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Seeing is believing. Or is it?: visual literacy in art & design education

Peter Wright

Visual forms of communication are dominant in the digital era. As the visual has increased in influence throughout contemporary culture, art & design slide collections, which would have traditionally helped users make sense of the visual world, have begun to rapidly disappear. How are students of art & design (and beyond) engaging with this visual proliferation now they can no longer rely on the support of the institutional slide collections and their expert staff?

From images of Audrey Hepburn covered in tattoos to colourized photos of iconic moments from history, originally captured in black and white, it has become increasingly difficult to take images at face value. It is obvious now, in our image-saturated culture, that believing is no longer simply a result of seeing.

Since the days of entirely analogue image use in university teaching and image provision, to today when the majority of use and provision is digital, I've moved from working in an art and design slide library (1997–2008) to being a lecturer on a module called 'Design, Culture & Context' (DCC) which is integrated into the degree courses of Fashion, Fashion Accessories, Knitwear and Textiles students at Nottingham Trent University (NTU) (2004-present). This, I hope, has made me more aware than most of how important an understanding of images is to our comprehension of culture, and also how education with and through images has changed during that time, largely due to technological developments. These complementary roles have given me some insights into how important the image world has become in education and the wider culture.

There are four main areas I'll touch on here:

1. The increase in image communication within Western culture.
2. The associated increase in the complexity of this communication.
3. How we attempt to make sense of this complexity as consumers and producers of the images, and as educators.
4. How students of visual culture are attempting to navigate the multiple meanings on offer.

Images are everywhere – Images are evidence

I'll introduce some of the ideas and examples covered with the students I teach on DCC, and then reflect on how they respond. The module is, in essence, a contextual studies module, with particular emphasis on visual culture, as well as covering aspects of material culture. In the past the module would likely have been a straightforward art and/or design history module, but ever since I've been teaching the module it has aimed to educate the students about the major ideas and cultural changes which have influenced the culture for which they are being trained to design. In this sense, the culture they are taught about is seen as the context within which they consume and design. This involves an introduction to both design philosophies (such as 'modernism', for example) and broader cultural shifts, such as the turn to a more post-modern mind-set within consumer culture.

Throughout the module images are used as evidence. Students are taught from day one that images contain cultural information and, as such, they will need to be able to interpret, or 'read', them. They will then use images themselves in their work as evidence of points being made in essays, presentations, dissertations and visual products (a visual essay). Images are also used as research tools to help the students understand past and present culture. The knowledge and understanding gained through this, it is hoped, can then be applied to their practical work, either as theoretical or visual inspiration.

The slide collection I used to work in was designed for these students, and others like them at NTU. As well as containing examples of accepted art & design history the collection was used and developed as a contextual resource, with the images being considered as visual proof of ideas.

Therefore, underpinning the DCC module, is a belief that how things look really matters. Students are encouraged to see themselves as both consumers of visual signs and producers, whether this be in the everyday form of social media communication or as designers.

As consumers of visual media we all need to understand the messages being communicated as it is becoming a core element in how we interpret and understand the everyday culture we inhabit.

> The world we inhabit is filled with visual images. They are central to how we represent, make meaning, and communicate in the world around us. In many ways, our culture is an increasingly visual one. Over the course of the last two centuries, western culture has come to be dominated by visual rather than oral or textual media.[1]

1. Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual* Culture (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1.

Visual culture is now so thoroughly embedded within how we think and act that we barely notice how we read it. Therefore, in order to be aware of how we make sense of all of today's visual stimuli, we need to take an objective step back from it all. In order to gain a deeper understanding of our visual culture we also need to appreciate that images can now purposefully misrepresent the truth while, at the same time, also drawing on the traditional power of the image as proof of their truth-telling properties. There is a complex relationship in place between the image maker and its consumers whereby there remains an assumption relating to traditional ideas that seeing is still believing and that the camera continues not to lie. Beyond this, there are also image makers who will knowingly play with this relationship in order to comment upon it – more of which later.

Reality is interpreted (and created) through images

Images, it could be said, are a strange way of giving proof of something, and, you could argue, an even stranger way of communicating ideas. In a photograph, for example, we have a fraction of a second frozen forever, representing a whole event, place or person. Yet, as Susan Sontag states in *On Photography,*

‘Reality has always been interpreted through the reports given by images’[2]

Key to the understanding of this statement is the word ‘interpreted’. Rather than simply believing what we see in an image, we can now appreciate that we attempt to read the meaning of any image placed before us. In order to do this we draw on our own personal and cultural experience and arrive at an interpretation unique to ourselves. This highlights how an image can never tell the whole truth for everyone at all times, but merely ‘a’ truth to the person viewing it. This slim version of the truth is not straightforward or free of bias, but it does assume that some truth is still contained within, and relayed by, the image. In this sense, the power of the image, residing in its ability to tell a truth, still exists. This power has helped give the image its current prominence in contemporary communication.

To quote an old song by The Kinks ‘People take pictures of each other, just to prove that they really existed’.

2. Susan Sontag *On Photography*, (London: Allen Lane, 1978), 153.

Fig. 1. Family snap, own photograph, c. 1975.

This image (Fig. 1), for example, of myself aged 6, gives proof that I existed in that time, and at that location. I have chosen this particular example, though, to show how images have the power to not only communicate meaning but to also create it. This image was originally made as a slide but was left unviewed for decades after initial family viewing due to a lack of slide viewing technology. The event being captured in the image, though, lived on in the family narrative as it depicts me after a severe reprimand for making myself extremely dirty while playing in the recently demolished remains of some nearby derelict houses. The event became a kind of family myth through re-telling. As a result of this, on seeing the image recently for the first time in over three decades, I remembered the image very well, but nothing of the actual events leading up to its taking. Here, then, the reproduction has more power than what it is representing.

The photograph, then, can not only record a version of the truth and seal it for others to uncover at a later date, but it also has the power to create ideas and memories. Images have thus been employed to do this on a much wider scale than that of a simple family image. This helps demonstrate the huge power of visual evidence, and it also hints at its limits.

With just the one sense; no sound, smell, touch or taste, the dominance of the visual in the last century or so, is largely uncontested. The other senses provide a huge wealth of information but their cultural influence is limited compared to that of sight. I recently carried out a project focussing more on sound, partly to understand the influence of the aural, but also, by comparison, in order to learn more about how the image works. At the same time as capturing a slice of visual evidence with a camera, I also recorded a slice of sound at the same time (fractions of a second for the image; 60 seconds for the sound). The still image was then combined with a loop of the captured sound to give a fuller representation of the scene (capturing a moving image with sound was ruled out as an alternative as I was looking specifically at the unique power of the still image to freeze a moment for eternity).

What soon became apparent was the simple realization that repetition is key to an understanding of the power and dominance of the image. Enforced listening to the repeated loops of the field recordings allowed me to gain much more information about what had occurred in the presence of my microphone. All kinds of nuances were revealed which would ordinarily be overlooked (underheard?). In an image, time is frozen and we can gaze upon that frozen scene endlessly. The selection of that particular moment also gives it a sense of importance not afforded to those moments left uncaptured. The dominance of the image in contemporary culture could, then, be said to derive from its superior seductive and persuasive qualities. The viewer of the image is also positioned as the God of all he/she surveys.

This would now be considered a traditional idea of the image, before the current digital visual explosion. The image, today, is hugely important yet, at the same time, individual images are more disposable than ever. The development of the 'Snapchat' social media app., for example, where images do not last forever but only exist on the recipient's screen for up to 10 seconds, would appear to be proof of this.

Never trust an image

With this seemingly contradictory appreciation of the image, and the addition of widespread digital manipulation of images, accurately

interpreting visual evidence is becoming ever more complicated. Advertisements regularly feature manipulated images suggesting the products shown are better than reality. Smartphones allow users to edit photographs before they are uploaded to social media sites giving an enhanced version of the individual's life. Many internet memes regularly use manipulations of old photos to fit in with current trends: the tattooed Audrey Hepburn mentioned earlier; or the trend for colourizing famous images, such as the one depicting the self-immolation of the Buddhist monk, Thích Quảng Đức in 1963, in order to make the previously black and white images *appear* more realistic. These current practices make the interpretation of images more difficult, adding layers of meaning, as well as stripping some layers away.

Artists have been commenting on the ability of images to construct and distort reality for some time, and they have incorporated the distortions into their own work. The Spanish artist, Jean Fontcuberta, for example, often focusses on these ideas in his own work. From giving visual proof of an alternative Galapagos in his book 'Fauna', to airbrushing himself *into* the history of Soviet space travel, he regularly plays with the power of the photograph and its ability to manipulate the truth.

Reality does not exist by itself

As Fontcuberta states,

'Reality does not exist by itself. It's an intellectual construction; and photography is a tool to negotiate our idea of reality.'[3]

He uses a canonical example from the history of photography to illustrate the point. Louis Daguerre's famous image (Boulevard du Temple, Paris, 1838), popularly known as the first image to capture a human form outdoors going about his ordinary existence, depicts a single still human, thought to be present because, unlike other subjects who were moving during the long exposure of the image, he has stopped to have his shoes cleaned by a street vendor. It is now thought that Daguerre instructed his assistant to assume the position for the duration of the exposure in order to improve the composition. If this very early photograph is unreliable, then which images are we to believe? In today's visual culture image manipulation is standard. As images no longer serve to represent a slice of lived reality, or truth, students of visual culture need more guidance than ever when attempting to make sense of our increasingly visual and visually manipulated world.

Artists have been engaging with these ideas for some time. Richard Prince, for example, with his re-appropriations of advertising imagery in the 1970s, questioned the place of images in consumer culture. Contemporary photographer/artists, such as Chino Otsuka and Nikki S. Lee, have used photographs to question the truth-telling qualities of the still image in an age when images can increasingly lie. Documentary photographer, Martin Parr, captures everyday reality within his images, whilst also highlighting how images now serve to manipulate that reality. In order for students to engage with these artist-led debates they first need to understand the basics, i.e. how images function in relation to truth and representation.

3. Joan Fontcuberta, 2013, in Aaron Schumann, 2014, *Time Magazine online* http://time.com/3807527/joan-fontcuberta-photography/#1. Accessed 9 Apr 2014.

Visual literacy is needed more than ever

In his book *Visual literacy* (2008), James Elkins says:

> The issue at stake is whether or not a University education can be based on images as well as texts... What is needed is a University-wide conversation on what might comprise an adequate *visual* introduction to the most pressing themes of contemporary culture.[4]

He goes on to say something I also think is correct:

> Since the 1980s the rhetoric of images has become far more pervasive, so that it is now commonplace in the media to hear that we live in a visual culture, and get our information through images. It is time, I think, to take those claims seriously.[5]

Visual communication plays such a large part in contemporary consumer culture that an understanding of how it works is vital to undergraduates who are destined to go out and work within that culture. These students are increasingly being left to their own devices when attempting to navigate the increasingly complicated, confusing and visually cacophonous world that confronts them every day.

Beyond the institutional slide collection... **(Figs. 2 and 3)**

Until recently most, if not all, UK Universities had a dedicated art and design slide collection which had been developed to support art and design teaching and learning. Many of these collections also included contextual images which were used beyond the confines of the art and design departments. Many of these collections have been 'retired' of late, largely due to the perception that such analogue resources are no longer relevant in our current digital age. The loss of slide collections and the many years of art and design pedagogy that they contain has left a big hole in the provision of visual resources available to students today. Without specialist resources and expert staff on hand to help, our students have been left having to fend for themselves in an increasingly complex visual environment. At a time when students require more assistance and guidance than previously they are often being provided with less.

In order to counter this, many members of staff, such as myself and my colleagues at NTU, are trying to make more of the resources now available to students. Image databases have been subscribed to in an attempt to retain some of the specialist curatorial aspects of the institutional slide collections. Databases such as 'Bridgeman Education', 'Creative Club' and 'Land Of Lost Content', for example, are used at NTU in order to give students more focussed and specialized resources than they would find elsewhere. The books and journals contained in University libraries, from where many institutions gathered content for their slide collections, are largely still available as resources for students and staff. These databases and print-based sources can help to plug the gap left by the decommissioning of dedicated slide collections, but the reality of it is that the whole of the internet is now available to each student instead. This ready availability can have its democratic and practical advantages, largely due to being available very easily at the click of a button, with the large downside being that the students have to navigate this huge expanse of material by themselves.

4. James Elkins, *The object stares back : on the nature of seeing,* (London: Harcourt, 2008), 3.

5. Ibid., p. 4.

Fig. 2. A slide collection, c. 2006 © the author.

From a teaching perspective I and my colleagues have found that this initially led to images being used less effectively in student work. Images were increasingly being considered as an afterthought, rather than being seen as a learning tool within the research process itself. As a result, they might be used as simple illustration or, at worst, mere decoration, rather than being embedded in their thinking as spring-boards for the development of in-depth theories and themes. Students need to be able to learn from the research they do with images. It should inform their wider research and thinking, rather than being a decorative add-on.

Fig. 3. A retired slide collection, 2013 © the author.

Student response

The students on the module I teach are told all of the above from the beginning of their studies. They are tutored in the art of image use and research over a period of three years. As a result, they are often extremely good at using images in their research. I recently interviewed a group of final year students, before the end of their course, but after their involvement with myself and my module had ended (i.e. at a time when they no longer needed to 'say the right thing' to me as their tutor).

Within a semi-structured focus group scenario one of the key questions I asked of them was:

Where would you advise a first year student to go to find images for their study? They replied, in order of importance:

1. Museums or galleries, to see the actual work.
2. The university library, because they have a great collection of books and journals.
3. Databases, which you know have been curated by experts.
4. Museum websites.
5. Artists, designers or companies own websites.
6. Everyday looking on sites such as 'Instagram', for example.
7. Take your own photos.
8. Trusted names on 'Pinterest'.
9. And finally, and only if you already know what you're looking for, 'Google Images'

I also asked 'How do you look for what you didn't know you were looking for'? And the response came: By making use of all kinds of quality resources put together by specialists who know all about what they're selecting for inclusion.

Many of these students produce remarkable work, due largely to the fact that the image research carried out is often at the heart of the wider research process. This greatly informs and enriches the work they produce for their contextual studies module and, as the ultimate aim of the module, it has a significant positive impact on the practical design work each student produces at the end of their degree.

The world may no longer have space for large, physical, slide collections, but more must be done to replace what is being lost as they, and the experts who staff them, are discarded. Students want quality resources and they need assistance with how to make the most of them. As the volume of visual communication continues to rapidly increase, the need for visual literacy as an essential element of art and design education increases with it. Internet search engines undoubtedly deliver quantity but they so obviously lack the expert curatorial focus provided by the traditional, dedicated, institutional slide collection. Students are now expected to curate their own collections, but they will still need support and guidance along the way from dedicated resources and expert staff.

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