This is an electronic reprint of the original article. This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.

Author(s): Hiippala, Tuomo

Title: Book review : David Machin (ed.), Visual Communication

Year: 2016

Version:

Please cite the original version:

All material supplied via JYX is protected by copyright and other intellectual property rights, and duplication or sale of all or part of any of the repository collections is not permitted, except that material may be duplicated by you for your research use or educational purposes in electronic or print form. You must obtain permission for any other use. Electronic or print copies may not be offered, whether for sale or otherwise to anyone who is not an authorised user.
NB! This is a post-print author’s version: do not cite.

To cite the review, please use the following reference:


If you wish send feedback to me about the review, contact me at tuomo.hiippala@iki.fi.
Reviewed by: Tuomo Hiippala, Centre for Applied Language Studies, University of Jyväskylä, Finland

With 34 chapters on 756 pages, the fourth instalment in the *Handbooks of Communication Science* series sets out to cover a vast field of study: the currently blooming research on visual communication. The editor, David Machin, observes in the introduction that although the nature of visual communication has been debated for centuries, the proliferation of academic journals and publications targeting the visual is a relatively recent but timely development. Yet Machin suggests that the ‘discovery’ of the visual within various fields of study runs the risk of reinventing the wheel, for instance, by importing field-specific theories and renaming established concepts, which may have been carefully redefined over decades within other fields of study. Unfortunately, this process of discovery rarely considers how to integrate the new perspectives into the existing body of knowledge (pp. 4–5), and consequently, the approaches to visual communication are indeed numerous, as are the topics considered, which is aptly exemplified by the current volume: in what other field can the reader encounter analyses of cider, pop music videos, and Tarot cards in consecutive chapters? This is precisely where *Visual Communication* seeks to make its contribution by bringing the various approaches into dialogue with each other. To do so, the volume attempts to explicate the theories, methods and assumptions underlying each approach.

Following a brief introduction, the volume is split into two parts of 17 chapters each. The first part presents methodological and theoretical approaches to visual communication, while the second showcases different topics of analysis currently addressed within various fields concerned with the visual. In addition to this rather broad division, other overarching themes may be identified in the volume. One such theme is critical discourse analysis (CDA), as exemplified by Konstantinidou and Michailidou (Chapter 4), who draw on Foucault to examine how immigrants are represented in Greek press photography, whereas Bouvier (Chapter 12) studies the representation of the 2012 Libyan uprising in British press photography using content analysis. Peled-Elhanan’s social semiotic analysis of layout (Chapter 27) pursues a similar critical perspective by addressing the representation of Palestinians in Israeli school textbooks. As appropriate for a reference work, the aforementioned chapters showcase various approaches to visual communication, with each chapter targeting a different aspect of visual semiosis or explicating a different theory. The chapters that are clearly oriented towards theory include Sonesson’s...
introduction to cognitive semiotics (Chapter 1) and Forceville’s proposal to use
Relevance Theory to the study of the visual (Chapter 2). These chapters comple-
ment the case studies well, as do those oriented towards methodology. Here, of
particular interest are the recent methodological advances in applying computer
vision techniques to both film narratives and photographs in social media, as set
out in the chapters by Bateman (13) and O’Halloran, Chua and Podlasov (25).

However, as the volume makes clear right from the beginning, visual communi-
cation is not limited to texts in print or digital media, as exemplified, for instance,
by the chapters of Carlson (theatre, Chapter 19), Beard (fashion, Chapter 26), Cox
(museums, Chapter 32), Teal (architecture, Chapter 29) and Jewitt (school class-
rooms, Chapter 16). Brougère’s Chapter 10, in particular, presents a compelling
analysis of children’s toys and their changing functions as a part of childhood mass
culture, which are often upheld, circulated and reinvented in transmedia franchises
that embed the toy – a concrete artefact – into a continuously evolving media nar-
rative. While Brougère’s analysis is situated within the framework of rhetoric,
Almeida (Chapter 24) continues the discussion from a social semiotic perspective,
using Kress and van Leeuwen’s visual grammar to examine how children’s toys
are represented in the manufacturer’s advertisements with the goal of teasing out
the underlying ideologies and values. These underlying connections are a welcome
addition to the volume, which help to bridge the inevitable gaps that are likely to
develop within a field of study as wide as visual communication.

Regardless of the topic under analysis, certain established scholars feature
prominently across the volume. Foundational thinkers such as Barthes, Foucault,
Mitchell, Kress and van Leeuwen represent the traditional, discourse-oriented ap-
proaches to visual analysis in the volume, which treat the objects under analysis
as an end product and symptomatic of the society that produces them. They
are counterbalanced by the chapters that target the fundamental processes gov-
erning visual communication, which constitute the second underlying theme in
the volume. Dyson, for instance, presents a psychological perspective to how we
distinguish between different letterforms (Chapter 9), whereas Puhalla adopts a
similar viewpoint to explicate colour hierarchies (Chapter 8). Holsanova’s Chapter
14, in turn, provides a comprehensive account of the processes that guide visual
perception. Throughout the volume, these two underlying themes complement
each other by connecting the low-level features, such as colour and letterforms, to
more abstract levels of meaning-making. This is a definite strength of the volume
as a whole, which deserves to be emphasised, as it has theoretical implications to
the entire field of study.

Yet those familiar with the first volume in the same series of handbooks, The-
ories and Models of Communication, will find the current volume less focused in
terms of subject matter. Moreover, the considerable gaps between the topics dis-
cussed in consecutive chapters demand, at times, a leap of faith from the reader: the aforementioned analyses of toys, for instance, stand 13 chapters apart. Organising the chapters into clearer thematic areas would have benefited those wishing to familiarise themselves with the various approaches to field of visual communication, in addition to using the volume as a reference work. This does not, however, by no means reduce the value of the volume, which is likely to have a ‘long tail’ instead of an imminent impact. A work of this breadth and depth, which the currently most valued form of academic publication – the journal article – cannot provide, should not be expected to generate citations, but contribute to fostering a new generation of scholars in visual communication.

That being said, a close reading of the volume will reward both newcomers and more established scholars in the field. As Machin points out, founding thinkers and thought leaders emerge rapidly in new areas of research, but the speed of progress may occasionally blur the view of those contributing to the body of knowledge (p. 5). As a junior scholar working mainly within the field of multimodal research, I am well aware how such intellectual centres of gravity can skew and distort one’s perspective. However, to my benefit, the chapters in Visual Communication contained many hidden gems, which could be easily bypassed when skimming the volume as a reference work, but coming across them made me rethink my perspective to visual communication and reconsider some of the concepts formulated within multimodal research. This is precisely where the value of this volume lies: it is not only a thorough reference work, but also serves as a firm foundation for developing visual communication as a field of study.