidst others. While other Greek universities use historic architecture in their homepages, they do so for different reasons. For example, Ionian University in Corfu depicts the old Venetian fortress that now houses its department of music. The fortress represents both Corfu's successful rebuff of the Ottomans (the Ionian islands, of which Corfu is a part, were one of the few regions of Greece that did not come under Ottoman control) and one of the most recognizable landmarks on the island. Upon entering the island, especially by ferry, one of the first things that is seen is the fortress. In contrast, National Athens Technical University

(Athens Polytechnic) places a graphic of the main building of its downtown campus. Although the graphic is much smaller and inconspicuously placed at the top right hand corner of the website, it too provides a symbol for Greece. It is one of the surviving buildings when the University, one of the first in Greece, was known as the Royal School of Arts. More importantly, though, it symbolizes the student resistance against the Greek dictatorship in the 1973. Both the downtown and the Zografou campuses became centers for student protest, and the building became a symbol of that protest.



**Figure 2:** Front entrance to the National Polytechnic University in Athens

Were we to ask students to analyze this site, we would have them look at all seventeen Greek university websites to begin identify the system of signs for which these graphics fall under. In addition they might compare these sites to their own University websites. For example, they might discover that the University of Athens, like most Greek universities, does not picture students or faculty, a common occurrence among many university websites. At the University where I teach, Kennesaw State University, the homepage offers several pictures of students, faculty, and staff engaged in fun activities. This website, typical of many in the United States, attempts to create a sense that the University is a place where people gather to learn as well as to have fun. Another difference, of course, is the University of Athens mythical representation of the disciplines. While many universities attempt to unite their mission with ancient education, often symbolically represented in their seals which borrow heavily on Greek and

Latin symbols, Greek universities deliberately tie their mythic representations to local mythology.

Once we have placed a particular graphic within a set of graphics, we must ask them to begin questioning why to determine their rhetorical context. We should not be surprised that the culture of Homer, Sappho, Sophocles, Gorgias, Plato, Aristotle, or their latter-day counterparts, Cavafy, Seferis, Elytis, and Kazantzakis would emphasize place and history on their university websites. Like many students around the world, Greek students are educated in nationalist and ethno centrist narratives. The Modern Greek scholar Ephe Avdela (2000) states this quite well in her abstract for “The Teaching of History in Greece.” She notes,

The Greek educational system attaches particular significance to national history. The continuity of Hellenism from antiquity to the present constitutes an essential component of Greek national identity and is continuously reproduced in school through the teaching of history and other courses and activities. In the highly centralized Greek school system, history teaching is organized around a detailed official syllabus and its single corresponding textbook. In the national narrative reproduced in school, the Greek nation is understood as a natural, unified, eternal, and unchanging entity, not a product of history. The teaching of history neither moves beyond this ethnocentric concept of the nation nor familiarizes students with the production of historical knowledge. (p. 239)

Greek students, she emphasizes throughout her article, receive the same instruction in Thessaly as in Thessaloniki, Delphi as in Delos. The Minister of Education directly oversees the teaching of history, going so far as to establish the syllabus and choose the textbook himself.

Yet, to say that Greece is proud of its history and willingly displays it in a variety of forms is one thing; to understand how that history becomes integrated with Greece’s mythology is quite another. The nationalism of which Avdela (2000) writes was born in the aftermath of the Greek revolution of the 1820s. With the burgeoning of the Modern Greek State in the 1830s, Greeks sought a foreign policy that would recapture land and, more importantly, a greater sense of national identity. Few outside of



Greece realize that the War of Greek Independence initially only gained the Greeks Attica and parts of the Peloponnesus. For most Greeks, there remained Thessaly, Epirus, Macedonia, Thrace, Smyrna (or modern day Izmir), and, of course, the Holy City, Constantinople. What was needed for them at the time was a foreign policy that would regain this territory. Yet, even more disconcerting for the Greeks was the lack of a national identity or desire to take back these lands. Identity was based rather loosely on local communities and villages. In response to this “crisis” the Greek politician Ionnias Kolletis proposed the Great Idea or *Megali Idea*, an overarching concept that would affect all areas of Greek culture from foreign policy to education.

In his brief history of Modern Greece, Gallant (2001) argues Kolletis’ genius lay in his ability to bring several strands of Greek culture together. He understood that the perpetrators of the Greek Revolution were secular liberals nursed on the enlightenment sensibility of Locke, Voltaire, Jefferson, and Payne. Conversely, they had led uneducated villagers to fight against the Ottoman persecution of their Orthodox beliefs. Thrown into this mix, Gallant observes, was the West itself, which had derived two philosophic views from Greece, what he calls the Hellenic and Roman perspectives, the former emphasizing the Greek enlightenment, the latter the more Eastern tradition of the Orthodox Church. In the end, Kolletis decided to create a strong national identity by transforming the already strong Orthodox identity. Gallant (2001) notes that this left Kolletis with two important tasks:

One focused on the appropriation of Orthodoxy by the Greek state in such a way that the ecumenical aspect of it was downplayed, and by so doing it wedded religious identity with a Greek nationalism centred on Athens. It was from this construct that the Megali Idea emerged. The second dynamic revolved around the purposeful construction of a public culture that emphasized the Hellenic as opposed to the Romeic dimension of Greek identity. Through a process of acculturation of this ideal, Greeks began to internalize deeply an Hellenic national identity that coexisted with but took

precedence over the Romeic one. (42)  
In short, and what I find worth noting here, is that the Greeks themselves had to be Hellenized after the War for Independence.

What is particularly interesting about studying the website for the University of Athens is in understanding the very role that the university played in Kolletis' *Megali Idea* as well as how it continues to reflect it today. Established in 1837 as the "Othonian University," it became the first university of modern Greece, serving not only the newly-founded state, but also the Balkans and Mediterranean, seeking to bring together Greeks of the mainland and Diaspora alike for the study of Theology, Law, Medicine, and Arts. At the National University, ethnic Greeks would receive what Avdela (2000) notes of Greek primary and secondary education as the Greek nation "understood as a natural, unified, eternal, and unchanging entity, not a product of history." We see this historical context played out in the choice that the designers of the University of Athens website made in picturing the most historic building on campus, the very building where the much of the post-revolutionary reconstruction of Athens took place. Furthermore, by placing a graphic of the building's mural on top, the designers strengthen the marriage of mythology and history that is so often a part in most nationalistic stories of the founding of a country.

What is not readily apparent, though, is the very role that the University of Athens played in visually dramatizing Kolletis' *Megali Idea*. Because of its prominent location and its importance, the University of Athens has often been a staging ground for visually representing nationalist ideas. Gallant (2001), in fact, recounts this amusing anecdote which takes place on the ground of the University in the 1870s:

The following year at another public ceremony, a statue of the Gregory V was unveiled at the University of Athens. It joined one of Rigas and, in 1875, one of Korais as well. Here was the 'holy' trinity of the Hellenic Revolution and revival: one who had espoused an ecumenical, secular new Greece, another who believed in secular Greece whose taproot was the Classical age, and a third who opposed the Greek Revolution. Yet in the invented tradition of nationalism, they became united as symbols of Hellenic liberation. Orthodoxy as religious identity had now been transformed definitively into a secular Greek national identity. (p.49)

(As an aside, I should note that the patriarchs of the Church initially resisted the revolution, in fact excommunicating the dissidents.)

## CONCLUSION

Where then does our study leave us? As we begin to fit the University of Athens graphics within a system of other Greek university visuals and then start to peel back layers of meaning, we see that two seemingly innocuous images suddenly have a great deal of meaning. We see that the University of Athens' website typifies other Greek university websites in its presentation of historic buildings and even mythology. However, its choice of graphics reveals significant differences which illuminate the history of the University, the first in Modern Greece, and ultimately the history of the Modern Greek state.

I began this article by stating that the teaching of visual texts both challenges and reshapes our traditional views of literacy in the L1 and L2 classrooms. Visual artifacts disrupt the logocentricism of texts by forcing language outside its sound system and beyond the spoken word. Being able to analyze, produce, and incorporate images, graphics, and photographs into texts is particularly important as the internet and other forms of multi-media begin to dominate the literacy's landscape. In short, it is important that students can view a multi-media text and understand how the different layers of media interact to create meaning. (It is important to note that I have not discussed producing visual texts, the subject of another article or another series of articles.) What I find especially relevant to both the L1 and L2 classroom is the choice of visual texts from outside the students' language and culture. In the case of international texts, students can often begin researching the meaning of different visuals by examining similar texts. As they uncover meaning through comparing and contrasting different conventions, they can start to explore that meaning in the history of that culture.

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